

around and within

*around*

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Bonnie Burangarra, Lorraine Connelly-Nortey, Nadeena Dixon,  
Sharyn Egan, Mandy Quadrio, Marlene Rubuntja and Judy Watson

November 2018, Macquarie Group Collection

Curated by Freja Carmichael



# and within

In her remarkable poem *The Past*, Oodgeroo Noonuccal says ‘the past is all about us and within’. Her meaningful words speak of the power and ongoing presence of ancestral ties for Aboriginal people. We remain connected to the land, waters and sky. Memories, emotions and events of people and place, as well as wisdom and knowledge are carried across generations. The seven Aboriginal female artists in *Around and within* — Bonnie Burangarra (Bonny Burarn.garra), Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Nadeena Dixon, Sharyn Egan, Mandy Quadrio, Marlene Rubuntja, and Judy Watson — also carry these threads in their artworks. The artists translate circular and spiritual relationships between past and present, shaped by their diverse histories, experiences and identities.

In 2018, the NAIDOC Week theme ‘because of her we can’ encouraged widespread reflection and acknowledgement of the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. At times, the influential contributions that our women have made, and continue to make, have been unseen or unsung. *Around and within* extends the celebration of our women by highlighting their important voices in contemporary art. The exhibition is grounded in the inspirational poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal of Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island). Oodgeroo Noonuccal was the first Aboriginal person of verse to be published. Her words and actions called for greater equality and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture. Our women continue to have an important role in our cultural, social and political survival. The innovative artistic practices celebrated in *Around and within* embody Aboriginal stories of resistance and continuity.

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## SIGNIFICANCE OF PROCESS

Aboriginal women's art production has previously been typecast by wider Australian perspectives into an 'anonymous sphere of craft'<sup>1</sup>. The western readings of craft and art have historically differed, with craft perceived as more of a decorative than meaningful art form. Mediums such as fibre and weaving, bearing qualities of handiwork and functionality, were often overlooked in contemporary art contexts. Yet there are deep meanings in these mediums and the processes of production. Not only has this lack of acknowledgement impacted their representation in exhibitions and collections, it has also impeded the recognition of cultural significance, innovation and knowledge that is inherent to the work produced.

There has never been a distinction between art and craft in Aboriginal culture. Creative practices in all their capacities — including functional and aesthetic — are vital to our culture and identity. Fundamental to the making of old and new forms are embodied practices that value the process of creating, along with the finished work. During the making of fibre work, our ancestors maintained a harmonious relationship with the land and seasons through sustainably collecting plant material. Spiritual Ancestors (from the Dreaming) laid the cultural framework for the creation of these important items and women (in most instances) enacted this, making basketry, bags, mats and adornment for daily life, as part of ceremony and creative expression. Undertaking the weaving together in a collaborative process, women exchanged stories and cultural knowledge, passing on techniques for making woven forms for the next generation.

*Around and within* reveals the importance of process. Each artist applies unique spiritual, emotional, cultural and physical practices that traverse past and present, and also engages in tender and thoughtful methods of art production. The exhibition journeys across three themes: **place of belonging, personal stories** and **ancestral wisdom**. The works featured here interconnect directly or indirectly with these subjects.

1 Hetti Perkins, *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1991), 7.



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## PLACES OF BELONGING

The continuous and unbroken connection to the land and waters within Aboriginal culture is expressed by artists affirming their relationship to places of belonging — their Country. Local artist **Nadeena Dixon**, a Wiradjuri, Yuin and Gadigal (Dharug -Boorongberigal) woman, connects to the lands of her ancestors through contemporary fibre and textile forms. Her alluring and gentle series, *Spirit lines*, is part of an ongoing experimentation pushing the boundaries of these mediums, and responds to the urgency of protecting and preserving intimate knowledge for future generations. Through colonisation, cultural practices and language have been affected in various ways in different areas across Australia. For some, traditional ways have been resting for periods of time, but ongoing awakenings have seen a widespread revitalisation of practice.

The five rectangular shaped wall pieces in *Spirit lines* are repurposed utilitarian hessian bags. In using hessian bags, Dixon responds to Aboriginal histories and colonisation. Hessian fabric and sacks were often provided to Aboriginal people on Missions and reserves, used for clothing, bedding, and in the collection of food rations. In the present, this fabric represents the endurance of people and culture. Dixon expresses resistance by manipulating the fibre and coating the fabric to make new forms rich with cultural expression. The lines painted on each panel are steeped in diverse symbolism inspired by the visual language of lines from her heritage and closeness to salt water Country. From thick strokes to delicate marks, the patterns have multiple and complex meanings portraying beauty in the landscape, ancestral songlines and threads of knowledge carried over time.

