

LOOKING CLOSELY AT

Contemporary Indigenous Art

Many stories, many styles

Whilst the 'dot and circle' paintings of Central Australia, and the cross-hatched or rarrk barks of Arnhem Land are familiar to most viewers, it should be understood that they are only two aspects of a broad and diverse approach to artistic expression practiced by Indigenous artists from Australia.

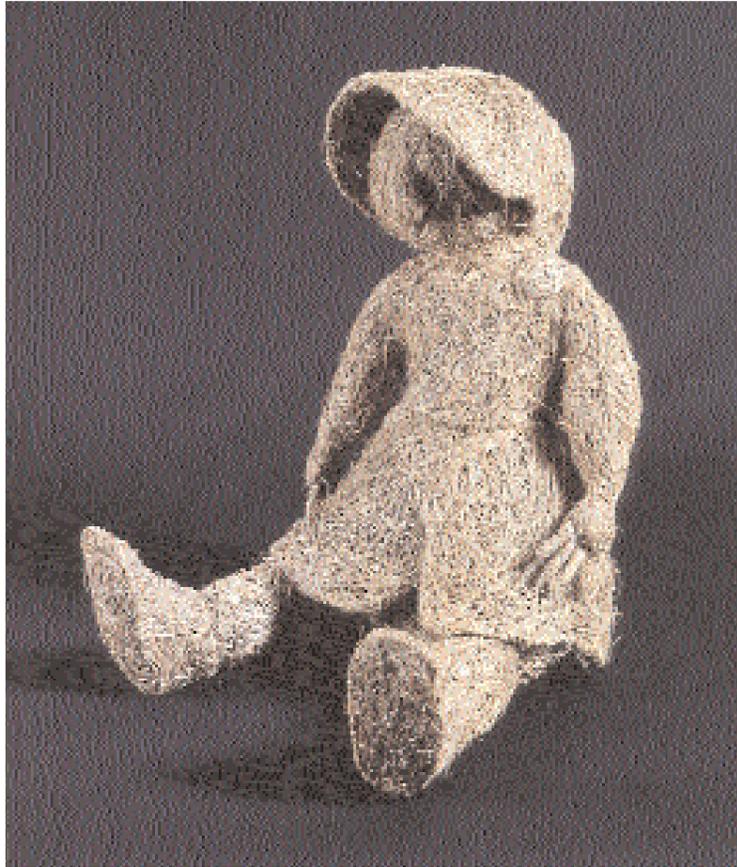
Art or artifact?

Traditional works such as barks, burial posts and dot paintings were not originally considered to be 'art', although this has changed in recent times. Such objects are now presented in art museums as powerful contemporary expressions of an ancient culture, as well as works of art.

Contemporary Indigenous art is difficult to categorise as it takes many different forms. Some work draws on traditional practices whilst often using Western media. The artists highlighted below illustrate this diversity of style and approach.

Joyce Winsley was a Nyoongar /Noongar artist from South-West Western Australia. She was born in Gnowangerup in 1938 and as a child was brought up on a mission with her two brothers. Joyce became a committed Christian maintaining her faith throughout her life whilst also valuing her Indigenous culture.

Gordon Bennett (b1955) draws on traditional symbols from his Indigenous culture and combines them with images from Western iconography. The artist confronts the viewer with issues which he wants us all to think about. His huge canvases



Joyce Winsley, *Church lady*, 1998, Guildford grass, cordiline vine

An oral tradition

Indigenous people in Australia did not have a tradition of writing and maintained their culture and beliefs through oral traditions and ceremonies. The latter would include objects made to be worn during ceremony, as well as body painting and the making of images on the ground, on rocks and on bark structures. The use of natural materials was central to the process of maintaining a connection with their country and culture. The materials used would have been those most readily available, varying from region to region.

Many contemporary Indigenous artists, who are reviving or maintaining their cultural practices, use natural materials in a variety of ways. Joyce Winsley reclaims her culture by creating delicate, detailed figurative objects from Guildford grass. Some of her first works were Marmaries - spirit men whose care was the responsibility of her grandfather.

document the often violent and turbulent relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia since 1788.

Sally Morgan (b1951), a Palyku artist, makes bright, graphic pictures that combine both traditional and Western styles. Her works represent places and stories that are part of her own history.

Julie Dowling (b1969), a Badimaya artist, reclaims personal stories of the hardships and deprivation suffered by her family during her childhood. Many of her works have an underlying sense of humour which perversely highlights, rather than hides, painful recollections.

Lin Onus (1948-1996), a Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta artist, created three dimensional forms and drew on everyday objects to communicate feelings of displacement associated with his mixed heritage and the rediscovery of his Indigenous culture.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye (1910-1996), an Anmatyerre artist, began painting in her 80s drawing on traditional stories whilst also creating her own iconography. Her work has a very individual and distinctive style, although its origins are still recognisable.

Rover Thomas (Jodama) (c1926-1998), a Kukatja/Wangka-jungka artist, maintained an affinity with traditional ochre colourings whilst developing his own individual style of painting that, like Kngwarreye, has been internationally acclaimed.

Art changes the way we see the world

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Joyce Winsley*

Working with fibre

Joyce Winsley attended a workshop in 1994 run by Nalda Searles, a contemporary Perth artist, who works with natural fibres to make baskets and decorative objects.

The workshop stimulated Winsley to create three dimensional human and spirit figures. Made from Guildford grass, stitched together with threaded cordiline leaves, she continues the tradition of using materials taken from the land.

Doll or Baby

How do you feel about the scale of the work?

Do you think the artist has made it doll size deliberately?

How does this doll-like quality affect your response to the piece?

If the work was larger would your reaction be different?

Marmarie men

Winsley's family originally came from Gnowangerup, which is near the Stirling Ranges. As part of his cultural duties, Winsley's grandfather was responsible for caring for the Marmaries or spirit men who were associated with the region.

For the artist, who was taken away from her family and brought up on a mission, these memories of her grandfather have helped her to reclaim her culture. The Marmarie men were the first figures the artist made. However, valuing her Indigenous culture has also enhanced her Christian faith and the importance of the church also inspires many of her works.



Joyce Winsley, *Baby*, 1999, Guildford grass, cordiline vine

The artist was a committed Christian and was making reference to the story of Moses in the bulrushes in the work, although she mentions *'that Indigenous people do not carry their babies in baskets but in a sling around the neck or tied onto a stick'*.

Does a knowledge of the story of Moses in the bulrushes help you to understand the work?

Baskets and weaving

Baskets continue to be used traditionally by Indigenous people to carry objects, collect food and for fishing. Weaving skills are important in many Indigenous groups and Indigenous women are often very skillful in making functional and highly sculptural objects.

The basket shape in the work is reminiscent of a seed pod or womb, both protective, nurturing devices developed to ensure the survival and continuation of the species it contains.

The intricacy and detail of this work attracts the viewer to it. As one looks at the piece there is a sense of it being very realistic. Elements, such as the hands and the placement of the legs, are particularly well defined. On closer inspection however we see that the head is more stylised. The face is featureless and the head is attached directly onto the torso, seemingly without a neck.

Can the viewer draw any meaning from the missing features or the differing styles of representation?

