

Coming From the Skin

WOMEN'S WORK, CROSS-GENERATIONAL LEARNINGS

Submitted by

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Statement of Authorship

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that through the use of particular methodologies that reflect Aboriginal ways of relating to others and to Country — autoethnography, Dadirri - deep listening, yarning, and foraging— my art practice connects to cross-generational creativity. Integrating these research methods into my art practice allows for an exploration of my personal family history and its relationship with Australian South East Aboriginal people's separation from family, disconnection from culture and the compulsion that many Aboriginal artists speak of, to learn old ways of making.

My argument about the centrality of process and making in connecting to personal history and environmental issues is expanded by reference to artists with a strong focus on reusing and repurposing materials who have also woven those links, including Fiona Hall and Lorraine Connelly Northey. I explore the way our art draws the viewer into conversations about the human impact on the environment. I explore the impact of seeing and using the detritus left in the bush and why this has become a focus of my artwork and I detail the role this research has had on building the strength of my voice as a resourceful contemporary Indigenous artist. The final exhibition installation includes work that holds family stories and connections to Country while bringing the viewer on a journey that cuts across old culture, present times and looks to the future of Aboriginal contemporary art.

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Due to Covid-19 will not be produced until I am able to access the university studio.

PREFACE

As this is a thesis about Aboriginal art by an Aboriginal artist, I will include here an acknowledgement of who I am and who my Elders and teachers are.

I would like to acknowledge that this is Dja Wurrung and Taungurung Country, land of the Jarra people. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that I produced my master's thesis on their Country. I acknowledge and thank my mother Dorothy Margaret Brooks, who gave me my creativity. I would also like to acknowledge Aunty Marilynne Nicholls, Aunty Claire Bates and Aunty Glenda Nicholls for sharing their cultural practices with me.

My grandmother was taken away from her community after November 4th 1915 under the Assimilation policy.¹ I applied to Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales for any information referencing my grandmother's name in their archives. I received pages from the Aborigines Welfare Board's minute book where her name is included in a group of girls approved to be taken to Cootamundra Girls Home. However, she did not attend the home, it is assumed amongst Aboriginal people and my family that she was left with a white family in need of domestic help somewhere on the way. She was not removed because she was neglected or mistreated; she was removed because she was of light-coloured skin. Under the policy of Assimilation children were removed and indoctrinated in ways to behave more like white people and were not allowed to have contact with Aboriginal people, which was punishable in often extreme ways

¹ The Assimilation policy was a policy of absorbing Aboriginal people into white society through the process of removing children from their families. The intent of this policy was the destruction of Aboriginal society. teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/section03/timeindig.php read 7/02/2020

such as jail time², denied rations, or threatened with the removal of children. After marrying my grandfather in 1925 my grandmother had little contact with her Country or extended family, living away from her people and spending most of her life in South Gippsland. She never returned to her family or Country. She did not pass on cultural ways or speak of her family with her children, who consequently did not know they were Aboriginal until later in life. My mother had clues to her heritage but did not talk about it often as she simply had nothing to tell.

Within this thesis I will explore my heritage and the impact it has had on my life and my artwork. In 2014 I started a Bachelor of Creative Art. After a while I found I was being asked to experiment and explore other ways to create art which was an opportunity to explore ways of making from my childhood. This has since become a vessel for ideas I have connected to life issues. These ways of making connect to traditional ways of making and fitted within my contemporary art practice. I also became conscious of the tacit passing of intergenerational knowledge and creativity in my own art making and what I saw in the groups and workshops I hold. I became more observant and realised that my siblings include elements of traditional practice in their work. We have discussed how we gained these skills and cannot remember learning, rather just knowing how to do them. When we were allowed into the weaving room in higher primary grades, we were taught to weave on a loom and started weaving in other ways with long leaves from the garden or pieces of vine from the banana passionfruit tree. With these we produced throw-away mats to sit on or a piece to stop the rain coming in and they were then discarded and left to decompose into the soil.

Traditional making, women's work and intergenerational learning are intertwined in my thinking in this thesis as I review my life art practices and ways of picking up information to

² Quayle, Amy *"Narrating Oppression, Psychosocial Suffering and Survival through the Bush Babies Project"*. (PhD thesis, Victoria University. 2017, Page 185.

strengthen my art practice. Ways of weaving vary across Australia as does the gender of the weaver, however in my experience weaving is women's work, and since colonisation has often been learned by secretly watching Mothers and Aunties when they work. Many Victorian Aboriginal female artists talk about this, how they learned by watching over the shoulders of their elders. When Aboriginal people were finally allowed to view artefacts stored on the shelves of museums,³ investigating those works provided information of the ways of their old people. In the publication, *Meerreeeng-An Here Is My Country*, various women talk about their mothers not teaching them because of the white ways forced on them. Connie Hart on page 121 *Mum told me we were coming into the white people's way of living. So she wouldn't teach us.* Mandy Nicholson on page 186 *Even though the people at Coranderrk were told not to practice their 'savage and uncivilised' culture. They still had a strong connection to it.*⁴

I place myself as a contemporary Victorian Aboriginal artist, who combines traditional making practices and women's work learned during childhood. As I was increasingly exposed to Aboriginal artists and their ways of making, I developed some additional understanding about traditional art practices and connections from the past in my own making process. I realised that similar practices could be observed in the work of other contemporary Aboriginal female artists. Lyn Thorpe, a Yorta Yorta, Wemba Wemba artist talks about Aboriginal art being art made by Aboriginal people. She speaks of its diversity and how its evolving nature keeps Aboriginal people

³ Conference paper - Museums - Indigenous people and museums: Introduction Indigenous people and museums: introduction by Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien explains the changes that took place from the late 1970 in regard to museums and Aboriginal peoples access to artefacts. Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien (eds), 2011, *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology*, National Museum of Australia, published online at nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/ ISBN 978-1-876944-92-6

⁴ Keeler, Chris, Vicki Couzens and Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. *Meerreeeng-an Here Is My Country: The Story of Aboriginal Victoria Told through Art*. Koorie Heritage Trust, 2010.

connected to the past, to Ancestors and to Country. “The beautiful thing about Aboriginal art...” she says:

is I think, and if you haven't got mainstream controlling and saying what Aboriginal art is, is the diversity ... and different styles and techniques. You know Aboriginal art is not stagnant ... We are ever evolving and changing however we are connected to our past, our Ancestors, our Country. Whether I decide to do a cloak ... with 'traditional' Aboriginal iconography or scrape it the 'traditional' way or whatever, that is not important. Lyn Thorpe, November 2004⁵

My final Honour's work, an installation titled *Mapping Me*, told the story of my connection to family, my lack of knowledge through separation from culture and an expansion of my thinking about the environment I lived and worked in. I finally accepted that what I was saying was political, a concept that I had previously pushed away from. I became aware that just being an Aboriginal artist placed me in that space and I was further involved because I included modern foraged materials as a focus in my art. As I reverted to childhood ways of making and building, I was exploring family, uncovering secrets and connecting to Country I was also developing new ways of making and connected to materials processed in traditional ways. This came naturally to me almost without thought. I used recycled and found materials from the bush as they are an essential part of the story as they make my thoughts/message clearer and more personal.

It was also during my Honours year that I organized meetings with Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers who were connected to the children I worked with as part of my artist residency at Golden Square Primary School. I was interested in the way women communicate not only with words but also through drawing and with hand signals to show the importance of

⁵ Fran Edmonds, “Art is us: Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing in Southeast Australia” (PhD thesis, Centre for Health and Society, Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, The University of Melbourne, 2007).

family. Children responded to these non-verbal prompts as if they already had some understanding of signals and symbols used within their family groups. I then began to wonder about my own skills and how I developed them and if I, like the children, was responding to words and gestures passed down through generations. Lee Darroch describes this way of knowing in her 2012 artist statement suggesting that creativity comes from within:

I think part of it too is you do remember in making those things for the first time, you do remember stuff that's a cultural memory, an Ancestral memory if you like – about how to go about it and what things mean – – you've got a responsibility to pass it on. There's no point in it ending with us. ⁶

Perhaps I, like Darroch and the children at Golden Square Primary School triggered our tacit understanding of making by touching materials or by seeing and making certain actions.

Furthermore, researching Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal artists, attending women's weaving circles and noting ways of passing on knowledge built my learning and knowledge base. I became particularly interested in how the women of stolen generations re-learned traditional ways of making and how this relates to my ways of working. A foundation for my research has been an awareness of the use of simple materials and connection to the landscape in the work of John Davis and of Maree Clarke's use of innovative ways of producing at including 3D printing, photography, print, painting, sculpture and traditional weaving in her art practice.

John Davis, a senior faculty member at the Victorian College of the Arts travelled widely and exhibited in America, Japan and Australia. His work was exhibited in the Victorian National Gallery as early as 1973. His later work expressed his strong connection to the landscape and its

⁶ Frances, Edmonds, et al. "Ancestral Memory out of the Shadows." *Artlink* 2, no. 2 (2012): 56-61. [cited 30 Apr 20].

fragile nature. He worked mainly with found materials, influenced by Arte Povera and the Australian bush of his childhood. He built assemblages; some he left in situ, recording the changes over time. Exploring his art practice opened an understanding for me that my practice had a place in the art world at a time when the biggest doubt about my art practice came from me. Davis, was very aware of the environment as Hurlston notes; Davis is concerned with the human impact on the environment.

At the core of his practice, particularly evident in his late works, was an awareness of ecology and a sensitivity to the elemental forces of nature and the effect of human actions. Now, at a time when issues relating to the environment seem more pertinent than ever, Davis's sculptures have even greater resonance. ⁷

Maree Clarke holds a Master of Arts Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and has been a practising artist for many years. She was part of the group who reintroduced the notion of Victorian Aboriginal art in the 1980s. She engages with a diverse range of materials from traditional to modern in her artwork. Clarke has space and purpose in both the contemporary and traditional techniques in her art. Her artwork and ways of making allowed me to think all things are possible. Clarke constantly returns to Country where she listens to the stories of her elders and others; this informs her artwork.

Clarke uses a form of deep listening known as *Dadirri*, a meditative Aboriginal practice used to develop the capacity to become the storyteller, a maker and knowledge holder, Dadirri is explored in chapter 1. Clarke's artwork reflects her heritage, symbols and totems of culture. Her master's thesis addresses the issue of disconnection from community and Country: the land, the plants and the animals. Clarke has developed her understanding of totems and symbols

⁷David, Hurlston, Charles Green, Robert Lindsay & National Gallery of Victoria. (2010). *John Davis : presence*. Melbourne : National Gallery of Victoria

and acknowledges that many South-eastern Australian Aboriginal people have no family knowledge because of the devastation to the Aboriginal population after the white settlers arrived. Clarke is not afraid to experiment with her art and has developed a diverse art practice. My exhibition will show case my blend of contemporary and traditional art practice and I acknowledge Davis and Clarke as inspirational in the development of my work.

During the time of my master's Research I have reflected on my art practice. I endured a period of public criticism of my artwork and I have established new family connections which have brought about an end to a lifetime of separation from my family's Aboriginal heritage. This has led to constant reflection on my art practice that sources modern day recycled materials combined with traditional ways of making. I check constantly that I follow appropriate protocols when connecting with Aboriginal people in my community.⁸

The first-person narrative of autoethnography as discussed in chapter 2, throughout this thesis highlights a personal journey about my artwork and its connection to my culture and family. My use of 'Aboriginal' when talking about myself and others in this thesis is my preference as opposed to the other words like Koori or First Nations that are often used in current times. In this context I see myself as Aboriginal first and the use of other words referring to Australian Aboriginals takes away from the focus of this thesis. These practices are the foundations to my robust defence of my art practice and its connection to Aboriginal ways of making and the contemporary world. In this thesis I will argue that my work is traditional. I put forward the notion that my way of making comes from within – comes from my skin? I will show this in my contemporary art practice

⁸ Karen Martin, and Booran, Mirraboopa, "Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Re-search." *Journal of Australian Studies: Voicing Dissent* 27, no. 76 (2003): 203-14.

INTRODUCTION

My artwork is a platform for storytelling. Through it I speak of family, the environment and how we live in the world. In this thesis I explore how my art practice can be considered both traditional and non-traditional and examine my use of recycled and found materials and how this relates to the traditional Aboriginal practice of making with left-behind things. I question the notion of tacit passing of intergenerational (ancestral/traditional) knowledge and how this process facilitates creativity and contributes to the understanding of identity and place. My personal experiences have been informed by what I have heard and seen through contact with others. This contact included workshops and talks in gallery's, for the media and in schools. My practice prior to my master's project brought insights into the broader impact of my art practice and added to my development as a contemporary artist and my ability to speak about my art.

This thesis acknowledges my grandmother's journey as an important aspect of my family's history and my personal life and my need to speak to my Aboriginality and how I connect with traditional art practices. Women have passed on their skills and knowledge across culture and times. In Aboriginal culture this was passed on through stories, making, drawing and dance. Weaving practices across Australia are specific to certain areas, groups or families and shared outside these connections only on special occasions. Children learn from a very young age, with the practice embedded so deeply that the actions of making become part of the essence of their world.

After my grandmother's exclusion from her people and for the whole time I knew her she did not talk about her Aboriginal family, did not share Aboriginal ways of doing or knowing. As an older connected Aboriginal person, I see myself carrying Aboriginal ways and hear from other Aboriginal people that although I 'look white I act Black'. I frequently wonder if these behaviours come naturally to me and other Aboriginal women, from the skin, do they come from my ancestry

through my bloodline? As I consider the influence of other Aboriginal artists⁹ in my own work, I look specifically at individuals who acknowledge that knowledge and memories are ignited when engaging with traditional ways.

Chapter 1 explores my choice of methodologies: Dadirri (deep listening), yarning, autoethnography, and foraging are separate ways of understanding which have opened new and different ways of viewing my contemporary art practice. Each is a separate technique; however, they are link strongly with ideas and Aboriginal ways of knowing. My research has become more reflective than originally anticipated, I did not expect the euphoric and the depressive responses to my own work that I have felt during this time. Gaining more understanding into cultural ways and family connections has impacted on work practices making me more focused on refining certain processes to meet a high standard in my final pieces of work. As I use these practices constantly, they have given me a stronger voice and better connection in my practice and in my life. I discuss my practice of recycling, reusing and repurposing materials and its connection to traditional ways of making and discuss my reasons for using such materials.

Chapter 2 takes a closer look at the connections between Fiona Hall, Rosaline Gascoigne and Lorraine Connelly-Northey, to position my work practice and to discuss their ways of making and how my working practice echoes theirs. Connelly-Northey, a Contemporary Aboriginal artist

⁹. "A huge gap in our knowledge in terms of who we are, where we come from and how we feel about ourselves can have devastating effects on our spiritual wellbeing. We need to be in touch with our past to be able to visualise our future. Art gives us the opportunity to express ourselves and to create form that mirrors our feelings, ideas and energies associated with our Aboriginality." Lyn Thorpe, November 2004 page 332, cited in Edmonds, "Art is us". Edmonds, Frances. "Art is us': Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing in Southeast Australia." PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2007. Lyn Thorpe P.334

is of particular importance as she uses her Aboriginal knowledge in her art practice and how it is placed in her artwork. Hall and Gascoigne both repurpose materials and everyday objects in making their art. Although all are seen and defined by their individual work there are aspects that connect them to my artwork and each other which will be explored.

Later in Chapter 3 I discuss recycling material in art practice and that this has become integral to many artist's practices. There are many reasons for this, I will discuss recycling, reuse and repurposing, and how they connect to my artmaking.

