2018

Milingimbi Artists Partnerships

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Hamby, Louise, "Milingimbi Artists Partnerships" (2018). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1077.
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

**Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018**

Published in *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018*

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

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Milingimbi Artists Partnerships

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The concept of “Deep Local” for the Textile Society of America is one that applies to many Indigenous people in remote parts of the world including Australia. Arnhem Land Aboriginal people have beliefs and practices that are closely linked to their land and ancestral beliefs. This connection to country is manifest in their artistic practices which are not static but reflect the changes in their society. For this paper I explore a project with many participants that resulted in a cross-cultural work known as the Reflection Pods. The cultural influences did not come just from the makers but from the concept originator. This work reflects on the history of Arnhem Land people with outsiders from the past and demonstrates their ability to work with outsiders today to produce successful work in the market place that anchors itself in their own country. It also shows the complexity that comes from collaborations with more than two groups of people.

Reflection Pods

The work, Reflection Pods, resides within Westpac Bank in their headquarters on busy Kent St in Sydney, 3,000 kilometres from the artist’s home. The work is composed of three individual units. The fibre panels are clustered together to form a circular structure varying in overall diameter up to three and a half meters. Each of the Reflection Pods creates an individual environment that is secluded from the others by a high circular wall that opens to show the view down Sydney Harbour. These dome environments are located in the non-public area on the fifteenth floor of the bank near their private café area. Primarily they provide a more intimate secluded space for either individual introspection or for small to medium size meetings.

Figure 1- Reflection Pods, Westpac Bank, Sydney, 2018. Photo: Westpac Bank

Cultural Influences on Country of the Makers

For this project there are several local environments that come into play through its conceptual development and in the realisation of the project. I begin with the local

environment of the primary makers of the textile panels that fit onto, in and surround the metal frame structure. The makers of the textile panels are Aboriginal women who live on the island of Milingimbi and Elcho Island in eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. The people from eastern Arnhem Land are known as Yolngu and have had a long engagement with people outside of their country. Being surrounded by the ocean Yolngu are at home in the water and gain much of their food from fishing and diving in local waters. This made them ideal partners in trade with the earliest arrivals to the islands, the Macassan traders. This group was a mixture of races from the Malaysian and Indonesian archipelagos, most commonly called Malays or Macassans. Their primary objective was to obtain trepang from the fertile waters surrounding Aboriginal land.

Many items of material culture were given or traded to Aboriginal men for their labour in procuring and preparing trepang. The most relevant item for Deep Local was the dug-out canoe. The praus that brought the Macassans to Arnhem Land were sail driven. Yolngu quickly saw the advantage of having sails for their canoes. Instead of cloth sails used by the Macassans they started making sails from pandanus which they called *garrurru*. The techniques and the materials they employed for the sails were entrenched into their way of life. Yolngu already made large flat items like fish fences. These were made from pandanus and attached to branches in small streams to block the movement of fish. The technique of twining that was used for the sails was already in their repertoire from the construction of mats and baskets. The sails made by Yolngu reflected not only the culture of the Macassans but also their own.

This knowledge is known by both men and women. The late Aboriginal scholar, Neparrnga Gumbula, highlighted this information in his exhibition *Makarr-Garma Aboriginal collections from a Yolngu perspective* held at the Macleay Museum at Sydney University in 2009. He included a model of a dugout canoe, *lipalipa*, and a sail. 'This lipalipa shows the knowledge that the Makassans have given to the Yolngu people when they visited the Arnhem Land shore from the 16th century, when they did trade in conjunction with Yolngu.'

¹

Joe Gumbula reaffirmed this with a story about his grandmother:

My mari (grandma), my mother's mother, her name was Gutjuringu and she was a Mandjikay woman. She was a sailmaker, a weaver and she would actually build the sails in her 'factory', if we put it that way. During that time she was making lots of baskets, a sail is another artwork, you sit on top of it and you start weaving on the floor, on the ground, and it takes you a long time. You have to lay down to stretch your back. It's a long job, and a big job that women carried out. In the Yolngu style of living, when that canoe is going to the open to fetch something like fish, to bring back good meat or big meat like turtle, they actually bring some of the meat, the big meat, back home just for that lady, for the manufacture of that sail. They always give that return gift and that return gift, we have that, still that's part of our understanding and part of our culture as well, we share things.²

¹ Joe Neparrnga Gumbula. *Makarr-Garma Aboriginal Collections from a Yolngu Perspective* (Sydney: Macleay Museum, 2009), 46.

