

feature

gatherings

WORDS BY ALISON KUBLER

In a bustling, cavernous work shed in the industrial suburbs of Brisbane, over a series of five, week-long workshops beginning in late 2007, a quite marvellous thing transpired: having travelled great distances from remote communities, a group of Indigenous artists gathered together with a team of foundry technicians to collaborate on the creation of an extraordinary suite of cast bronze and aluminium works.

Janice Murray,
Jipiyantongi, 2007, aluminium.
Photo: Ben Harris

A joint initiative between The Toga Group (the private developer for the commercial and residential elements of the Darwin Waterfront Development) and Brisbane-based foundry Urban Art Projects (UAP, headed by brothers Matthew and Daniel Tobin), *Gatherings* was conceived by a Public Art Advisory Panel to engage as many remote communities in the redevelopment as possible. UAP was originally mooted for the project as a result of its previous successes working with remote artists from Aurukun,

Maningrida and the Torres Strait, as well as on the strength of its impressive CV of large-scale public artworks (at, to name but a few, Sydney International Airport, the National Police Memorial and Reconciliation Place, the last two both in Canberra). Most recently, UAP collaborated with highly collectable Torres Strait Island artist Dennis Nona, on his 2007 Telstra Art Award-winning piece, *Ubirikubiri*.

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This page: Gershom Garlinggar at work. Photo: Scott Harrower

Gershom Garlinggar, *Burrar*, 2007, plasticine pattern. Photo: Scott Harrower

Gershom Garlinggar, *Burrar*, 2007, bronze. Photo: Ben Harris

Opposite page: Graham Badari, *Kuluban* [Fruit Bats], 2007, aluminium. Photo: Ben Harris

Far right: Janice Murray, *Jurriyi*, 2007, aluminium. Photo: Ben Harris



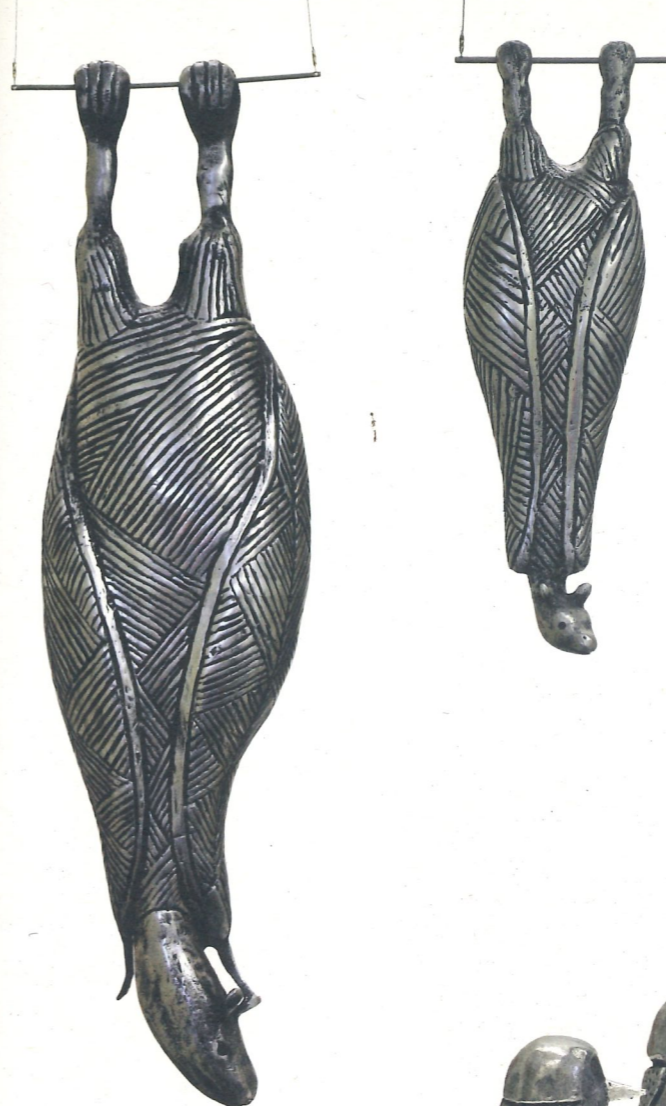
The Gatherings workshop's origins build on UAP's ongoing commitment to providing training and necessary skills to Indigenous artists to assist them in realising work for the public realm, a lucrative arena for skilled contemporary artists. For the many of the 19 artists involved – painters, printmakers, carvers and textile artists – the project marked a first foray into sculpture. In terms of the sheer scale of the vast distances covered bringing artists to Brisbane, and the significant cultural sensitivities that needed to be negotiated, Gatherings was a major undertaking, illustrating that UAP is not just a foundry but also a tireless advocate for the integration of Indigenous art in contemporary Australian life.

The results form part of the Darwin Waterfront, a 25-hectare former industrial site in the process of being transformed into a business, tourism and recreation precinct connected to the harbour. Although but a small aspect of the multimillion dollar development, Gatherings is the really feelgood chapter of this tale. The literal and metaphorical 'gathering' together of these artists and artisans produced something truly unique in the spirit of collaboration and, more importantly, practical reconciliation.

Working closely with UAP's skilled team of pattern makers and fabricators, the Gatherings artists, chosen for their strong individual practices and reputations, were introduced to the processes of producing cast work, including a brief on pattern making, sand moulding, casting,

fabricating and finishing. Discussions about how to sensitively translate their traditional art practices into three dimensions were aided by the examples of work created by Maningrida and Aurukun artists and the UAP team. In addition, several of the artists visited the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, where they met curator Diane Moon.

Back in the UAP workshop, the artists created mould 'patterns' sculpted in plasticine and polystyrene, from which castings were taken in bronze or aluminium to produce editions of 12. Graham Badari, a printmaker from Gunbalanya, translated his skills to three aluminium flying fox sculptures entitled *Fruit Bats*. The pattern work



eloquently echoes the characteristic lines of his prints, imbuing the creatures with a magical quality. Similarly, the exquisite intaglio work on Wukun Wonambi's sacred designs (*Wawurritjpa* or sea mullet), passed on by his father from elders who had kept the information in trust, is a wonderful articulation of the artist's celebrated traditional bark-painting skills in three dimensions.

Margaret Gamuti and Melinda Getjin, traditional weavers from Milingimbi in Arnhem Land, wittily translated their skills into a new medium: Gamuti's *Basket (Bathi)* is modelled on a traditional woven form and cast in aluminium, while Getjin's *Dillybag with*



Dots is a wonderfully honest response to a new material. Similarly, her *Crows* capture perfectly the inherent character of the subject, at once naive and slightly menacing. Overall, there is an undeniable humour inherent in the work produced, and a sense of revelling in the process of experimenting with a new medium. Janice Murray's family of *Whistling Ducks*, for example, cannot fail to elicit a smile.

Importantly, the workshops with UAP are ongoing, with continuous advisory support from The Toga Group, and financial support from the Northern Territory Government. UAP workshop manager Mary Stuart observed:

The workshops are very much an equal exchange. Whilst we (UAP) impart our knowledge and skills in the realm of cast sculpture, we also gain greatly from the

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experience of working with Indigenous artists from many different communities. It's an exchange that inspires the discovery of common sensibilities.

The editions produced are to be sold through the relevant galleries and art centres, with the profits shared between all the stakeholders. Some of the Gatherings series featured in 24HR Art's window exhibition spaces as part of the Darwin Festival, and 17 works can be seen in November in an exhibition at 2 Dank St in Sydney, as part of collaboration with Suzie Spira and Jenny Hillman, of Waterhole Art. ○

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