

## Following lines: Art and Ecology from Merrepen Arts

*What we are doing by making this art, these designs, is inviting people to see the world as we see it. To see it through our eyes - Patricia Marrfurra McTaggart AM*

Two hundred and twenty five kilometres southwest of Darwin, artists from Merrepen Arts are at the forefront of a resurging Indigenous textile movement. What began in the late 1970s has re-emerged over the past five years as an exciting contemporary art form that is rapidly drawing national and international attention.

The designs have always been there. Long before the community and the art centre was established, as an inherited, encyclopaedic visual language that communicated the intimate knowledge and connection the Ngen'gi wumirri and Ngan'gi kurrungurr people have with their natural environment.

Nauiyu, the home of Merrepen Arts, is an Aboriginal community located on the Daly River, surrounded by hills, spectacular wetlands and billabongs. There is an abundant supply of bush-tucker including barramundi, which sees keen fishermen flock to the region during dry season. The art centre in Nauiyu was originally established as a Women's Centre in 1986 with Merrepen Arts, Language and Culture Aboriginal Corporation founded in 1992. The name *Merrepen* (Livistonia Palm) was chosen in recognition of the founding women and the natural material they would use to weave fish traps, mats, dillybags and baskets; a practice that continues today. Since the inception of the art centre artists have worked across a range of mediums including acrylic paint on canvas, etching and printmaking, cast glass, silk batik and of course, the hand screen printed textiles for which they have since become renowned.

Merrepen Arts has a long history of printmaking practice with artists having collaborated in workshops with printmaker Basil Hall for over two decades. The first print workshop was held at the art centre in the late 1980s. Textile screen printing soon followed with artists such as Molly Yawalminy, Mercia Wawol, Patricia Marrfurra, Gracie Kumbi, Christina Yambeing, Ann Carmel Mulvien, Henry Sambono, Margaret Gilbert and the late Mary Kangi translating their designs to layers on acetates. In 2011, an invitation to textile designer Bobbie Ruben saw her host a series of workshops at Merrepen Arts over two years. The partnership provided an opportunity for the artists to refine their techniques and produce a series of highly contemporary, sophisticated designs which immediately commanded attention and shifted audience perceptions of Indigenous Australian textiles.

Rhythmic lines drawn by the artists evoke the swelling waterways, the mist from the hot springs, the bundles of *merrepen* and *yerrgi* (pandanus) ready for weaving, the skin and the eye of a crocodile submerged in the mighty Daly River, the subtle shifts that to a trained eye signify the changing seasons.

Artists Gracie Kumbi, in her intricate *Yam* 2015, and Ann Carmel Mulvien, in *Lotus Leaf* 2013, offer striking celebrations of traditional plant-based foods which continue to be collected and coveted today. For Marita Sambono it is the power and beauty of elemental

occurrences that are a constant source of inspiration, such as in her acclaimed textile *Fog Dreaming* 2013. Yambeing's *Billabong* 2013, a complex five-screen textile design, evokes images of women wading through the water, collecting lotus pods and stems to be eaten. In her *Mud* 2011 textile and *Mud* 2012 painting on canvas, Yambeing recalls the texture of drying mud after the 2011 Daly River flood- an event that saw the community accessible only by boat for almost two months.

The designs not only represent skilled ecological observations; they are documents of personal histories. In Patricia Marrfurra's *Seed Pods* 2012 the artist recalls a childhood memory: "I remember as a young girl we would play with these seed pods. We would put them over heels and walk up and down the steps of the church, to make the same sound as the ladies shoes when they walked in" she recalls, laughing.

Aaron McTaggart's *Crocodile Skin* 2012 and *Crocodile Eye* 2012 textile designs relate directly to his Child Spirit story. An incident with a crocodile was the signifier to his mother, Patricia Marrfurra, that she was pregnant. When Aaron was born he bore a mark on his head in the same place that crocodile was shot. For his brother, Kieren Karritpul, interpretations of woven forms and plant materials are homage to his mothers, grandmothers and aunties, the strong women who have surrounded him throughout his life imparting to him their traditional knowledge. Karritpul won the inaugural Youth Award at the prestigious 3<sup>1st</sup> *Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards* for his textile work *Yerrgi* 2014; a depiction of bundles of prepared and dyed pandanus ready for weaving. He continues to interpret elements of weaving in his bold paintings on canvas, with fine, colourful lines that depict *yerrgi* traditional woven fishnets.

Artists from Merrepen Arts have become renowned for their sophisticated and highly contemporary sense of design, which is applied to a range of artistic mediums. However it is the stories behind the surface, stories that speak of an intimate understanding of the natural environment as well as personal histories, which will remain their enduring legacy.

Marie Falcinella

Marie Falcinella is a Project Coordinator and Curator. She was Interim Manager at Merrepen Arts in 2015, has worked with Elcho Island Arts and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre and was Gallery Manager and Senior Curator of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.