

Weaving the Waterways: Women and Fishing

Weaving a connection of river-life, from the Murray to the Birrarung

11 March – 14 May 2017

Glenda Nicholls (Wadi Wadi/Yorta Yorta/Ngarrindgeri), Guest Curator and Artist

Accompanied by artists

Clair Bates (Malingappa/Paakantji, Barkindji)

Donna Blackall (Yorta Yorta)

Deanne Gilson (Wadawurrung)

Georgia Macguire (Wurundjeri)

Bronwyn Razem (Gunditjmara)

Artists' statements

Claire Bates

I come from a large Aboriginal family and grew up on the mission in Wilcannia. My grandmother Hannah Quayle spoke the Paakantyi language and continued to practice her Aboriginal culture. I believe the inspiration and influences for my work were developed when I was a young child growing up in the bush and listening to the stories of my grandmother. My basket weaving and jewelry making has led to my involvement in festivals and workshops where I have been able to showcase and share these arts and crafts throughout Australia.

Donna Blackall

The long neck turtle I have made for this exhibition is a very important animal to me because it's my totem and relates to the Yorta Yorta country that is connected to Glenda through the mighty Murray river.

Deanne Gilson

In 2016 I was lucky enough to do an artist residency with Glenda for the Pacific Islander Festival, in Guam. During this time I learnt so much about the Aboriginal women's business of making nets for fishing, hunting and gathering. The ceramic fish I have included are reminiscent of a time when women contributed to the gathering of food to feed their children, through the practice of fishing and net making. I see the fish as a good health symbol for my people and culture. The fish is also a link that travels through the waterways connecting us all, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people throughout this abundant country.

Georgia Macguire

My practice focuses on the lived experiences of Indigenous women. I make paper bark flowers to celebrate women who have come before me and their unique ability to survive through self determination and craft techniques. Within the context of this exhibition I have made flowers to recognise the other women in the exhibition and the influence they have made in my life as living teachers and inspirations.

Bronwyn Razem

My *Eel Trap* relates to Aboriginal fishing practices of the Western District. For many areas, with waterways emptying into the sea, eels were the focus of fishing and a staple protein for the Gunditjmara people. Eel traps and fishing nets were used when the water flow was high. In modern times traps are made from wire. My grandfather Nicholas Couzens taught my uncles how to catch eels when they were boys.

Soundscape provided by Jonathan Andrew

Jonathan Andrew

I composed Glenda's *Milloo Song* specifically for my mother, Glenda Nicholls' exhibition. I am a musician having completed a Bachelor of Jazz Studies majoring in jazz guitar in 2004. Since then, I have performed around Australia at various festivals and including festivals also in the UK.



left: Glenda Nicholls,
Basket and Net 2014,
recycled paper, jute, dye
Glenda Nicholls with Nets
photo Suzi Baumgartner

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Curated by Glenda Nicholls



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cover image: Glenda Nicholls (Wadi Wadi/Yorta Yorta/Ngarrindgeri)
Ochre Net 2012, string, wood, ochre, 570 x 181cm, Koorie Heritage Trust Collection AH3891
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Foreward

The Koorie Heritage Trust is proud to present *Weaving the Waterways: Women and Fishing*, an exhibition curated by Wadi Wadi, Yorta Yorta and Ngarrindjeri artist, Glenda Nicholls. We are thrilled to present Glenda's first exhibition as a guest curator, building on the significant relationship the Koorie Heritage Trust has held with Glenda over the years. As an artist Glenda has exhibited with us in group shows, sold works through our retail store, facilitated workshops, and she has many works held in our collection including over 300 hand-crafted feather flowers.

Glenda's *Ochre Net* (2012), featured in this exhibition, is a significant piece in our collection and a pivotal work in Glenda's practice. The work was acquired through the Koorie Heritage Trust's Acquisitive Award at the 2012 Victorian Indigenous Art Awards, and also won that year's award for three-dimensional works. This important piece marked the beginning of Glenda's investigation into netmaking and is the only net in our collection to date.

Since 2012, Glenda has continued to research weaving and craft techniques relating to river-life through her arts practice. Representing the culmination of her research, this exhibition showcases the evolution of these techniques as they have been passed down through the generations, now incorporating contemporary materials and new designs.