Waanyi artist **Judy Watson's** *black soil plains* and *untitled II* are part of a series created after a seminal return to her Country in North West Queensland. In 1990, Watson travelled with her family to their ancestral lands, spending time at Riversleigh Station — where her grandmother was born — Lawn Hill Gorge, and other places relating to her lineage. Being shown important sites by family and 'learning from the ground up'<sup>2</sup> was a powerful moment for Watson and has become the touchstone that Watson returns to in her practice.

2 Judy Watson, conversation with curator, August, 2018



These two spirited paintings reflect Watson's distinctive process that involves working with an un-stretched canvas on the ground, wetting the canvas with liquid, observing folds, before applying successive washes of pigments, paints and various material into the canvas that is then manipulated by her body and movement to resemble the topography of Country. By recreating her own experience of discovery through this individual process, Watson's artwork references hidden histories in wider Australian culture that are uncovered by investigation.

In *black soil plains*, rising to the surface is a white dotted form that carries the presence of travellers moving through place. As the track traces a non-linear direction, Watson provides a reminder of the life, memories and emotions that are eternally held within these lands. Similarly *untitled II* expresses the metaphysical state of being on Country by looking down into, and up through the ground itself. Both works reflect the ongoing connection between past and present, and affirm the importance of place and belonging to Aboriginal people.

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## PERSONAL STORIES

Intimate, generational, historical and ongoing experiences of people and events directly relating to colonisation are unforgettable. As a member of the Stolen Generations, Nyoongar artist, **Sharyn Egan** carries a sense of loss and displacement in her work. At the age of three, she was taken away from her family and placed in the New Norcia Mission in Western Australia.

Akin to Egan's other works, the pair of woven vessels called *Kaartdijin*—meaning knowledge—carry emotions that continue to be felt by Aboriginal people. Using seagrass collected from her local coastline in Fremantle, Egan prepares fibres strand by strand into workable material. From these strands she creates sturdy forms using a random weave technique incorporating elements from salt water environments, such as shell and coral. The tangled rhythms of fibre and voids in weaving patterns visually represent fragmented histories, where the past can only be revealed in glimpses framed by what is known and also unknown.

In Egan's fibre work, there is a strong sense of beauty and belonging. Through her contemporary practice of weaving, she connects with people and community, and exchanges knowledge and stories. Being on Country and working with natural materials also brings her closer to the land and her ancestors.

For palawa (Tasmanian) woman **Mandy Quadrio**, materiality is embedded with narratives as a way of addressing past histories and present day existences of her people. The large hanging sculpture, *mathinna* employs the harsh cleaning material of steel wool to speak of intentional colonial attempts at cultural erasure. Its vibrant shape extends across space and dances gently with movement, asserting a living and dynamic culture. Her trio of intimate female shields, titled *Vulva Shield*, reflect on Aboriginal women's experiences of gendered history. Using bleach, black velvet, stitching and dried bull kelp, Quadrio creates sensual pieces. These works reclaim experiences of sexualisation and vulnerability to empower and celebrate Aboriginal women.

Both of these works combine found and manufactured materials with the use of traditional kelp fibre. The kelp is the key material and holds a dominating presence. This natural resource, which travels from the sea to the land, has been used by Quadrio's people since time immemorial to create water carriers and basketry. Working with her material culture and extending the practices of her ancestors offers Quadrio a solid grounding to her identity and Country, through which she claims her sovereignty as a proud palawa woman.

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## ANCESTRAL WISDOM

As women belonging to great fibre traditions, contemporary fibre artists connect with the visual languages of their ancestors through techniques, forms, materials and symbolism. Using gathered remnants of metal, mesh and wire, Waradgerie (Wiradjuri) artist, **Lorraine Connelly-Northey**, has created a series of bags titled *Narbong (string bags)*. The process of gathering intertwines her inherent resourcefulness instilled by her Irish father and the cultural understandings shared by her Aboriginal mother. The found resources are expressive of colonial history. Connelly-Northey repurposes old fence wiring once used to exclude and deprive Aboriginal people access to their lands, traditional ways of life and cultural activities, such as fibre practices. She maintains weaving practices by physically bending, twisting and folding these materials into traditional forms.

*Narbong (string bag)* is inspired by woven carry bags used by ancestors for food, resource collection and ceremonial purposes. Customarily, they are woven with natural material, the style and technique dependent on the region and tradition they are associated with. In the present, Connelly-Northey creates her own language of fibre, weaving together filaments of physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural strands to express her deep knowledge of the land, stories and wisdom of her people.

Milingimbi and Maningrida fibre artist **Bonnie Burangarra** (Bonny Burarn.garra) is renowned as a prolific weaver and preserves the importance of fibre production in Arnhem Land. Burangarra creates woven forms based on customary techniques and continues harmonious relationships with the natural world. Her large sculptures innovate traditional fish traps techniques, extending their form and injecting colour into pandanus fibre with natural dyes sourced from the local environment.

