

Weaving stories of country with deft fingers

Craft

Kerry-Anne Cousins

Bula'Bula Arts: Miyalk buku-manapanmirri (women gathering together) - weavings. Beaver Galleries. On until July 9.

Bula'Bula Arts is located in the Ramingining community in Northeast Arnhem Land, 400 kilometres east of Darwin. The exhibition at Beaver Galleries is an introduction to the weaving art created by the Yolngu women who gather together at the art centre.

There are finely woven mats, mindirr or dilly bags, fish traps, fish scoops and baskets, all demonstrating a degree of skill and intuitive use of design and colour that make the work outstanding. A core objective of Bula'Bula Arts is to preserve these traditional skills within the culture of the Yolngu community.

The Art Centre is located in a timber building built high off the ground in tropical style. It is surrounded by a shady veranda - a boon in the hot dry season. When I visited, artists Margaret Djarrbalabal Malibirr and Mary Dhapalany who have work in this exhibition, were weaving mats on the veranda with deft and sure fingers.

The works in this exhibition are predominantly woven using gunga or pandanus fibres (pandanus spiralis), and balgurr or kurrajong bark. The small spikes of the pandanus need to be removed by hand before it is expertly torn by the women into long equally sized strips. It is then soaked and dyed before it is used.

Evocative of country are the beautiful colours that the artists achieve through natural dyes using the fruit, leaves, bark and roots of

local plants. Colours can be very subtle, ranging from soft smoky mauves, deep reds and browns - as in the work of Julie Djulibing Malibirr - to the bright reds and yellows found in the resplendent woven mats of Delilah Lilipiyana.

The woven mats take centre stage not only because they cover the walls of the timber art gallery but because of their striking designs and vibrant resonating colours. Each mat is unique and bears the creative signature of its maker in the kind of weave and choice of colours.

The weave on each circular mat radiates out from its centre. In some mats the weave follows a circular pattern emphasised by darker coloured bands of weaving, as used by Kathleen Malpamba, while in Evonne Munuyngu's mat the weave takes a spiral pattern



Jordina Milibiwirri - Mindirr (Pandanus bag).

giving the work a dynamic sense of movement.

Each mat is characterised by long fibre fringes, an integral part of the design, that wave gently like delicate tendrils.

These mats are accompanied by a collection of tightly woven dilly bags in one colour or multi-coloured bands and several beautifully constructed coiled

baskets. Jordina Milibiwirri's attractive oblong formed basket invites speculation - is it perhaps designed for gathering bush tucker as it would fit neatly under one arm?

Another interesting and unusual basket by Linda Dalparri is more structural with sections of its "ribcage" filled in by different types of weaving. Its use could be for

food gathering but with its curved bottom it could also be a baby basket that would sit securely cradled on the ground.

The woven fish traps and scoops have forms dictated by their function but these forms are also pleasingly organic and sculptural. The large fishtrap by Mary Dhapalany is a good example of a satisfying and attractive sculptural yet functional form.

I don't know the true cultural significance of these works and in any case it is not my story to tell. I can only respond to these works on an aesthetic and personal level.

These artists have the power to speak to us through the visual and spiritual representation of their country and evoke memories for me of a special place in Australia that I have been privileged to visit.