

# magic carpets from ernabella

In this special report on The State Library of South Australia Rugs Project, art consultant and key participant **Pamille Berg** reveals the process, personalities and outcomes of this extraordinary collaborative project.

In July 2003, three huge wool rugs, designed by an Indigenous woman artist from a remote Central Australian community and hand-tufted by skilled artisans in mainland China, will be installed in the newly-renovated State Library of South Australia in Adelaide.

The project is the product of continuous collaboration among the Director and senior staff of the State Library of South Australia, the architects for the Library's current \$40 million redevelopment (MGT Canberra Architects in association with Hassell Pty Ltd in Adelaide), the architects' specialist art program consultant, Pamille Berg Consulting Pty Ltd (PBC), and the artists of Ernabella Arts Inc (EAI), working in liaison with their coordinator, Hilary Furlong.

Ernabella, 440 kilometres south-west of Alice Springs, is one of the oldest permanent settlements on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands returned to the Indigenous people by

the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act (1981), South Australia. In 1948, the Presbyterian Mission at Ernabella had set up a 'craft room'. During the next 28 years, the women, who already had an ancient tradition of hand-spinning, adapted their technique to include using the wool from Ernabella sheep to produce fine woollen goods and hand-pulled woollen rugs. In 1971, the technique of batik was introduced, and has since become one of the Ernabella's signature contemporary art forms, along with paintings on canvas, printmaking and painted ceramics.

Rather than merely providing remarkable floor rugs for the new Library, the collaboration's intention from the outset was to create an ongoing partnership for the design and production of 'one-off' rugs between EAI and Korda Bros Pty Ltd, the Australian representative of international carpet manufacturer, Tai Ping. This partnership would address the urgent need of finding additional long-term creative outlets and income streams for the artists at Ernabella, arising not from the continuing sale of the artists' individual handmade objects (which, inevitably, has a limited scope), but rather from forms of applied design produced elsewhere by specialist fabricators.

To everyone's delight, this new, ongoing collaboration was formally launched in May 2003, at the 15th International Commercial + Residential Design Exhibition in Melbourne. Known as *designEX*, this four-day annual exhibition of products and designs is attended each year by thousands of architects, interior designers, suppliers, retailers and potential clients from around Australia and the Pacific Rim. An eight-metre-long feature wall within the Korda Bros' designEX display stand presented exquisite samples of the artists' contemporary rug designs on silk and cotton, hand-tufted rug samples and informative, high-quality trade literature explaining the Ernabella + Tai Ping design and fabrication range.

How did this remarkable development occur over a short eighteen-month period, underpinned only by the funding of a single, isolated public art commission? It was the result of a carefully conceived, carefully structured collaboration.

The redevelopment of the State Library, located on historic North Terrace in Adelaide, has been a project of many years duration for the Library and its architects. The budget

was impossibly tight from the very beginning, as the project moved from initial feasibility studies and master plans into a formal building project of renovations and additions. Despite frequent lobbying by the architects for an integrated art program and the Library's keen enthusiasm, no money could be reserved within the project budget for the commissioning of art.

In October 2001, Library Director Bronwyn Halliday asked MGT Architects to undertake a significant project with the artists of EAI for a public area of the building. My tentative proposal of the artists' design of specially fabricated floor rugs was of particular interest to MGT's Design Partner, Hal Guida. He saw the potential of the artist's design, in large scale, to 'make the space'. It would create a welcoming ambience for the diverse users of the Library, and an additional layering of meaning and content in the public circulation areas. Hilary Furlong, the coordinator at EAI, the artists themselves, and the rug manufacturers, Korda Bros, enthusiastically endorsed the idea.

At the artists' invitation, in April 2002 I spent a week in intense observation and discussions with the coordinators at the Indigenous-owned art centres at Ernabella, as well as in the communities at Mutijulu, Amata and Fregon. No significant funding was available for the trip, but all parties combined partial resources and donated time.

This assembling of the project from fragmentary resources has characterised its development. The on-site observations during that trip convinced me that Ernabella's 33-year exploration of design in batik would produce superb, purpose-made rug designs.

It was essential to set up a formal Art Advisory Committee to the Library's Board, to provide specialist advice on the continuous development of this complex, collaborative commission. We were also able to secure financial support for the project through the remarkable generosity of donations from the Myer Foundation, the Perpetual Philanthropic Foundations, the State Library of South Australia Foundation, the Frank and Hilda Perry Trust, the Hon. Diana Laidlaw and Bronwyn Halliday.

