

## Exhibition Review

### *Unfolding Territories*. Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, Australia.

*Both textile and text form the fabric of a postcolonial transformative dynamic that weaves its way/beats a path to and fro towards complex cultural self-determinations.*

Paul Sharrad, "Trading and Trade-offs," *New Literatures Review*, (un)fabricating empire, No. 36, Winter 2000)<sup>2</sup>

*Unfolding Territories* was the title of a textiles exhibition held in conjunction with the international conference *Fabric(ation)s of the Postcolonial* at the University of Wollongong in Australia in December 2002.<sup>2</sup> This exhibit came at the end of a year that celebrated the art of textiles globally and, particularly, on the pan-Pacific Rim. Key forums and exhibitions included *Intertwine* at the Adelaide Festival, South Australia, *Textile Tides—Convergence 2002*, in Vancouver, Canada, *Through the Eye of a Needle* at the Vancouver Museum, Vancouver, Canada, and *Splendorform: Elizabeth Jameson* at the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle.<sup>3</sup>

The unraveling stories of shifts in territorial political boundaries and the results of shifting identities

which play out in our postcolonial period may best be told by exploring the layers of meaning and discoveries held in the folds of contemporary fabric arts. The artists showcased in *Unfolding Territories* have developed artwork out of investigations into such new cultural parameters and recent critical dialogue, influenced by theorists such as Sarat Maharaj, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Nicholas Thomas. As Janis Jefferies stated in the conference keynote address, "cloth is a powerful metaphor for cultural translation . . . a moment's reflection brings to mind any number of feelings and experiences in which cloth, thread, and fabric are embedded in the metaphoric use of textiles to illuminate social and political relations. Within this context my

own practice—exploring the intersection between the personal and the political—takes textiles and cloth as a starting point.”

The relationship of textiles to the history of colonizing territories and developing sociocultural definitions of landscape, particularly in Australia, can be seen in the work of exhibitors Beth Hatton, Kay Lawrence, Liz Jeneid, Yvonne

Koolmatrie, and Diana Wood Conroy, and in materials ranging from embroidery to tapestry, printed fabrics or cast paper. In her catalog essay, Diana Wood Conroy reiterates the often-stated claim of Australian art communities that:

*It is a commonplace in Australian art history that our culture is haunted by the dispossession*

