

A new spin on Indigenous art

THIS YEAR'S NATSIAA HAS THROWN THE SPOTLIGHT ON WEAVING – A LESSER-KNOWN ABORIGINAL ART PRACTICE THAT'S INCREASINGLY ATTRACTING THE NOTICE OF COLLECTORS. **SUSAN MCCULLOCH** WENT TO SPINIFEX COUNTRY IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA TO MEET SOME OF THE 170 MEMBERS OF THE TJANPI WEAVERS GROUP, THE WINNERS OF THIS YEAR'S NATSIAA FIRST PRIZE. PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GLENN CAMPBELL**.

Kantjupayi Benson
with *Tjanpi Grass Toyota*.

“We make lots of things at Blackstone – paintings, baskets, manguri [head rings] – it is rich country and it's sometimes hard work to collect the grasses for making things but it's what we love doing and what keeps us strong physically and culturally.”

Kantjupayi Benson is one of the senior weavers of around 170 who have formed the group Tjanpi (grass) Weavers. They are based in numerous small communities in the expansive spinifex country which crosses the borders of Western and South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Their central point is the small community of Blackstone, some 400km south west of Alice Springs in Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) lands lush with a wide variety of grasses.

The female-based co-operative was established in 1995 and has since become known for its weavings of imaginative figurative sculptures and colourful baskets made largely from grasses but also raffia and wool and decorated with feathers, seeds and other objects.



Members of Tjanpi Weavers with *Tjanpi Grass Toyota*.

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In August, 20 of the Blackstone women won the highest accolade in Australian Indigenous art – the \$40,000 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Known as either the NATSIAAs or more often the Telstras for the company which has sponsored the prize for the last 12 years – the award is the highlight of the indigenous art calendar and the women's winning work, an almost life size woven car, called *Tjanpi Grass Toyota* created huge media attention.

“It is a wonderfully witty, well-crafted and relevant work,” commented the judges, director of the Queensland Art Gallery **Doug Hall** and artist **Destiny Deacon** in a press release. “In one sense it takes us to the heart of community life and its tradition of weaving from grass that belongs to the women's country. On the other hand it not only recognises but also celebrates the four-wheel drive as central to desert living for Aboriginal people.”

The work was conceived by a pioneer of the movement and senior weaver Kantjupayi Benson after the making of another monumental work, the world's largest basket (5 metres wide, 4 metres long and 2.5 metres high). This boat basket into which more than 20 people fitted, was shown at the World Expo in Hanover Germany in 2000.

The sketch of the woven Toyota was outlined by Kantjupayi Benson in chalk on the floor of the Blackstone community hall. The women collected the strong minyerri grass about 20kms outside of town, fashioned the long strands into coils held together with jute twine and wire and attached these to steel panels covered with chicken wire mesh. Under their direction these

were then made into the shape of the car by Perth sculptor **Claire Bailey**. The whole process took a month.

"Cars are really important to us for work in collecting our grasses, for hunting in the bush and going to ceremonies," says Mrs Benson. "We thought it would be a good idea to make a big one for fun and to show that it is an important part of our lives."

Blackstone Tjanpi Weavers started in 1995-96 following women's workshops in six communities run by teacher and artist **Thisbe Purich**, with contributions by weavers including **Nalda Searles**, **Philomena Hall** and **Renita Glencross**. Thisbe Purich has since become the art co-ordinator for Tjanpi Weavers.

"During the arts workshop at Blackstone in May 1995 we went on a trip out bush to collect materials for basket making," she says. "At first the women were busy dancing. However a small group of Jameson, Blackstone, Warburton and other women and I collected some different grasses. The women started to wind them around and the first baskets were like hair rings. We used big darning needles and string and wool. At Jameson **Dora Land** and **Nora Holland** continued to experiment. They came over to my house with two huge bird nest like



baskets wound around an old bucket to keep the shape."

Some of the early baskets were decorated with ochre and fat and were, says Purich, extraordinary shapes and sizes. Some were sent to Uluru's Maruku Arts Centre – a popular tourist outlet – and quickly sold.

Materials are a combination of grasses, tree beans, bush turkey feathers, human hair, sheep wool, raffia and other modern materials as well as emu feathers, seeds and beans. Sometimes the baskets and sculptures are sewn together with thin strips of bark, vines and creepers or string, coloured wool either bought especially or found around the camps.

