

pottery that defies convention

WORDS BY STEPHEN BOWERS

What is about ceramic forms by Aboriginal artists that makes them so distinctive? So compelling?

The answer might lie in their grounding in heritage and tradition, and the impact they make as entirely fresh statements. As contemporary works from an ancient culture they also tell of the momentous creative evolution occurring in Australian Indigenous visual arts and culture, as artists take up new materials, explore new forms for community and cultural story telling and innovate with modes of personal expression. Alongside time-honoured traditions of community lore,

cultural storytelling and depictions drawn from a profound connection to the land, there are the experimental voices of creators responding to audience and market opportunity as they push self-consciously forward on paths of discovery and refinement.



Opposite: Sabo Tipungwuti, *Japarra (Moon Man)*, 2006, earthenware and underglaze. Photo: Courtesy of Fusion Design

Cyril James Kerinauia, *The Hunting Party with Dog*, 2005, earthenware and underglaze. Photo: Courtesy of Fusion Design

Judith Pungkarta Inkamala, *Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo*, 2006, hand-built terracotta and underglaze decoration. Photo: Courtesy of Fusion Design



‘Change is in the air. Older artists are working with younger artists.’

Aboriginal artists have only been working in this medium for a few decades – there is so much that is new. Experiment and innovation are strong and, whilst working with tradition, artists are not hostage to its limits. Working in a remote community requires resourcefulness and ingenuity. Services and facilities readily available elsewhere are not to be taken for granted, but with art centres and community and family-based group support for those producing new works, the artists are not isolated or static.

Change is in the air. Older artists are working with younger artists. There is a vigour and a connective cross-generational spirit of contemporary enterprise in these works, which in exhibitions from Alice Springs to Chicago are meeting with interest and acclaim. It is still an evolving field and, as could be expected, output varies from the expediency of the ‘souvenir’ through to major rigorous works by outstanding artists.

While reflecting their communities, each artist has a distinctive style, an original voice. For example, artists associated with Ernabella add to story motifs and cultural learning their personal symbolic designs known as *walka* (pattern and designs based on a personal idiom), which

might have begun in a two-dimensional context, such as painting, drawing, prints or fabrics, but which are being adapted to three-dimensional forms.

This is pottery that defies convention. It is evolving as artists innovate with materials and techniques. In addition to the better-known styles of two-dimensional Aboriginal visual art – the ‘dot story maps’, the bush tucker plants and animals, and the parallel and crosshatched line-drawn images in prints and paintings – we encounter strong three-dimensional forms and figurative sculpture. Think of Hermannsburg’s quirky painted vessels and zoomorphic lids, or the hand-built symbolic figurative sculptural works of Tiwi, where daily life and weekend adventures may provide inspiration – fishing expeditions when the tide is right, turtle hunting or a trip to the shop to buy cigarettes – and depictions of hunting parties, canoes and turtle boats provide refreshing inspiration for sculptural works.

Cultural symbols, stories, patterns and colours still appear strongly, as can be seen in works from the newest group, recently established in the craft centre in Alice Springs, and which includes senior artist Nyukana (Daisy) Baker. But artists

also push beyond the familiar when they work on hand-built forms or specially-made plates. Not limited only to the brush, they might also sculpt, gouge, cut and carve into the raw surface of the clay.

Names to look out for include Eddie Purutantameri, John Bosco Tipiloura, John Patrick Kelantumama, Cyril James Kerinauia, Jock Puautjimi and John Bosco Tipiloura’s nephew, Mark Virgil Puautjimi and Sabo Tipungwuti, associated with Tiwi and Munupi on Bathurst and Melville Islands. At Ernabella, they are Priscilla Adamson, Nungalka (Tjaria) Stanley, Tjunkaya Tapaya, Vivian Thompson and Tjimpuna Williams. At Hermannsburg watch for Irene Mbitjanaentata, Judith Pungkarta Inkamala and Rahel Kngwarria Ungwanaka. At the new centre in Alice Springs, you can find works by Jillian Davey, Nyukana (Daisy) Baker and Karen Carroll. ◉

Works by artists from all four centres will be shown in a major survey exhibition, *From the Earth*, to open at JamFactory on 12 December 2008.

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