

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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# SPECTRUM

## String Theory

August 31, 2013



*String Theory* is loosely defined as “a theory of everything” – which makes it an appropriate title for an exhibition at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#). Be prepared, however, for a different experience to that provided by the usual cutting-edge creations. Allowing for a few conspicuously sophisticated items, most of this show of indigenous fibre-based work could be

described as folk art, craft, or even Outsider Art. For curator, Glenn Barkley, this is the most exciting aspect of the project. “I would like to suggest,” he writes, “that Aboriginal textile-based art sits at the MCA’s core like a time bomb. It is a clear indication of Aboriginal art’s ability to rupture contemporary art’s trajectory.” Unless you’re a French intellectual, ‘rupture’ is a word that probably suggests a hernia rather than a radical destabilisation of the contemporary art scene. Nevertheless, it’s a seductive idea: insisting on the paradox of Aboriginal art being an utterly contemporary form of expression grounded in age-old traditions. It is an activity that doesn’t recognise the distinctions between amateur and professional that determine the way so much western art is displayed and sold.

In many cases indigenous art barely distinguishes the individual creator from the community in which he or she resides. There is a strong sense in which even the most talented artists are but vehicles through which a local culture and the spirit of the land find expression. While it’s obvious some artists are better than others, the subjects of their work are owned collectively. We can admire an artist’s technical skill or expressive flair, but never see him or her as separate from their homeland.

The “trajectory” Barkley finds so distasteful was in full flourish at this year’s Venice Biennale, in which the director, Massimiliano Gioni, offended the contemporary establishment by including folk art and Outsider art in the main exhibition. In a small way, *String Theory* restages this confrontation, suggesting that art can’t be right or wrong, only good or bad.



Robyn Djunginy, bottles, 2013, Pandanus, natural dyes



Dale Harding, Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls, 2013, hessian sacks, mohair wool

It is still difficult to assess quality without making some form of moral judgement, based on (unspoken) notions of authenticity. Aboriginal art has suffered in the past from being stigmatised as “folk art”, but Barkley would like to turn a negative into a positive. He sees “folk art” as a term that describes an activity centred on people rather than objects. Many of those works the curator finds so exciting as an expression of collective endeavour, will be less appealing to viewers. One

might expect to find these dolls, prints and baskets in a shop or market, rather than an exhibition at the MCA. In anticipation of such criticisms, designer Alison Page has been commissioned to create a shop in the midst of the show.

This is not only a retail outlet, it is a way of acknowledging the crucial role the art market has played in reviving and maintaining indigenous cultural traditions. Without a commercial incentive many of the greatest works of Aboriginal art would never have been created. The same applies to the dolls, textiles, baskets, prints, jewellery and miniature carvings that sell for smaller prices. The recent [Darwin Art Fair](#) was dominated by such work, which has become more pervasive as the steam has gone out of the high end of the market.

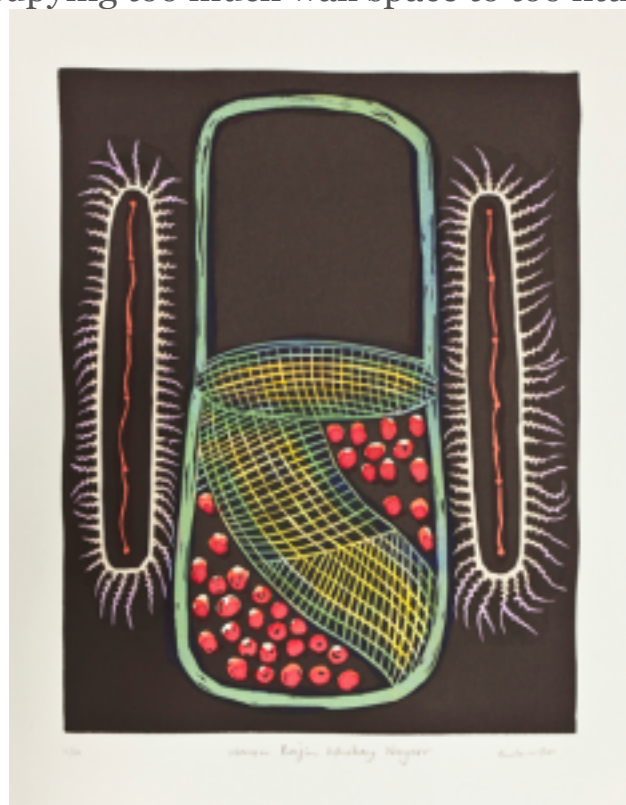
There is a logic to this, and an argument worth taking seriously. If I can't endorse *String Theory* wholeheartedly, it's because all these small objects and artifacts don't occupy the MCA galleries in a convincing fashion. The exhibition has a low-level visual impact, occasionally feeling empty and scrappy. This impression is reinforced by the central presence of the shop, even if it is a special designer version.

