THE BASKET ECON– OMY

Today in Australia we are experiencing a wave of fascination and appreciation for the woven object. **Kevin Murray** examines basket lines of practice that connect the Tjanpi weavers of Australia's Western Desert to the telephone-wire weavers of South Africa and more.

Photograph by Keith Saunders
Transparent baskets: Wendy Golden, *Warped Group*, 2004–05, monofilament
Yellow and orange baskets: Emma Davies, *Cups*, 2005, polypropylene

During the heyday of economic rationalism, 'a degree in basket making' was used as code for the decline of university standards. As the accountants took over, the basket economy took a dive.

Trade in baskets is thriving. But it's not just cash that's being exchanged. Baskets are a currency for new dialogues that are bringing people and cultures together.

In Victoria, the Melbourne Museum recently mounted a substantial exhibition of fibre works from the Injaluk community in western Arnhem Land (*Twined Together: Kunmadj njalehnjaleken*, 2005) organised by Louise Hamby (see review page 48). This is complemented by an exhibition at Melbourne's Alcaston Gallery (July 2005) from the Injaluk Arts and Crafts Centre.

Further west, Nalda Searles curated *Northern Exposure*, featuring baskets by Martu women from around Turkey Creek, Balgo and Parnngurr in Western Australia. These artists have produced a bounty of objects combining grass fibre and brightly-coloured commercial wools.

From non-Indigenous sources, the Sturt Gallery in Mittagong is presenting a basketry exhibition (*Old Traditions and New Ways*, June 2005) curated by the revered Virginia Kaiser and including her work. Kaiser's work expresses extraordinary skill in her use of new materials, such as Bangalow palm and techniques including the 'knotless netted' basket. *Woven Forms: Contemporary basket making in Australia*, the flagship exhibition on basket making presented by Object, will feature work by 65 contemporary fibre artists, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. The exhibition will open in Sydney in September 2005, and then tour throughout Australia.

Baskets weren't always taken so seriously. The 1980s witnessed a backlash against the 'feel good' culture of the 1960s – it was a time when suits replaced kaftans. During the heyday of economic rationalism, 'a degree in basket making' was used as code for the decline of university standards. As the accountants took over, the basket economy took a dive.

Yet today, baskets are one of our most celebrated art forms. What's changed? There are two main reasons for this resurgence. The first relates to the growing significance of Indigenous arts. The second reflects a growing appreciation of 'poor craft', the capacity to create art with materials at hand.

The significance of fibre in Aboriginal craft is well known. Dilly bags and fish traps are widely celebrated as works of skill, creativity and utility. In the 1990s, these objects began to be viewed as works of art within a modernist aesthetic. Their formal qualities could be appreciated independently of their practical or anthropological function. In 1997, Yvonne Koolmatrie used traditional fibre techniques to create an installation for the Venice Biennale. Fibre work provided an important opportunity for Indigenous women artists to gain appreciation on the international stage.

While the strength of Indigenous basketry is well recognised, there is also a continuing exchange with non-Indigenous artists. The history of modern Aboriginal basketry features white missionaries who helped circulate information about techniques throughout remote Australia. Margie Smith recently coined the term 'string lines' to describe the way that coiling has become a 'lingua franca' for women across the north.[1] The 1990s witnessed a heightened level of exchange in the basket economy.

A particularly strong fibre school has emerged in the Western Desert. The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjarra Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council was established to support remote communities south-west of Alice Springs. Despite access to desert grasses, baskets had rarely been made by Western Desert peoples. But, once equipped with the necessary knowledge, baskets have become as natural a way of representing their land as is dot painting.

In 1995, NPY hosted *tjanpi* (grass) workshops to introduce basket-making techniques. Baskets quickly functioned as a kind a material diary of life in the desert. Outings into the bush brought back grasses, wool from old jumpers was a useful

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Jill Brose, *The Embrace*, 2005, Alexandra Palm infloresence

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Muriel Maynard, *Globular Basket*, 2004, stitched with maireener shells

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Kumplaya Girgirba, *Desert Basket*, 2005, spinifex grass and wool

binding agent, much cherished raffia added vibrant colour, and an assortment of materials such as seeds and feathers provided ornamentation. NPY encouraged this new craft by guaranteeing to buy every basket produced.

