



waradgerie *weaver*

LORRAINE CONNELLY-NORTHEY

SWAN HILL REGIONAL ART GALLERY TOURING EXHIBITION



Lorraine Connelly-Northey: *Waradgerie Weaver*



Lorraine Connelly-Northey's first group exhibition *KayiKuthap (I'm Sorry)* was in Swan Hill at the Uniting Church's Community Gallery in 2001. Part of the exhibition was later moved to Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery at the request of the then Director Helen Kaptein. Connelly-Northey's first solo exhibition *Narbongs* was also at Swan Hill in 2004. During the ten years that have followed the artist has been on a fast ride, taking her work to many Australian galleries and museums including most State Galleries and to numerous major art events across the country.

A strong sculptural sensibility and accomplished making skills underpin Connelly-Northey's work and have enabled her to range from delicate, almost ephemeral, objects to expansive and weighty forms. The ideas that inform her work are the other essential component and these have been shaped by the artist's diverse experiences, interests and influences.

Growing up in a regional Victorian town with an Aboriginal mother and a father of Irish heritage shaped a particular set of family and personal experiences. The derogatory attitudes of conservative, predominantly white rural communities and resulting self-sufficient marginalisation are common to many Indigenous artists and often inform their political expression. The politics of Connelly Northey's work is however never intentionally overt although commentators often read her choice of materials as forbidding, discordant and even hostile.

*"By the age of eighteen I had embraced the fact that I wasn't black or white, but both. I believe it was this that gave me a sense of belonging and confidence to acknowledge and understand my Aboriginality."*¹

Growing up as a Waradgerie woman in Wemba Wemba country has been another significant dislocation, one that has both reinforced identity and sharpened awareness of unwritten protocols that determine what is and is not appropriate for an Aboriginal artist not on her own country. This is reflected in the fact that in spite of teaching herself to be skilled weaver and gaining an extensive knowledge of weaving practices, the artist has never felt able to use the local traditional materials from North Eastern Victoria in making her own artwork.

Lorraine Connelly-Northey's parents have very directly influenced her work as an artist. Childhood experiences of the bush and riverine environments were rich with the traditional

knowledge of her mother's people but this was instilled, most often, during compulsory weekend rabbiting and foraging trips with her father to sustain the family food supply. His resourceful scavenging and reuse of discarded materials provided access to the improbable and poignant materials that so strongly identify the artist's work. Lorraine also remembers going to work with her father and learning to use his carpentry tools. At the same time Lorraine's mother sewed, crocheted and wove craft objects *"for bread and milk money."*² Evocation of a resonant if often hardscrabble childhood world is always a particularly powerful driver of Connelly-Northey's work.

*"...I set out to ensure that however my art developed it would represent my parents equally and, of course, make my parents proud."*³

After working in the public service during her young adult life Connelly-Northey was drawn back to the Mallee by her desire to learn more about traditional Aboriginal culture and in particular to enhance her knowledge of indigenous plants and their uses. Always a diligent student she read widely and voraciously. Her research was self-directed and it led her to an educational role at Swan Hill TAFE. Since that time her art making has been motivated by a strong didactic impulse although ironically it was frustration with a lack of engagement by students that precipitated her own art making.

Lorraine Connelly-Northey often mentions a strong Waradgerie tradition of matriarchy. Nurturing, protecting and providing for children, usually on her own, has demanded some practical decisions by the artist. Most immediately it was the time demands of child rearing that made fashioning her work from found materials the quickest and most affordable technology.

All of these factors combined with a searching intelligence and a self-deprecating sense of humour have sustained Lorraine Connelly-Northey over the last ten years of art world prominence. She remains clear in her intentions and unmoved by acclaim. There is perhaps a significant symmetry in returning to Swan Hill in 2012, an opportunity for reflection and the beginning of another cycle of rich endeavour and challenging art making.

Julian Bowron

1,2&3: The artist's notes, unpublished



SWAN HILL REGIONAL art GALLERY

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