This thesis is limited in its scope as I will not be formally interviewing Aboriginal people, makers or artists. My decision to instead focus on my own practice and relate stories in the third person was informed by the realisation that questioning Aboriginal people about their art practice would uncover other issues that I did not have the capacity at this time to support them with. Traditional Aboriginal art is, among other things, about family, separation and loss, the making is acknowledgement and the memories are reactivated when talking about the art. The impact of anthropological research that excluded community is well documented and is discussed in *Footprints in Time*¹⁰, a project on research of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Communities contacted for the research expressed that they felt like 'the most researched people in the world'. The Federal Government Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies were developed because of this. I did not wish to add to this burden people carry. Instead I ask these questions of myself. Will the understanding that my discoveries and experiences bring contribute to my broader understanding of Aboriginal ways of sharing and making? Will I be able to use these experiences to build my art practice and highlight traditional ways in my art? I talk about my mother in this thesis with her permission. I will not

¹⁰ dss.gov.au/about-the-department/publications-articles/research-publications/longitudinal-data-initiatives/footprints-in-time-the-longitudinal-study-of-indigenous-children-lsic

be interviewing her formally however it is important to my development as a person and an artist to listen carefully when she does initiate conversations about her young life. Listening intently and reflecting after these conversations I will weave the issues she raises that others have raised as anecdotes to support my ideas in this thesis.

Chapter 3 also explores the importance of attending art groups, weaving circles, facilitating workshops at galleries and schools made available to all people, but in particular Aboriginal people. Within this chapter information gathered from the workshops focuses on ways of making and recycling to be paired with other anecdotes to support the idea of Aboriginal ways of knowing.

Making together and thinking through my making process enabled me to reflect upon the origin of my ideas, how I understand traditional art practice and its place in my work and the work of others. Working with children provides an opportunity to break down into simple terms what I make and how I make it.

In chapter 4 I explain how my increased confidence allowed me to practice traditional art. As a person not connected to community or family until 10 years ago, I felt that I did not have the knowledge, understanding or right to practice art in what is commonly regarded as traditional means (for example using ochre). The community understands this and have been supportive of my art making and my achievements learning from strong Aboriginal women who taught me traditional methods of weaving and making. I was surprised how easily the ideas and concepts fitted into my methods of artmaking.

Originally, I sought recycled materials as they were affordable and abundant particularly as my ideas required larger artworks. The importance of using these materials grew as I spent time in the bush and saw the waste there. I began to realise that using these materials mirrored

old Aboriginal ways of making as they collected what they needed from their environment and adapted to what the environment had to offer them.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people sometimes struggle with the idea of using such materials because there is a perception that post-colonial materials should not be used in traditional Aboriginal art¹¹.

My practice sits within the emerging discourse that challenges consumer culture and makes pathways for young Aboriginal people to make with what they choose both as Aboriginal and a contemporary artist. That artists are accepted for their artwork not rejected because of what they make with. I have been told that my work was discussed in a with the tutor saying... “What Janet is saying is, if you’re Aboriginal and an artist you’re an Aboriginal artist, it doesn’t matter what you make your art with.” My use of recycled materials is not new however when presenting my work as Aboriginal art I am reflecting back on the ways of gathering that Aboriginal people have used, collecting only what I need, and using what is available. In our time the materials in the bush have changed so what we use to make with changes too.

This research has several aims as I highlight the link between my art practice and traditional Aboriginal making. Observation of ways of passing on knowledge between Aboriginal people will give me insight into how I gained my understanding of making. I will explore my navigation between traditional and contemporary art practice and the work of women in passing on knowledge. Importantly I will develop my narrative of the place of recycled and found objects in my practice and Aboriginal art.¹²

¹¹ Mishel McMahon Aboriginal [Indigenous Academic Enrichment Advisor](#). [Indigenous Student Services La Trobe university](#) When she was attending a TAFE workshop for Aboriginal people.

¹² This research will also bring together yarning and autoethnography as methodologies suited to Aboriginal discourse in research.

CHAPTER 1. RESEARCH THAT EMPOWERS MY COMMUNITY

I began this project with the intention that there would be interaction with community, workshops and weaving circles which would be used to bring the voice of the local Aboriginal community into the work. After preparing, planning and observing the interactions of participants in other workshops it became clear that these groups are often places in which people seek to look for healing. As a member of such groups I have witnessed talk about researchers coming into community and taking and not giving back. I wanted to avoid being another such researcher, encouraging people to 'open-up' without providing the support to individuals with ways to deal with residual torment and issues that come up. When talking to my mother I have always been very careful about how I approach the subject of her Aboriginality, for although I have a right to know my ancestry, she also has a right to deny it. It has taken quite a few years for her to be comfortable with the idea and it was not until she met her cousins and they accepted her that she embraced her own mother's past. While this research would have been a good opportunity for community story-sharing, it raised the question of my ability to support people in that process.

With these untenable challenges to my original idea I was forced to continue to look within myself, not only for my art practice, and ways of knowing, but also for ways of explaining it to others through research. Exploration and consideration of how such a quandary would be approached in traditional times by Indigenous people led me to consider Aboriginal ways of passing on and retaining knowledge and ways to maintain self when contemplating issues that may not have easy or/any answers.

These methodologies; Dadirri, yarning, autoethnography and foraging¹³, closely aligned to Aboriginal ways of knowing through sharing by listening, sharing stories, talking about truth and gathering what is required for survival.

In Aboriginal cultural knowledge, the telling and retelling of information about the environment, family and connections to Country is passed on from generation to generation through song, storytelling, dance and art. In her book *Memory Code*¹⁴ Dr Lynne Kelly, Honorary Research Associate La Trobe University (2016) discusses how Aboriginal people memorised large amounts of information that gave them understanding of the seasons, plants and animals, in their own home area. It also enabled Aboriginal people to move over vast areas of country without maps or compasses. The methodologies I draw upon for this research revolve around the role of objects (or the practice of making them) in the transmission of knowledge.

Dadirri, or deep listening is used to observe the environment, to become part of it and memorise each aspect no matter how small, to come to an understanding that all are a part of the whole. Autoethnography takes the researcher's experience as the subject of ethnographic research. It involved my reflection on my life and art practice with the view that it may open connections with others through art, song and dance to highlight or replace the areas where language is a barrier. Yarning or talking together passes on information in an intricate way that develops a person's place in a group and wider environment. Repeated over and over so knowledge is retained, individuals are able to connect to others through woven personal ties. Foraging is a way for Aboriginal people to travel lightly on the land. Objects and materials are

¹³ Foraging and recycling are issues in current thinking and discussed widely.

¹⁴ Lynne, Kelly, *The Memory Code: The Traditional Aboriginal Memory Technique That Unlocks the Secrets of Stonehenge, Easter Island and Ancient Monuments the World Over*. 2016.

used on an as needed basis, with little retained because there is no need to retain most objects, as time and again Aboriginal people return to the same place for the same materials, knowing when to harvest or hunt through the stories passed on through generations.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is now established in academia and acknowledged as a way to express personal issues in research, in particular when talking about culture, trauma, and oppression. In *Autoethnography and Heuristic Inquiry for Doctoral-Level Researchers*¹⁵ Robin Throne legitimises the place of Autoethnography in the area of art research and exploration that is discussed in the first person. Autoethnography is also affirmed in *Autoethnography: An Overview*¹⁶ as a legitimate process for use in scholarly research that allows the exploration of personal life experience.

Denzin states in *Interoperative Autoethnography* that '*There is no truth in the painting of life, only multiple images and traces of what has been, what could have been, and what is now.*'¹⁷ Aboriginal storytelling is the perfect example of Autoethnography, where the painting of life has been buried under the painting of the lives and stories of others. In recent times Aboriginal people have started to scrape off the over-painting in areas that have covered their family's history to acknowledge the original painting hidden beneath.

Autoethnography as a methodology is a way for me to talk about my art, culture and family. Aboriginal art usually carries stories of ancestry, family and place, like in Connelly-Northey's *O'Possum - skin cloak: Blackfella road*.¹⁸ This work tells the story of the shock for her

¹⁵ Throne, Robin. *Autoethnography and Heuristic Inquiry for Doctoral-Level Researchers: Emerging Research and Opportunities*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-9365-2>

¹⁶ Ellis, Carolyn, Adams, Tony, AND Bochner, Arthur. "Autoethnography: An Overview" *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [Online], Volume 12 Number 1 (24 November 2010)

¹⁷ Norman, Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*. Second ed. Qualitative Research Methods; 2014.

¹⁸ Connelly-Northey, Lorraine. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/108726/>

and her community when they realised that an ancient burial site had been bulldozed to make way for a road.

Discussing my artwork within the frame of autoethnography I am linking closely to Aboriginal ways of passing on information. Storytelling and information sharing are embedded in objects made by Aboriginal people. Stories about the past, histories of Aboriginal connection to Country, place in community and family, are all mapped along Songlines. Using autoethnography I present my personal experiences in my writing to elaborate and connect my art practice to my family history and culture. There are stories attached to each piece of my art: stories about family, community and the environment. Within this thesis I am careful to ensure that when I introduce things that other Aboriginal people talk about, I do so in order to challenge or further reinforce my narrative. As discussed further in chapter 4, many questions about Aboriginality, Aboriginal issues and how my art holds a place in the Aboriginal art world require me to be knowledgeable and confident in my narrative. Autoethnography as a methodology has allowed me to develop a strong purpose of truth telling in my narrative, an urgent concern for many in speaking about Aboriginal history and storytelling at the current time. This aspect of autoethnography I plan to explore further in future work. For now, as a result of an autoethnographic approach, my talks are fuller and more engaging for the listener. As I connect stories across community both by contributing to and accepting the narratives of others, I become more confident in my own voice and truth. This thesis allows me to explore and address connections between my work and Aboriginal ways of passing on knowledge and stories.

My reconnection to my Aboriginal family was concurrent with my university experience and thus forms a strong part of my art practice. The dialogue between my work and my family history is an integral part of my practice and a way for me to relate the story of assimilation and the impact on Aboriginal people. I use autoethnography as an avenue for truth telling when I

speak of my art and how I make it. I use these experiences to explore issues of family connection, separation and my place in the Aboriginal community. Recently, I have been told that my work presents as a political comment, which I had often denied. However, I realise now that while I continue to speak in this area, I am being political. As Aisha Durham writes, '*autoethnography is a spiritual act of political self-determination, of reclamation*'.¹⁹

I am also very aware that in yarning and using autoethnography here I risk being called out as telling stories (tales) when speaking about older historic issues. Carolyn Landon an historian specialising in biography and life writing from Monash University, for example was called out when she wrote *Memoir of a Dreaming Place* in 1999. With no apparent collaboration from other historians or peer reviews and archives full of events seen from the white narrative, some said who can trust an old man's memory and her own reflections prompting her to write *Jacksons Track Revisited* ²⁰ (Landon 2006). My lesson from this is to connect stories when speaking with Aboriginal people and link them to documented evidence – birth, marriage and death certificates. In this way, stories will fall into a developing timeline (both personal and broadly historical). This is important when talking to other Aboriginal people because it forges connections and relevance to the wider community/story. I endeavour to continue this practice so truth is not determined solely by either written and/or photographic documentation or by oral history, but by the combination of them all, with each verifying the other.

Many Aboriginal artists use an autoethnographic approach in developing their practice. Brenda Croft is a Gurindji/Malngin/Mudburra woman, artist, curator, lecturer freelance writer and Associate Professor Australian National University. Croft's work explores Aboriginality, the

¹⁹ Throne, Robin. *Autoethnography and Heuristic Inquiry for Doctoral-Level Researchers: Emerging Research and Opportunities*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-9365-2>

²⁰ Carolyn, Landon. *Jackson's Track Revisited History, Remembrance and Reconciliation*. Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Monash University EPress, 2006.

Stolen Generation, displacement, loss, journey, family and the deep feelings that Australian Aboriginals have for knowledge about who they are and what happened to take them to this place where they are disconnected from mob, ancestors and Country.

*Subalter/N/ative Dreams*²¹ is a brutally honest exhibition in which Croft lays out her story for all to see. The photos are large, dominating the space. They speak of the artist's connection to family, Country and her Aboriginality. They also place her as the researcher in charge of an unfinished story, an urban Aboriginal seeking place in her father's Country.

In this exhibition she presents two journeys. First her father's Journey; photos of her father's Country (the land where he was born), to the place her ancestors are. The second journey is her personal, physical journey onto Country. This takes the viewer to where Croft searches for the past and the impact of colonialization is placed squarely in view. She takes the viewer back to her father's Country in the gallery space. This emotional journey is a familiar one to Aboriginal people seeking out answers to past questions, clues to family connections and traces of truth in a world of disconnection and obstacles. Portraits of her face are in her father's Country. She goes to places where, at times, nothing is found. Her research skills are stretched as she analyses and makes judgments on the information she finds. How does the evidence corroborate what she already knows? Does she need to change her thinking? Is the 'evidence' correct or mistaken?

Croft's self-portraits are overlaid with the words used to debase Aboriginal people. The use of these words takes the viewer to a place all Aboriginal people have been, a world where they are degraded and displaced. Deprived of their culture, ceremony and language. Language becomes a weapon used to render Aboriginal people less and making them 'other'.

²¹ Brenda, Croft, 2016 stillsgallery.com.au/exhibitions/2016/croft/

“full-blood, half-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste, quadroon, abo”²²

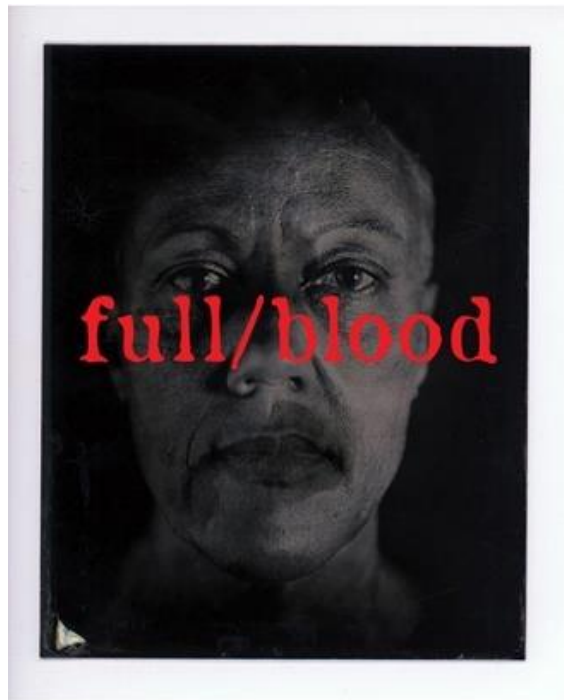


Figure 2 Brenda L Croft full/blood, subalter/N/ative dreams

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Croft’s storytelling is bold and she does not hesitate to place herself at the centre. I found this work confronting, sad and I wanted to look away. These words are the reasons Aboriginal families like mine hide away, pretending to be ‘normal’ people in society, thinking we were protected by our light skin. I can hear my mother’s cousin say to her on their first meeting when they were both in their 80s. “Don’t worry Margaret we didn’t tell anyone we were black either.” We are also holders of guilt, while we look away to protect ourselves when we hear these words spoken to our brothers and sisters.