A major appeal for tourists is the closeness of these baskets to the desert lifestyles. Tjanpi coordinator, Thisbe Purich, advises customers at their NPY Alice Springs store always to smell the baskets. The rich, smoky odours of the camp provide a compelling testament to the origin of the baskets.

In late 2003, I went on a 'basket run' with Thisbe through a string of Western Desert communities. Over five days we drove through immense landscapes, as though passing through whole countries rather than visiting neighbouring communities.

The small towns along the Blackstone Ranges are particularly strong in basketry. The scenes in Mantamaru (Jameson), Wingellina and Papulankutja (Blackstone) testified to the significance of basketry not just as an art form, but also as a means of engaging with the world.

In each community, several white men and women in crisp uniforms delivered important services, such as health and maintenance. This was Indigenous welfare in action, providing better services to Aboriginal communities. But it wasn't enough. Although a necessary part of survival, welfare leaves the population in a relatively passive position. Noel Pearson suggests an active alternative: 'The Indigenous people of our region, our communities and our families, have a right to take responsibility'.[2] As a white visitor, I felt that service delivery alone was not going to lead to increased understanding.

By contrast, the basket economy offers reciprocal relations between Ngaanyatjarra and Walpalya (whitefella). The arrival of the Tjanpi truck signalled the start of intense discussions between Thisbe and the makers. New techniques and forms were displayed for Thisbe's comment, and she was able to bring back responses from outside audiences to their work. Grand plans were hatched, such as Kantjupayi Benson's idea of making an entire Toyota out of grass. This was not just another service, it was a creative dialogue.

The Western Desert basket economy flourishes in the most adverse conditions. Thisbe and I visited a 'sorry camp', to where most of the community had been relocated while they awaited an upcoming burial. All individual possessions had been abandoned for the sake of communal grief. The 'sorry camp' was a scene to strike horror in the hearts of welfare officers. The only element to protect its inhabitants from the lightning, raging winds and driving rain was blue plastic sheeting. But rather than run around panicking to ensure health and safety conditions were met, Thisbe moved cheerfully among the plastic *wiljas* (shelters), chatting to inhabitants about baskets they had made. The ready-to-hand nature of basket making enables it to flourish in the most rudimentary of conditions.

Basketry's capacity to incorporate a wide variety of materials at hand provides the second reason for its popularity. As globalisation renders cities increasingly similar, basketry offers a means of recovering a sense of local identity. The broad variety of materials that can be incorporated into baskets enables them to act as testimonies of place.

Banbiyak, *Coiled Basket*, 2005, dyed pandanus

Telephone wire baskets, 2004, African Art Centre, South Africa.
Photo: Andy Stevens

This 'hands on' aspect of basketry is shared with other popular forms of cultural resistance, such as stencilling. As technology becomes ever more compact and inaccessible to tinkering, it increases the potency of MIY (Make It Yourself) pursuits.

Baskets are no longer limited to organic materials. As a language of place, their relevance extends to urban conditions. A notable example is telephone-wire weaving from South Africa. According to legend, the use of telephone wire emerged during the apartheid era, when large numbers of rural workers moved into the cities to take jobs in factories. A watchman would normally pass the time by weaving covers for his hand club. As there was no grass at hand, he had to look around for a suitable replacement, and the brightly plasticised telephone wire appealed. It soon became so popular that there were problems with telecommunication as wire was stolen to make baskets.

In 2001, I went on another 'basket run' – this time through Mpumalanga (Transvaal) with a woman working for Telkom, who was distributing wire to basket weavers and buying the best results. Used to the free exchange between makers and curators in Australia, I was surprised at the way that the product designer dictated what baskets the women should make. In spare moments, I spoke to the weavers individually to see if this was a problem. The leader of the group, Agnes Mafuso, showed me her house and explained how the small money obtained from Telkom sales was the difference between whether or not her family had food. Here, the basket economy was not a supplement to welfare – it was everything.