I gratefully acknowledge the exhibition supporter; Eucalypt Australia, along with our key supporters, the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria's Organisations Investment Program, the Australian Government through the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program, and the City of Melbourne.

I especially wish to acknowledge and thank Glenda for all her work on this project, along with the other contributing artists; Clair Bates, Donna Blackall, Deanne Gilson, Georgia Macguire, and Bronwyn Razem. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Trust's Exhibitions and Collections staff, in particular our Senior Collections and Exhibitions Manager, Charlotte Christie, our Exhibitions Coordinator, Jan Duffy, our Public Programs Officer, Zenzi Clark, our Collections Coordinator Jane Walton, and our Senior Collections Curator, Nerissa Broben.

Tom Mosby
CEO The Koorie Heritage Trust



right: Glenda Nicholls, *Flames of Inspiration*, taken while gathering fibres at Lake Toom, 2016
photo: Glenda Nicholls

Weaving the Waterways: Women and Fishing

Weaving a connection of river-life, from the Murray to the Birrarung

My name is Glenda Nicholls and I was born on the verandah of the Swan Hill district hospital in Wemba Wemba country in 1954. My Aboriginal name is Jule Yarra Minj which means Little River girl and I recognise my Wadi Wadi/Yorta Yorta and Ngarrindjeri descendants. I am the second child of nine children.

This exhibition draws on memories of family camping and fishing outings along the Murray River and its tributaries. The unspoken blueprints of generational crafts and bush skills, inspired by watching and learning from my grandparents and parents, were implanted in my mind and brought about the pieces chosen for this exhibition.

Family bush outings were a big part of my close family kinship and the development of life skills. Family Elders encouraged the learning of different (adapted) bush skills such as preserving, protecting and looking after country. Other teachings were looking, listening, feeling and smelling the land, knowledge of where to find bush foods and plant sources. My grounding from being on country is where I have learnt self-healing over mind and body; the necessary life skills in coping and adapting to bush life and land knowledge; and life in general.

These blueprints of my craft, handed down from my ancestors, have for some years remained in my heart and mind until this time of creativity. In keeping with my story line, I have tried to incorporate the stories of women and fishing practices in some of my woven pieces. Both parents taught the visual skills of animal tracking and listening skills of the bush and its environmental surroundings. My father encouraged his six daughters at an early age to go outside the box of female duties and explore the special gifts we each had and to never be restricted in what we wanted to do in life. Whether it was in the kitchen baking cakes, in the paddock loading the hay bales, or picking the tomatoes, I reminisce about my father whose cultural teachings were a special reminder of my parents' partnership within our family unit.

After raising my own family I became more serious about my craft. I wanted to make something that no artist in Victoria had yet created. I think that's why I was given the task of weaving fishnets. Why fishnets you may ask? Well the idea came to me as a vision in the form of a dream. In this vision was an ochre net and a throw net. I had no idea of how to make these nets so the *Ochre Net* was my first attempt. Surprisingly it gave me a great result. Winning the Koorie



Glenda Nicholls, *Nick Nacks* 2016, kangaroo skin, jute, recycled paper, quondong seeds, clay, wooden gnat
photo: Suzi Baumgartner

Heritage Trust Acquisition Award and the *CAL Victorian Indigenous Art Award for Three Dimensional Works* in the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards (VIAA) in 2012. When I was making the *Ochre Net* someone told me that women didn't make fishnets, so I had to prove to them wrong. My research showed that women and children were very instrumental in making fishnets and small bird nets.

I pride myself on finishing a project so the other vision of the *Throw Net* had to be completed. Living in the Queensland tropics with my young family, I was mesmerised watching the fishermen who were able to throw a caste net, enabling it to make a perfect circle on touching the water surface and entrapping fish in its mesh. And so, the *Throw Net* came to fruition.

Other net pieces that followed came from inspiration and acknowledgment

of life. The three woven cloaks entitled, *A Woman's Rite of Passage*, have brought about different types of thinking since winning the Deadly Award at the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards in 2015. The Cloaks were my way of proving a political point, that of women being at the forefront of welcoming and acknowledging people to country, while including some subtle reminders of past wrongs to Aboriginal women.