Aboriginal people understand the journeys that Croft embarks upon through her art, journeys into the unknown where there are often no answers, yet she tells her story and the story of her family over and over gathering the pieces as she goes. Autoethnography sanctions Croft and other Aboriginal researchers and artists to be open to exploring their personal life and

²² stillsgallery.com.au/exhibitions/2016/croft/

connects them to broader social experiences. It allows me to talk about my Aboriginality and express myself through art whilst also adding my voice to a broader social commentary. Like many other Aboriginal artists, I explore separation, loss and regaining cultural practices and the impact this has on my understanding of who I am as an Aboriginal person, where my place is in community and in the wider world. As these stories in art are researched and supported by other Aboriginal voices the narrative of Australian history changes to include Aboriginal history post-colonisation. I have developed a narrative that I feel strongly about and am able to stand up to others who wish to subdue my voice, trying to maintain the status quo. It is difficult to speak as an Aboriginal person without condemning the past, however if change is to happen for the better for all, truths need to be told. Autoethnography gives me the opportunity to speak my truth as Croft does in hers. In the, sometimes uncomfortable, viewing of Aboriginal art where I immerse in someone's story, as I have with Croft's, I use Dadirri to let my mind embrace new knowledge and put it into place. I quieten my mind to allow space for putting the narratives together in a way that makes sense to me.

Dadirri - Deep Listening

Dadirri²³ is the practice of deep listening. Many Aboriginal Nations practice deep listening: Yorta Yorta Nations call it *gulpa ngawar-l*, in Gunai Kurnai language it's called *molla wariga*. This quiet contemplation is similar to meditation or chanting. Australian Aboriginal people have many words for listening, which indicate the type of listening that is taking place. They also embrace the concept of being free to wait silently for answers knowing they would come if you wait long enough. There is also a resignation that at times, the answers you seek are not the ones that you desire, nonetheless they are answers.

²³ Miriam-Rose, Ungunmerr, 2013 <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri>

Dadirri is the way I clear my mind and let the bush sounds flow around me to stop the chatter of my mind and give space for ideas to develop. I usually come to my artwork without concrete ideas, simply making until the ideas come. I find practising Dadirri regularly has supported me to develop techniques that fit the concepts that come out of my time in the bush. This is where I practice Dadirri, however I am not limited to a place, rather it is a state of mind: I am not thinking, I am not looking, my mind is still. Sometimes thoughts float past, I do not engage with them, I do not make noise. When I am finished; I stop. My head is clear, my mind awake and creating comes over the next days and there is the answer, an idea for new work or a solution to a problem that has been sitting there waiting for me to see it. Although I didn't have a name for what I was doing I have instinctively practised Dadirri since I was a child. Much of my time was spent looking and listening as I wandered around my birthplace as a child. 'Outside', to us as children, was over 250 acres of farmland that we could roam. Almost all of the land had a beautiful panorama from the Strzelecki Ranges to the Bass Coast. My favourite activity was to sit and look for hours, Dad used to ask 'what are you looking at all day'. I would just shrug and he would look at me as if to say 'what are we going to do with this one'. Now I realise I was practising Dadirri, in the same way I made sculptures with wood to see if they would come together, contemplating how everything works. I have been practicing Dadirri instinctively most of my life.

Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (AO) is an Aboriginal elder of Nauiyu (Daly River), a renowned artist, activist, writer, public speaker and teacher. Drawing on her research, she established the use of Aboriginal ways of Dadirri in the healing of Aboriginal people and children. Her conference paper *Dadirri Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness* led her to eventually set up the Miriam-Rose Foundation (in 2013) where she continues her therapeutic work Ungunmerr says:

When I experience Dadirri, I am made whole again, I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need for words. A big part of Dadirri is listening. ²⁴

Ungunmerr advocates that Aboriginal people, particularly young people, walk in two worlds and need place and support to manage connection to both so that one does not delete the other. I know young Aboriginal children who scrub their skin to get rid of the colour. Sitting and listening to their stories and showing them that they matter by deeply listening to them is often the best support you can be. Josh Muir²⁵ a young Aboriginal man who recently exhibited at the Bendigo Art Gallery, talks about living in two worlds and his art reflects the complexities of that.

In her thesis *Retrieving, Reclaiming, and Regenerating Language and Culture Through the Arts* C. L. Bennet (2016) develops these ideas arguing that in Yorta Yorta language *Gulpa Ngawar-l* (deep listening and looking) represents Indigenous ways of knowing, thinking, learning, teaching and being. Practising Dadirri (deep listening) in my connection to others has taught me to listen, hear, show respect and not judge. It has given me insight into how my art fits with the past, present and the future. Dadirri has opened my mind to possibilities I could not see before due to the clutter of past issues and as a result I have new insights into my artwork. I developed a deeper understanding of story-telling as a part of art making and have had access to deep stories in the community that mirror my own stories and give a further layer of truth with each similar story. While I sit practising Dadirri immersed in the environment at Mt Alexander I am better able to notice colour, shape and texture in the bush, connecting me to the traditional ways of only taking what is needed. Listening to what the Country was communicating shifted me away from modern materials. Dadirri has helped me connect to my

²⁴ Ungunmerr "About Dadirri"

²⁵ Josh, Muir, 2019 bendigoregion.com.au/bendigo-art-gallery/exhibitions/josh-muir-whats-on-your-mind

elders who have taught me traditional ways of making that I have now integrated into my otherwise contemporary practice. It is this shared approach to making that ties my own practice to that of my elders; though the product is aesthetically dissimilar, both are grounded in this traditional knowledge and understanding of the world. Aboriginal people acknowledge that I listen and allow them the space to tell their story and I have been privileged to hear stories never told before by showing and discussing their artwork with me or the artwork of their elders that depict their family stories.²⁶ This has opened space for broaching ecological and social issues that would otherwise not be raised with community, by practising Dadirri art can speak to us. Many artists talk about meditation as a tool to being more connected to their creative process. Heather Marsh for example, conveys the change to her creative practice after she started to meditate regularly: *“The biggest change to my creative practice has been allowing myself to make art without having to have a major project in mind.”*²⁷ . She argues that meditation has left her freer to play without an agenda and has as a consequence shifted the direction of her work. Dadirri and yarning as methodologies may seem to be opposite to each other however an important part of both is deep listening, one silently listening for the answers when sitting on Country, the other deeply listening to what people have to say.

Yarning:

It is customary when introducing yourself to other Aboriginal people to relate your connection to Country, who you belong to and what connection can be found between you and the person/people you are speaking to. This specific Yarning gives Aboriginal people

²⁶ During the Aboriginal Art Fair Bendigo 2019 that I organised a woman came with a large painting. It was quite old and a story of her family. She asked if she could show it as it had never been out of her home before. She acknowledged that it was a painful story but one she needed to bring out to move on from the past.

²⁷ Sabrina, Brix, 2018 artshub.com.au/education/news-article/career-advice/arts-education/sabine-brix/how-meditation-helped-my-creative-practice-8-artists-share-tips-256719

understanding of who I am, who I am related to and clues of how I might be related to them. This way of introduction enables trust to be built and opens conversations that bring people together. My standard introduction would be said in a similar way to the opening of the preface of this document. Over time, some people who had not met me before, now introduce me by my family connections.

According to Dawn Bessarab of Bardi (West Kimberley) and Indjarbandi (Pilbara) and Bridget Ng'andu (2010) there are three types of yarning: social, collaborative and therapeutic.²⁸ Social yarning occurs between people on a casual basis where no one controls the conversation which may contain gossip and topics not connected to research. Yarning is an ice breaker and sets up the relationship prior to the researcher introducing the areas that they want to explore. Collaborative yarning is where people actively share knowledge with full understanding of the research topic. Therapeutic yarning happens if traumatic issues arise and the research then changes pace to listen and support the participant to get through the sharing. Listening allows the participant to talk about issues that they may not have discussed before and the researcher becomes the holder that keeps the participant in a safe place to express their story.

As touched upon in the opening of this chapter, social yarning has been utilised in this project in favour of collaborative and therapeutic yarning due to the level of support required for the latter approaches. Social yarning, the more informal of the three has enabled a more intimate connection to people in the community. My own family story was buried deep and circumstances ensured that my Grandmother never revealed or returned to her family. I will never be part of anything that extracts family histories without express permission. Thus, my

²⁸ Dawn Bessarab, and Bridget Ng'andu, "Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research". *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*. 3 (1), (2010): pp. 37-50.

family research was delayed because some members of my family were not ready. Many Aboriginal people feel interrogated by the Western way of gathering data and have often not been given feedback on the resulting information gathered, or the actions carried out based on the information they provided. Aboriginal people are suspicious of those who question and assume their purpose is to take but not give back.²⁹

In the extreme, people have had family remains removed from Australia, never to be returned, for the purposes of research that has been undertaken with no intention of providing benefit to Aboriginal people.³⁰ The actions of such research, led to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), creating the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (GERAIS) with the intention of ensuring that all research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples follows a process.³¹ I instinctively followed this way of connecting to Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal men, while working in a Community managed mental health service and seeing the direct results of their connectedness with me.

Self-introduction between Aboriginal people cannot be shortened; it takes as long as it needs to. At this first meeting we are relationship-building according to the way we fit together by our ancestry and place in our families. This first interaction is remembered by older people and can reflect on you as a person depending on how you conduct yourself; proper unprompted self-introduction shows respect. Through appropriate first introductions I may find out more about my family connections to the wider Aboriginal world and my connection to the person I'm

²⁹ Amy, Quayle, *Narrating Oppression, Psychosocial Suffering and Survival through the Bush Babies Project*, 2017. Page 185

³⁰ Thomas, David P. Bainbridge, R. Tsey. K. "Changing discourses in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, 1914-2014" *Med J Aust* (2014); 201 (1): S15-S18. doi: 10.5694/mja14.00114

³¹ aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research/guidelines-ethical-research-australian-indigenous-studies

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speaking to. I immediately become family and space is made for me to fit in. After this long winding yarn the stories come out, some are gossip and others link with stories I already know and we both give information to corroborate a story. These narratives explain the connection to people and may also connect me to other artists in my family. While yarning, I am listening for connections to my artwork and hints that connect to my ways of foraging for materials. Descriptions about the reasons for making the makeshift humpies along the Murray River are told in family and mirrored in the stories of Aboriginal people settling on the river flats at Shepparton, these stories connect to my grandmother's story. Yarning is a winding, elaborate, tapestry of Aboriginal families and culture and my habit has been to connect to stories that I have already heard and added to from several sources. So, when I place my work alongside my ancestors' humpy-making I have several accounts that verify that is what was done to shelter people across south east Australia after colonisation. I know from the photo that I have of my great grandmother that these were found materials such as corrugated iron, canvas and wood, sourced along the rivers and in the crown land around that area, discarded by white settlers.

Yarning is also a place for the truth as known to the person speaking. It is not a place for argument or talking over the speaker; each speaks their truth then someone else speaks their truth so Dadirri is needed to gather the right information. Yarning is not a place to question; it can be a lengthy endeavour. This was particularly noticeable when speaking to elders who were invited to a school meeting to talk about the proposed mural at Golden Square. The yarning went on outside the meeting and continued further still into the community to establish if I was a trustworthy person. Yarning has been a very useful way to engage and learn from others, like foraging you can take what you need for the conversation.

Foraging – Left Behind

Foraging throughout this research is used as a method as I look for materials that are left behind in the local places that I frequent. This might be at the local op-shop, laneways, beside the railway line near my home, or atop/around/throughout Mt Alexander. I have also foraged by asking a store for packaging materials.

Foraging is integral to my art practice: I treasure the waste that is left behind and of no apparent use to anyone, waste that is often discarded at the place of its use. I am not alone in acquiring materials this way. Lorraine Connelly-Northey consciously employs industrial waste material instead of using traditional weaving materials that she does not have a personal affiliation with. Other people's cast-offs, particularly when left in the bush are a primary source of material for me: I retrieve them, clean them and use them in my artwork. However, I forage in the op-shops and places I know I can get material with colours and textures so aesthetic decisions are made, and some control is exerted. I use leftover materials in my artwork in an attempt to minimise my footprint on the planet. I seek out left behind materials like wire, plastic, metal, often found in the bush, also beside the road and sometimes collected and brought to me or left on my doorstep by people who know of my work. Aboriginal people have used what is around them to adapt to meet their needs as the landscape changed and evolved over thousands and thousands of years and were able to use that adaptability to survive white settlement. As Petitjean (2010) argues,

Aboriginal people had to adapt to changing climate and environmental conditions. For instance, towards the end of the last ice age some 15,000 years ago, as the climates dried up and large lakes evaporated, giving way to deserts, diets had to change. During

*the long period of isolation, one of the richest cultures on earth was able to develop and maintain itself until this day.*³²

It is the ability of Aboriginal people to learn white ways of working that has enabled them to provide rations for their families and find a place in the new world order. Many women learned white ways of weaving and their children and grandchildren resurrected the old ways of weaving by researching old artefacts rather than the usual learnt experience from elders. James Tylor a young Australian artist of Multi-cultural heritage comprised of Nunga (Kurna) Maori (Te Arawa) and European (English, Scottish, Irish) artist is replicating tools and weapons often copying from books and museum artefacts to create what his elders would have used in everyday life. There are elders still today, who will not pass on cultural ways for a variety of reasons. How did they make string, nets, baskets and dilly bags when the white invaders took all the land for themselves? To maintain itself, this old traditional Aboriginal culture had to be ready and open to adapt to making and using new materials found in the materials available to them. Aboriginal artists like Taylor and Clarke base some of their work on the artefacts in museums and replicate them in their art.

In 2019, I entered a weaving composed of recycled plastic in the Koorie Heritage Trust Annual Exhibition for Victorian Aboriginal Artists. I was awarded the Creative Victoria: Excellence in Any Media award for this work entitled *Seaview 2018 (Figure13)*. My artwork was attacked as 'not traditional' and some argued that it had no place in the exhibition. Both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people made it known on the Trust's Facebook page that they did not approve. Post after post, demands were made as to why a 'piece of rubbish' had won such a

³² Georges, Petitjean, *Contemporary Aboriginal Art: The AAMU and Dutch Collections*, trans ,Anne Paret, (Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, 2010).14,.

prize. Accusations of it not being traditional art, not being worthy, not costing any money to make, flooded the page. This experience alerted me to the fact that although Aboriginal people and many contemporary artists of all backgrounds use, reuse and adapt materials that others regard as rubbish, the practice is not broadly acknowledged or accepted. This forced me to address my ways of working and my thinking behind what I do. At no time did I consider that I should stop making in this way. Exploring and acknowledging cultural methods within my research project has enabled me to more clearly articulate the foundation of my work and ideas.

As stated earlier my use of recycled materials was initially driven by two factors: cost and guilt. As I made large works, cost prohibited me using new materials. There was also a slow gnawing in my gut as I spent more time in the bush and the amount of waste left amongst the bush was growing at an alarming rate. The question kept arising, what I was doing and what would eventually happen to these pieces that I made? The least I could do was repurpose as a way of expressing concern for the environmental vandalism I see in the bush. I now buy almost nothing to make my artwork.

The use of recycled materials communicates meaning and memory in the artwork. Memory is an important part of my work as I cut used clothing into strips and people recognise some fabrics. In the weaving *Mothers Aunties Daughter 2019* (Plate 2), the fabric came from my mother, my daughter, my daughter-in-law, my granddaughter and from my own store/collection of materials as my ancestors would have used everything with no waste and no excess. The impact of this work; beyond the response of my family was interesting, the viewers become very focused on the materials, some went to read the label and came back to the work with greater understanding. They understood the meaning of the weaving as a memory weaving of four generations of women from one family. I leave all buttons, labels, zips etc. on the weaving as I want it to be clear what the work is made off..

According to Estelle Barrett, in an article,

*Creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns; it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit and experiential knowledge ... The continuity of artistic experience with normal processes of living is derived from an impulse to handle materials and to think and feel through their handling*³³

Materials that have been left behind carry the mark of the previous user, shadows from another life, men's check shirts evoke memories of a hard-working father. As with Gascoigne's work made by rearranging industrial waste to please her eye, the materials original purpose is not hidden. Similarly, Hall uses every-day materials such as bank notes to make birds' nests in *Tender* (2003-06), so if the viewer notices the materials the nests are made from, they have the opportunity to think more deeply about what Hall is presenting to them. Their questions might be: Is she simply making from discarded banknotes or is she making from bank notes for a reason and what is that reason? The viewer is left to think through this themselves.

