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Front Cover, detail of Emma Gorge (full work on inside front cover) - 10cm x 7cm, rusted papers, map fragments, hand stitched; image by Peter Vorlicek

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breaking ground

making ground

A paradigm shift is occurring in the Northern Territory in the way in which the art of weaving is being viewed. The woven objects produced are manifestations of the artists' connection with the environment that surrounds them, along with the flow of intra- and cross-cultural currents. It is the overlapping of ideologies that creates the threads of wisdom across the face of Northern Territory fibre art.

My own weaving story began when I moved to the Top End from the east coast of Australia in 1994. I had woven one basket previously and was enthusiastic to learn more. Whilst living in Darwin I was very fortunate to meet one of the most influential mentors I have had in my life. Through a network of friends I met *amala* (my Yolngu 'mother') Gondjalk Dhamarrandji a *Djambarrpuyngu* elder from North East Arnhem Land. She adopted me as her *waku* (daughter) and it was through my relationship with her that I was able to learn about Top End Indigenous culture and fibre.

Amala lived in Darwin because she wanted to. Most weekends we would go collecting *gunga* (pandanus) and *gala* (natural dyes) in and around Darwin, on country that traditionally belongs to the Larrakia people. It was during this process of 'weaving a basket', working for *amala* and interacting with the 'bush' that I began to associate landscape with function, and weaving as a vehicle for creating and maintaining a social fabric.

This 'adoptive' relationship with my *amala* is not unique, it reflects what happens 'on the ground' in the Northern Territory where Indigenous Australians comprise 30% of the population. Adoption into their kinship system (*gurrutu*) by giving outsiders *mark* is one way they are able to share their landscape and co-exist, despite the huge impact that colonialism has had on the welfare of these people.

Individual contribution towards collective harmony is one of the things Yolngu have taught me through the concept of *gurrutu*, (relationship). *Gurrutu* is a significant aspect of everyday Indigenous society. It was through working in collaboration with her (*amala*) that I was given the knowledge of firstly *gurrutu*, *gunga djama* (weaving pandanus) and of *bathan djama* (cooking colour into the fibre). Missionaries discouraged this concept of *gurrutu*. Initially women were in fact forbidden to use plant dyes with their fibres because of the spiritual elements contained within the reciprocal relationship of maker and plant. It was not until the 1920's and 1930's that the brilliant hues seen in Top End basketry today began to be used. Incidentally the missionaries also influenced the way in which weaving with fibre is now generally perceived as 'women's work', although the forms are different. Traditionally both men and women were weavers.

The rhythm of weaving like music is universal, a language that has the ability to intertwine people across cultures while simultaneously strengthening the relationship people have with their ancestors, their land and their culture. The woven form's function - utilitarian or ceremonial, often admired for its beauty, seems in danger of becoming obsolete and the weavers themselves marginalised - this is particularly so in Western first world countries.

Recently basketry in Australia is enjoying a renaissance facilitated by exhibitions such as *Twined Together - Kunmadji Njalennjaleken* (2005), curated by Louise Hamby and Jill Nganjmirra and the *Seven Sisters* (2004), curated by Kevin Murray. The value of fibre and the art of weaving are still overshadowed today by the mass

consumerism that is driven by the unsustainable use of chemically based plastics. The Northern Territory is not immune to the detrimental influence of the modern consumer age, but coexisting with these influences is an ancient living culture belonging to an extraordinary landscape. It is these elements that have fostered and facilitated the rise of Northern Territory fibre as a contemporary form of artistic expression.