There is also a disjunction between the art made by artists from the communities and the politically charged work of urban artists such as Tony Albert, Laurie Nilsen and Dale Harding. Albert's photo-series called *Optimism*, features an indigenous man wearing a traditional woven basket draped over his back, in which different objects signify a variety of lifestyles and expectations.



Nilsen makes a stylish form of junk sculpture, using barbed wire, metal fan covers, and a mass of found objects. His work addresses issues such as the degradation of the environment and hostile attitudes towards Aboriginal people. It is broadly ironic in a way that bespeaks an acute conceptual awareness.

Dale Harding is the youngest of the trio. His most telling contribution is an installation of five tiny hessian sacks, embroidered with crowns, called *bright eyed little dormitory girls*. It refers to the hessian dresses girls in institutions were forced to wear as a form of demeaning punishment. The piece serves as a poignant reminder of the sort of 'care' handed out to children in the not-so-distant past. Another piece called *one's own country* is less successful, being nothing more than a rusty ball of steel wool, a needle and thread. The ideas behind the work are vaguely conceived, occupying too much wall space to too little effect.



Evelyn McGreen, Wawu Bajin Whukay, Basket for cherry and yam, 2009



Tony Albert, Optimism #2, 2008, Type C Photograph

By contrast there is a fresh, unaffected feeling about many of the dolls made by the Noongar artists of Western Australia, which are full of personality and stories, even though they will never be anything but minor works. Equally irresistible are the pandanus fibre bottles by Robyn Djunginy of Ramingining, which give an original twist to a traditional artform.

Arguably the two outstanding contributions to this show are the paintings of Pilawuk Regina Wilson, from Peppiminarti; and the ambitious collaborative sculptures made by the Tjanpi weavers of the western desert.

Wilson is the matriarch of the Peppiminarti community, 300 kilometres south-west of Darwin, which she and her husband, Harry Wilson, founded in 1973. Her people, the Ngangkurrungurr,

have always been weavers, making baskets, mats and fish traps out of native reeds and grasses. It took a visit to a Pacific Arts festival in 2000 to convince Wilson that she should try painting.

The works that resulted seem to have grown organically out of her weaving activities. A typical canvas is covered in threads of colour – criss-crossing, interlocking, forming discreet patches. Wilson's palette is often brilliant and unpredictable, but her trademark works, such as *Sun Mat* (2008), retain the yellow tones of the grass used for weaving. Translated onto canvas the mat seems to radiate heat and light. It's almost psychedelic.

The Tjanpi Desert Weavers are among the recent success stories of the Aboriginal art industry, being founded in 1995 by the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Women's Council. It is a collaboration in the best sense, in which women from different localities gather at a campsite to make work, sing, and swap stories. The process has encouraged the artists to make large, ambitious sculptures.

Their best-known piece is probably the *Tjanpi Grass Toyota*, which won the 2005 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. In preparing works for *String Theory*, three artists camps were held between April and June this year. Working with themes from the traditional story of the Seven Sisters, the women have created a range of hybrid forms that would look entirely at home in a Tim Burton film. This includes life-size woven female figurines seated on the floor; gnarled trees, with branches and roots exploding in all directions, and a group of women metamorphosing into trees.

One thinks inevitably of the tale of Daphne and Apollo, in which the nymph is transformed into a tree to avoid the god's unwelcome attentions. It is perhaps, a vindication of the show's title that the myths of the Greeks and Romans echo the stories of the desert people, which probably stretch back even further into the past.



Yarrenyty Aritere Artists, Little Dingy, 2012, dvd, photograph



Frances Djullbing, Yukuwa feather String Yam Vine(detail), 2003

We know that in Aboriginal culture the past, with its creation stories and mythical heroes, seems very much alive in the present. The spirits sang the features of the land into being, and the Tjanpi



Desert Weavers sing as part of their own creative processes. This intense interconnectedness which binds people, land and story so closely together, is the antithesis of life in modern urban societies, which only seems to grow more atomised and rootless.

It requires a leap of the imagination to find a vision of a more harmonious universe in a basket or a tiny doll, but it may be worth making the effort. This exhibition asks us to relinquish our ingrained taste for spectacle, and take pleasure in small things.

*String Theory: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art*

*Museum of Contemporary Art, August 17 – October 27, 2013*