

Rare beauty born of deep knowledge

CRAFT

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BULA'BULA Arts, Gurrwiliny II - weavings. Beaver Galleries 4-21 March.

Bula'bula Art Centre is located in Ramingining in North East Arnhem Land. The centre is housed in a timber building built up high to look over Gurrwiliny - the surrounding area of the Arafura Swamplands.

Its wide veranda provides a cool and pleasant spot for the women to sit and weave. When I visited the centre some time ago the indescribable smell of the Australia bush filled the hot dry air.

The silence of this remote place was punctuated every now and again by the raucous cries of birds and the soft murmur of the voices of the women.

I thought of all these things when I visited the current exhibition of weavings from Bula'bula at the Beaver Galleries.

The weavings in the exhibition are of mats, fish traps, batjbarra (water chestnut scoops) and mindirr (dilly bags). The objects are woven using fibre from local plants and coloured with natural dyes.

It is a long process that begins with harvesting the plants that include Pandanus (the most commonly used for the body of the work) Sandbark Palm, Kurrajong fibres and Banyan bark.

The plants are stripped and drawn into long fibres or twisted into string before dyeing with natural dyes.

In experienced hands this process looks deceptively easy but knowing the right part of the plants to use, the thickness of the fibre needed and the ability to keep the fibre of uniform width and thickness needs great skill.

The use of local dyes grounds each work in the environment of its maker. A deep attractive red dye from Bloodroot grass is particularly noticeable in the collection of mindirr by Mary Dhapalany and Margaret Djarrbalabal Malibirr.

Downy magpie geese feathers are also woven into the string fibres of the dilly bags

and a string headdress, adding another decorative element.

A series of mats on the walls fizz with colour and movement like whirly gigs. Their strong structural form is created by the ribbed spokes that radiate out from a tightly woven centre.

From this central focus decorative coloured bands of different types of weaving designs are woven into concentric circles.

Each mat is finished in a long fringe that is a clever decorative device with its free flowing nature adding a contrast to the formal structure of the weaving. Sometimes it is longer than the actual weaving.

Apart from its circular form the design in

each mat varies because of the use of colour and the types of weaving.

From Daphne Banyawarra's stunning mat with its pulsating yellow heart of colour to the strong design and colours of a mat by Julie Djulibing Malibirr and the evenly spaced rhythmic bands of colour used by Kathleen Malpamba, each work carries messages of country and culture.

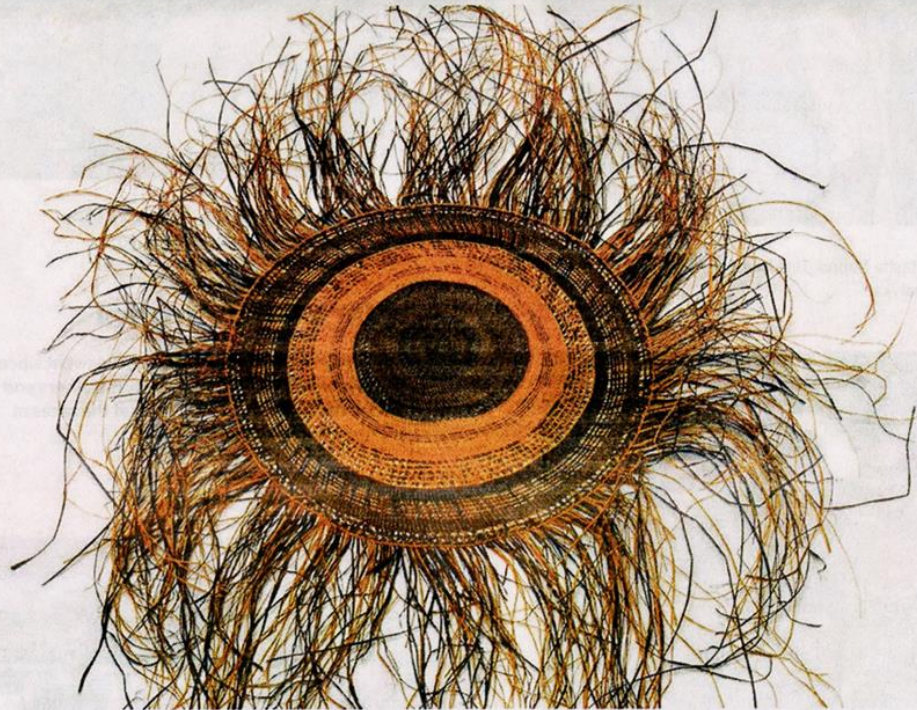
The collection of fish traps by Evonne Munuyngu and Mary Dhapalany are based on traditional objects that were in daily use. The fish swims through the large opening and cannot escape once in the trap. A smaller opening allows little fish to pass through the trap - a form of husbandry that benefits

sustainability.

A group of scoops by Mary Dhapalany have an open boat shape which allows them to move easily through the water with their large open weave acting as a sieve. Her two larger scoops have big round sculptural forms that appeal to contemporary sensibilities even though the form arises from a utilitarian object.

The works made by these women artists are not only beautiful objects but carry with them deep cultural knowledge.

It is this knowledge of Yolngu tradition that these women artists are concerned to preserve and pass on to the younger generation



Daphne Banyawarra, woven mat, pandanus and natural dyes (detail).