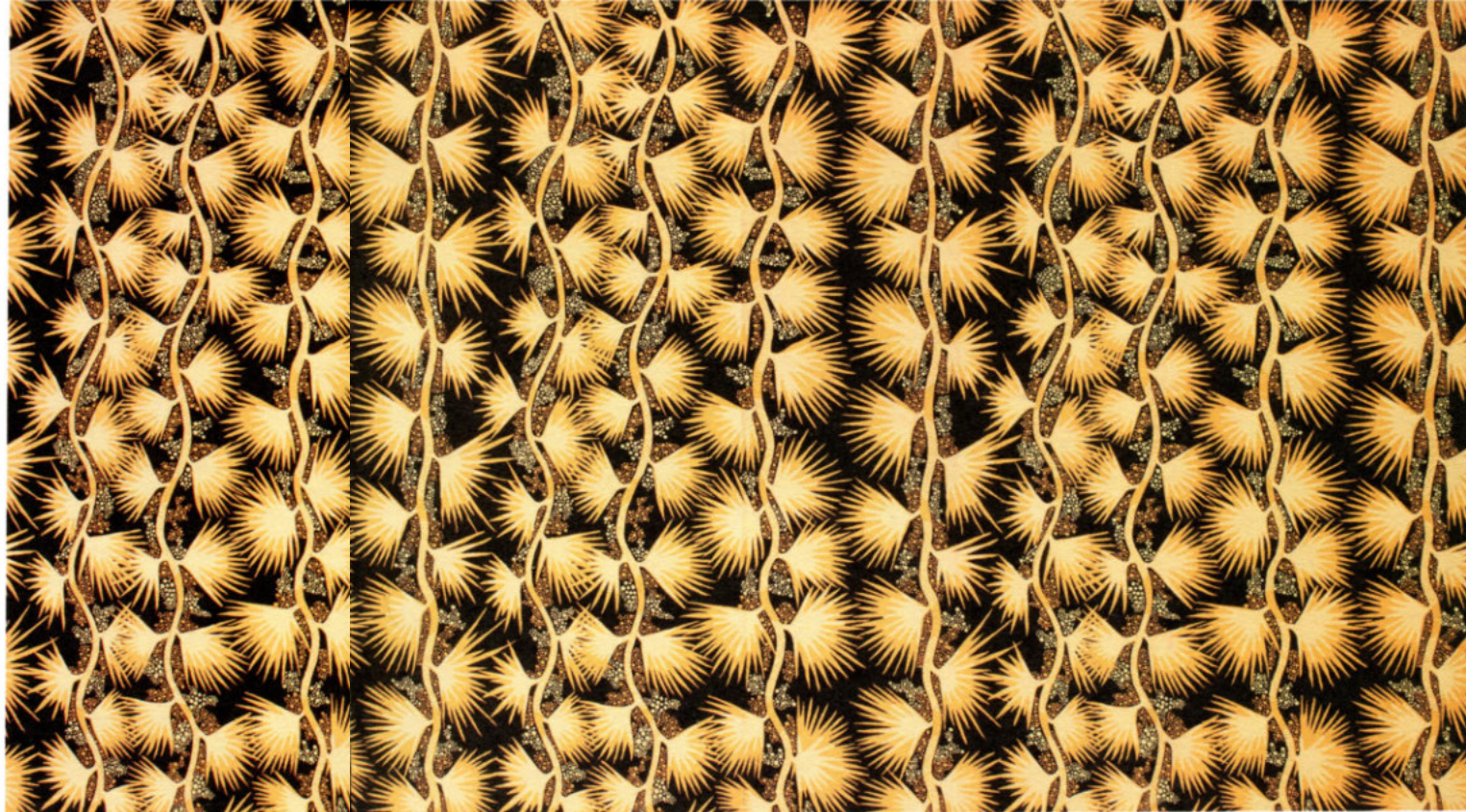


NEW ACQUISITION

Textiles from Merrepen Arts

ANNE-MARIE VAN DE VEN — CURATOR



INDIGENOUS TEXTILE PRODUCTION is re-emerging as an exciting contemporary art form, and six striking new designs have recently been added to the Museum's contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island (ATSI) arts and design collection. All were produced by artists working at the Merrepen Arts Centre located at Nauiyu Nambiyu, a small Aboriginal community of around 450 residents situated approximately three hours south-west of Darwin. Four leading Merrepen artists are represented in this new acquisition: Marita Sambono, Gracie Kumbi, Ann Carmel Mulvien and Kieren Karripul.

The name Merrepen refers to the *Livistonia* palm tree (commonly known as the cabbage-tree palm) that grows on the banks of the river. It was chosen in recognition of the founding women and the natural material they used to weave fish traps, mats, dillybags and baskets — a practice that continues today. Around 20 artists work at the Merrepen Arts Centre. In refining their techniques, these artists have become renowned for sophisticated designs that speak of personal histories, skilled ecological observation and an intimate understanding of the natural environment. Designs are usually screen-printed onto a base cloth of linen or 100% cotton drill, but sometimes also on to silk.

Inspiration for Marita Sambono's work comes from the power and beauty of elemental occurrences in nature. In the case of *Fog Dreaming* (2013) it is the soft ethereal fog that, from time to time, converges on the wetlands. When crafted into a dress by Raw Cloth of Darwin, this design won the Myer Fashions on the Field award at the Melbourne Cup in 2013.

Fog Dreaming and Gracie Kumbi's *Merrepen* are iconic works as they relate closely to the wetland environment surrounding the centre.

Kumbi has a distinctive style, creating patterns to complement her painting, which makes her work eminently suitable for the production of textile repeats. She has converted the Merrepen leaves into a heraldic motif that reflects not only the environment in which she lives and draws inspiration, but also the origins of the centre. In her work there is a sense that designs existed in nature, long before the community and the centre were established. *Yam* by Kumbi (2014) and *Lotus Leaf* (also called *Lotus Pod*) by Ann Carmel Mulvien (2012) work in the same way — celebrating the traditional plant-based foods that continue to be collected and coveted at Nauiyu Nambiyu today. Lotus plants are found in abundance in the many billabongs in the area.

Award-winning emerging young Top End artist Kieren Karripul is another of the Merrepen artists represented. His work pays homage to his mothers, grandmothers and aunts: the strong women who have surrounded him throughout his life, imparting their traditional knowledge. In 2014 Karripul won the inaugural Youth Award at the prestigious 31st Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards for his textile work *Yerrgi*. This work depicts bundles of prepared and dyed yerrgi, or pandanus, ready for weaving. The other acquired design by Karripul, *Fish Net* (2013), pays tribute to traditional woven yerrgi fish-nets.

Together, these six works reflect outstanding contemporary Indigenous art and design practice, complementing the Museum's existing woven, screen-printed and batik ATSI textile collection.

Three of the textiles are currently on display in the large showcase outside the theatres on Level 2 of the Powerhouse Museum. ▀

Textile length, *Merrepen*, screenprint on linen, designed and made by Gracie Kumbi, Merrepen Arts Centre, Nauiyu on the Daly River, Northern Territory, Australia, 2013.