In this way an artist can initiate conversations with the viewer and shift their perspectives of the world. In the exhibition *From Paper Bark to Plastic 2019* in Kyneton the emphasis was on plastic and some were confronted by plastic bags being used and hung on a gallery wall (Figure 2, Plates 6-7).

³³ Estelle Barrett "Experiential learning in practice as research: context, method, knowledge", *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 6:2, (2007) 115-124, DOI: [10.1386/jvap.6.2.115](https://doi.org/10.1386/jvap.6.2.115)



*Figure 2 Paperbark to Plastic Exhibition- the old Auction house 2018
Various works: materials - recycled materials, raffia, plastic, paperbark and found objects.*

Some people walked out, some asked questions and some were inspired. As an artist in residence it was an opportunity for me to observe and interact with the audience and to evaluate the impact and the worth of what I was doing. I want to be part of the conversation about recycling, reuse or repurposing in 2020's while expanding the place for truth telling about Aboriginal history in Australia. I see my work as part of a long tradition of the adaptability of Aboriginal people – people who were able to change with new experiences that would at first appear beyond comprehension, experiences from natural disasters to colonisation. Aboriginal people have weathered events that changed everything and yet survived.

CHAPTER 2. VISION, CONNECTEDNESS AND INFLUENCERS

This chapter will explore three artists who influenced my art practice, they are artists of influence in the wider art world, each has their own strong motivation that manifest through their art. They all use every day repurposed, recycled and found materials in their art. I place my work beside theirs because of those similarities. I have known and admired each individual artist for many years and similarly to the work of John Davis and Maree Clarke, their art sustained my belief that there was a place for my practice. As an older woman newly exhibiting my artwork this was important encouragement for me to maintain my ideas of making art for the contemporary art viewer. I understood that I needed to network and speak about my art publicly and develop stable ideas that can be scrutinised, understanding more about these artists supported my narrative. Rosalie Gascoigne, Fiona Hall, and Lorraine Connelly-Northey all repurpose, recycle and use found materials in their art making as I do, and their stories are behind the development of their work.

Gascoigne, Hall and Connelly-Northey experiment in their contemporary art practice, delivering art that is unique to them, but they are similar in their connection to place and use of everyday found and discarded objects. All are females exploring how art enables them to express their view of world and life issues. They each explore the western impact on indigenous cultures and the environment.

Gascoigne's materials were gathered from the paddocks around her home, collected and left to weather until the patina fits her ideas for a piece of work, she scrutinised the landscape and replicated it in her work. Hall's work is continually evolving, always large installations, multiples of pieces made from used and found materials making a direct comment on capitalism and its effect on the landscape, particularly the impact of capitalism on developing countries. She understands the power of visual effects and often engages the viewer with the beauty of her

work. Lorraine Connelly-Nortey chose to make from recycled and found objects to ensure her work was different to that of other Aboriginal artists. Her art is a commentary about Country, family and the ongoing impact of colonisation. Her work, like Hall's, offers multiple pieces within an installation. Following are insights into the work of these three artists and how they connect to each other and to my practice.

Rosalie Gascoigne

Rosalie Gascoigne was born in New Zealand in 1917 and studied art at Auckland University. After marrying, she emigrated to Canberra, Australia, to the isolated scientific community of Mount Stromlo. She died at 82 having exhibited for 25 years. Her life story fascinates me as an older woman as she entered the art world where older women are not well represented. She was known to have exhibited flower arrangements in the style of Ikebana³⁴, a Japanese practice that has strict rules for construction arrangement. In an interview with Robin Hughes in ³⁵ Gascoigne talks about her life and feelings of not fitting the role of the wife of the time, her separateness from the other women in the community and her feelings of isolation that drove her out into the roads and paddocks around her where she saw the beauty in the decay and discarded detritus in the environment. Her desire to create overpowered her desire to conform and her strong spirit enabled her to pursue her passion for art.

Gascoigne started to experiment with scrap materials in the 1960s, she foraged around her local area looking for objects in the landscape, a fallen tree, fencing wire, cast-off materials left behind to decay where it fell. She was scavenging materials from paddocks, roadside or the

³⁴ Ikebana is an art form in Japan that celebrates nature and has a religious purpose. Most plants and animals have symbolic meanings and Ikebana is a way to display them to their best advantage. These arrangements are often found in temples in Japan.

³⁵ Hughes, Robin. [.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gascoigne/interview9.html](http://australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gascoigne/interview9.html) Hughes interviewed Gascoigne for Australian Biography project in 1998 the year before she died.

local tip where she says, after death old ladies' possessions went where no one wanted them. Gascoigne was collecting for current and future work.³⁶

Gascoigne talked about the leftover marks of the user and how she looks for that when she is choosing materials for her work. I understand this concept and look for this in my own work, the stamp of the previous owner. Gascoigne talked about collecting as a passion on its own, almost separate from her artwork. To her, these objects were art in themselves. She was attracted by the colour of steel, metals, wood and wire after it had baked in the strong Australian sun, inundated in down-pours of rain and baked again. There is an earthy quality to the colours of hardened, drowned and re-baked found objects and materials left out in the open to the weather and further enhance the sunburnt quality. I have my own dumps where I collect wire and tin and I, along with Lorraine-Connelly Northey have developed relationships with strangers who tell where the good rubbish is. Gascoigne is known to have said that even though she loved the green damp New Zealand landscape she had grown to love the "boundless space and solitude" of Australia. She had found her place.

The Crop 1, 1976 shown at the Macquarie Galleries, Canberra, demonstrates a simplicity in Gascoigne's work as well as Gascoigne noting the changes of her time. The dried salsify heads seemingly planted on an iron plate, surrounded by wire, representing a fence, depicts a native plant being confined by the grid of Australian agriculture. Gascoigne captures the change in landscape, fenced in, the breeze rustling the heads of the plants. *The Crop 1* is a blend of Gascoigne's discipline of Japanese flower arranging and her passion for the use of discarded materials. The sculpture is strong and deliberate, blending the visual elements of agriculture and its impact of the landscape.

³⁶ Robin Hughes australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gascoigne/interview1.html
Recorded: November 12, 1998

All Summer Long 1995, Bendigo Art Gallery, by Gascoigne is a large assemblage work made of wood and acrylic. This is part of a series from the 1990s. Originally information signs Gascoigne has cut and repositioned the pieces. The wood is weathered and the yellow colouring signs is weathered and neglected. The text is bold and dark, in its original state from a sign with a public service message, now asking us to wonder, explore our minds for a reason for its place here. Was she making a comment on industry waste? Or how we clutter the landscape with that waste? Perhaps she was anticipating a public conversation that was yet to come? She was interested in how these materials came together after being dismantled and remade for another purpose. There is a vulnerability to this work for me. It is clearly made from old, cast-off materials - wood ready for the fire- before it was selected for this artwork. The discarded signs in a new life and a different iteration of the wooden pieces in Gascoigne's interpretation are reintroduced into a gallery space. ³⁷

Gascoigne first exhibited in 1974 at 57 and exhibited for 25 years. Her work is poetry of the Australian sunburnt landscape, she reflects the geography of place and the abstract random way man-made cast-offs take on the aspects of the landscape in the rounding off hard edges and the mellowing of colour to blend into the landscape. An essay by Richard Morris³⁸ discusses movement in Gascoigne's artwork. It reflects that the mind perceives what is seen and the eye brings to the viewer what has been seen, offering an opinion that the two are not always the same. Discussing the surface of an art piece called *Monaro*, in the same series as *All Summer Long* it is noted that the perception is of unfinished and disconnected pieces, when looking across this large work the eye comes across obstacles created as the pieces are not laid to fit together..

³⁷ White. J. 2000 Art Collector. "I've always known how hopeless I was at painting or drawing," she told curator Deborah Edwards of the Art Gallery of New South Wales at the time of her 1997 touring survey show. "But I can arrange. I want to make art without telling a story: it must be allusive, lyrical."

³⁸ Richard, Morris, "Visualiing Monaro: Contributing Factors to the Viewers Perception of Motion in Rosalie Gascoigne's, *Monaro*, 1989." *International Journal of the Image* 4 (1) (2014): 27–34.

This creates a perception of movement and that motion, as seen by the viewer, is created by the missing pieces laid under the connecting pieces. He uses the example of the areas between floors of a high rise building that house infrastructure and are unseen, nevertheless, they are a part of the building as a whole as examples of what we know and what we see and likens the in-between areas to the missing parts the viewer cannot see but assumes are there. This concept expands the viewers reading of the work to include movement and likens it to the breeze on the wheat fields of Monaro. This perception of movement is what I aim for in my weavings and the challenge is to keep the eye on the work and not lead it away, keeping it focused on the work.



*Figure 3 All Summer long 1995-1996 Gascoigne, Rosalie Acrylic on wood assemblage
Bendigo Art Gallery / images are copyright of the artist.*

Gascoigne's art is a direct reference to the place where she resided unlike Fiona Hall who has a wider world view in her art. While the scope of their view is vastly different, both are

representing what they see to be impacting the environment. Hall and Gascoigne are two women from two different times recording the changes of the environment.

Fiona Hall

Born in 1953, Fiona Hall attended the Art School of Sydney where she studied painting and photography. By 1976 she was in London working as a photo assistant to Fay Godwin and her first solo exhibition was in London Creative Camera Gallery. By 1978 Hall was back in Australia exhibiting. Over time her photography became more experimental, telling a more complete story about what she saw. Hall's practice expanded to include sculptural objects and installations. Hall's shift away from photography was pivotal to her art, equally important to her career was when she 'came off the wall' becoming a world-renowned artist working in installation, sculpture, garden design and the moving image. She works with materials she can manipulate to comment on capitalism and its impact on the world, particularly the third world, globalisation, ecology and economy.³⁹

Hall represented Australian in the Venice Biennale in 2015 with the installation *Wrong Way Time*, a conversation about capitalism and the destruction of place, the environment, plants and animals. In this installation military camouflage uniforms were shredded and knitted into forms that hang from the ceiling, almost skeletal in appearance, a strong mixture of modern and ancient ways of dress of soldiers and reminiscing of guardians of tombs of the bad spirits or gods in adventure or horror movies. The concept of having these hanging structures can cause the viewer to think about what the installation is about. The repetition of the objects drawing the viewer to inspect the hangings. The viewer can conjure up the simple folk that live in places of

³⁹ Julie, Ewington, Fiona Hall. Vivienne Webb (ed.) "Fiona Hall: Force Field MCA Education Kit", Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2008)

war, with nothing to protect them from the invaders. Called *All The Kings Men*, these hanging sculptures are the centre of this installation carrying a significant message to the viewer about *Wrong Way Time* and its message.



Figure 4 Fiona Hall *All The King's Men*, 2014-15
roslynnoxley9.com.au images are copyright of the artist.

I found this part of the exhibition the most intriguing. The fierceness of the faces contradicts the gentle way they were made. The idea that the hangings sway as viewers pass by making them, the viewer, becomes a part of the installation that others might see. This aspect of the hangings I have seen in my large works where the viewer spends time speculating about what they are looking at. The movement of hanging work caused by them is unexpected and stops some viewers to speculate about the work. It's possible they do not realise that they created the movement themselves.

All The King's Men reminds me of Hall's work *Tender* 2003. There is a visual connection between these two artworks. Both have multiple objects made of shredded materials. The shredded material is manipulated into objects very different to the original materials purpose.

*Tender*⁴⁰ is a group of sculptures of bird's nests – some made by extinct species. Each is an exact replica of the bird's nest as found in museums in South Australia and Queensland. Each nest is fashioned from shredded American dollars because the American dollar is the preferred currency across the world and the dollar is a symbol of the first-world's destruction of global habitat. In a YouTube ⁴¹ video posted by Queensland Museum Hall talks about *Tender* with its 86 nests. In response to the curator asking her why she needs to make so many? Hall comments, 'I just do, I need to'⁴². Talking about all the other aspects she has come across in her exploration of this subject, apart from the objects (nests), birds and their habitat and the impact of capitalism on the environment they live in. She shows in this conversation how involved she becomes with her subject matter and the same multiple objects may be a part of this extended thinking as a way of bringing out or managing her thoughts and ideas.

The hangings forming *All The King's Men* knitted material, *Tender* is woven shredded paper banknotes and *Medicine Bundle for the Non-Born Child*, 1993–94 is a full baby's layette, made from shredded coke cans knitted together. The theme of Hall's work is to confront capitalism and its impact on the environment by using the objects of capitalism to cause scrutiny of itself. The gentleness of making is jarring against the materials being used. When she speaks, she carefully refrains from laying blame at anyone's feet, but she articulates very clearly who or what she sees as the problem that needs to be solved.

Hall's choice of imagery used to explore her ideas shows a focus on detail and a truly inventive mind. Multiples of the same object, small detail changes making each piece different when the viewer spends time to scrutinise each piece. This is seen for example in the faces of *All The King's Men*, all different but the size and material are the same. Knitted camouflage material,

⁴⁰ *Tender*, 2003-05 <https://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artwork/fiona-hall-tender-2003-05/31:1069>

⁴¹ Hall, Fiona. [youtube.com/watch?v=7-3d75Zltg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-3d75Zltg) 3 Dec 2016 – 17 Apr 2017 | Queensland Art Gallery

⁴² Hall, Fiona. 2016 [youtube.com/watch?v=7-3d75Zltg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-3d75Zltg) 3 Dec 2016

shredded banknotes, clocks of all types, multiple nests, multiple skulls, multiple sardine tins. Hall discusses this as being part of the way she represents her thoughts, a way to jolt the thinking of the viewer, maybe a way to jolt her own thinking. The use of multiples is a common thread between the work of Hall, Gascoigne, Connelly-Northey and me. I wonder at the reason for this in our artwork, does the repetition add emphasis or is it necessary because nothing can ever be truly the same as another.

Hall's inquiring mind, exploration of the landscape and the impact of industry on the environment developed as she explored the world. Her comprehension and knowledge around the issues represented in her artwork are clear as the artist talks in front of her artwork and her feelings about the issues are supported by this knowledge.⁴³

Attention to detail, Hall's way of representing hard and disturbing ideas often in quite beautiful ways attracts the attention of the viewer. In the publication *Fiona Hall*⁴⁴ Julie Ewington takes us on the journey of the artist and activist. Giving us insight into Hall's dedication to the depiction of both the beautiful and the dark underbelly of life and the destruction of landscape from war and capitalism. Ewington states:

*While beauty and violence are here literally knotted together with silver wire ... Hall makes no comment on the motives and the histories that are produced ... Hall note's the coexistence of life and death everywhere, and in the fate that awaits all living things, whatever has brought them to their ends.*⁴⁵

Lo raine Connelly-Northey is an Aboriginal artist who like Hall is a storyteller. Like Gascoigne she tells her story about her place and her people through discarded and foraged agricultural waste in her home area.

⁴³ Spruyt, Tai. "Fiona Hall" Design and Art Australia Online, daao.org.au/bio/fiona-hall/biography/ written: 2009 updated: 2011.

⁴⁴ Julie, Ewington, Julie. & Fiona Hall & Art Gallery of South Australia. & Queensland Art Gallery. 2005, *Fiona Hall / Julie Ewington* Piper Press Annandale, N.S.W

⁴⁵ Ewington. "Fiona Hall": 165.

Lorraine Connelly- Northey

Lorraine Connelly-Northey a Waradgerie artist was born in 1962 at Swan Hill, Victoria.

