

## **Opening address at Nomad Art Canberra by Valerie Kirk Head of Textiles, The Australian National University**

It is my pleasure to speak this evening about Maningrida Threads: Handcrafted fabric from Babbarra Design – the history, particular features of the work and issues facing the fabric-printing centre.

The work compliments the exhibition by Winsome Jobling titled “Breathe: Works in Paper” reflecting on the pockets of remnant bushland around Darwin which provide breathing spaces in the city; to listen, reflect and wonder.

At the Indigenous fibre conference Selling Yarns, in Darwin, in 2006, I noticed the stall selling Babbarra fabrics was swarmed by people. You had to get in quick as each piece was individual and the work was being snapped up by people in the know, relishing the opportunity to buy the fabrics brought in from the remote community. Maningrida is 371 kms east of Darwin and 2989 kms from Canberra in north central Arnhem Land situated on the coast and last year I travelled in a small 3 seater plane out to the settlement. The town supports a population of 2,600 people, which includes those who live on the 30 homeland centres.

The Babbarra Women's Centre was established in 1983 as a woman's refuge. From this it has developed into a small business enterprise running five arms of the operation: Laundromat, hairdresser, OP Shop, cleaning crew and the fabric-printing workshop. Babbarra Designs is the major activity at the Women's Centre and has been in operation since 1989. It is supported by CDEP which stands for - Community Development Employment Projects and the program is an Australian Government funded initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Job Seekers. Through CDEP the fabric printing workshop employs 13 women and they produce block printed and screen printed fabrics, sometimes with additional hand painting. There is also a sewing area where garments and products are stitched up and sold to the community and visitors.

The Babbarra shop is a little Aladdin's cave for fabricistas.....if only they could travel the 2989 kms from Canberra to get there. Local people come into the shop to buy for themselves, their families and friends. Visitors to the community, health advisers, government officials, and education specialists drop in to purchase some of the special fabric that they know is made at Maningrida by the local women. They want to support the artists and acquire something with associations to the place and the people.

Sometimes fabric is commissioned: for women park rangers who put in a request for metres of fabric to make into work skirts as their uniform, for the Darwin Convention Centre and Pandanus Apartments, Darwin and with recent housing development at Maningrida there has been a demand for curtain fabric. Small amounts of fabric are sold in other places like Nomad in Darwin and Canberra, the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair or bought by cult fashion house Raw Cloth to be made into boutique clothing.

Before Nomad we rarely saw Babbarra fabrics in Canberra and in most other cities people don't see the fabrics at all. They are rare. Although fabric printing has been happening continuously on Aboriginal communities since the heyday of the Crafts in the 1970s only small amounts of fabric are produced due to the time-consuming methods used. It has generally sold directly from maker to end user so has flown under the radar

of galleries, collectors and publishers. Now communities are investigating means of increasing production through outsourcing screen printing and accessing digital print bureaus, opening up questions about the value of the handmade and authenticity. The issues become more urgent as CDEP is under threat of being replaced by sustainable business models where there is no subsidy and the income generated has to cover all costs.

Perhaps also because the fabric is Women's business, Textiles, Aboriginal and Australian it has been taken for granted. Last year when I presented an exhibition of Indigenous Printed Textiles at the World Textile Organisation in Mexico, the international audience was astounded by the quality and boldness of the artwork, the intriguing imagery, the confidence and creativity. Is this another example of where you have to make it overseas to gain recognition here?

The artists depict their dreaming stories, spirit beings, surroundings, bush foods and tools. Through these aspects their lives and spirit are embedded in the cloth. Deborah Wurrkidj is an experienced artist and has worked at Babbarra Designs since 1991. Her work encompasses the breadth of subjects she can respond to in her paintings and her fabric work. In "Yawkyawk" she has drawn the female water spirit from the Duwa story that she learned to paint from her father. The fabric "Bush Apples" in black white and grey shows the fruit drawn freely and joyfully, repeated in layers on the cloth. The "Dilly Bag" fabric in turquoise, behind the desk, shows the woven collecting basket, usually made from vine or Pandanus, and used to carry a fresh catch of fish or yams. The patterned image conveys her knowledge of the process of making the basket, the intricate lines giving a sense of the complexity and time invested in the process. In the gallery here you can see some of the fibre objects alongside their images in the fabrics. The images move between realistic depictions, schematic drawings and abstract renditions of subjects. Elizabeth Gandabuma, in her work, "Mudripples" shows an abstraction from nature, a pattern created from observation and innate knowledge of the repeating marks in mud. The direct hand process of working allows for further abstraction as colours and images are layered in the print. Unusual things happen in the fabric as artists move from one block and pattern to another or overlay screens in different directions. This gives the work a very quirky sense of design, which probably without the artists knowing, is the latest fashion in the European design houses with companies like Custeau and Desiguel.

A folder on the plan chest gives you details about all the artists and their work with photographs that show you the people, the place where they work and their environment. It helps you to realise that these are not anonymous pieces of cloth, each piece is different and embodies the maker – a woman's view of the world and her relationship to family, culture and country.

Congratulations to the artists on a stunning show.

Thank you to Angus and Rose Cameron, Nomad Art, Darwin for having the insight and willingness to promote Babbarra

Fiona Sivyer, Nomad Art, Canberra for the beautiful display of the works

Claire Summers, The Babbarra Women's Centre Manager for her calm persona and tireless dedication to the women and the centre.

To CDEP for providing an income to the artists, their families and community and enabling the dedicated hand printing of artistic fabrics. We hope the Babbarra Women's Centre will be able to transition into a new self-sufficient business model to be able to continue the fabric production post CDEP.

The opportunity is here to buy the fabric tonight – artwork to keep and cherish in solidarity with the Babbarra artists, fabric to add vitality to your home, office or wardrobe or give as a unique gift. Unless you want to travel the 2989 kms to the little shop at Maningrida, this is your chance. Fiona and staff are ready with scissors to snip off a metre or why not invest in a stunning length of fabric. It may not be under the radar for much longer.

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Valerie Kirk



From left: Rose Cameron Director of Nomad Art, Fiona Sivy Manager Nomad Art Canberra, Valerie Kirk Head of Textiles The Australian National University, Dr Louise Hamby Postdoctoral Fellow Australian National University.



Opening night, *Maningrida Threads: Handcrafted fabric from Babbarra Design* at Nomad Art in Canberra.