

String Theory

Woven in 2-D Karen Mills

Booker-Lowe Gallery, Houston, Texas

27 September–3 November 2012

What I see in my work is the telling of the story about family and about culture. It's about children learning from adults how to make things. In the case of Aboriginal women, it's taking the children out bush to source materials and to talk about country, to share heritage and knowledge and then to make the bags. I'm really talking about the social context of family and culture. The string is a metaphor for this.

A conversation with Karen Mills, Booker-Lowe Gallery, Houston, Texas 29 September 2012

From her earliest childhood memories Darwin-based artist Karen Mills always made the looping mark, often as a doodle. It is a mark that has had many manifestations throughout her life, and it features in the paintings on display in her first international solo show, which opened at the Booker-Lowe Gallery in Houston, Texas in September 2012¹.

Woven in 2-D is made up of 10 small works (30 x 30 cm) and four large works (65 x 65 cm). The smaller scale works recall the crafts of lacework, crochet and knitting: intricate and intimate. 'I like to work in a small format. I see my work as being about the work of women and on a domestic scale', Mills explained in a gallery talk at Booker-Lowe that coincided with the opening of the exhibition. The larger works are looser, with generous negative space and shapes that drift across the canvas surface and become anchored on an edge – shifting continents coming to rest.

For Mills her muses are the weavers of Arnhem Land. The looping, weaving, coiling, loosely knotted string bags and tightly woven ceremonial dilly bags are reflected on her canvas. Some of the smaller works in the exhibition are bottle-shaped and inspired by Ramingining weaver Robyn Djunginy's bottle-shaped coil baskets. (The two artists were shown together in *Twined: weaving and abstraction*, curated by Fiona Macdonald at Cross Art Projects in Sydney, July–September 2010.) 'I like the curve of the line', Mills explained in her gallery talk, 'and for me some of them [Djunginy's woven bottles] could be read as land forms ... rocky outcrops'.

Mills was born in 1960 in the Northern Territory town of Katherine, when the population of the town was less than a thousand. As a baby she travelled with her mother more than 400 km to Elliot and was adopted by a schoolteacher stationed in the town at the time. Mills then travelled more than 2700 km from her birthplace to South Australia, where she was raised.

Mills' birth mother's country is near Kununurra in the Kimberley region of Western Australia – home to contemporary artists such as Freddie Timms, Lena Nyadbi, Patrick Mung Mung, Betty Carrington and Mills' grandmother Kittey Malarvie. Mills is now based in the tropical climes of Palmerston, a satellite city of Darwin, where she has lived since first travelling to reconnect with family more than 30 years ago. She mostly paints in her Palmerston studio but has also started to work onsite in Kununurra.

Like other Northern Territory painterly painters and master mark-makers (Neridah Stockley, Jenny Taylor and Marina Strocchi), Mills operates in the global contemporary art space, in the tradition of artists such as fellow Australian metaphysical landscape artist Dale Frank, German Gerhard Richter, Belgian Luc Tuymans and South African Marlene Dumas: artists who push, pull and ply paint around the canvas, channelling history and memory as they go. Mills' utopian non-objective impulse is in the tradition of abstraction – paint is just paint and the conversation is with the canvas. However, for this exhibition in Houston her work is mostly figurative: the shapes unmistakable string bags, baskets, dilly bags. Her work could be read as belonging to the tradition that critic and theorist Clement Greenberg coined 'Post-Painterly Abstraction': her paintings mirror the gestural sweeping brushwork of the Abstract Expressionists when she works large enough; her use of layering echoes the stained surfaces of the Colour Field artists. And yet, like Stockley, Taylor and Strocchi, Mills' art is inextricably and instinctively the place and space of the Australian landscape.

The articulation of her painterly vision is only possible at the nexus of her experience and influences as an Aboriginal woman in contemporary Australia, a place of both deep connection and belonging to country, and also disjuncture and dislocation from a nation in denial of its own history. While Mills' job is to paint, there are inescapable politics: an Aboriginal person who continues to express their connection to country and culture, despite a history of invasion and intrusion, and in the face of policies of intervention, is making the political statement that they are still here. Mills' string theory connects to the beginning of the universe and to creation and to the Aboriginal ancestors who travelled across the land and made everything: who took on the form of dilly bags, string bags, fish traps and other ceremonial objects and left themselves behind to become the country and all of its features, and as tools for people to use to hunt, to eat and to survive. Traces of the ancestors live on in the loops and knots and string that bind these objects together today and also bind them to the past.