This is her family's Country although she has not lived on it for long periods of her life. Her father, a non-indigenous man, married her mother a Waradgerie woman and had seven children. Her mother was brought up on a mission and like the women in my family was not allowed to practice traditional ways. The punishments they received when caught participating in traditional practices were severe. Her mother taught her the spiritual aspects of her heritage and Lorraine learnt traditional practices by looking over the shoulder of her mother, taking over when her mother was busy and learning her craft by doing rather than being taught. Her father encouraged her to make in traditional ways and he also taught her about the land and the waterways.

Connelly-Northey refined her weaving skills under the tutoring of Yvonne Koolmartie and became known as a Master Weaver of the Ngarrindjeri people (her People), Although Connelly-Northey developed into an expert weaver she felt uncomfortable using the grasses from Koolmatie's traditional Country. Aboriginal people don't take from other people's Country unless invited and would only take small amounts, possibly while learning a new craft. This made it harder for Connelly-Northey to practice as the change in water flow and route of waterways on Connelly-Northey's country meant that original grasses on her country had died out. It was her father, when talking to her about her Country, the environment, Aboriginal practices and her artmaking who suggested she explore industrial waste in her artwork.

Connelly-Northey uses found agricultural materials discarded in paddocks, objects and materials from the tip; feathers, shells and seed pods of all kinds. She spends time gathering, taking only what she needs, with an artist's eye she is collecting for current artwork. Using her understanding of traditional making methods including coil weaving she brings these materials together to make comments on the world she lives in.

Connelly-Northey blends traditional practice and the agricultural materials within her contemporary art practice. Connelly-Northey's artwork tackles what has happened to Aboriginal people since colonisation, including the injustices that have happened to her people since then. Connelly-Northey states in an article, with Timothy Morrell 2013 ⁴⁶ that it wouldn't matter where she was born, she would be doing artwork about injustice. Her feelings are strong and her ways of expressing these stories in her art are profound.



Figure 5 Lorraine Connelly-Northey *O'Possum-skin cloak: Blackfella road*.
National Gallery of Victoria / images are copyright of the artist.

The sheer size of *O'Possum-skin cloak: Blackfella road*, massive 268.5 × 703.0 cm rectangle hangs on the wall and towers over the viewer. Made from discarded agricultural materials; corrugated iron, rusted and barbed wire this art piece reflects the destruction of an old Aboriginal burial ground near Swan Hill. Connelly-Northey tells the story of Aboriginal people from her Country driving through newly graded road construction where they could see human bones protruding from the escarpment. The foundations of a road were excavated without regard for the visible signs of this being a burial site. Hands made of corrugated iron around the boundaries of the work taunt the viewer to come closer, have a proper look. They remind me of

⁴⁶Morrell. Timothy 2013 artcollector.net.au/lorraine-connelly-northey-cross-cultural-constructs/ issue 66

the biblical paintings of people coming out of the ground to be raised to heaven. The size gives an impression of the weight of the piece, a weight we should all carry for the disrespect and disregard we have of these sacred places.

Connelly-Northey blends traditional knowledge of weaving and making to reproduce daily objects in industrial waste. She fashions coolamons⁴⁷, bark shaped holders for food or wood and dilly bags out of these discarded materials, shaping and reworking them until they take on the shapes she wants. She maintains her strong cultural ways with the materials from the white man's world. Her dilly baskets and coolamons are delicate and gestural, with colours from the landscape strong in the rusted, weathered materials she chooses to use.

Connelly-Northey first showed her work in 2001. It did not take long from there for her work to be part of the exhibition *What's On: Contemporary art in the Murray-Darling region* at the Mildura Art Gallery where Helen Kaptein introduced her to curator Carolyn Saunders. Connelly-Northey has produced work for several exhibitions including solo work such as *Three Rivers Country (2010)*⁴⁸ where she explores her mother's birth Country.

Connelly-Northey's way of working, the twists and turns she goes through to produce these profound stories are a way of weaving the ancient and the modern together. As a contemporary artist, she seeks textures, colours and shapes that fit together in her small works or as part of her larger exhibitions.

Connelly-Northey's ways of working and the material she works with interest me as I work with foraged materials, I too appreciate the colours created by weathering and the soften edges of materials that are left out in the open and shaped by Australia's extremes of weather. Her

⁴⁷ Here are at least 2 ways of spelling coolamons that Connelly-Northey uses: coolamons or koolimans

⁴⁸ Connelly-Northey 2010 mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2010.46A-C/

work is very powerful as she is telling stories of women's work, family, culture, heritage and the wider world she lives in.

An essay by Warwick Mules entitled *Earthing the World*⁴⁹ discusses the artwork of Lorraine Connelly-Northey . Mules discusses the theory of *Re Earthing the World* when humanity returns to previous ways of living combining these old ways with new techne (ways of making art). Mules sees a Connelly-Northey wire bowl displayed in a modern designer home as the conduit to his theory and discusses how her bowl sits in this environment and in his view takes back and reconnects that bowl with the earth. He suggests it is a way of seeing in another way that brings it and the viewer back to earth to reconnect with it and find other ways to be. The basket in this modern setting opens the viewer's mind to what might come. It is a philosophical view that in its way poses no answers or ways forward however reading this chapter opened my thinking about Aboriginal art and its impact on the artist and the viewer.

All the mentioned artists have influenced my artwork over time and are still current in my thinking about how and why I make. We are all tactile artists feeling the material in our hands opens ways of working it to develop a bigger more meaningful picture. In the preface to *Experiential Learning in Practice as Research: Context, Method, Knowledge*, Barrett (2007)⁵⁰ states that "*arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns; it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge but also on that of tacit and experiential knowledge.*"

As artists our perceived knowledge is in our exhibited works however our real knowledge is in how we bring materials together to tell a story that is bigger than us. Gascoigne says she

⁴⁹ Warwick, Mules, *Worldmaking: Literature, language, culture* Edited by Tom Clark, Emily Finlay and Philippa Kelly [FILLM Studies in Languages and Literatures 5] 2017 ► pp. 99–10

⁵⁰ Estelle, Barrett, (2007) Experiential learning in practice as research: context, method, knowledge, Journal of Visual Art Practice, 6:2, 115-124, DOI: [10.1386/jvap.6.2.115_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jvap.6.2.115_1)

was not influenced by the artists of the time that she made work in. She created her artwork in beautiful symmetry, not influenced by other artists but was she influenced by the times she lived in and the changing world around her. Her work gives us ideas of a changing place, the grid work in her art re-establishing the place of discarded materials. Lorraine Connelly-Northey, not wanting to be culturally inappropriate, chooses discarded farm materials, her work is an expression of an ancient culture and a decaying modern world. Gascoigne, Hall and Connelly-Northey and I are talking about world views, Fiona Hall with her constant and persistent narrative about consumerism and its impact on third world continues.

I include myself here as I feel I belong, on the edge of this group of innovative, strong artists. Gascoigne, Hall and Connelly-Northey and I all create from a central theme of everyday, discarded materials, our built objects from industrial materials where our work starts from foundational ideas, about the environment, community, family and place. When we look back on the lives of these artists we see people who as very young children were artists and creators, learning from their families and the environment - except Gascoigne who lived in a family that frowned on art making – a product of her times in the early 1900's, she was destined to be a teacher. Hall was interested in art as a young person, recognised by her mother and Connelly-Northey learnt weaving by looking over her mother's shoulder. I have been making and building since I was a child, an activity passed on and nurtured by family, I watched over my mother's shoulder and was scolded by my grandmother for not 'making properly' even though I don't remember her teaching me. Connelly-Northey and I live in families where knowledge was gained beside your mother, women's work. Learning by copying rather than learning from teaching. Her mother and my mother were not taught but gained the knowledge because of a need to know what was known before. How these ways of understanding creativity and art come to some people is not fully understood. If you speak to an artist and ask them about their past they

are often looking for the artist, whose the blood they carry that gives them the ability to create. This is not my domain to explore but DNA investigation that is becoming more and more specific may tell in the future if this comes from nature or nurture.

Gascoigne, Hall, Connelly-Northey and I all have an 'eye' for the right piece of every-day left behind, discarded piece of material that is just right for an artwork. We fossick through materials until we find a piece to portray something deep inside us that needs to be expressed. We all make objects over and over, why, is not clear to me but I know the drive that makes this happen. We strive to get a perfect reflection of our inner thoughts.

Gascoigne, Hall, Connelly-Northey and I all feel/felt the weight and texture in our hands as we make and reshape materials into the object of our imaginations. By remoulding discarded materials, we continue the story of material that nearly ended on the ground near the rubbish heap. Gathering materials with colours touched by the sun and the rain, materials that hold the memory of the past owner intact on the surface, highlights our stories of the changing world. We gather our stories, select materials, build our art pieces and offer a story for the viewer to ponder.

CHAPTER 3. ESTABLISHING AN UNCONVENTIONAL ART PRACTICE

I have established an unconventional practice by doing two things not all artists do. I test my ideas and verbalising my narrative with artists, creative post-grad students and others attending my workshops, in order to make artwork. It gives me a better understanding and more clarity to my thoughts and purpose as I speak to groups and see how they interpret my words. Workshops connected me to community, enabling me to reflect on traditional and contemporary practice and allows for my self-actualisation as an artist. Explaining my art and techniques to new learners enables me to examine my own practice and further enhances my thoughts and develops my ideas. The other unconventional thing is I break the rules of the weaving processes; which is generally symmetrical, my weavings are not. I interfere with the weaving structure by physically changing the shape and direction of the rows. I manipulate the rows to leave gaps and insert other materials into the gaps to enhance the story being told.

My experience through life when I am working with groups of children is you are often left to your own ways of passing on information. I sought out authors who offer ideas and support in how to do this successfully. I became interested in the theory presented by Tyson Yunkaporta, who is a Senior Lecturer of Indigenous Knowledges at Deakin University, a strong advocate for Aboriginal people, a writer, art critic and researcher. His ideas in *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*⁵¹ concentrate on the complex Aboriginal ways of connecting and the relationships within Aboriginal society that include family, others and the environment. I first heard of him in a radio interview and I felt that his theory related well to my

⁵¹Yunkaporta, Tyson, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. S.I.: Text Publishing, 2019.

ways of working with children. *Sand Talk* presents the latest of his published works and discusses Aboriginal ways of learning and how these ways can be introduced to children's learning experiences.

Yunkaporta outlines his concepts through the *8 indigenous ways*: holism, visual, community, symbols and images, nonverbal: kinaesthetic, land links, story sharing and nonlinear. These cover the areas of learning and closely align with my own practice and information sharing. When I was first asked to attend a school and talk about Aboriginal culture and art, it surprised me that there were no suggestions, no lesson plan and no outline. I had conversations with Elders and teachers to develop lessons for the children. I wanted to tell the truth of Aboriginal history and culture in a way that children could embrace and for me that way was through art and storytelling. My style of passing on knowledge to children is similar to what I did as an integration aide: talk to children in a way they can understand, tell them a story and get them to help fill the spaces. Involving children and adults in workshops about Aboriginal art and culture, included ensuring my grandchildren understand their connection to country through making art. The passing of intergenerational knowledge is an integral part of making art with children, passing on that knowledge is important when making art with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. It places the art in the lives of people around us and children start to understand how they fit into their family and community. My grandsons like me to tell stories about their father and aunty particularly stories of them at the same age. I was commissioned to support the children at Golden Square Primary school producing a mural (Figure 7) when I first met a grade six boy. He was sent to me to talk about what he would like to paint on a mural. He said he thought it would be a boring mural because he and his brothers were the only Aboriginal children at the school. He was very surprised to know there were plenty more Aboriginal children there. When he painted his part of the mural, he painted his planned symbols and added several symbols for

families and said that they were for all the other children he didn't know about before. He was very proud of his newly found knowledge.



*Figure 6 Golden square mural with children's animals and symbols 2017
Collaboration between Janet Bromley and Aboriginal children at the school*

Workshops held in 2019 at Bendigo Art Gallery, Maryborough Art Museum and Koorie Heritage Trust have been about making wall-hangings with recycled materials (Figure 3). My role is to talk about the art surrounding us in the gallery space and why I make art in the way that I do. I always have finished work for the children to look at so they know what they are doing today as an example of what it may look like when they are finished. This helps them in the making process, in their vision of what they will make. I talk about why we should recycle and

encourage the children to ask question and encourage them to talk about it amongst themselves. When talking about Aboriginal culture I place the children in the story, so when talking about how we like to see our families we talk about how far away they are, we discuss how we might get there and surmise that because there was no transport before the arrival of white people, we would have to walk. I suggest this might mean that families lived closer to each other. Many children react to this suggestion wishing this was true now. There is always someone in the group who is vegetarian so we talk about what that means and if Aboriginal people could have survived like that and we usually agree they could. Most lament - 'how would you live without McDonalds?'

The start of the weaving is tying the warp to chopsticks or bamboo rods. When children are making individual hangings, they tie between six and ten weft threads – usually a nylon ribbon as this will help the work to last as it is stronger than yarn and least likely to disintegrate.

The chop stick is anchored to the table so the children can work unhindered by their work moving. At this stage we all work together with nylon ribbon to make several rows. The children are excited and start to help each other. With individual smaller work we gather the even number weft pieces and place them over the top of the chopstick and lay them on the table. Some children pick this up quickly and others do not, so I ask the ones who understand to help the others on the first rows. We lay down the first weft row of yarn then gather the even number rows and bring them back to the original place; next we gather up the odd number weft pieces and lay them up on the table above the chop stick.



*Figure 7 Children's wall hangings 2019
From workshops at Bendigo Gallery*

When making the bigger hangings both ends have bamboo rods which are secured to the table. I talk to the children showing them how to weave with an under over pattern changing

with the next row which is over and under 'this is how we lock our weaving in place, this is how we make it stay together'. I encourage them to sing with me under and over, then we all laugh. We continue till we have six to ten rows. Then the children choose which material they want to use next. I do not instruct here, just keep moving around the group and make sure they have not made any big mistakes. If I see something is going wrong I think about what the child has been like and talk to them about what they think will happen if we hold the work up, will it stay together or fall down, then we decide together how to fix it. Sometimes I back fragile areas with tape to make sure they stay together. We talk about the colours, where the pieces have come from. I usually have some strips of clothing that were from my family and I tell the children about this. The group that found a strip from my mother's cardigan were very excited and ran to tell their teacher they were having my mother in their weaving. One young girl said she would not be allowed to cut up her old clothes because she had three sisters, I told her about my five sisters and how we wore each other's handed down clothes. She stayed close while she talked and told me other stories about her family.

I talk to the children all the time, reframing my instructions if I feel they are struggling to understand as not being hands-on in these experiences could make a child feel left out and different. Some children are given special jobs, loud boys plaiting the pieces to hold up the hanging is a joy to watch, at first they are a bit uncomfortable and as I show them and then they do it, they get excited and figure it out between them. When they finally make a plait they are so proud of their work in what they may have thought of as girls work. I sometime single out older Aboriginal boys for special roles if they seem to be hanging back, not connecting with the process. I quietly introduce myself and ask them if they could do a job for me – often I am inventing tasks, but they are unaware of this. What they understand is an Aunty is asking something of them and they accept and take on the role. Often their role in their family would

seem grownup to western eyes, many grow up without a parent or in a blended extended family where they might have responsibilities looking after the other children or older people. When they take on a role, they take pride and ownership in what they are doing. Singling them out with thanks is not appreciated, I make sure I thank them quietly when the group leaves to go to their next class.