Many of the materials are simply those lying around communities. "All you need are needles and string and you can even make a needle from a tinned meat key ... making baskets has been really good for us women. We can make them easily in the bush. While you're digging for maku (witchetty grubs) and tjala (honey ants) you can collect seeds and grass as well. It also gives us more money," described the chair of the NPY Women Council, **Winnie Woods** in the Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture.

Although once traditionally women made looser-weave hair string and other fibre bags, the main objects made by women from this area until this new project started had been large padded headware, manguri. These thick spongy pads are necessary buffers for the head as well as steadiers for the carrying of wooden water and food-filled bowls, firewood and other goods. Grasses, hair and animal fur were also woven into string belts, head bands, skirts and face coverings for modesty. Bush sandals were made from bound grass bundles.

Some of the first baskets and manguri made in 1996 were shown at Alice Spring's Desert Mob annual show held by the Araluen Arts Centre. Araluen has been a strong supporter of Tjanpi's fibre works ever since, and recently acquired a major collection of manguri.

The women's first bag and basket show was held, shortly after, at Araluen – the colourful baskets were highly sought after by collectors and tourists alike. Where some of the larger figurative works such as Kantjupayi Benson's life-like figures representing the Seven Sisters story are exhibited as sculpture in the public and leading city commercial galleries and priced accordingly, the brilliantly-coloured baskets and smaller sculptures have made unique pur-

chases for those wanting contemporary Aboriginal art at modest prices.

Some of the larger baskets made from fine layers of woven grasses are decorated with soft, long emu and other feathers and retail for around \$800. So too the figurative sculptures such as one metre high emus, dogs and kangaroos. However many of the smaller items including coiled and twined baskets striped with vibrant greens, yellows, blues, reds, oranges and a huge variety of other colours and adorned with beads, small feathers, twigs and twine sell for as little as \$15 with many fine examples available for under \$200. Brilliantly coloured and infinitely different, many collectors have become self-confessed Tjanpi addicts – appreciative of the often quirky sense of humour and innovation of the sculptures and the variations in design and brilliant use of colour and fabric of the baskets.

"They are obviously stunning gifts or a way to build up a great collection of unique and genuine works," says Alice Spring's Gallery Gondwana manager **Kate Podger**.

Gallery Gondwana has been a strong supporter and outlet for Tjanpi's work since its inception. "People always think of painting when they think of Aboriginal art," says Podger. "But these fibre works can be as exciting as paintings. They are often exotic – such as quirky birds,



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rabbits and other fauna – and have a real presence."

She says their main buyers tend to be women with an interest in fibre or textiles, or those wanting to give unique presents. "The market for them has grown hugely in the last few years," she says. "Everyone is always looking for something new in Aboriginal art and these certainly fit this."

Their success, she says, has also encouraged other communities such as Titjikala to experiment with sculptural figurative objects. They have even influenced greater variety in the ubiquitous beanie hats which some beanie-makers are now decorating with feathers.

The effect on the communities themselves, says Purich, has been profound. "These baskets are business," she says. "They maintain women's link to the land and to their traditional objects. They provide the women with meaningful employment. They have developed into a business for the women and have also become trade items in exchange for money, family favours or obligations."

"Contemporary baskets reflect individuality in form and materials because they are not bound by a tradition of specific foundation or design. While out collecting grass, women take time to hunt and gather food, teach their children and sing songs from their country. Basket weaving is providing women with culturally appropriate work and additional income." ■

The 22nd Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award exhibition is at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory until 23 October, 2005.

Above from far left:

Sandra Somerfield, *Pack Camel*, 2005. Grass, Raffia and wool, 87 x 100 x 3cm.

Paluma Nampitjinpa, *Magpie*, 2005. Raffia and wool, 20 x 40 x 15cm. Unknown, *Rabbit*, 2005. Grass, Raffia and wool and synthetic packing, 16 x 30 x 14cm.

Unknown, *Bird*, 2005. Raffia and Grass, 16 x 32 x 20cm.

Baskets by Panjiti Jackson, 2005. Raffia and Grass, 35 x 45 x 45cm, 45 x 55 x 10cm.

COURTESY: GALLERY GONDWANA.