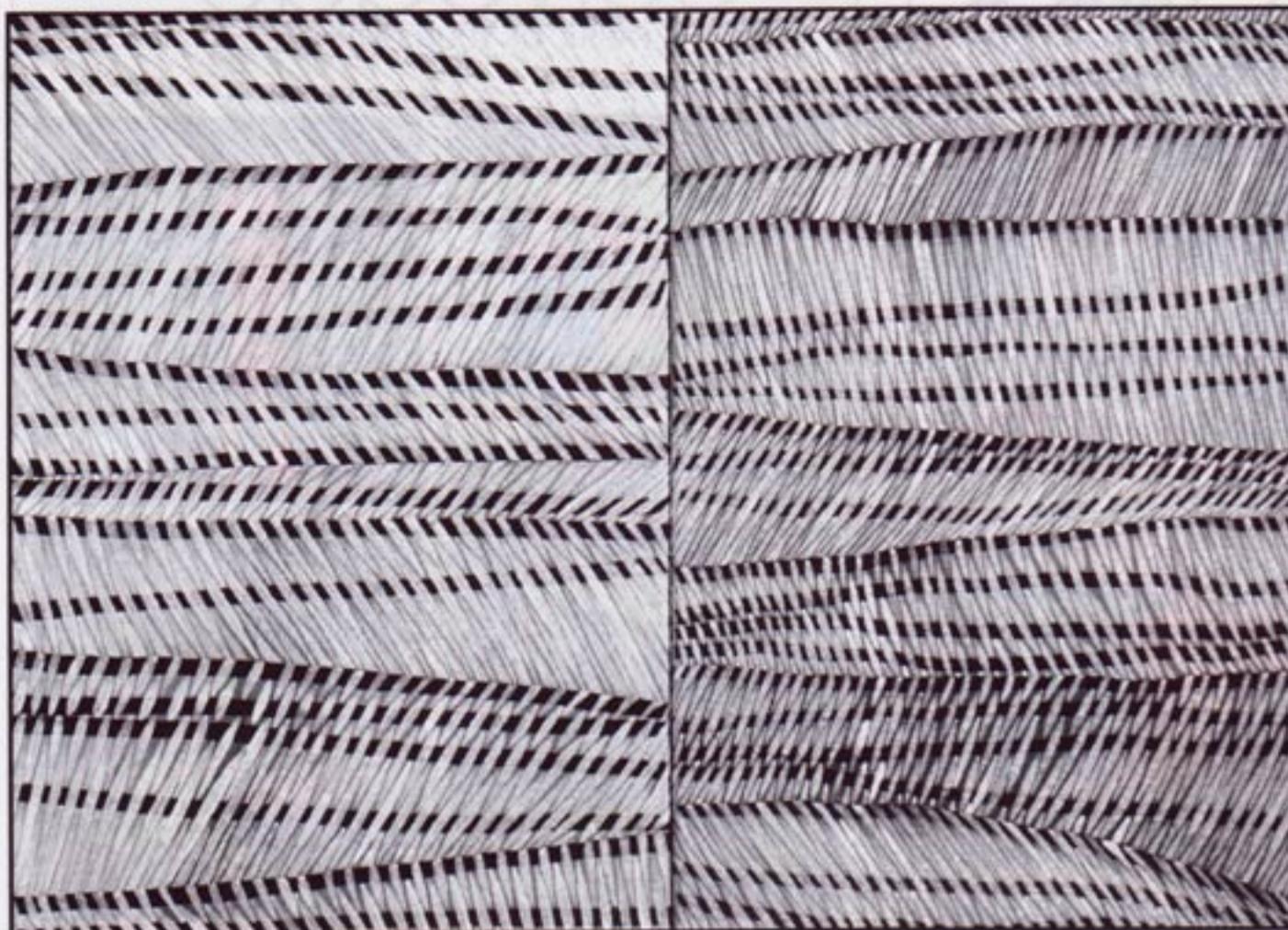
Weaving is a collective dialogue, representative of our connectedness to place and to one another. It is the combining of two elements sometimes described as the warp and the weft to create an entirely new object (and metaphorically a new reality). However it is not only the combination of warp and weft that is occurring here, it is also the combination of two paradigms of thought and/or influence, whether it is an unconscious or a conscious decision by the maker.

For the most part, it does not matter that the artist may not recognise that at sometime in the making they have drawn upon the influence of two knowledge systems - or, it could be said, two cultures - Indigenous and Western. It is the humble process of collecting materials directly from nature that knits people with place. In the Northern Territory the Indigenous traditional connection to land predominately remains unbroken (even if the federal government fails to fully recognise this). The woven object is a prime example of the continuity of Indigenous culture within a contemporary context. Typically the process of 'leaving for the day with the children all together in the back of a troop carrier, to collect (basketry materials) and if lucky, hunt',¹ is a very normal part of traditional Indigenous lifestyle.

The art of fibre has the transcendent ability to express a formal association with a particular location. Indigenous artists inherit their relationship from their ancestors, and through a life of living close to kin and to country attain a deeper understanding. Non-Indigenous makers of woven forms must cultivate their understanding of geography and environment. So it is in the Top End of the Territory that Indigenous fibre artists produce work that is based on thousands of years of weaving tradition, a tradition which remains dynamic. The fluidity of Aboriginal culture allows it to develop and negotiate the challenges and opportunities of contemporary life. The symbolic meanings encoded into the material culture of Indigenous fibre art are often overlooked.

So we have at the forefront of this renaissance Indigenous weavers harvesting materials from their homelands. Joining the Indigenous weavers now is a new generation of non-Indigenous artists who out of conscious desire are developing their own relationship to place. They explore themes of belonging while negotiating issues of postcolonialism and reconciliation....

