

Gadaman Yolngu - Clever People

New Fibre Works from Elcho Island Arts

In April this year Outstation Gallery in Parap, Darwin played host to a most astounding exhibition... *Gadaman Yolngu - Clever People*.

Alongside traditional woven objects, the exhibition presented both 3D and 2D woven pandanus sculptures - a new direction for many of the artists from Elcho Island Arts which is based at Galiwinku (Elcho Island) located off the coast of north-east Arnhem Land, 550km from Darwin.

Weavers from Galiwinku (Elcho Island) have a well-established reputation as outstanding basket makers and they have exhibited widely. However, woven sculpture is relatively new for them and artists such as Mavis Ganambarr have channelled their highly refined basket making skills into exciting forms. An example is Ganambarr's three-dimensional sculpture *Djetama (Dhuwa Yam)*, woven from pandanus and dyed with native plant pigments.

Mavis, who is the Artist Liaison Officer at Elcho Island Arts, was one of the first Yolgnu women to have a solo exhibition of her weavings. Her work has been celebrated extensively, most recently in *Recoil*, a touring exhibition curated by Margie West which explores recent contemporary and cross-cultural developments in fibre art practice throughout Australia. Mavis' sculptural baskets in *Recoil* incorporated a hybridization of several basket-making techniques to create her unique style of basketry. In the exhibition *Gadaman Yolngu - Clever People*, she has taken this a step further through her sculptural works.



'I am very proud of what my grandmother taught me to do, but now I am making different, new styles of my own ideas. I teach my children and one day they will teach their children. In this way we will keep our culture strong.' (Mavis Ganambarr)

The exhibition had a definite oceanic theme with three-dimensional and two-dimensional sculptural figures including turtles, fish and octopus. Beth Djarrupi's series of flat pandanus sculptural works weave a narrative of a typical day as a saltwater *miyalk* (woman), where travels along the beach would include being witness to a myriad of marine life alongside a gorgeous setting sun. Many of the works have been acquired by the National Gallery of Australia, among them Judy Gurruwiwi's *Rock Cod*.

Consistent innovations and developments in their fibre art practice confirms the Elcho Island weavers as valid cultivators of culture and custodians and keepers of the natural world. The nature of the medium lends itself to inventiveness and sharing, with knowledge and skills being effortlessly transferred, translated and adapted. The phenomenal fibre sculptural works in the exhibition *Gadaman Yolngu - Clever People* are testimony to this with a multitude of forms and mediums being explored. □

Story by Aly de Groot.