² Ibid.

Contact Zone of the Reflection Pods

The new museology with its emphasis on museums as contact zones owes its theoretical formation to two individuals who are not museum curators or anthropologists. A great debt to the field is owed to Mary Louise Pratt who is a Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures at New York University. This is her definition of the term. 'I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.'³ Pratt's term may be extreme for the circumstances of the Reflection Pods but does reflect the coming together of different parties with varying degrees of control and contact with each other. I will explore the relationships between the players, their country and how these factors influenced the development of the Reflection Pods.

Westpac

The instigator of the Reflection Pod project is one of the largest banking firms in Australia, Westpac in Sydney. It was part of the major refurbishment of their Kent Street Office which coincided with their 200th anniversary. Part of the vision of Westpac is that this project would be part of their Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). In Australia most organisations have a Reconciliation Action Plan often know as RAP.⁴ The RAP provides a framework to contribute towards a reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities and the wider Australian public. A RAP is designed to build and encourage relationships, embed respect and to develop opportunities to improve socio-economic outcomes. As Sasha Titchkosky, one of the collaborators in the project explained, 'All the big Australian corporations have reconciliation plans but beyond having a welcome to country, unless they are active in the region where they can employ Indigenous workers, they don't really know how to give form to them.'⁵ Westpac Nicole Howard looks after Major Property Projects and the Kent Street Refurbishment. She has been the liaison person between the bank and other parties involved in the development of the Reflection Pods. The interior design firm Geyer is responsible for the design of the Kent Street fit-out and are committed to having an agile working environment providing more flexibility.

Lucy Simpson

Indigenous designer, Lucy Simpson, has had an ongoing design relationship with Westpac since 2013 through her company Gaawaa Miyay. She is a Yuwaalarraay woman from northwest New South Wales. She has produced designs for logos, wall designs and her graphics have been used by the firm THERE to provide signage, wayfinding and environmental branding in the refurbishment. Nicole Howard approached Simpson to see if she was interested in working on the refurbishment project. At that point Howard was referring to the piece as a type of reflection pod that had some type of overhanging component.

Simpson developed the concept that was originally telling a Sydney story as the Headquarters for the bank was located in Sydney. Combining her own Yuwaalarraay concepts with those

³ Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991), 40.

⁴ "Reconciliation Australia." Reconciliation.org.au. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation-action-plans/> (Accessed 13 August 2018).

⁵ Stephen Todd, "Westpac HQ's Revamp Showcases Aboriginal Artistry with Koskela Woven Domes." *Afr.Com.* <https://www.afr.com/brand/life-and-leisure/koskela-woven-domes-put-aboriginal-artistry-at-heart-of-westpac-hqs-revamp-20180613-h11ci1>. (Accessed 18 June 2018).

of Eora Nation clan groups, local to Sydney, about women and their communications through meeting together she called the piece Dyalgala.⁶ The name Dyalgala is used by the southern Sydney Aboriginal language group Dharawal and the Dharug, groups of the Eora Nation⁷. The concept of Dyalgala (to hold / embrace) combined with the notion of creating a space to hold a moment, a thought, a presence was incorporated with notions of making, community and exchange to form the idea of the pods.⁸ Simpson's idea was that the making be undertaken by south-eastern makers so as to tie in with the Sydney story and local materiality.⁹

Figure 2 – Simpson involvement on plaque and placement on wall in Westpac. Photo: Louise Hamby and Westpac.

This concept would have situated the project with the Deep Local of the Sydney area but this was not to be the case. Unfortunately, Simpson was not able to oversee the production of the work and this aspect of the project was given to Koskela as they had also worked with Westpac and had existing relationships with artists in Arnhem Land.