Fibre artists in the Northern Territory who have incorporated Indigenous techniques and materials into their practice do not do so lightheartedly. They are acutely aware of the politics of appropriation, as Alison Gray curator at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory has stated: 'In the doing and making of fibre art, [their] respect for Indigenous cultures and the Indigenous landscape is given animation.'² This statement is a reflection of the respectful attitude fibre artists have for their Indigenous counterparts. It is the overlapping of ideologies that makes artists working with plant materials influential in terms of articulating a more holistic Australian identity.



Impelled by place and landscape, some artists examine their own notions of belonging. As painter Fiona Sivyer states, 'If it isn't your country, you haven't been brought up here, or you have no understanding of the environment you can feel a stranger within your own land'.³ When Sivyer moved to the Northern Territory in early 2002 as an artist-in-residence and painting lecturer at the now Charles Darwin University, she was struck by the difference of the Northern Territory. It is big sky country, the sun hotter, the light harsher, the culture and geography uniquely entwined. Sivyer recognises this in her painting process, as she references Indigenous weavers' practice of creating woven forms/objects out of geographically specific plant fibres. Sivyer draws upon the act of repetition mimicking the act of weaving; in doing so she creates meticulously constructed woven surfaces.

Sivyer's collaboration with artists from Munupi on the Tiwi Islands north of Darwin have heightened her awareness of Australia's postcolonial issues and 'aroused a deep sense of the importance of cultural and ecological factors in shaping a sense of identity and belonging'.⁴ Sivyer's acute observation of these issues coupled with her innovative approach to weaving with pigment has placed her within the landscape and into a cross-cultural environment. Sivyer offers the viewer a new way of seeing - not looking just at the landscape but also from within. Light filters through Sivyer's landscapes; perhaps it is the light of respect and recognition for Indigenous Australians' role as custodians of the land, and perhaps it is also from her relief at discovering that she too belongs.

There are other artists who push the ideology of 'weaving existence', further defining the idea that this movement is distinctly related to the Northern Territory. A recent graduate from Charles Darwin University, weaver Aly de Groot explores the potential of her environment for inspiring and informing her art practice. De Groot has the ability to intersperse a collection of chaotic substances with Indigenous plant fibres, using everything from old car tyres, barbed wire, found objects, and animal bones to rusted scrap metal - 'that, which is [often] overlooked'. This heightened awareness of her immediate environment allows de Groot to navigate the

relationships between people and place, Indigenous and Western. Adrienne Kneebone, another Northern Territory fibre artist who lives 'out bush', recognises a complicated identity arising from her own mixed ancestry and art practice. Kneebone's great grandfather was a strong man in the circus, an alternative space for people who struggled to secure a place in mainstream society. Within Kneebone's own family there has been speculation regarding the origins of her great grandmother. In more recent times some members of her family have begun to question whether or not their matriarch was Cherokee Indian or Indigenous Australian. Kneebone does not actively seek to discover whether her grandmother was one or the

other, but an awareness of origins does inform her own art practice. Kneebone's fibre art primarily begins with an intuitive art process; she surrounds herself with the raw materials of the traditional Indigenous weavers (pandanus and colour) and begins to create whilst continually questioning her right to do so.

Art is how we tell each other about ourselves. Possibilities arise from those artists who work within the realms of a cross-cultural ideology. It is in their commitment to develop a cross-cultural understanding - breaking ground to make new ground that means perhaps one day we can see *Yolngu* (Aboriginal people) and *Balandi* (European people) swimming together, sharing the mainstream of life.

Top of page, Momentous by Fiona Sivyer, acrylic on canvas, 60cm x 40cm (all over diptych). In the original manuscript, Fiona Gavino also pays tribute to Lena Yarinkura: "one of Australia's leading fibre artists. Yarinkura is Burnungku, a clan belonging to the Yirritja moiety, she resides at Bolkdjam an outstation near Maningrida in central Arnhem Land. Yarinkura's departure from the making of bags and baskets, into the production of narrative sculptures has enabled weaving to go beyond the boundaries of material culture (artifact) and become objects of fine art...."

Fiona Gavino, Aly de Groot and Adrienne Kneebone will exhibit with their respective mentors Gwen Egg, Wendy Golden and Nalda Searles in *Call and Response* a travelling exhibition through Territory Craft that will be launched at their Darwin Gallery, 8 September - 1 October, 2006. The show will subsequently be shown at Gallery 159 in Brisbane, mid-2007. Information from terracraftdwn@bigpond.com

³ Hali P., 2004, Unpublished paper, Alice Springs

⁴ Gray A., 2005, *Arafura Craft Exchange*, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

⁵ Sivyer F. cited by Anita Angel, 2004, *borders/borders*, Charles Darwin University

⁶ Ibid