The project's long planning and our extensive contact with Korda Bros and EAI allowed us to tailor a design development that was culturally appropriate and acceptable to the Ernabella artists' process, while still meeting restricted time programs and funding limits. From the outset, our aim was to produce professional results for the State Library as the client, and to achieve as much support as possible for a continuing future at Ernabella of applied design for major public, commercial and residential interior design projects. Each party in the collaboration was formally asked to identify the 'extras'—in the form of mentoring, professional time,

Below: The hand of an Ernabella artist holding the Javanese canting, which is the implement by which the hot wax is applied to silk or cotton in producing each Ernabella artist's distinctive designs. Photo: Stewart Roper.

Below: An outcrop of the Musgrave Ranges points the way to Ernabella with a vivid native legume carpeting the plains after an infrequent storm. Photo: Stewart Roper.

Bottom: A waterhole on the track between Ernabella's remote sister communities of Amata and Fregon, where women artists also run their own art centres. Photo: Pamille Berg.





business development and enrichment—they could bring to the project, thereby substantially enhancing its potential impact and future opportunities for Ernabella artists.

Eric Korda of Korda Bros, an immigrant who started a design and production company from scratch over 50 years ago, immediately offered Korda Bros' resources to assist the artists in understanding applied design practice and contracting, as well as in potential business development and publicity with Tai Ping worldwide in later stages. MGT Architects undertook many extra hours of construction coordination against a minimal fee. My colleagues and I at PBC also found ways of weaving the strategic development of intensive collaboration with Ernabella and Korda Brothers into other project schedules and trips, thereby enhancing our capacity to create ongoing projects for and with EAI.

The results speak for themselves. We structured the first Design Phase of the project to include all members of Ernabella Arts Inc who wished to participate to attend a formal Design Orientation at Ernabella in September 2002. At the Orientation, we used design drawings, prototypes and samples to explain the site, context, requirements and 'brief' for the rugs to the artists. Each artist submitting a conforming design was paid a preliminary design fee. From the 13 superb designs submitted, Pantjiti McKenzie's

design was selected to be prototyped in China and to proceed into the Design Development Phase.

However, to continue the professional development in rug design of the other artists at Ernabella—thereby enhancing the prospects of continuing new projects with Korda Bros—both Pantjiti and all other interested artists were given a Design Development Phase Orientation in late November 2002. While Pantjiti prepared additional Design Development Phase rug-design batiks in silk for the State Library project, the other artists were invited to prepare new rug designs, responding to interior design colours and materials, for which, if submitted according to the specifications, a Design Development Fee would be paid.

In February 2003, we presented Pantjiti's Design Development Phase work as well as the 1:1 prototype of a section of one of the rugs to the Art Advisory Committee for formal approval. The meeting of the Committee was scheduled to allow Pantjiti and her husband, elder Simon Tiyanu McKenzie, to be present and to participate in the discussion and approval. The discussions were facilitated by continuous translation from Nancy Sheppard, a former Pitjantjatjara translator for the South Australian government and both Pantjiti's and Simon's teacher when they were students at the Ernabella School over 50 years ago.



### The Library Director

The State Library invited the Ernabella Women's Arts Cooperative to be involved in the Library redevelopment because of the 50-year relationship between the two groups. Early chalk drawings from the 1940s and 1950s had been placed with the State Library for safekeeping a number of years ago, and the two groups developed a relationship during this time. The Library wanted a permanent and significant statement about this important relationship in its new Library, to show how the artwork had developed over the years and to reinforce the role of the Library as the custodian of South Australia's heritage.

**Bronwyn Halliday**, Director, State Library of South Australia



### The Architect

From the earliest design sketches, the architects were intent on providing a place within the easily accessible public areas to exhibit a selection of the vast collections of the State Library. The design developed as a 'treasures wall' incorporating natural resources and manmade artefacts explaining and illustrating aspects of the rich history of South Australia. A day-lit seating area alongside was designed, and the opportunity to provide an extended surface for rugs made to designs from the Ernabella community was irresistible, since it continues the original design intent in a most imaginative manner. The delicacy of the batik designs, developed in the bold colours of the earth, result in vivid interpretive and abstract images that remind us of the remote landscapes of the Central Desert, which is so characteristic of South Australia.

**Harold S. Guida**, FRAIA AIA, Partner, MGT Canberra Architects



### The Manufacturer

I was thrilled at the possibilities for superb hand-tufted rugs that were easily apparent in the first Ernabella batik designs that Pamille showed to us in our Sydney offices. We are always interested in collaborating with artists, and, to us, the chance to work with Indigenous artists is a wonderful thing. My years of experience suggest to me that we will have fine opportunities to introduce Ernabella-designed rugs into major design projects in Europe and Asia, as well as in Australia, and I look forward to continued hosting of the artists in our offices in future collaborations and the mentoring of their business skills.