In many freshwater and salt-water communities throughout this country, fish traps resonate cultural and spiritual value. Aboriginal people traditionally used them for sustainable resource collection and for ceremonial purposes. Fish traps, and all fibre forms, embody in-depth knowledge of land and seasons, and material collection and preparation for the specific weave used. Burangarra's contemporary making celebrates continuous relationships with the land and waters, and expertise shared across time and generations.

Like Burangarra, **Marlene Rubuntja's** soft and vibrant sculptures also translate community and collaboration through her active involvement in the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists centre, located in the Larapinta Valley Town Camp, Alice Springs. Formed in 2000, the art centre has become a special place for the social and emotional well-being of the community. For Rubuntja, it's a place of great strength and connection. The artists here are acclaimed for their soft work made from recycled woollen blankets that are dyed using elements of the land with local flora, tea and remnants of metal. Through this dying process, unique patterns and colours are created as a background canvas for sewing, stitching and sharing personal stories and reflections.

Rubuntja's *Bush Food Queen* and *Two Women Hungry for Goanna's* proudly honour the stories and traditions of her female ancestors. The works reference the abundance of the land and sharing of resources through food collection using traditional carrying forms known as coolamons. Created from the hands and from the heart, these works have travelled a parallel journey with Rubuntja throughout the process of their making. They are imbued with her lived experiences and the daily life at the town camp. The soul-filled works are further brought to life through Rubuntja's skilful and colourful sewing — her favoured medium for cultural expression.

Collectively, *Around and within* speaks of the complex and interconnected relationships to the past. These artists embrace a diversity of mediums, techniques and materials that are informed by their histories, ancestry and present day experiences. From lightly woven seagrass vessels and sturdy metal bags, to elongated pandanus fish traps and vibrant soft sculpture, these works carry the resilience and strength of the land, people and culture.

The range of artistic practices highlights the historical, spiritual and emotional importance of processes that underpin powerful forms of creative and cultural expression. These works, carefully formed by the artist's hand, speak to something deeper beyond their tangible materials: they address to the meanings, knowledge, relationships and histories that are imbued around and within each work. The many layers, intersections, and uniting of threads, fibres, fabrics, metals, pigments and paint is metaphoric of contemporary Aboriginal identity, and are embedded and entwined with links to the past and present.

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*Freja Carmichael is a Ngugi woman belonging to the Quandamooka People of Moreton Bay. She is a curator working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities on diverse exhibition projects. Her work centres on the preservation and promotion of traditional fibre knowledge and embedding collaborative curatorial approaches. In 2017, she was awarded the inaugural Macquarie Group First Nations Emerging Curator award.*

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Mandy Quadrio. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Marlene Rubuntja. Photo by Freja Carmichael.



Bonnie Burangarra. Photo courtesy of Milingimbi Arts and Culture Centre.



Lorraine Connelly-Northey. Photo by Jules Boag.



Judy Watson. Photo by Jo-Anne Driessens.



Nadeena Dixon. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Sharyn Egan. Photo courtesy of the artist.

## ARTIST PROFILES

### **Bonnie Burangarra (Bonny Burarn.garra)**

Bonnie Burangarra belongs to the Burarra / Walamungu people and is a recognised fibre artist from the West Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory. Her practice continues traditions of collaborating with natural world to create contemporary woven fish traps and other diverse forms. Burangarra's innovative and beautiful fibre work is a rich expression of culture and place that links generations together. She is represented by both Milingimbi Art and Culture Centre and Maningrida Art Centre and her work is held in the collections of the Myer Foundation and Charles Darwin University Art Collection, among others.

### **Lorraine Connelly-Northey**

Lorraine Connelly-Northey is of Waradgerie (Wiradjuri) and Irish descent. Born and raised in Swan Hill, Victoria, Connelly-Northey is renowned for her innovative use of industrial and organic materials to create objects and installations that are grounded in her heritage and inspired by traditional forms. In the early 1990s, she began exploring weaving practices and since then her work has been exhibited widely, including in the 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, and acquired for numerous private and public collections. Recent exhibitions include group shows *Colony*, National Gallery of Victoria (2018), *Measured Response*, National Art School (2018) and *Obsessed: Compelled to make*, Australian Design Centre (2018).

