

# Charmed by exuberant, creatively joyful works

## Craft

Kerry-Anne Cousins

**YARRENTY Arltete Artists: *Werte Canberra!* Beaver Galleries. Until May 20, 2022. [beavergalleries.com.au](http://beavergalleries.com.au).**

What a delightful experience to view this exhibition of soft-fibre sculptures of figures, animals and birds by the Yarrenyty Arltete Artists. It is hard not to be moved and uplifted by the work in the exhibition at Beaver Galleries which charms by its sheer exuberance and creative joy.

Yarrenyty Arltete Artists is an art centre that was set up in 2000 in the Larapinta Town Camp in Alice Springs in response to chronic social issues facing the community.

What began as an arts training program has now morphed into an ongoing lively and creative community space celebrating culture and creativity.

The five artists from the art centre in the exhibition are Roxanne Petrick, Marlene Rubuntja, Louise Robertson, Dulcie Sharpe and Rhonda Sharpe.

These artists have created their fibre art works using repurposed blankets, screen printed textiles, woollen yarn, paint and feathers.

The blankets are dyed with natural dyes in

browns and greys and provide the foundation form of the sculptures.

The sculptures vary in scale from small birds by Rhonda Sharpe (40 centimetres in height) to larger works like *Bungalunga* (125 centimetres) by Marlene Rubuntja. These soft sculptural forms are then decorated with wool stitching in a cacophony of rainbow colours that bring these wonderful creatures to life.

Subjects like the charming *Girl with digging stick* by Rhonda Sharpe and the playful irascible dancing figure of *Little Tommy in blue jeans* by Marlene Rubuntja as well as the many birds of the Alice Spring area are inspired by the artists' immediate surroundings. There is a directness between the artist's observation and the work itself so that the artist's imagination, unfettered by convention, is able to be given full expression.

It may be fanciful but somehow it's easy to believe that these creatures are released into the world fully formed with their own individual personalities. I wonder if it could be rather a responsibility to take one of them home.

Rhonda Sharpe's work *Owl* has its own characteristic quizzical look and stance. Its body is covered with stitching in mainly stem and blanket stitch enunciating its feathers



Marlene Rubuntja, *Little Tommy in blue jeans*. **Picture: Supplied**

and all-knowing eyes. Real feathers are used cleverly to indicate his fluffy wings.

Feathers from peacocks and emus are also used to comic affect by other artists as beguiling tufts on the heads of their bird sculptures. The kind of stitches, their density and colour placement seem related to Indigenous painting techniques.

They are used not only to create decorative

patterns but also to "draw" and thereby describe the individual characteristics of their subject.

In some works like Louise Robertson's *Bird* the stitches are close together creating patterns that suggest the bird's plumage, whereas in Roxanne Petrick's *Bird* the stitching simply indicates the outline of the feathers.

Sometimes, as in Marlene Rubuntja's *Bird*, the stitches are closely packed together to create a crazy patterned patchwork of colour while in another of Rubuntja's bird sculptures the stitches are rendered as repeat patterns of small strokes to indicate breast feathers.

Paint is also included to supplement the stitching like the green wavy painted lines in Dulcie Sharpe's elegant *Bird* and in Rubuntja's double-faced *Bungalunga*; a spirit-like figure with its intricate headdress suggesting actual body painting.

The continuing success of Indigenous soft sculpture art and the recent interest in the Yarrenyty Arltete Artists (also currently on display in the National Indigenous Art Triennial at the National Gallery of Australia) will, I hope, have contributed to the growing appreciation of the creativity, innovation and skill that these Central Australian artists have shown in this wonderful exhibition.