I keep thinking about Yunkaporta's ways of learning, in particular the non-linear perspective – my natural way of supporting children to connect to what I am telling them is never direct, we yarn as I would with adults. This connects us to what is around us, in and outside the classroom. With children their families are always part of the conversation. Establishing connection to who my family and community are at the start of our time together and encouraging them to think about their place in the world often opens a connection to me, so they feel able to talk with me quite quickly. I always tell Aboriginal children to tell their families that I am coming to their classroom, parents are protective of their family circle and as a rule they are accepting when they know when other Aboriginal strangers are around their children. Not a long time ago the rules around connecting to other Aboriginal people were very strict and in some families around Australia these rules remain. I am always sharing stories and children love to share back. In groups I encourage them to share with each other with a cautionary tale of not sharing what their mother/family would not like being shared. Many Aboriginal families still hold on to the secrecy of who they are and where they come from. Old people still try to quieten their sons and daughters who might talk about being Aboriginal and some Aboriginal people younger than me talk about growing up saying they were Spanish or South American. There are many hidden agendas that relate back to the past that people do not want talked about. It is not respectful to force discussion of Aboriginality, and I am always cautious when dealing with these issues.

Running workshops and the conversations with children that arose out of them helped me to focus on what I do in my art and why I am compelled to do it this way. The experience of workshop facilitation has developed clarity in my work and the materials I use to make with. As a result, I explored more what I need to say in regard to my work and the materials I use.

I reinforced within workshops my strong narrative about recycled materials in the production of my work. There were the financial limitations of making large works and the waste that this would result in. I had come to feel responsible for ensuring I was at least repurposing materials through my work. Furthermore, as my work became larger and more complex, I found the volume of materials required made recycling a practical and sustainable alternative to sourcing new materials. As many art pieces have a short life span, particularly those of a student, I was uneasy about the waste that followed the making and discarding of art pieces. This in turn, prompted me to consider old practices, that were more sustainable. Aboriginal ways of thinking and of managing resources : “harvest what you need”, “don't take more than is necessary” and “nurture your surroundings to ensure that your totem has the right place to grow and feed your family.” I found that there is a strong link between environmental issues, my Aboriginality and my artmaking and I sought to extend the reach of my art and develop a platform that is wide and approachable to a broader audience. There is always the opportunity to influence someone’s thinking along the way. Hall’s artwork and her influence as an elder in the art community comes from the same perspective. She articulated this in her interview with Anna Dickie (2015):

*I don't think an artist can change the world with their work, but I do think artists are game changers. I think artists are like litmus paper, not just visual artists. Actually, artists and scientists both are like litmus paper—they give a sense of where things are. Hall*⁵²

⁵² Anna, Dickie, ocula.com/magazine/conversations/fiona-hall/

My grandchildren and other children flourish when given access to art and making and will pass on making ways unlike my grandmother who was denied this life process. I found that I could express my ideas through art in a sustainable way and connecting to artists such as those in this thesis, opened possibilities that I could expand and build on.

Many things inspire me to create. However, during these last two years I have in my mind's eye a photo of my great grandmother (Figure 8) sitting in front of a humpy made for her by her children. She lived in it when she had to leave the mission, crossing the border over the river to Victoria to receive a pension. Her walking stick, a piece of wood, a branch that someone had found for her. Her seat a crate, the humpy is made of cast offs that people have found in the surrounding bush, pieces of wood, tin, corrugated iron and canvas.

Aboriginal people saw the potential in these materials that others had left behind. I do this in my art practice. It is difficult to find words for rubbish or waste in Aboriginal language as there is potential for use in most things given time to think about it. Materials were gathered to be used, not collected or stockpiled and were not carried from place to place. Aboriginal people have sharp eyes and adapted what they found to suit their immediate need. After colonisation, they adapted to the materials they found in the bush, new materials and ways that came with the new people. It has been an interesting observation that although people in general hear about recycling in art they don't seem think about it and are surprised by my revelation that the materials come from the op-shop or the bush. It would be interesting to explore this further in the future.



*Figure 8 My Great-grand-mother, banks of Murray river 1930s-1940s
Used with permission of extended family members.*

I do not set out with a plan for my finished work, however I do plan to use specific materials and have a scale in mind from the beginning. I start with broad ideas and am open to turning in another direction as I take a step away for the work and reflect. In fact, I often do not realise that I have taken another tangent until that moment when I walk away from the work. This mode of working is intuitive and at times obsessive and I can lose track of time as it seems to slow down or speeds up, hours can go by quite quickly. This approach to making enables work to manifest into something close to the original concept or something completely different. In order to begin this intuitive process, I find that it is important to first centre myself. This is where

the practice of Dadirri has become a way to balance and centre myself, the creativity flows from there and then the making can begin.

Starting a weaving is similar each time. The process starts by bringing the patterns, materials and colours together, sorting into piles of yarn or shredded material on the floor. The colours are quite important, more important than I realised, until I started to reflect on what I do. Like fingers down a blackboard, colours that don't belong together jar against each other. If I feel that I have inadvertently paired colours that don't belong together, I undo the work and take the offending colour away. When seeing non-connecting colours, I am driven to separate or remove, I think 'they can't stay like that it's an affront to the eyes. At other times I enjoy the tension. This is true with the hangings *Joy of Making 2020* (Figure 9) and *Those who Follow Us 2019* (Plate 3). These are joyous weavings filled with all the colours of the rainbow bouncing around, clashing with each other and making a special, happy, visual space. The visual cacophony of colours coming together but still rather separate, in their own place rolling and folding, finding a space of their own. There is always room to break your own rules and these two works do that.



Figure 9 *The Joy of Making 2019*
Materials: recycled materials, yarn, beads, lace.

Blue along with tones of blue, red blue, green-blue or other colours toned with blue like cherry red are among the first chosen colours. Tones of yellow and colours that complement yellow and blue are the next pile. Greys and blues and the browns are the colours for artwork about Country, for example the hanging *Our Country 2019* (Plate 1). These colours all reflect the landscape I see around me. They also mirror the paperbark in the hanging; the dry Australian bush parched for rain, ready for fire if lightning comes along, carries these colours. The colours in *Celebrating Aging 2019* (Figure 10) accentuate the main body of the work that is white with ripples of colour representing our youth, parenting years, hardship and happiness, what has gone before and what is yet to come.



Figure 10 Celebrating Aging 2019
Materials: recycled materials, lace, yarn and plastic.

My way of weaving requires colour texture and movement to enhance the narrative of the piece to flow and roll over the surface. Texture accentuates depth, movement and colour. In my finished hangings, this is accentuated movement when the weaving is hung, particularly when hung away from the wall. The weavings are designed to be hangings and can be quite chaotic when compared with any traditional weaving. There is little need to secure ends and so if there is a knot securing two pieces together that will be a way to add texture to the weaving.

Ends often hang out and may be altered or woven back in at a different point to give flow and movement to the weaving. Most of my weaving has the appearance of landscape when first viewed. I interfere with the weft rows pushing them up and down to add to the movement in a piece or I might weave half rows to create a higher aspect and then weave across a full row which then changes the symmetry. My interest in weaving, a traditional making process, and using new materials grew at this time when I found others used similar materials and had similar ideas. My sessions with Master Aboriginal weavers taught me about adaptation, as each had family ways of weaving that catered to the needs of their community – for example, net making for those who live by water, coil weaving styles determined by availability of grasses and reeds.

When I attended an exhibition at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology: Fast Fashion: The Dark Side of Fashion⁵³ 2017 ideas started to develop around what I was doing and why. Prior to this I was alone with my ideas and I found that this exhibition linked me with a concept that others understood. At the time I was making large hangings and had resorted to cutting up opportunity shop clothes because I simply could not tolerate new material being destroyed in this way. The exhibition was a deep look at what happens when we make fashion particularly now fashion makers are resorting to having their clothes made in Asian countries where the labour costs are cheap. The exhibition explored the polluted rivers from the run-off created when dyeing cloth, to the towering heaps of clothing being sorted for shredding (not distributed to people in need to wear as many assume) and an Indian woman feeling sorry for the people in western culture “...where they discard clothes because they don’t have enough water to clean them” rather than knowing the truth is that many people in western cultures simply discard clothes too

⁵³Erika, Nostrom, Professor Ostrud exerci tatior adipis (Cologne) rmitgallery.com/exhibitions/fast-fashion/

easily for very little reason. It imbedded in my mind what are we ⁵⁴doing, and I decided to not buy material for my art until it was impossible to find what I need second hand. At this time, I also came across the publication *Art + Climate = Change* and saw the work of Chris Jordan.

Anthony Fitzpatrick's commentary included in the publication *Art+Climate = Change*⁵⁵ *Intolerable Beauty: Facing the Mirror of Mass Consumption* 2016 features Chris Jordan's photographic work. This stark and bleak photographic collection is a reminder of what happens to the environment when waste is discarded. Piles of building rubble, tyres, rubbish and plastic dumped in the bush is something I have seen myself, after taking a wrong turn in Vanuatu and driving out of the tourist spots and more locally in the bush around Bendigo. Such areas are my piles for foraging, collecting what I need for my work, following traditional processes of gathering. I find the photographs of Jordan are quite violent, piles of rubbish discarded around the scene, dumped, no-one cares, and no-one owns these piles. His photography makes the picture seem endless communicating that this will always happen, there is no end. What we see can send us either in a direction of denial or on a path that tries to do something, tries to alert people. This is the lot of the artist when they start to see something that they are passionate about, how can you change people, enable them to see. Some are driven to try and so my contribution is an artistic one that may open the eyes and minds of the viewer.

I have built relationships with opportunity shops who collect for me when I need more material. The pieces all come from the bundles that are destined to go overseas. Clothing is washed and sorted then I cut the material into strips as long as possible, not removing anything

⁵⁴ This comment came from a video in the exhibition where a group of Indian women situated within the piles of clothing where they sort clothing into colours. She thought this was why so much clothing was sent for them to sort. *Fast Fashion: The Dark Side of Fashion*

⁵⁵ Guy, Abrahams, Bronwyn, Johnson, and Kelly, Gellatly, *Art Climate = Change*. 2016.

from the garments, the buttons, zips, seams and labels stay as a prompt for the viewer to recognise that this is clothing cut and repurposed. Nylon ribbon used to cover clothes hangers is perfect because it makes a strong frame for the weaving to hang on, important when making larger hangings which include bark and sticks. The ribbon is threaded as the warp and then the decisions are made as to how long the leftover pieces should be. I wonder, 'Should they hang down under the hanging or should they be short and discrete?'. Sometimes they are used for their colour as it can be quite striking in effect. This is evident in the black and orange weaving *Under Our Feet 2019* (Plates 4 & 5).

Weaving and making with recycled materials has an unexpected impact of being a memory holder. People recognise particular material as being similar to that worn by their own family whether it be men's shirts or babies' clothing. Some reactions can be quite strong, an aspect of my work I had not considered. However, in an article Harper's Bazaar Justine Picardie discusses the connections we have to clothing and the memories that the sight of that piece brings to us. In the article *The Secrets Your Clothes Reveal* Picardie reminds us of the connections we have to pieces of clothing from significant times in our lives. The last poignant paragraph from the article connects her reflection to the comments made about my weaving when recognition occurs.

*And if by chance, some precious piece does disappear- through a wrinkle in time,
like my mother's wedding dress -then try not to mourn it, for its own story will
remain, woven into the warp and the weft of a life.* ⁵⁶

The interactions I have had during the time of this thesis have spiked my curiosity and shown me that by embracing my own way of making I have developed important insights in traditional

⁵⁶ Justine, Picardie, Harper's Bazaar; May 2006; 3534; The Harper's Bazaar Archive pg. 105 Tur, S., Blanch, F., & Wilson, C. (2010).

ways of making and contemporary art making and how they come together. In my writing I am concentrating on Women's work. Thinking about the information, ideas and influences that have presented themselves through interaction with others and through planning for outcomes makes me excited about the future where perhaps my work will make a difference.

CHAPTER 4. PERSONAL PRACTICE AND EXHIBITIONS

This chapter will examine exhibitions and specific art pieces. including those that will be included in an exhibition later in the year. For me, the most noticeable aspect of my artwork is the visual effect, however I have noticed some viewers have an emotional connection seeing more than the materials pieces are made of. The textures and the materials are at the front, behind the visual effect is a way of working and collecting that goes back to Aboriginal ways of knowing and collecting only what is needed. My collection of work explores issues that hold a deeper story of my cultural heritage. Most Aboriginal artists I have encountered since starting this research speak of ancestral or blood memory and Aboriginal knowing being a part of the way to understand what you are doing and how you make. As I read the words of Elisa Jane Carmichael's 2017 master's thesis⁵⁷, I hear her words of separation and the use of art to heal community and the visible spaces of unknown knowledge. In her exhibition *Weaving with Ancestors* I see work that is similar to work I have made. A piece called *We See Your Hands Weave with Us 2019*.⁵⁸ where she has left spaces to represent the gaps in her cultural knowledge. Aboriginal artists speak of these gaps and their efforts to fill them with cultural knowledge specific to their mob. In my Honours exhibition *Mapping Me* had a possum skin with spaces indicating the knowledge that I do not have of my culture and my family. This idea of spaces often comes into my work. At an artist camp I produced a piece of art that unbeknownst to me at the time, was almost the same as Carmichael's *We See Your Hands Weave With Us*, (a quick sketch beside her work shows the similarities to my work onsite at Boho camp (Figures 11 & 12).

⁵⁷ Elisa, Carmichael, *How is weaving past, present, futures?* Masters by Research by Creative Works, Queensland University of Technology (2017).

⁵⁸ Sally, Butler, Issue 15 2019 [Elisa-Jane Carmichael Weaving with Ancestors. Sally Butler Issue 15 2019](https://garlandmag.com/) <https://garlandmag.com/>



Figure 11 *We see your hands weave with us*
Elisa-Jane Carmichael
 Photo Louis Lin, Courtesy artist and Onespace
 Gallery



Figure 12 *Quick sketch wire hanging idea*
 BOHO camp 2019

Elisa Jane Carmichael, a Quandamooka woman, uses traditional knowledge and lost practices, regained through museum and gallery searches passed on to her from elders and placed in her contemporary practice to keep and maintain her people's cultural ways.

Lee Darroch, a Yorta Yorta, Mutti, Boon Wurrong woman says at the conclusion of the article *Ancestral Memory – Out of the shadows: ...you do remember in making those things for the first time, you do remember stuff that's a cultural memory, an Ancestral memory if you like – about*

*how to go about it and what things mean — you've got a responsibility to pass it on. There's no point in it ending with us*⁵⁹.

As I grapple with these ideas and concepts I constantly question and re question my thoughts and ideas.



Figure 13 Seaview 2018
Winner Koorie Heritage Trust Creative Victoria Excellence In Any Media
Materials: recycled plastic baling twine, bubblewrap

⁵⁹ Fran Edmonds, et al. "Ancestral Memory out of the Shadows." *Artlink* 2, no. 2 (2012): 56-61. [cited 30 Apr 20].

Seaview 2018 (Figure 13) is an artwork that forced me to re-evaluate my narrative about myself and my art when it was awarded Koorie Heritage Trust Exhibition; Creative Victoria Excellence in any Media Award. Responses from Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people included several observations that 'art' being made from plastic was not cultural work and that it was unacceptable as it was made from rubbish or cheap materials. In hindsight I realised the criticism was not questioning my Aboriginality, my reaction was my hurt ego, however, not once did I think to change the way that I made my work. The criticism indicated that I needed to build a stronger narrative, connecting my modern materials and processes to the traditional ways of foraging.

When I started the weaving *Seaview 2018*, I already had a good understanding of how plastics would work in my hangings from my long use of all types of materials and my experimenting along the way. I had made small hangings incorporating plastic and observed the difference in how light interacted with it. Bubble wrap refracts the light from the bubble and the popped bubble in different directions, when woven together it gives a perception of movement and gleam, shimmering as the viewer walks past. This is where practicing Dadirri consciously linked to my practice has been a bonus for me, it gives space to let ideas flow. and come from within. In this instance a blue, green bubble wrap and light flickering through the trees exploded into this weaving idea.

