

Woven Lines

Essay by Maurice O’Riordan

One of the casualties of the recent cyclones (Lam and Nathan) to hit northern Arnhem Land communities has been the devastation of natural resources used for weaving. The palms providing the leaves which are stripped, dried and then dyed for weaving were either flattened or water-damaged by the cyclones, leaving several communities of artist weavers at a standstill. It’s not the sort of cyclone fallout detail that generally makes the news but it does give us pause to consider the very central place of weaving in Top End Aboriginal artistic and cultural expression and how the medium itself has become so potently manifest through other mediums – painting, printmaking, installation, glass – and across cultural lines.

In Daly River artist Kieren Karritpul’s art there is no escaping the woven lines of inspiration. The woven form is both subject and metaphor in his work, and also to some extent part of their process. In his first solo exhibition, Karritypul, at Nomad Art last May, the titles of his paintings, prints and textile-based work all indicated a particular woven form including the *yerggi* which is actually a pre-woven form, *yerrgi* being the Daly River word (Ngan’gikurrungurr language) for the ubiquitous pandanus plant, the Screw Palm, *Pandanus spiralis* which together with the Sand Palm (*merrepen*, *Livistona humilis*) are the main sources of fibre for Top End weavers.

Kieren’s art introduces *yerrgi* in a very specific state – in the form of bundled-up strips that have been dyed and are ready for weaving. For the artist they are a reminder of a childhood spent with his mother and grandmother weaving, the communal process of gathering and preparing the pandanus fibres also an opportunity for passing on ‘old stories’ and cultural knowledge.

As a visual motif, Kieren’s *yerrgi* bundles take on a variety of appearances. They can appear cocoon or candy-like with their fantails forming where they are each tied at one end. Sometimes they are elongated and sometimes more squat; sometimes they are naturalistic in their colouring (in tune with local dyes) and other times adopt a more heightened colour pitch. Perhaps their only uniform characteristic is the pattern of their alternating fantail ends.

In essence, Kieren’s *yerrgi* bundles symbolise the potency of weaving and the woven form and become a metaphor for the very idea of potency.

Perhaps this is an autobiographical touch from someone so young who is in the early formative stages of realising his own potential as an artist. And yet there is a delightful and seasoned ingenuity in Kieren’s choice and varied rendering of the *yerrgi* bundle. Like Monet’s haystacks – vehicles for the study and celebration of light, Kieren’s *yerrgi*-‘stacks’ are a meditation on and celebration of Aboriginal culture.

In *Woven Lines* Kieren also celebrates the form of other woven objects such as the fishnet. This also undergoes varying levels of representation and abstraction, from a literal rendition in which the upright conical form of the fishnet is depicted (each painted line echoing the woven line), to more fragmented or close-up views of the net as though peering into its opening. In these abstracted views, the woven form almost becomes mandala-like with the imagery built up from radiating bands of short parallel lines. In this sense the line can be seen as a faithful transposition of the coil weave technique rather than the traditionally longer, looser stitches though it is in effect more about Kieren’s visual-poetic licence in the process of translating one form into another to become something much more than what it represents; to transcend.

Kieren is certainly not the first Top End artist to give form to woven objects through a two-dimensional medium. Such translations have a strong lineage in Daly River and nearby Peppimenarti in particular, to some extent pioneered by artists such as Regina Wilson and the late Patsy Marrfura. Artists from Arnhem Land such as Kate Miwulku (*Maningrida*) and Robyn Djunginy (*Ramingining*) have likewise merged mediums, along with Darwin-based artist Karen Mills’s minimalist musings on this theme through painterly abstraction. Such a lineage might faze a lesser artist in their quest to make an original mark. One feels that for Kieren it’s simply part of an endless reservoir of inspiration. His mark with this second solo exhibition is already made; may his line continue to unravel and delight.

Maurice O’Riordan
Director Northern Centre for Contemporary Art
2015