As economic conditions improve, I hope we see a transformation of wire weaving from a curiosity to

Virginia Kaiser, *Nobody's Perfect!*, 2005, jacaranda and date palm fruit stalks on huon pine base

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an art form. The skill and understanding of colour, evident in township artists like Ntombifuthi Macunasa, are waiting for the curatorial encouragement that will help realise its potential. This is where collaboration between Australia and South Africa is likely to flourish.

Wire also offers new opportunities for Australian basket makers. FORM's exhibition, *Seven Sisters* (touring Western Australia in 2005), features Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists who all worked with the legend of basket making, Nalda Searles. Her piece, *Night Lights*, 2004, incorporates lights, enabling it to represent the night sky, exploring the relation between land and heaven. Makers like Wendy Golden and Emma Davies have been exploring the way that baskets can transform mundane plastics into artistic works.

The Waradgerie (Wiradjuri) artist, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, has been using found wire to make baskets. Connelly-Northey was born to an Irish father and Waradgerie mother. In recent years, she has returned to the area where she grew up around Swan Hill, Victoria, on a quest to learn about the local plants well enough to start making baskets. In the meantime, she has been scavenging pieces of rusted metal and transforming them into Aboriginal artefacts. She bends a rusted fencing pale and calls it a spear. She has beaten a piece of galvanised iron and made it a *coolamon* (a basin-shaped dish). And she has collected pieces of wire mesh, mattress wire and barbed wire, and created an installation for Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, *One Hundred Dilly Bags*, 2004.[3]

As in South Africa, innovation in basketry has come from using materials at hand. In Australia, however, choice of materials also powerfully expresses the individual path of contemporary Aboriginal craftspersons. Connelly-Northey has recovered non-Indigenous materials for traditional uses in a way that reflects a biography that has incorporated Gubba (Koorie for 'whitefella') ways for Waradgerie ends.

It is especially in the cross-cultural arena that exciting new developments beckon. The growing African population in rural Australia provides an interesting new craft stimulus. For the Craft Victoria exhibition, *Woven Lands* (May 2005), Kirrae Wurrong artist Vicki Couzens helped coordinate workshops involving women from the Warrnambool Sudanese community. Though not used to making baskets, they took to the task with enthusiasm. They worked around the phrase *'Mavish Miskalah'* (Arabic for 'No worries'), which the women used to say in honour of their Australian hosts. Exchange across the south also features in the triennial *Arafura Craft Exchange* exhibition at the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory [see review page 46]. In 2005, this includes baskets by Fiona Gavino and Indonesian artist, Anusapati.

Baskets will continue to connect people together, but not make them the same. The spread of the basket economy is likely to be one form of globalisation that creates more difference than it destroys. Given the skills involved in contemporary work, we are unlikely to see the bottom falling out of the basket economy.

Kevin Murray is Director of Craft Victoria (www.craftvic.asn.au) and The South Project (www.southproject.org).

1. Margie West, 'String lines', *Artlink*, vol. 25, p. 57.
2. Noel Pearson, *The 2003 Leadership Lecture*, 5 May 2003; see www.leadershipvictoria.org/speeches/speech_pearson2003.
3. Lorraine Connelly-Northey's work will appear in the Craft Victoria exhibition, *Make the Common Precious* (August 2005), the Linden show, *Cross Currents*, (July 2005) and in *Woven Forms: Contemporary basket making in Australia*, Object Gallery, 2005 (September 2005).

BASKETS ON SHOW

Woven Forms: Contemporary basket making in Australia
Object Gallery, Sydney, 17 September – 13 November 2005
FORM, Perth, 3 February – 24 March 2006
Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, 4 April – 26 May 2006
Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, 7 July – 13 August 2006

Also touring in 2007 to CQ Gallery, Brisbane; Casula Powerhouse, Sydney; Craft Victoria, Melbourne; Jam Factory, Adelaide; Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston; Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery, Townsville

6 Strands: baskets from the collection
Australian Museum, Sydney, from 17 September 2005