Gascoigne foraged along the back roads near her home ideas coming to her when she laid eyes on a weathered sign or Hall wandering through a Museum in London when she saw some birds' nests and she had the idea of making the nests out of American dollars. To some this doesn't make sense however as artists we do not just gather materials, we gather ideas and inspirations that are stored for future use and we try to replicate what has gone before buried in our creative psyche. Connelly-Northey deliberately looked for agricultural waste to develop the

ideas that were ready and waiting for the right materials to appear. My own work has become enmeshed with recycled or repurposed materials, I look for materials in the bush or wander through op-shops picking and choosing as I go. I have strong preference for certain colours and materials and run materials over my hands feeling how they will react to weaving and how they will hang.

When I considered how I needed to use the gallery space offered to me as artist in residence at Daylesford Macedon Ranges Open Studios I realised that I would need to source quite a few pieces to place in the space. As I gathered pieces together, I came to understand how connected each piece of my work was and how I had been going through a long process of building a story for several years.

The placement of my work in the Daylesford Macedon Ranges Open Studios was an opportunity to think about my artwork as a collective (Figures 14 .15). The space was quite large so I had to think across a few years of work and how I could bring the pieces together in a themed way. *From Paper Bark to Plastic 2019* was hung by the gallery curator, I usually hang my own work, so this was a new experience to work with a curator to convey my ideas on placement. The exhibition brought about 30 pieces together. Most were made as part of my master's research and consisted of a large canoe-shaped vessel and cups (made in the previous year), several wall hangings, dolls and animals. The plastic wall hangings were the feature of the exhibition. Purely made from plastic, one weaving had brands visible, made from recycled shopping plastic bags and another weaving where the bags are visible as the sole focus of the weaving with no brands visible, so it is clearly from shopping bags.

The weaves in most hangings were tight. Difference in tightness changes the texture of the piece. The last hanging, made from bedding plastic, was not as tightly woven and so was very soft to the touch, it made me think of using it to make a piece of clothing sometime in the

future. Recording new ideas is part of my work practice, I often get new ideas from my work or combinations of my work and I often make with that idea eventually.



Figure 14 From Paperbark to Plastic 2019

The Old Auction House

Various works: materials - recycled materials, raffia, plastic, paperbark and found objects

I had a discussion with a seven-year-old boy who attended the exhibition with his mother, while she looked at the work he stayed and had a yarn with me. We talked about the internet game Minecraft. He could see the similarities between rectangle grid-like shapes of my weavings in his Minecraft game and how they fitted together and asked could he make them in his game (the wonder of a young mind always thinking and planning). Many can see grid work in Gascoigne's constructions also. However, like me, she said she was not influenced by existing genres, she too was simply influenced by the shape of the time she lived in.

As artist in residence I was accessible to the viewers questions and comments. Some liked the art some did not, questions ranged from "why plastic?" to "How can we save the world

from capitalism?”. One older woman though it was disgusting that plastic was being displayed in the gallery. Her offence led her to question my Aboriginality and she needed her companion to remind her to remain civil. Through this and similar experiences, I have become an expert on my art and its relationship to my heritage. The conversations that have arisen out of recent presentations of my work have been important for my growth as an artist and as a person.



Figure 15 Four Hangings 2018
From Paperbark to Plastic – The Old Auction House 2019
Various works: materials - recycled materials, raffia, plastic, paperbark and found objects.

I am not alone in being challenged with personal questions stemming from the public display of my work. Gascoigne was interviewed in 1998 by Robin Hughes.⁶⁰ I was surprised by some of the questions about her marriage and other details of her personal life, however I have

⁶⁰ Robin, Hughes, 1998 australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gascoigne/interview9.html. R Recorded: Australian Biography project

since found out that people do ask artists quite intimate questions and I learned to be ready to answer or steer the conversation in another direction if I feel I need to.



Figure 16 Doll Collection 1, 2019

From Paperbark to Plastic – the Old Auction House 2019

Various works: materials - recycled materials, raffia, plastic, paperbark and found objects.

I realise that these personal enquiries go to the heart of this thesis. My thesis question explores the notion that tacit passing of intergenerational (ancestral/traditional) knowledge facilitates creativity and contributes to the understanding of identity and place. I found myself in a place where others were asking me this question as they were seeking answers during the

exhibition. I was able to experiment and rethink my narrative and at the end of the day went to a park to sit and think about what had happened during the day. Here is where I started to firm up what I thought about and what I said. South East Australian Aboriginal art has, for a long time, been seen as belonging to the past - Museum art – and not placed alongside contemporary or mainstream art till the late 1970's. Frances Edmonds thesis for her Doctor of Philosophy 2007 researches Aboriginal Art in South East Australia and connects to individuals and community to investigate art practice from 1834 onwards. She discusses South Eastern Aboriginal art at this time as not being perceived as 'Real' art with the dominance of Northern Territory Art in Australia⁶¹. Her research gathered many South East Aboriginal Artists together to show the depth of art is amongst Victorian Aboriginals. A visit to local and international galleries will show the absence of Victorian Aboriginal Art. This is a product of the myth that Victorian and Tasmanian Aboriginals died out, or at least were bred out, lose of colour was presumed to make you not Aboriginal. Although this is being debunked by Aboriginal people who have been reclaiming their culture it is often not understood/accepted by others because it is a deep personal issue.

Thesis exhibition

My masters exhibition includes several hangings and sculptural pieces. I made a collection of dolls and creatures through my master's project. They are like the soft glue that fits in the gaps and held ideas at bay while I went through the thinking process for what I saw as the bigger more important work but on reflection they are important. Faceless and made of scraps, we practiced our life roles as females and learned ways of connecting bits and pieces together making, practicing from an early age. The dolls and the animals have their place in this

⁶¹ Frances, Edmonds, 'Art is us': Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing in Southeast Australia. PhD thesis, Centre for Health and Society, Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, The University of Melbourne (2007).

exhibition (Figure 16 , 17 , Plates 8-16). While I reflect on how my siblings and I entertained ourselves making dolls, I discovered my mother made dolls also. The dolls were made of sticks, leaves and flowers, I don't remember naming the dolls we played with them and then discarded them when the game was over. I originally considered my recent dolls in the same way – as a playful pastime, but I now realise their importance in my practice.⁶²



Figure 17 Group of Dolls 2, 2020
Materials recycled materials, found wire, plastic, paperbark
Dimensions: height: up to 30cm width 20cm

The dolls are a significant component of the final exhibition. Six dolls and three animals will stand as a group in witness like the ancestors will be doing. The dolls were something to do when I was creatively stuck and time away from the large intense works.⁶³ In the exhibition they will stand aside, a place to retreat away from the big intense ideas, a calm, gentle place where maybe some memories are woken. Being invited to enter the exhibition *Ngardang Girri Kalat*

⁶² On reflection the connection to Tjanpi weavers and other Indigenous weavers and artists across the world can be found through making dolls. Future research on dolls and their place in Indigenous culture may follow on from this.

⁶³ Kandasamy, Sujane, Anand, Sonia, Wahi, Gita, Wells, Kate, Pringle, Kirsty, Weatherall, Loretta, Keogh, Lyniece, Bailey, Jessica, and Rae, Kym (2016). *Re-stitching and strengthening community: three global examples of how doll-making translates into well-being in Indigenous cultures*. *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* 7 (1) 55-75. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah.7.1.55_1

Mimini, (Mother Aunty Sister Daughter) 2019, reminded me of the significance of the dolls in my life, a soft, pleasing memory of my childhood and a reminder of the making, discarding and memories that still remain. It would be interesting to explore these more in the future as there are many cultures that make dolls.

Exhibiting at *Ngardang Girri Kalat Mimini (Mother Aunty Sister Daughter)*⁶⁴ at Central Goldfields Art Gallery, 2019 with 29 other regional Victorian female Aboriginal artists I was a bit overwhelmed. Within the group are some of the women that put Victorian Aboriginal art into galleries in Melbourne and contributed to the reintroduction of Victorian Aboriginal Art in the late 1960's while others were well known national and international artists. Contributing to this exhibition was an honour and an opportunity to interact with them. Reflecting on the title of the exhibition, I decided my work would reflect women and my family, I wanted to honour and put myself forward as being worthy of being in this group. The work that I have completed over the last two years has been building in momentum. I now have a series of woven pieces with depth and variety that facilitates the expression of my ideas in a way is increasingly specific for each piece. I viewed the weavings for this exhibition to be a continuation and development of my preceding work. I spent some time on Mt Alexander practising Dadirri, sitting quietly and letting the ideas come. I could feel the old people watching and the concept for the *Ngardang Girri Kalat Mimini* exhibition fell into place. I even came up with the name of each piece before I left the mountain. This is unusual for my work, as usually the ideas come out of the making. However, after this I decided to make three weavings expressing a deeper story about myself and my family.

⁶⁴ <https://netsvictoria.org.au/exhibition/ngardang-girri-kalat-mimini-mother-aunty-sister-daughter/>

I worked on ways to separate what I was doing with each weaving so they could stand together to tell a story but still stand alone with their own specific stories as well. Each of the three pieces were the same size and were hung side by side hanging slightly away from the wall, so that a breeze made by passing viewers would make the hangings move gently , creating a feeling that the ancestors were walking with them.⁶⁵

Our Country 2019 (Plate 1)

The first of the three weavings consists of recycled clothing representing the places my family have connected to and the place I am connected to now; the Country that has accepted me and helped me grow, where I can go to sit and listen for answers. A landscape expresses my deep connection to Country and the things I see when I wander through the bush. Bark, wire and clothing in the blues, greys, olive greens and grey greens of the landscape are woven together for this work, I sourced many materials in my mother's hometown in South Gippsland and collected the browns in small swatches from my mother's cupboard in the hometown where I grew up, for me these are the colours of North Central Victoria.

Starting this weaving I became absorbed to the point that I don't remember making some of it. I find that weaving becomes a safe place where I can let my mind go flowing with the work. The notion for many Aboriginal artists that ancestors are involved in their art making may relate to this space entered as an artist when everything is almost making itself and time becomes irrelevant. A picture comes from far away – far away in time or far away in my mind. The outcome of this weaving is very similar to landscape paintings I paint. An Aboriginal elder said to me "...it looks like your grandmother's Country, maybe she wants you to do this for her!" - Maybe.

Mother, Daughters, Aunty 2019 (Plate 2)

⁶⁵ These three pieces are the product of yarning and autoethnography as they tell my story and the story of my family.

The second of the three weavings represents my immediate female family. Each female member of my immediate family gave me a piece of clothing; my mother, daughter, daughter-in-law and my granddaughter and these were incorporated as a celebration of us. This weaving is more complex than the other weavings with the emphasis on deep personal connections that are highlighted by the materials used. I needed to ensure that I placed each person in their proper place in the weaving and decided that my mother would be at the bottom holding the rest of us up.⁶⁶ Her strength sustains me and her powerful love for us all is the most important thing in life to her. This weaving is made of lengths of recycled clothing cutting to strips. Nothing on the piece of clothing is taken off so all the buttons, buttonholes, zips and labels are still there. I want you to know where the material comes from, maybe this will inspire a question about why it was used and open conversations about our environment and how we need to consume less.

I cut the clothing into strips first before I started the weaving and laid strips out on the ground so that I could see what shape I needed to make; this part comes from within, I sit and look till I know what to do. Part of my weaving practice is to interfere with the straight rows of the weft pushing the materials into other shapes. I do this with my hands and my fingers by pushing the rows down to the side or make a hole that will be filled with some wool or leave it as space. I decided this weaving representing my family would resemble a landscape. In Aboriginal culture people are born of the earth, she is the mother and this weaving shows our connection to Country. It is denser than the other two weavings. I felt a surge of relief when I finished this piece as its meaning to me was very strong. It hangs between *My Country* (Plate 1) and *Those Who Follow Us* (Plate 3) keeping them together but allowing them to go off on their own separate journey.

⁶⁶ Mum is getting older, she's 87 and sometimes forgets things so when she sees this weaving in person I'm pretty sure that she's going to be asking me why I cut up her cardigan.

Those Who Follow Us 2019 (Plate 3)

The third weaving represents the children of my family, my mother's grandchildren and great-grandchildren who follow along behind us becoming more than us and integral parts of us. They are the future that we old ones may not see; however, they take parts of us in their life journeys. My mother had her hand in this weaving. The materials were from my collection of materials gathered over the last two years. I kept pieces, left over from the workshops with children at Bendigo Art Gallery, Central Goldfields Art Gallery and Koorie Heritage Trust and they seem to bring the joy of those children to the making process. My mother, with her arthritic hands, and her wandering mind, sat beside me while I wove, and she untangled yarns. She did not want any help she wanted to do it herself. This is powerful to me as it was the first time she has shown an interest in the process of my weavings. Her classic retort from two years ago '...what is all that junk' had faded away. Sitting closely together my mother talked about her life and the art objects that she had made over the years, like when she built sets and furnishings and props for a musical company. My mother told me that her mother never taught her how to make anything, but she watched her to see what she was doing. She scolded my mother if she was doing it wrong when she was making something, just like my mother had done to me. She knew her mother had knowledge about making however it wasn't until our recent journey to reconnect to our Aboriginal family she acknowledged that her mother had good reasons for not telling her.

As we worked together on *Those Who Follow Us 2019* (Plate 3) my mother talked at length about her own mother and about her childhood. She remembered her mother singing and what a great cook she was. My mother talked about not being provided with writing materials and paper and therefore being unable to do her schoolwork. She talked about making her own

entertainment as a child, about making bush ballerinas from gum nuts and flowers and how she would sit on the ground in the bush and have her own ballerina show. She was the 3rd of 6 children, the first girl, with two older brothers. She remembered how she had to play football and that she had to be the wicketkeeper for cricket because her brothers made her. She owes her exceptional memory and understanding of sport to her brothers. She talked about what her father did to her mother and her youngest brother and how she put a pillow over her baby sister so she couldn't hear what was happening. All these things in a matter of fact voice that's just how it was. My mother was talking about her place in the world. Maybe she did not remember I was there as she concentrated on unravelling the yarns. I was silent; when elders tell you these stories they are not asking for comfort or advice they are telling you how it was so that you know, so you can tell stories in the future so that others will know and learn from them.⁶⁷

In Aboriginal culture elders are always respected, old people are always looked after: children are followed by grand-children who are in turn, followed by great-grandchildren. It is the role of children no matter how old they are to support those older than them. In my family, so disconnected from the Aboriginal world, my mother still has those attributes. It is seen as disrespectful for a person to try to stand out or prioritise their life over that of other people, particularly family, so stories are facts narrated to let others know what happens in the world.

I wanted to make a weaving that looked a bit chaotic to represent my large family. I wanted to make something that looked fun and had movement. My mother has 10 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren, and I wanted to show the spirit of them all in this weaving. I also wanted to show that there was a diversity of young people and children in this weaving.

⁶⁷ Yarning is a long conversation where an elder has first right to speak until they are finished. And often goes in unexpected directions if you are deep listening to what is being said.

According to my mother, I have achieved that. These three weavings hang together to represent Country, culture and family.⁶⁸

From Plastic to Paper Bark (Plates 6 & 7) shows the transition from natural to man-made materials. Showing the journey from the traditional world to the contemporary world, one hanging is made with bark, one with bark and plastic and one with only plastic. These hangings are an image of me as I stand between the two worlds of traditional and contemporary making. My work is traditional in the foraging of materials and the story telling in my work as I am taking what I need from the environment however the modern discarded materials take my work in to the modern world. I'm making a claim that this story speaks from the traditional to the contemporary world.