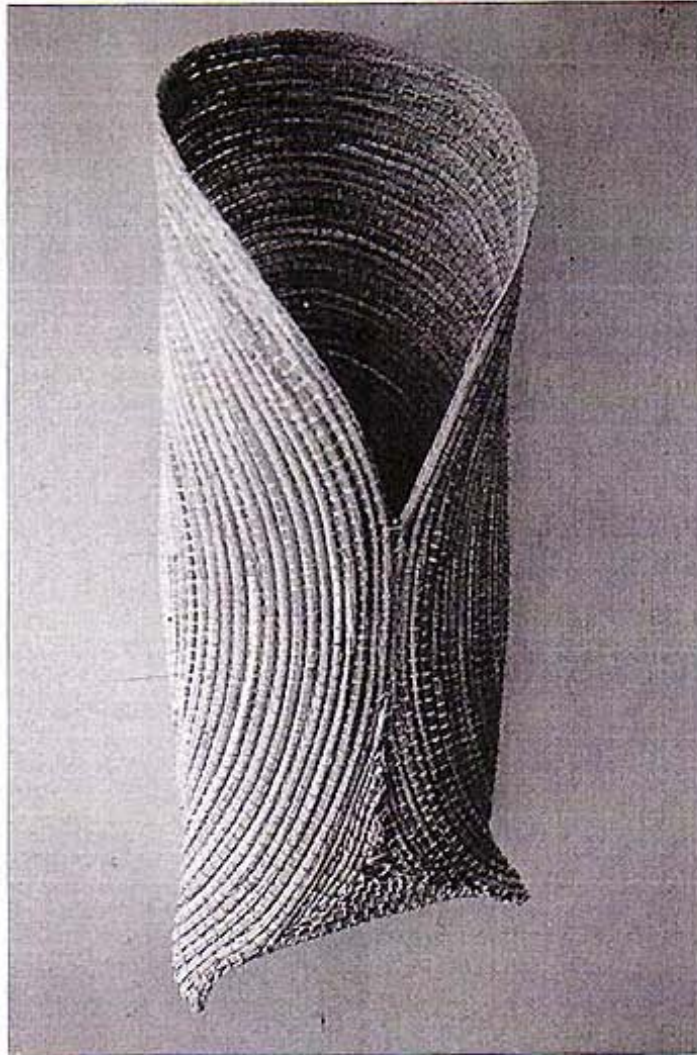


Figure 1  
Yvonne Koolmatrie, *Burial Basket*, 2002,  
rush basketry.



*and violence done to Aborigines and this anxiety has given rise to melancholia in non-Aboriginal arts practice.*<sup>4</sup>

Koolmatrie, a Ngarrindjeri weaver, displayed a haunting coffin basket from the burial tradition so important to her culture. Contemporary Tiwi funerary armbands and feathered ornaments from the family of Josette Orsto, which mark relationships to deceased members of her tribe, were displayed alongside a length of printed fabric representing body adornment by Tiwi artist, Jean Baptiste Apuatimi. Penny Harris, an

Australian sculptor, displayed a pair of old shoes cast in bronze, with a delicately textured patina, set on a wire bed frame. The installation evoked a ghostly mood and, as her title suggests, a "Waiting." Sue Blanchfield's work beseeched viewers to question consumer tastes considered fashionably exotic by awkwardly juxtaposing an early colonial image as the pattern for a typical Yirrkala, a Northern Territory community-store simple shift dress, recontextualized in transparent silk organza. The image Blanchfield chose for the printed repeat is a rescaled version of a famous historical moment in Australia,

recorded by the well-known Port Jackson painter in 1798, which records first contact.<sup>5</sup> The artist has chosen to comment upon specific elements of this painting and to play with our sensibilities by applying the revised version of the narrative as images on the kind of dress still worn by the indigenous women in northern parts of Australia. The image Blanchfield repeats is of the lone Aboriginal, Barrangaroo, wife of Bennelong, in her canoe, and a rowboat containing Governor Phillip and his eight armed men, thus illustrating the dramatic inequality of indigenous/settler relations<sup>6</sup> which



Figure 2  
Ruth Hadlow, *Aeroplane Parts* [detail], 1998, installation of seventy pieces of cloth pinned to the wall.



still continues today, albeit perhaps in other forms. Kelly Thompson, from New Zealand, works with both organic and mapping imagery, and is interested in the interchange between eighteenth century Maori and European explorers. Her thoughtful monochromatic works are mediated by the interface of using digital Jacquard loom technology. Ruth Hadlow, another Australian artist presently living in West Timor, compares the Ngarrindjeri coiling stitch of indigenous artist, Janet Watson, in the 1920s, to her own artistry of buttonhole and blanket-stitch embroidery to construct the image of a plane developed from over seventy small fabric samples. Hadlow has, in a sense, collaborated in Watson's earlier vision and comments on "how planes used to be fragile things . . . vulnerable and so hopeful . . ." This pristine artwork installation, made in 1998, with its sensuous off-white sheen, is a particularly eerie image given the twisted weapon of destruction we now associate with aeroplanes in the wake of the events of 9/11.