Mills paints standing above her canvas, which lies stretched and face-up on the studio table, a choice also made by one of the most well known of the Colour Field artists and Abstract Expressionists, Helen Frankenthaler, who moved from a Pollock-style of painting above the canvas laid out on the floor to a waist-high table later in her career. This posture and proximity to the canvas restricts the artist from being able to manoeuvre around the work or make the sweeping gestures with the brush enabled

with the canvas laid out on the floor. Mills surveys the surface from a vantage point hovering above it, any part of the canvas in easy reach. She works across it, feeling her way. The layering of the surface is built up using various mediums to thicken and to thin and fragments of old canvas stored in her studio cut into strips. Paint is applied with everyday implements: Mills' string marks are made with syringes or icing bags, tools drawn from the domestic realm.

Thin layers of paint are built up using more transparent colours such as red and yellow. 'It's really about the paint, working with the paint and the process of doing that... the property of the pigment', Mills said in her Booker-Lowe gallery talk. The layering technique and reading of the pigment is reminiscent of the work of Frankenthaler. When speaking of pictorial choices, Frankenthaler said that her decision-making process was wholly unregimented. 'There is no "always",' she said, 'no formula. There are no rules. Let the picture lead you where it must go.'²

'Some days I only get to a couple of layers. I have them [the canvases] on the table, walk around, look at them, think about them, think about what the painting is saying – have more thoughts, come back, do another couple of layers. It is very much an intuitive process so I don't really know what they are going to turn out like: it's my conversation with the work that is really developing.' Mills said.

Building up layer upon layer can be a time-consuming and anxiety-ridden process: When to pull back? When to keep going? How will the pigments, medium and layers resist and surrender to each other? If you look down along the walls of the Booker-Lowe Gallery to the sides of Karen Mills' 30 x 30 cm canvas works you will see the accretions of texture. From a side-on view the built-up surface silhouette of each painting is a testament to the labour of the artist. Some of the colours that drip down the sides are no longer evident on the surface of the canvas – they are hidden below, secreted akin to the layer of red ochre that is laid down at the beginning of Arnhem Land bark paintings, of the rarrk pattern that masks the sacred designs and hidden meaning of Maningrida artist John Mawundjul's work and of the Central Australian desert artists who hide restricted information below layers.

The painterly traditions of the Abstract Expressionists; the maestros of surface and texture such as Jules Olitski; the spiritual pursuit of the De Stijl artists; an equal concern for positive and negative space; inescapable family origin – these are the layers of Mills' deceptively simple works. The latest re-emergence of interest in string theory seems to have been brought on by a frenzied response to a perceived end of the world pre-empted by the expiry of the Mayan calendar. String theory: a desperate scrambling for the meaning of everything and a search for the origin of us. Mills' paintings: the ancestor's journey, the knotted string bag, the cycle of life, cultural continuity. They are like string – without beginning or end. Stringing it all together, to use Mills' own metaphor, is cultural continuation and survival.

Karen Mills' paintings have been included in curated exhibitions, group and solo exhibitions at Cross Art Projects in Sydney, Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne and Karen Brown Gallery in Darwin. Mills has travelled internationally for inspiration on several artist-in-residence and studio programs. She was awarded the inaugural Wenten Rubuntja Fellowship of six weeks in New York in 2006 and a residency in Banff, Canada in 2009, specifically for Indigenous Artists whose background was one of separation from family.

Current projects include Cross Art Projects with Kittey Malarvie of Waringarri Arts, Kununurra where Mills has recently been an artist-in-residence painting alongside her family.

Woven in 2-D was on show at Booker-Lowe Gallery, Houston from 27 September to 3 November 2012.

Texere – to weave new paintings by Karen Mills was on show at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne in April 2011.

Twined: weaving and abstraction curated by Fiona Macdonald, Robyn Djunginy and Karen Mills, was exhibited at Cross Art Projects, Sydney, from July to September 2010.

Michelle Culpitt studied art and media at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and Sydney College of the Arts. She is currently the Senior Program Manager at Desert Inc in Alice Springs and has worked in various arts-based roles over the past 14 years, including at the Biennale of Sydney, Maningrida Arts and Culture, and the Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA). She is currently completing a Masters in International Development through RMIT, Melbourne.

References

¹ The Booker-Lowe Gallery was established in 2002 by Nana Booker (also Australia's Honorary Consul of the State of Texas) and her partner David Lowe. Mills was invited to exhibit her work as part of the gallery's 10-year anniversary.

² Loos, T. 2003. 'Back to the Future Helen Frankenthaler', *New York Times*: April 27, 2003 retrieved 02/01/2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/27/arts/art-architecture-helen-frankenthaler-back-to-the-future.html?scp=1&sq=Helen%20Frankenthaler,%20Back%20to%20the%20Future%200&st=cse>