Koskela

Koskela is an interior design firm located in Sydney founded in 2000 that has as a goal to sell and produce Australian products and be champions of social enterprise. It is owned and operated by the husband and wife team of Russel Koskela and Sasha Titchkosky. For Koskela this has meant all Australians including Indigenous ones. In an effort to make that happen Titchkosky attended the 2006 Selling Yarns event held in Darwin. From there she made connections with Elcho Island artists and started working with them in 2008.¹⁰ The successful collaboration between the community and Koskela resulted in the project called Yuta Badayala, a series of lampshades that were made with natural fibres twined and coiled over frames made by Koskela. This project became very special to the team at Koskela.

⁶ Lucy Simpson, "Lucy Simpson and Dyagala." Interview by Louise Hamby. Audio Recording, Sydney, 23 June 2018.

⁷ Les Bursill, Mary Jacobs, Deborah Lennis, Beryl Timbrey-Beller, and Merv Ryan, *Dharawal: The Story of the Dharawal Speaking People of Southern Sydney*. (2001), Sydney. n.p.
http://www.lesbursill.com/site/PDFs/_Dharawal_4Sep.pdf.

⁸ Gaawaa Miyay Facebook page. Accessed 20 June 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/GMiyay/posts/>, 2018a.

⁹ Lucy Simpson, Dyalgala," Interview by Louise Hamby, Audio Recording, Sydney, June 21, 2018.

¹⁰ Louise Hamby, "Cross-Cultural Collaborations: Editorial," *Craft Australia*. 2010.

Figure 3- Yuta Badayala, Object Gallery, February 2010. Photo: Louise Hamby

We feel extremely privileged to have been given an insight into the Yolngu culture and to have developed relationships with the wonderful weavers at Elcho Island Arts. The lights are so special as they are the embodiment of this culture and spirit and are filled with the stories and laughter of their makers.¹¹

Koskela also undertook a commission for the award-winning restaurant Noma in Copenhagen. They wanted to commission a unique art piece with Australian Indigenous artists. Koskela returned to Elcho and the artists, Mavis Warrngilna Ganambarr, Judy Manany, Margaret Dhorrpuy, Ruth Lulwarriwuy, Megan Djuramalwuy Yunupingu and Helen Gatjikin produced panels for the wall sculpture. They would later be associated with the Reflection Pods.

Milingimbi Art and Culture

In the next level of commissioning of the Refection Pod, the Milingimbi Art and Culture Centre, the not for profit community owned and governed centre became a key player.

MAC supports artists to create contemporary artworks in line with the artists and directors vision of continuing to uphold traditional skills and values. MAC also provides artists with access to digital archives of historical artwork and delivers projects aimed at supporting elders to transfer knowledge and practical skills. MAC is also a hub where artists come together daily to create artwork, advise the art centre coordinators,

¹¹ “Koskela Yuta Badayala,” <https://www.koskela.com.au/yuta-badayala-1>, January 3, 2014.

assist with adding information to the digital database or to simply be part of the social atmosphere.¹²

Milingimbi Art and Culture Centre then became the administrators for the Reflection Pod on the ground at the most local level. They employed the artists at Milingimbi and three from Elcho Island. Both MAC and Titchkosky felt that the women at Milingimbi would benefit from having other experienced Yolngu women helping them. Elcho artists, Mavis Ganambarr, Judy Manany and Margaret Dhorrpuy, were all adept in working on and around a frame from their lampshades and the work for Noma. Milingimbi Art and Culture staff made the arrangements, including funding through ANKA (Arnhem Northern & Kimberley Artists, Aboriginal Corporation) for them to travel to Milingimbi and spend seven days with the Milingimbi artists. At that time the Elcho Island Art Centre was not able to facilitate this activity.

The Milingimbi artists are a group of women varying in age and experience and all are part of Milingimbi Art and Culture centre. They share fibre practice and often kinship and the Art Centre provides the opportunity to work together regardless of kin or clan relationships. They include Helen Ganalmirriwuy, Susan Balbunga, Helen Milminydjarrk, Zelda Wuigir, Elizabeth Rukarriwuy, Abigail Mundjala, Rosetta Wayatja, Rhonda Gapirrawuy, Debbie Wuduawuy, Sabrina Roy, Jennifer Brown, Sandra Manydjurrpuy, Joyce Naliyabu (now deceased), Mandy Batjula, Ruth Nalmakarra, Margaret Balayu, Margaret Rarru and Frances Rrikili. Ganalmirriwuy, Milminydjarrk, Nalmakarra and Rarru are sisters, all being Garrawurra. The oldest maker is Margaret Rarru and one of the youngest one is Abigail Mundjala.