**Eric Korda**, Director, Korda Bros Pty Ltd.

### The Arts Centre Coordinator

When I started in late 1999 as coordinator for Ernabella Arts Inc, it seemed to me an urgent necessity—if the art centre was to prosper, let alone survive—that reliable income streams not dependent on government grants should be developed as quickly as possible. But how? The batik work, despite its great beauty and popularity, was becoming less cost-effective as an income earner; the ceramic project, which has great potential, was in its early stages; the limited edition prints on paper were very marketable, but production was limited; and the fine art painting, despite its originality and cultural history, needed a new creative stimulus. We developed a few items manufactured under licence but the income from these was in copyright fees and very small. The other reality was that only a small number of artists—approximately 20 full-time, and 30 part-time or occasional—produced the work. We couldn't make enough work, and none of the art forms were in themselves 'big ticket items'. Although we pursued a vigorous exhibitions policy, and artists were regularly invited to enter prestigious events and national competition exhibitions, nevertheless the future looked grim.

In my view, we had to find ways of making long-term creative partnerships with manufacturers and distributors, nationally and internationally. Through these, the artists' creative genius and unique aesthetic could be applied to high quality works made for a bigger market than our one-off fine art works could ever reach or supply.

My first thought was to somehow attract a major public art commission: like a sprat catching a mackerel. In early 2000, when in Adelaide for our *Milpatjunanyi* (Telling Stories in the Sand) exhibition, I muttered all this to Jenny Tonkin, then Librarian of the Indigenous collection at the State Library of South Australia, where the Ernabella schoolchildren's pastels from the 1940s and 1950s are kept and treasured. Unbeknown to me, Jenny then talked up an idea to Bronwyn Halliday, the Director of the State Library, when she was working out the art commissions for the new Library—and so, here we are.

The last 12 months, since Pamille Berg first visited Ernabella, have been thrilling. The fine discrimination and informed appreciation of the artists' work that Pamille brings to this project is a critical factor in its success, and in the artists' understanding and enthusiasm for what they are doing. When Pamille recently showed the artists the carpet prototype from Tai Ping of Pantjiti's batik design for the Library rugs, their mouths really did fall open. It was beautiful, and exactly reproduced the brio and delicacy of her marks.

It does seem a delightful correspondency that, from their beginning 54 years ago with their handmade woollen rugs, the Ernabella artists are now making their mark for the future with these magical carpets.

**Hilary Furlong**, Coordinator, Ernabella Arts Inc.



Left: Pamille Berg, flanked on the left by translator Sandra Ken and industrial designer Jon Burchill, leading the initial Design Orientation at Ernabella for all artists interested in submitting a design for the State Library rugs. Photo: Pamille Berg Consulting Pty Ltd.



Opposite page: Pantjiti McKenzie, prototype (1:1 scale of detail of one of the State Library rugs), hand-tufted in wool by artisans at Tai Ping's factories in mainland China. Photo: Pamille Berg Consulting Pty Ltd.

The additional second-stage rug designs by other Ernabella artists produced during this period were reviewed with considerable excitement by the Committee and Korda Bros. All parties agreed that they will be offered to Korda as 'stock' examples for potential one-off rug designs in return for a negotiated fee, with additional fees and absolute copyright control provided to the artist should further projects eventuate. A third set of rug designs for future use by Ernabella and Korda was then commissioned as an integral part of the State Library project, with the agreement that any designs not retained by Korda Bros would belong to the State Library. These would be auctioned as exquisite silk and cotton batiks as part of a special fund-raising event, with the proceeds split between the Library's projects and the individual artist.

### The Ernabella artists

The following text (with translation) is from a talk between Makinti Minutjukur, artist and Trainee Municipal Services Officer for Pukatja Community, Ernabella, Sandra Ken, Anangu Education Services and Hilary Furlong, coordinator, Ernabella Arts Inc. These are Makinti's words:

Waaka nyangatja kuwaritja nganana nyangangi munula kuliningi kaya artist tjutangu kuliningi walka palyantjikitjangu panya walka panya palula-nguru carpet palyantjaku. Kala putu nguwanpa kuliningi tjana wangkanyangka palu kulinula, 'Uwa nganana artist tjuta munula walka palyalku tjana nyakuntjaku.' Kala kutju kutjungku walka tjuta palyanu munula Hilary-nya ungu ka paluru iyanu.