My net making processes and techniques continue to be in keeping with the weaving and knotting process of bygone days. Feather craft came to me at an early age. Many of my younger days were spent recuperating from numerous childhood illnesses, which left me lots of time to watch my grandmother and mum doing their craftwork. I admired the feather flowers my mother made and watched so intently that in later life I found I could also

make them without any teachings. *Christina* was made in memory of my Great grandmother, Christina Bonney/ Pinkie, who passed on knowledge to my mother. A poem accompanying the works, is my interpretation of the story I heard from my mum about her journey, with her younger cousins, in a horse and cart owned by their grandparents Robert and Christina Pinkie, from their country in South Australia to Victoria; settling across the river and near the bridge at Swan Hill. This was where my mother grew up and lived on property leased from the government by my Grandmother Christina, and this is where my mother was taught, by her grandmother, many of the skills of Aboriginal women's weaving. To me, this shows where and how our cultural weaving storyline has travelled. I find this appropriate as some Aboriginal women moved from their country to that of their husbands' country and thus claimed their new lands through dispossession, as their own. A point that will, I am sure, be discussed at length in some circles. I am still trying to piece together the reason why my grandparents settled near Swan Hill but am thrilled that the weaving and craft storyline travelled. The partnership of my grandparents and my parents has shown me the importance of family and kinship values and how cultural tools and art were often adapted to make monetary gain for survival.

Women and fishing have always been of interest to me as I grew up in a fishing

family. Over the years, I acknowledged the hand fishing technique used by my maternal grandmother, Emily Pinkie/ Karpany, and the pole fishing technique used by my paternal grandmother, Lady Gladys Bux/Nicholls.

For me, growing up and living near the waterways has brought a sense of being grounded when I needed healing. It also meant that we had food, the fish, turtle, mussel shells, crayfish, eels and yabbies. Not to mention the birdlife and other wildlife that lived off its waterways and tributaries.

My mother and father taught us at a very young age how to catch the fish and yabbies. I remember my younger siblings sitting on my Mum, Dad or Nanna's lap, pretending to hold the fishing line as they fished. I also remember watching Dad making extraordinary fishtraps using chicken wire to catch the Murray River crayfish, turtles and fish that were caught within them.

Using a line, small bait, nets and buckets to catch yabbies was a childhood past time that carried on into adulthood. As kids, the yabby and shrimp nets we crafted from adapted materials brought much imagination, like the use of a grape bucket, or the often used sunshine milk tin or the bird wire yabby scoops and laughingly, the yabby scoop net made from Mums stockings and a wire coat hanger.

I once read a *Wiradjuri* creation story of how the first man and woman came about. Men were made from river clay



Glenda Nicholls, *Pine Needle Basket with Net* 2016, pine needles, waxed thread, jute
photo: James Henry

and women were found in the water. I asked my mother why water was so important to women and she said, without blinking an eyelid, "water is life". I asked why, and she said, babies are born in water, if there is no water there is no life. Then it all made sense to me. Without water, our babies would die.

I've already mentioned that we no longer use the tools of yesteryear so now our mob make art to keep the weaving and craft practices alive. And so, now the storylines continue and the passing of weaving and craft knowledge is carried into future generations in a contemporary way. We still consult, counsel and acknowledge, not only each other but also our ancestors, promoting self-esteem, pride and acknowledgment of different and yet the same practices within our cultures before, now, and into the future.

In 2016 I was chosen to travel to Guam USA for the Festival of the Pacific Arts as a member of a collaborative group called Ngardang Girri Kalat Mimini (Mother Aunty Sister Daughter). Group members Deanne Gilson, Bronwyn Razem, Georgia MacGuire and myself were given the task of promoting the unique art practises of Indigenous women in Victoria through our weaving, painting with ochre, ceramics and flower making. I am extremely excited that these very talented ladies have agreed to show some of their work in this exhibition. I am pleased to also have my dear friends Clair Bates and Donna Blackall join the team with their own unique weaving styles showing creative styles from their country from the Murray and Darling River waterways.

Glenda Nicholls
Guest Curator and Artist