Some of us are family and some Yolngu (people) we didn't know, some of us have been weaving for a long time and a few are just starting to learn, we are from different clans and live in different camps but all of us are working together.¹³

The women have a shared history particularly in regard to the Macassan visitors to their respective islands. In both places, aspects of Macassan culture have become part of the local culture. They also share the missionary experience that was not only about the Christian faith but the ethics of work and importance of their own fibre practice. The missionaries Harold and Ella Shepherdson started their work at Milingimbi and then moved to Elcho Island during World War II. They encouraged fibre production for women and were involved with the introduction of the coiling technique that is now part of the repertoire of fibre practice in Arnhem Land.

The Development at Milingimbi

In May 2017 the fibre work began on the Reflection Pod. The Koskela team of Sasha Titchkosky and Dr Harriet Fesq, curator, arrived on the island along with the women from Elcho Island. During this time MAC assisted the artists to collect fibres and dyes from Langarra and Rapuma, other islands near Milingimbi. Pandanus had thorns removed, split,

¹² Rosita Holmes, "Statement about Reflection Pods," Interview by Louise Hamby. Audio recording. Milingimbi, February 2017.

¹³ Susan Balbunga, Helen Ganalmirriwuy, Helen Milminydjarrk, Abigail Mundjala, Elizabeth Rukarriwuy, and Selda Wuigir, "Milingimbi Artist's Statement," Milingimbi Art and Culture, (unpublished manuscript) 2017.

dried and dyed. Kurrajong was cut, bark removed, beaten and/or spun depending on use. The first stages after preparing the material involved wrapping the frames with kurrajong fibre. This provided the starting point for a variety of techniques and patterns to be completed. Often the material consisted of beaten kurrajong that was coiled with string made from the fibre.

The Elcho women returned home and completed the petals for the large Reflection Pod there. MAC coordinated the packing and shipping of those frames to Sydney to Koskela. Milingimbi Art and Culture Centre continued to work with the artists at Milingimbi to ensure the completion of each panel in line with the design brief.

We work together at the Milingimbi Art and Culture - everyday harvesting gunga ga bulgurr (pandanus and kurrajong), peeling the gunga, twining balgurr string and weaving together. We come to the art centre every morning doing djama (weaving work). Going home keep doing djama 5, 6, 7 o'clock lights on now. 8, 9 o'clock. At the wanga (home) the grandchildren are helping, collecting firewood and roots, bark and leaves (used for dying natural fibres). This is how they learn their culture and law.¹⁴

Children and others often came to the Art Centre to see and learn what was happening. It became a community affair. Local dogs, like three-legged Mambur and Sparkles, became part of the action, going collecting, sleeping and sitting by the works or observing in general at the Art Centre.

Figure 4 - Helen Milminydjarrk, Elizabeth Rukarriwuy, J. Naliyabu (dec), Mandy Gaykamangu, Helen Ganalmirriwuy working on frames with dogs watching at Art Centre, 2018. Photo: Louise Hamby

The djamarrkuli (kids) came from the school (as part of the Junior Crocodile Rangers program). They are looking at what we are doing and walking around to see the new artwork.¹⁵

¹⁴ Balbunga et al., "Milingimbi Artist's Statement," 2017

¹⁵ Ibid.

The role of Koskela after their initial visit was completed at a distance in Sydney. They were responsible for the final selection of the panels for each pod and the lighting that is an integral part of the experience. Beautiful shadows are cast onto the walls echoing the intricate textile techniques. They worked with the design team at Westpac for the final look of the project.

Materials and processes of cultural identity

A closer look at the materials and processes involved in the Reflection Pods demonstrate the links to local identity. The women and their traditions are entwined into the Pod. The work is not only a place of reflection and contemplation but one where different localities come together with the dominant one being Arnhem Land. The materials used in the fibre construction, pandanus and kurrajong, are the main ones used by the artists at Milingimbi and Elcho for their individual work. They are also the fibers for the Reflection Pod. *Gunga*, *Pandanus spirailis*, is the principle fibre used for baskets and mats. *Balgurr*, kurrajong, *Brachychiton megaphyllus*, fibre is primarily used for making string for bags, nets and handles for twined baskets. The same natural dyes used in their personal fibre work was also employed for the Westpac piece. *Djundum* yellow, *Pogonolobus reticulatus*, *gultiji-gultiji* brown, *Haemodorum brevicale*, and *mul* black, *Petalostigma pubescens* are some of the local colours and dye plants used by the women.