Ka Pamille-nya pitjangu Ernabella-kutu munu nganampa walka tjuta ngalya katira ngananala wangkangi. Tjana nganymanytju ngurkantankuntja nintinu Pantjitiku walka. Paluru walka Pantjitiku nintira wangkangi panya walka tjukutjuku-nguru pulkantjikitjangu. Munu photograph nintinu walka panya tjukutjuku-nguru pulkantjatjanungku palyantja.

Ngayalu ngunti kuliningi tjinguru tjana walka panya tjukutjuku nguru rug palyantjaku, kaya artist kutjupa tjutangu kulu nyanga alatji tjinguru kuliningi. Mununa mala kulira nintiringu panya Pantjitiku walka uwankara-nguru rug palyantjaku, pulka mulapa.

Ka tjinguru ngula rug wingaringkunyangka artist uwankara ankuku nyakuntjikitja. Kala tjinguru nyanga purunypa munta kutjupa way palyalku ngula, ngura kutjupanguru mukuringkula ngatinyangka.

As proof of the remarkable possibilities of the fluid batik design language at Ernabella, which became increasingly apparent over the course of the project, three new rug design commissions for corporate and professional clients have already arisen for Ernabella artists.

The final stages in the State Library rug design project collaboration included a trip by Pantjiti McKenzie and other key artists during fabrication of the rugs to Korda Bros' offices in Sydney for finalisation of State Library rug yarn colours; mentoring in business development practices applicable to EAI; and a scheduled trip for the artists to Adelaide to participate in a special dedication of the rugs by the Library around the time of its dual openings in July and September 2003, enhancing the meaning of the rugs project for Library staff, visitors and the artists.

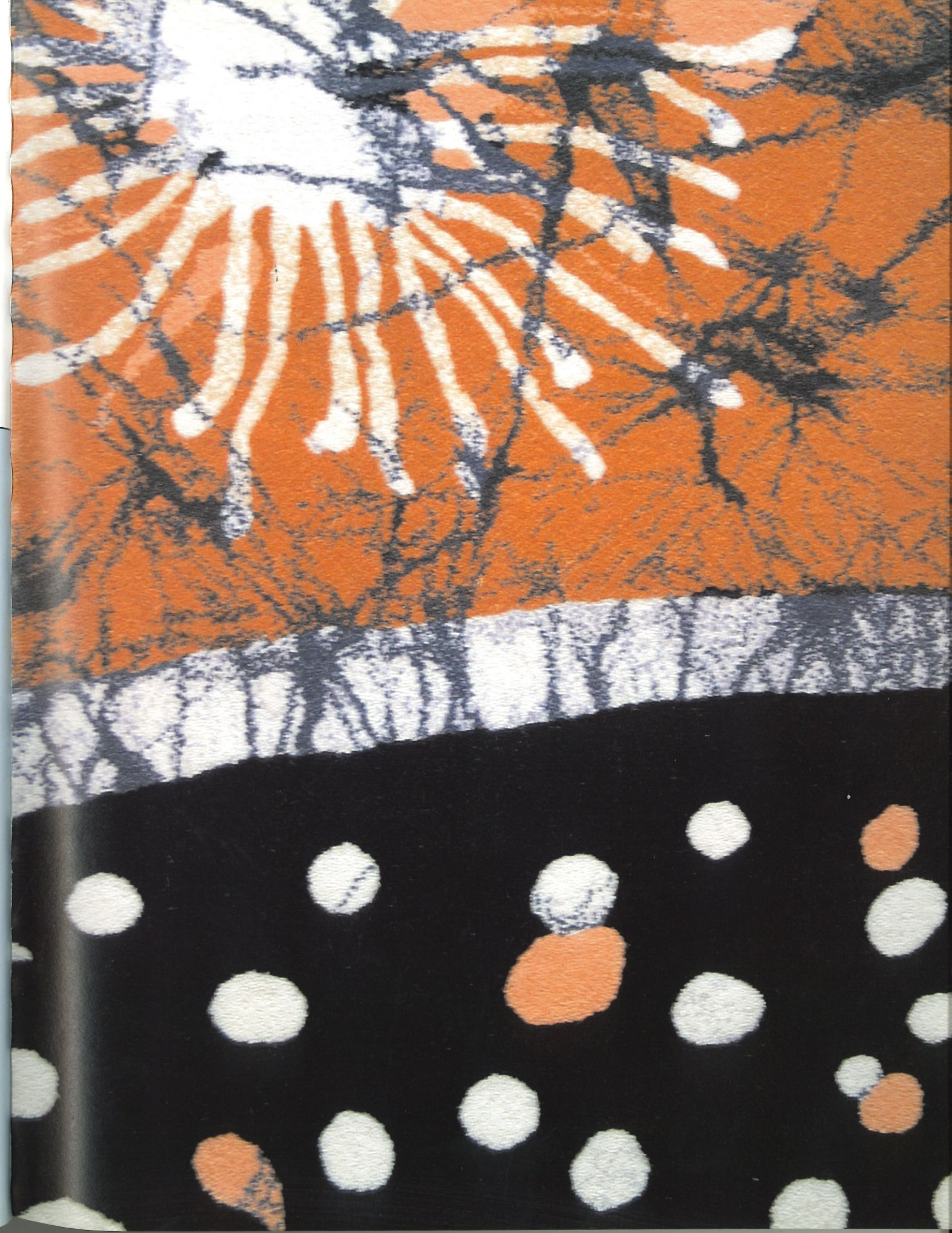
*This commission is exciting and a new thing. The artists had to think about making a design that would be enlarged many times. All of us felt it was hard to understand what was wanted but we all said—'Hey! We are artists—we know how to make art, so we'll just have a go!' So we each made our batik and gave them to Hilary and she sent them away.*