Other artists in the exhibit investigated their experience and identities as migrants, such as Valerie Kirk from Scotland, my own background in Northern Ireland, while a shawl patterned with complex symbolism from Kalate Nadesi, North Iran, was brought to the exhibition by conference keynote presenter Jasleen Dhamija from New Delhi.<sup>8</sup>

The postcolonial world has inherited a situation of continual dislocation, and artists will most likely continue to grapple with questions such as those posed in

this exhibition. In Australia, the locus of much textile arts practice involves a complex connection to the land and both on-going and historical relations with indigenous peoples. Through the creation of hybrid cultural objects and a reexamination of the position of historical textile artifacts, artists will develop personal and political narratives that will unfold to critique culture as we know it. The lessons that curator Diana Wood Conroy offered conference attendees as a result of her immersion in the very different traditions of the Aboriginal Tiwi culture (from Bathurst and Melville Islands, Northern Australia), and as an archaeologist in the Greco-Roman traditions of the Mediterranean, perhaps illustrate most poignantly how contemporary artists deal with a type of "double grounding"<sup>9</sup> and demonstrate that the textiles arena offers such artists a powerful medium for further investigations of the body, trade patterns, storytelling, and identity.

#### Notes

1. Published by the Centre for Research in Textual and Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong; the School of Humanities, University of Tasmania, Launceston; the Department of English, University of New South Wales; and the Faculty of Arts/School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University.
2. Funded in part by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant garnered by four key researchers in the disciplines of English Studies and Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong.



3. In 2003, "new artistic and theoretical potentialities that have emerged as a result of blurring boundaries between art, fashion and textiles," forming hybrid practices, will be explored at another conference, entitled *The Space Between* at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia.
4. See, for example, Griffiths, Tom. *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, p. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 and McLean, Ian. "Under Saturn: Melancholy and the Colonial Imagination," in Thomas, Nicholas and Losche, Diane (eds), *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, pp. 131–6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
5. This painting is by an unidentified painter called the Port Jackson painter who produced a large body of work in Australia at the time of first contact, c. 1790s (see Emmett, Peter. *Fleeting Encounters: Pictures and Chronicles of the First Fleet*. Glebe, NSW: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1995. This exhibition enabled Australians to view paintings many had not seen before from the collections held in British museums. In the original painting Governor Phillip, two officers, and eight armed men are in the background, bearing down upon the Aboriginals in fragile canoes, including Barrangaroo by herself (which is one of the few illustrations of a woman in a canoe, although Aboriginal women in Botany Bay and Port Jackson were fisherwomen). The artist has produced a feminist retelling of these elements to illustrate the overlooked but often sophisticated understanding of the female Aboriginals such as Barrangaroo, who tried to negotiate traditional kinship relations into the new settler system, and is now infamous for requesting to give birth in Government House in a symbolic act of establishing just such a relationship. The request was refused and is considered a crucial lost moment, especially by feminists, in the history of settler/indigenous relations in Australia.
6. In a conversation with this reviewer, in January 2003, Blanchfield stated that such dresses might be derived from the mission shifts of earlier this century, yet are still considered a standard and are sold today in shops in isolated communities at the top end of the Northern Territory, Australia. These simple dresses are typically imported, and may be the only outfit available for purchase by Aboriginal women. The artist hand-unpicked this shift, which she bought in Yirrkala in 2001, to make an exact replica copy. Blanchfield states that the transparency of her new art object relates to "seeing through the hypocrisy of how we still treat Aboriginals in this country."
7. Artists' statements, *Many Voices*, 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial catalogue, curator: Gill McCracken, p. 10. Sydney: SOS Printing, 1998.
8. Jasleen Dhamija said of the piece that it was "a poignant expression of the lives of Afghani women. The instruments of war, the burning houses and the air-field depicted on it reflect the environment in which it was created. More conventional motifs acquire a totally different significance. Multiple squares created along with stylized houses indicate the walls of the gutted homes. A yellow flower emerging out of a gun is a blast. Yet in the midst of this destruction there is hope, which is expressed by the creation of this tree of life budding with green leaves."
9. From Diana Wood Conroy's presentation paper entitled "The Knotted Self: Reflections on Postcolonial Textiles in Australia," delivered at the University of Wollongong conference, 28 November 2002.