

beyond the city limits

Ian Were takes in the wild and fragile beauty of
Shirley Macnamara's vessels

"It's hard to catch Shirley Macnamara on the phone", I was told by Margot Osborne, "especially if she's out mustering". Macnamara runs a family cattle property at Mt Guide Station, a little south of Mt Isa, and she's also an artist of some note, recently selected by curator Osborne for the intriguing touring exhibition *Wild Nature in Contemporary Australian Art and Craft*. Mt Isa—Queensland's largest provincial city west of the Great Dividing Range—lies over 2000 'ks' north-west of Brisbane close to the Northern Territory border. It's about twice the road distance as Brisbane to Sydney—another country as they say here. More geographically isolated and wilder than city-folk often imagine, it's definitely "outback".

Macnamara began painting her surroundings in 1988, but stopped for personal reasons and started weaving objects, which she's been doing now for around ten years. Over this relatively modest period she's been part of a number of national touring shows—particularly those dealing with Indigenous and regional artists, or exhibitions that speak of "mapping" the country—and collected by several State and regional galleries, especially in Queensland. Her objects are mostly made from natural materials found in the bush near her weatherboard house-cum-studio. After a visit there in 1997 curator Diane Moon remarked: "There is a Georgia O'Keefe sparseness to the interior white-washed space. The impression is further developed by the presence of bleached animal bones ... and wide, red-earth vistas stretching into the distant heat haze."¹ Macnamara draws her raw materials—in the form of spinifex grass, or more precisely, spinifex runners—from this remote earth. "I have been searching for quite some time to find a medium ... that I could sculpt with and feel I have now found it in the spinifex ... a very coarse grass that grows everywhere at home" said Macnamara in the mid-90s.² Macnamara has often combined the substance with synthetics such as nylon, and other natural materials found nearby, like ochre.

Spinifex is considered to have great value in traditional Indigenous culture: its strong and durable fibre was used in the construction of shelters, it has medicinal properties,

its seeds are ground to make a damper (bush bread), and a strong resin can be extracted to bind weapons—and repair tyre punctures in the outback. Macnamara's Guutu series (the traditional word for vessels or containers in her language) reflects the Mt Guide landscape in which the prickly forms of "porcupine grass" or spinifex glisten in the low western sunlight. Each year, during the dry period between August and September, Macnamara gathers individual spinifex "runner" roots that reveal shades of gold and red after they are stripped of their outer shell. Strand by strand Macnamara twists, weaves and moulds the spinifex into graceful forms, their colours and shapes reminding her of times of personal significance.³

In its natural habitat, spinifex is hardy, strong, almost defiant—an evolutionary survivor in an unforgiving land. What she says about her material is quite revealing, as are her personal comments relating to the loss of her husband. "Sitting in the dust gathering spinifex ... in this arid part of my beloved bush country, aware of its strength in being able to resist the harshest conditions ... From this, my work evolved. Empty, torn and twisted in grief—searching, reaching for strength."⁴ And later in 1997: "I could see myself as the spinifex. You belong to the area so your roots are there and you have to be strong enough to survive and keep going ... It is fragile as well as strong. But you are fragile as well..."⁵ Macnamara's work—oeuvre in fact—fits Osborne's *Wild Nature* theme well: "Shirley's use of spinifex runners is a central metaphor of resilience, a key idea" of the exhibition, Osborne told me.

In Macnamara's hands the hardy spinifex fibre is twisted, tied and constrained into sculptural vessels—bold, yet at the same time delicate, fragile, and sometimes nest-like. I'm thinking of one in particular, made in 2001, that's lined with emu feathers. Titled *Guutu 14*, it was part of the *Double Take: Recycling in Contemporary Craft* touring exhibition⁶, and is now in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery. The exhibition was an inquiry into the culture of recycling materials by contemporary Australian artists. *Guutu 14* incorporates the feathers of a dead emu found

at the roadside near Macnamara's property. The use of the feathers and the ovoid shape of the vessel are significant developments in Macnamara's practice. To date, the artist has made only two of these beautiful objects.⁷

Macnamara's vessels are certainly rhizomatic, probably enigmatic, and maybe even schizophrenic—in that they possess at least a couple of lives at the same time. Though borne out of the dry, parched ground, this wild and fragile work takes on a new life, a sophistication that allows its natural beauty to be at home in a far-away New York-style Sydney apartment, or to be utterly comfortable in a contemporary exhibition or art museum collection. The roots of her practice may be a thousand years old, but Shirley Macnamara's vessels appear somehow new—embodied with a fresh, strange beauty.

endnotes

1. Moon, Diane (curator), *Carried Lightly*, exhibition catalogue, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, Queensland, 1998, p11.
2. Macnamara, Shirley, *No Piece of Cake*, exhibition catalogue, Kick Arts Collective and Cairns Regional Gallery, Queensland, 1995, p20.
3. From material adapted by Trish Johnson, Project Officer and Community Trainee Coordinator, Queensland Art Gallery, December 2001, from notes by Diane Moon, supplied to the Gallery, 2000; and information from Avril Quail, Associate Curator, Queensland Art Gallery, 2002.
4. Macnamara, Shirley, *That's Women All Over*, exhibition catalogue, Fire Works Gallery, Brisbane, 1995, p4.
5. *Spinifex Runner*, exhibition catalogue, Campbelltown Bicentennial Art Gallery, 1999, "Conversation with Diane Moon 1997", p8.
6. *Double Take: Recycling in Contemporary Craft*, exhibition catalogue, a Craft Queensland and Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft collaborative project, 2001.
7. From material adapted by Trish Johnson, Project Officer and Community Trainee Coordinator, Queensland Art Gallery, December 2001, from notes by Diane Moon, supplied to the Gallery, 2000.

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Below: Shirley Macnamara, *Untitled*, 2000. Spinifex grass runners, nylon thread and synthetic polymer fixative. 43 x 33 x 20cm. Collection of the artist.