*Then Pamille came back with our designs and talked some more about them. She showed us Pantjiti's batik which they had chosen. She brought a photograph enlargement of a little piece of Pantjiti's design and we could all see what it looked like when the design that Pantjiti had done was made as big as the rugs would be.*

*I didn't really understand then that the rugs would be all of Pantjiti's design. I thought it would be only the little piece—that had been made bigger. The other artists thought the same as I did. Now I understand that nearly all of Pantjiti's batik design will be made in to the rugs—and the rugs will show her design, but much, much larger than her batik.*

*We hope when the rugs are completed that all of the artists will be able to go and see them. Then, perhaps when people from other places see the rugs they will ask us to make something similar or maybe something quite different!*

**Makinti Minutjukur** was one of 13 artists from Ernabella who submitted designs in batik on cotton for consideration in the State Library rug project.





Right: Artists at the initial Rug Design Orientation examining some of the extensive graphic material provided by the architects for their site-specific briefing. Photo: Pamille Berg Consulting Pty Ltd.

The story, of course, does not end here. Strategic development is already under way between PBC, the artists and coordinator Hilary Furlong regarding other ways in which we can utilise and develop the Ernabella artists' skills in textiles, painting, printmaking, ceramics and wood carving in future projects. We all believe that the simple, direct methodology that we evolved in working together on this complex State Library project is equally applicable in other potential collaborations across Australia among contemporary artists and craftspeople, clients, coordinators, architects and project managers. It is all about using whatever means are at hand to concentrate on celebrating our privileged existence in the midst of creative cultural production, and being committed to its ongoing enhancement in all possible ways.

**Pamille Berg** is the Director of Pamille Berg Consulting Pty Ltd in Canberra, which provides consultancy services to clients in public art planning and coordination. A former Chair of the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, Ms Berg was a Director of MGT Architects for over 14 years.



Senior Ernabella artist Pantjiti McKenzie, designer of the State Library rugs. Photo: Stewart Roper.

### Pantjiti (Kathy) McKenzie

Pantjiti was born in 1942, and her home country is near the Blackstone Ranges in Western Australia. She and her husband, Simon Tjiyangu McKenzie, have five grown children. As a child, Pantjiti lived in the bush in the traditional way with her father and his two wives. After her father and one of his wives died, his second wife, Pantjiti's mother, and her family group walked 600 kilometres east to Ernabella to visit family.

Throughout her childhood, adolescence and young womanhood, Pantjiti moved constantly between the communities of Ernabella, Mulga Park, Amata and Areyonga, travelling mostly on foot, over an area of 87,000 square kilometres. She worked at both Ernabella and Amata in the community art centres and in the early 1980s in Alice Springs, she made artwork while her husband was working for the Pitjantjatjara Council.

When Ernabella Video and Television (EVTV) started operations in 1984, Pantjiti and her husband became custodian managers and producers and BRACS workers (Broadcasting Remote Aboriginal Community Services) for PY Media (Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara Media). Over the next 15 years, they produced over 1,000 videotapes documenting Anangu Pitjantjatjara life and culture from the inside.

Local television broadcasts began in Ernabella in April 1985 with a small narrowcast transmitter, well before satellite television. It was Australia's first community television station.

For more information about EVTV see: [www.pymedia.in-sa.com.au/video/evtv.html](http://www.pymedia.in-sa.com.au/video/evtv.html)