Materials for this group of weavings came from the bush. The amount of plastic discarded in the bush is surprising and disturbing. I often wonder what my ancestors would have thought about finding our detritus in the bush. They would have spent time researching what they could do with it. I believe that they would appreciate the new materials and as they always adapted them for use, decided what they would transport with them and what would be left behind for their return as they have done for tens of thousands of years.

Under Our Feet 2019 (Plates 4 & 5) a set of weavings, will concentrate on the inner structure of the earth, a concept that has been in my mind for a long time, after I dreamed of it when camping in the bush. Aboriginal people of this area call Bendigo region upside down country. Many people understandably assume that this is about the destruction of the

⁶⁸ Lorraine Connelly-Northey talks about family and culture whenever she talks about her work. We both choose to repurpose materials and turn them into a representation of our stories, gathering as our ancestors did, adapting and reshaping what is available to us.
<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/creative-life/lorraine-northey-connelly/lorraine-connelly-northey-talks-about-process/>

environment during the gold rush. However, stories go way back in time to volcanic eruptions told in Songline stories of this area. Geographic maps of the area show the massive pressures on the land during the time of movement north away from the Antarctic that buckled and reshaped the underground below our feet.⁶⁹ The ground was truly turned upside down a very long time ago.

These weavings have their structures interfered with to create the structure and texture of folding and change in the earth. When viewing an open cut gold mine this shaping of the earth can be easily seen. The weavings are quite modern and structured including black, orange, gold and grey with threads of orange running through them to reminiscent of the destructive force deep in the earth and the lava that once flowed across the land. Aboriginal people of the Dja Dja Wurrung tell stories of eruptions that happened 7000 years ago.⁷⁰ This part of the exhibition asks us to look inside for what we cannot see but can perceive is there. This represents Country and what lies beneath our feet, places we cannot actually see but which holds us up and is the foundation of our world.

An eagle's nest is a central element of the exhibition. Eagles nests are a strong and powerful image in traditional culture and imagery. The eagle is not the totem of my mob, but it is the traditional totem of the culture (Dja Dja Wurrung) Bunjil is the custodian of the land where I now live. Traditional life and work were guided by each mob's culture, by gender and your role within the group's community. While it was not usual to replicate eagle's nests in traditional culture, I wondered what rules would be applied if I, as a woman of Yorta Yorta descent, were to replicate an eagle's nest albeit in discarded materials. Together with my grandchildren we made nests to consider how this work in the out of context (off Country) gallery space. These two nests

⁶⁹ portergeo.com.au/database/mineinfo.asp?mineid=mn229

⁷⁰ cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/nyernila/dja-dja-wurrung-the-two-feuding-volcanoes/

were made in the bush and are still erect, however some issues came up in regard to the building of the eagle's nests and my inner sense of cultural roles of men and women⁷¹ was constantly on my mind. In Aboriginal culture there are rules about men's and women's business that I have a strong instinct for, that stop me from entering into men's business. I have no rational explanation for this only that I cannot step around it. As I grappled with the idea of building a nest I also had to work through these inner thoughts and strong feelings. The construction of the eagle's nest in the gallery space left it up to chance as it would need to be made on site, even with practice in the bush there was no way to guarantee the nest would represent a nest.

After consideration and consultation with the children and my mother I will build an eagle's nest my own way using branches and industrial waste from the bush floor, using bailing twine to bring it together. The structure of eagle's nest is a challenge because the eagle builds its nest at the top of a tree between a forked branch, that will last for many years. What is the process of weaving the first branches that keeps the nest fixed to the tree? How the eagle does this is a mystery to me, how is it started? The children had a lot to say. I could imagine Aboriginal people watching an eagle build its nest and concluding it is indeed a mystery and a creature worthy of respect.

My exhibition captures some of that wonder at the natural world and how Aboriginal people lived on the land pre-colonisation. The process of the masters has led me to consider issues I had not thought about before and has opened new and interesting ideas to explore in the future, the ancestors will be there watching and judging me.

I was wondering how to talk about or show how the bush is full of weaving, how the branches of a tree fall to the ground where branches cross over each other like the warp and the

⁷¹ deadlystory.com/page/culture/Life_Lore/Ceremony/Men_s_and_Women_s_Business

leaves and small branches, leaves and grasses are the weft as they all settle together into the ground. Pondering the eagles nest took a lot of my time and I spent time with my grandchildren building two nests. One day when I was practicing Dadirri sitting looking at the horizon on Mount Alexander three eagles came into view. Soaring overhead, gliding on the currents flying way up high and then falling quickly to catch the current up again. This went on for a long time, I felt like I was watching an ancient dance, Bunjil would be watching to as he always is.

I knew then that I am not an eagle and I had to build the nest my way. So, I gathered what I needed to start and placed long sticks in plaster, so the base was secure. I gathered the remnants of tyres left on the roadside, discarded after being ripped off tyres as drivers do stunts on the roads. I was interested in the way weaving brings materials together and it is recognised regardless of what materials are used. However, I found the tyres quite hard to separate and the wire treaded throughout the tyre quite hard to control and very sharp so I have a nest, but it couldn't not be handled by anyone but me. It attracted comments from people, particularly young men, that I showed it to, they saw it as a nest. One saying '...it looks like a bird had gone and collected rubbish from the bush'.

I needed to rethink and again on the mountain a group of cyclists went past and I decided I could use bike tyres as I would be able to control them more easily. The concept of an eagle's nest was going to work (Figure 18), and I decided to include a large weaving to complete the nest, they will be close together, so the nest seems to be sitting in the bush.



Figure 18 Collage of nest ideas

Including Nest a watercolour with recycled paper, twigs, 2014

Materials: recycled materials, found wire, plastic, paperbark

Throughout this time, I have been making other items, building my traditional skills by attending workshops and weekends with elders who pass on their skills to keep their culture alive. These sessions are surrounded by tradition and require respectful attendance as these elders are passing on their family ways of weaving and making. Elders ask, in trust, that acknowledgment is made the teacher. Sometimes you are asked not to pass on special skills to others as these skills are old family traditions kept in family and passed to you because of a

respect the Elder has for you. This has been a humbling experience that they have allowed me to join their groups and it has been a place where I have felt ancestors watching and approving. All these elders have helped their mothers recreate their old ways of doing and gather together to trigger the tacit knowledge they all have. They are truly powerful people.

Sally Butler said *We don't often think of weaving as something that narrates history*, commenting on Carmichael's exhibition *Weaving with ancestors*.⁷² I find this comment, worrisome, weaving is age old across most cultures. How can it not tell history?

⁷² Sally, Butler, 2019 garlandmag.com/article/elisa-jane-carmichael/

CONCLUSION

In my master's studies I found the most difficult and most rewarding aspects were how to balance myself between old-world culture and the world I live in. My disadvantage has always been that I was not connected to my Indigenous community as a young person. I did not learn the ways of my old people; I did not have anybody to support me through the process of trying to learn practices and processes.

This thesis explored how creativity can be tacitly passed intergenerationally. I combined methodologies that best align with Aboriginal ways of knowing — including foraging, Dadirri, yarning and autoethnography — in order to demonstrate how art practice can integrate knowledge that 'comes from the skin'. That knowledge is closely tied with relationships not only to community and ancestry but also to place, and aligns with my concerns around sustainability, recycling and repurposing materials. In exploring how creativity can be activated through intergenerational knowledge, my thesis also considered how my practice is situated between traditional and contemporary.

As an artist I make using the traditional practices of foraging and storytelling. This has been the way of Aboriginal people over the centuries. During times of land upheaval caused by earthquake and volcanos, floods and drought Aboriginal people learned to live in their environment as it presented itself to them. After the white man landed in Australia they had to adapt to a completely new way of life, different to anything in their history held in Storylines. Adapting by using what was in their environment was their speciality so they quickly learned new ways of making, weaving and building. As I move through the countryside looking for material to work with, I know my ancestors did the same: interacting in the environment and being flexible in their approach to the materials available and how they use them. As a contemporary

Aboriginal artist, I adapt and use recycled materials as they become available; my practiced eye sees what I can use for future ideas in the bush or a dress in an op-shop.

Practicing Dadirri and yarnning has finetuned my ability to hear the important information about family and making when with other Aboriginal people. Dadirri has also reconnected me with the earth and what she has to offer. My increased use of Dadirri has heightened my ability to move from less focused making to specific artwork ideas, although my making is always driven from a need to make. My art develops from the making of an object and then deciding what to do with the making as if the process has a mind of its own. This is the practice that connects me with tacitly acquired intergenerational knowledge, connecting with knowledge gained over years. My practice has been able to easily adapt newly acquired techniques after I attended workshops held by Aboriginal Master weavers: Auntie Marilynne Nicholls, Glenda Nicholls and Aunty Clair Bates. Their generous sharing of cultural weaving practice and their bringing me into the circle of weavers added to my feeling of belonging and acceptance for who I am and what I do both as an Aboriginal person and an artist. They each have a different speciality area in ways of weaving, I found this beneficial for my own practice as it reinforces adaptation as part of Aboriginal weaving. They also share stories, within these groups, of family and Country which was supportive of story-telling in my arts connection to the past, the present and the future

There are specific new areas of research that have come for this thesis. The connection to the Tjanpi Weavers and their indigenous story telling in their cultural and contemporary weavings could be researched alongside other traditional Indigenous cultures who tell stories through their weaving and making dolls and animals. I could also take further my exploration of Dadirri and yarnning as methods of gathering information about connection and place; how yarnning in the making across Indigenous cultures holds stories and gathers and dispenses information; and if yarnning has a place in the contemporary world. There is also a strong case in

this thesis for further research into foraging, recycling and Aboriginal ways of adapting to change - including climate change - and how these insights can be developed and shared by all.

I never thought of myself as an activist however as a contemporary Aboriginal artist I have the opportunity to put ideas and thoughts forward to be considered by others that my forebears were not enabled to. My artwork engages with the complex story of life involving the past, present and the future. Tradition is what we look back on; the art of today will one day become traditional. In that future there will be many young Aboriginal people exploring their traditional making processes in their new contemporary work. I hope my work will support them in having a wider conversation about how and what they make, and how their art practice allows them to understand their place in the world.

PLATES



Plate No: 1 *Our Country*

2019

Photo attribute to Ian Smith

Materials: recycled materials, string and yarns, possum skin, found wire and paperbark.
Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm



Plate No: 2 *Mother, Daughters, Aunty* 2019

Materials: recycled materials, string and yarns, possum skin.

Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm



Plate No: 3 *Those Who Follow Us* 2019

Materials: recycled materials, string, possum skin, plastic beads and yarns.

Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm



Plate No: 4 *Under Our Feet 1* 2019

Materials: recycled materials, string and yarns, possum skin.

Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm



Plate No: 5 *Under Our Feet 2*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, string and yarns, possum skin.

Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm

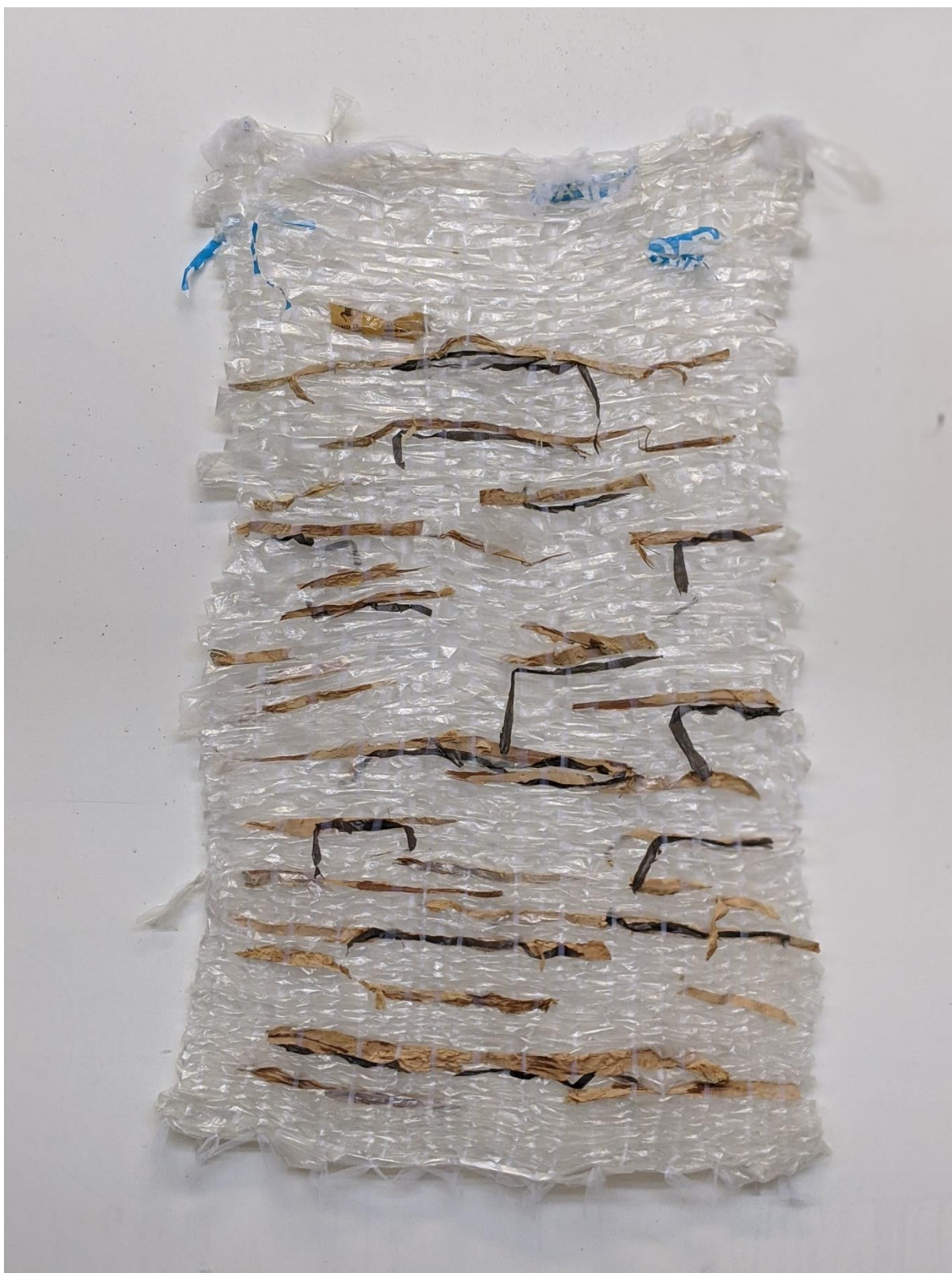


Plate No: 6 *From Paperbark To Plastic 2* 2019

Materials: recycled plastic, paperbark, sticks, possum skin.

Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm



Plate No: 7 *From Paperbark To Plastic* 2020

Materials: recycled plastic, paperbark, sticks, possum skin.

Dimensions: length: 140cm width: 70cm



Plate No: 8 *Animal 1*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 15cm length: 20 cm



Plate No: 9 *Animals 2*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: length: 20cm height: 12 cm



Plate No: 10 *Animals 3*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: length: 20 cm height: 12cm



Plate No: 11 *Doll 1*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, baling twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 18cm height: 18 cm



Plate No: 12 Doll 2

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 20cm height: 23cm



Plate No: 13 Doll 3

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 15cm height: 18 cm



Plate No: 14 *Doll 4*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 15cm height: 18cm



Plate No: 15 *Doll 5*

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 15cm height: 20 cm



Plate No: 16 Doll 6

2019

Materials: recycled materials, plastic, bailing twine, paperbark and wire.

Dimensions: width: 18cm height: 15cm

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