### **Nadeena Dixon**

Nadeena Dixon belongs to the Wiradjuri, Yuin and Gadigal (Dharug-Boorongberigal) people and is based in Sydney. She is a visual and performing artist working across diverse platforms and mediums including song, dance, textiles, short video, photography and animation. Her work centres on preserving traditional knowledge and language for future generations. Dixon has a postgraduate degree in Indigenous Arts Management at VCA University of Melbourne, Diploma Multi-Platform Production (interactive technology), and Masters in Fine Arts at UNSW Art and Design. Recent group exhibitions include *From Freshwater to Saltwater*, The Rocks Discovery Museum (2017) and *Born into Existence*, Boomalli Aboriginal Art Gallery Co-operative (2018).



### **Sharyn Egan**

Sharyn Egan is a Nyoongar woman, living in Fremantle, Western Australia. Working across fibre, sculpture and painting mediums, Egan's work expresses her personal experiences of loss and displacement as a member of the Stolen Generation. She is well-known for her woven forms, that are grounded in traditional techniques and is active in sharing and exchanging artistic skills through collaborations, workshops and teaching. Recently, she completed the public art commission *Waabiny Mia – Play House*, Perth and was a commissioned artist this year for *Ngara – Ngurangwa Byallara (Listen, Hear, Think – The Place Speaks)*, Blacktown Native Institution. Her work is held in state and national collections including the Berndt Museum of Anthropology and the National Museum of Australia.

### **Mandy Quadrio**

Mandy Quadrio is a Brisbane based artist working across sculpture, installation and mixed media. As a proud palawa, Tasmanian Aboriginal, woman connected to her ancestral home of Tebrakunna in North-East Tasmania, her art practice asserts resilience and cultural continuity in order to bring forward palawa agency, ownership and self-representation. Quadrio completed a Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art achieving 1st class Honours (2017) at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, where she is currently a PhD candidate. Recently she was a selected artist for the *Hatched National Graduate Show* at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art and she had her first solo exhibition, *Speaking beyond the Vitrine*, at Metro Arts, Brisbane (2018).

### **Marlene Rubuntja**

Marlene Rubuntja was born in Mparntwe (Alice Springs), grew up at Amoonguna community to its east, and now proudly calls Larapinta Valley Town Camp her home. She is a printmaker and textile artist with the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists. Her vibrant and spirited work translates her lived experiences and daily life at the Town Camp, whilst also celebrating the proud stories of her ancestors. She recently exhibited with the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists in the 21st Biennale of Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art (2018) and Tarnathi, Art Gallery of South Australia (2017). In 2016 she was awarded the inaugural Vincent Lingiari Art Award.

### **Judy Watson**

Judy Watson belongs to the Waanyi people of North West Queensland and is a Brisbane based artist. She works across print media, painting, drawing and sculptural forms to explore ancestral, political, historical and environment aspects of her Aboriginal heritage. Watson is an acclaimed artist and has exhibited widely, received major public art commissions and her work is held across state, private and international collections. Selected awards include a Moët & Chandon Fellowship (1995); NGV Clemenger Award (2006); and Works on Paper Award at the 23rd National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awards (2006). She co-represented Australia at the 1997 Venice Biennale and was included in the 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012). Earlier this year she was announced as the artist appointed by the City of Sydney to create a major public artwork honouring the First Peoples of Australia.

## LIST OF WORKS

### Bonnie Burangarra

*Fish trap*, 2006  
Pandanus fibre, natural pigments  
Macquarie Group Collection

*Fish trap*, 2007  
Pandanus fibre, natural pigments  
Macquarie Group Collection

### Lorraine Connelly-Northey

*Narbong (string bag)*, 2008  
Rusted rabbit-proof fencing wire,  
fencing wire  
Macquarie Group Collection

*Narbong (string bag)*, 2008  
Rusted mesh sheeting, tie wire  
Macquarie Group Collection

*Narbong (string bag)*, 2008  
Rusted rabbit-proof fencing wire,  
fencing wire  
Macquarie Group Collection

### Nadeena Dixon

*Spirit lines 1-5*, 2018  
Hessian, acrylic paint,  
cotton thread  
Courtesy of the artist.

### Sharyn Egan

*Kaartdijin*, 2018  
Seagrass, coral, shell  
Courtesy of the artist.

### Mandy Quadrio

*mathinna*, 2018  
Tasmania bull kelp, steel wool  
Courtesy of the artist.

*Vulva Shield 1-3*, 2018  
Tasmania bull kelp, river reed,  
bleached black velvet  
Courtesy of the artist

### Marlene Rubuntja

*Two Women Hungry For Goanna*, 2017  
Dyed blankets, polyester wadding,  
embroidery thread  
Macquarie Group Collection

*Bush Food Queen*, 2018  
Dyed blankets, polyester wadding,  
embroidery thread  
Macquarie Group Collection

### Judy Watson

*black soil plains*, 1991  
Powder pigment, pastel, oxides  
on canvas  
Macquarie Group Collection

*untitled II*, 1990  
Powder pigment, pastel on canvas  
Macquarie Group Collection



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