Figure 5 – Cross-twining and open twining with pandanus on a petal. Photo: Louise Hamby

The techniques employed by the artists are part of the repertoire of constructions methods used in their artwork. They include twining, coiling, looping, knotting and wrapping. A main distinguishing factor for the Reflection Pods is that all of these are now used flat and worked around a steel frame that supports this work. The large work that was flat in the early part of the twentieth century was the Macassan sail made from pandanus twined together. Pandanus triangular skirts were flat. Now twined round mats are flat and are the standard form for pandanus mats.

The frame component of the work was created by Koskela in Sydney. The units or petals were designed to clip together and sit within a circular frame. Lighting was attached to the unit at the top after the work was assembled. The frame in varying sizes is the common structural element for the work.

Figure 6 – Frame and inside view of the Reflection Pod. Photo: Louise Hamby

Westpac did have some design criteria concerning the colour of the work. To fit within their overall design for the area they asked for most of the work to be monochromatic. This requirement was met in the large pod with its fourteen petals completed by the Elcho artists. The small pod with ten petals or units has seating for one with a small table and the medium pod with twelve petals with seating for two were made by the Milingimbi artists, some of which were also neutral, no dye to the natural fibre.

The other strong linking component to their local identity is the techniques they utilised in the making of the panels. Twining, looping, knotting and wrapping are techniques that have been used in Arnhem Land long before any outsiders came to their country. With missionaries in the late 1920s came the technique of coiling which is now very much a local one and also appears in the Reflection Pod. The work is referred to by some of the artists as ‘lampshade’ due to the history of the engagement of Koskela and Elcho with lampshades.

At the art centre we were thinking together how to put the gunga ga bulgur onto the frame but we all use our own miny’tji (design). We all know different ways of weaving and knotting. Putting our work side-by-side with all our different miny’tji together to make one yindi (big)artwork makes it really latju (beautiful).¹⁶

The engagement with outsiders provided an opportunity to experiment and explore the structural possibilities of their familiar materials of kurrajong and pandanus with techniques used every day.

¹⁶ Balbunga et al., “Milingimbi Artist’s Statement,” 2017

The Future

The Reflection Pod has provided an opportunity for artists at Milingimbi to bring their local identity to a more global audience. By doing this, new opportunities have arisen. A commission from Koskela for an office space in Brisbane involved making a series of fibre pendants that formed a lampshade that echoed the form of the meeting tables underneath. This project allowed for more freedom in colour and design with unusual images of fish and stars completed by Susan Balbunga.

Commissions from outside of the community are crucial in assisting the social elements of work.

Today we keep coming to the art centre every morning, sometimes working on yindi project together and sometimes doing our own djama. Weaving is dharrwa djama (lots of work) but we are happy to keep going.¹⁷

Another reason for the continuation of such projects is an economic one. According to art adviser Rosita Holmes:

Large-scale commissioned projects like this ensure that the artists have a guaranteed income from their practice for the duration of the project. The excitement and challenge of working in different ways helps to get the interest of younger generations and encourages people that weaving knowledge but haven't yet committed to their craft to step up.¹⁸

In September 2018, I accompanied Helen Ganalmirriwuy and Ruth Nalmakarra, two of the artists from the Reflection Pod project to Switzerland to see their historic items in museum collections including fibre works. While on this trip Nalmakarra showed images of work and included the Pods to show how their work was moving into the future with new ideas. For her the project idea 'was not Yolngu way, but balanda way.' However, she felt that by the end it had turned into Yolngu way through their local knowledge and use of materials.

¹⁷ Balbunga et al., "Milingimbi Artist's Statement," 2017

¹⁸ Holmes, "Statement about Reflection Pods."

*Figure 7 - Ruth Nalmarkarra describing the petals in a presentation at Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland, 2018.
Photo: Louise Hamby*

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