

Artist Focus: Mary Teresa Taylor

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Mary Teresa Taylor at the Kira Kiro Art Centre, July 2015 © Jason Thomas 2015

Once described as a cantankerous sweetheart, 77 year old Mary Teresa Taylor's temperament is a delightful combination of brazen bashfulness. To the casual observer misinterpreting her brusque manner as the attribute of a cranky old lady and thereby merely dismissing her would be a big mistake. This is a talented artist, a woman who has experienced great love and tragedy in her lifetime. Tempered by the frank way she describes these events; equally revelations of the good and the bad, her candor has a sometimes shockingly confronting sincerity, a characteristic also conveyed through her art.

Asked to introduce herself on camera during an interview in Kalumburu recently Taylor is visibly shy, she first has a nervous laugh and then looks straight into the lens and loudly pronounces; *'My name is Mary Taylor and I born in Wyndham. My mother had two twins, my other sister passed away and I'm living. [To cameraman] You got it?'* Throughout the course of filming Taylor would verbalise her uneasiness at being interviewed; *'So what now? Anymore?'*ⁱ, then follow this up with personal revelations and sporadic bursts of wholehearted laughter.

Born in Wyndham in 1939, Taylor grew up in Oombulgurri, (formerly Forrest River Mission), with her parents and grandparents, King David and Ethel. Today Taylor is one of the Traditional Owners for the Balangarra Native Title area, which extends from Kalumburu in the north Kimberley to her grandparents country along the western border of the Cambridge Gulf in the east. Oombulgurri has had a difficult past, in recent times with its much controversial closure, but also historically as the location of the notorious Forrest River Massacre of 1926.

Taylor's memories of this event are informed by stories told to her as a child by her parents. She speaks of the stone cairn memorial and cross made of water piping built in August 1927 at a hill overlooking the mission and floodplains of Oombulgurri - *'... you know you go up that road and you see that cross there, little kid and all buried there.'* At the foot of the cross was a wooden box containing pieces of human bone collected at identified places of conflict Gote-gote-merri, Mowerie and Darla.ⁱⁱ *'You pass that Camera Pool and you keep walk, going there, you see that big cliff like that now [motioning with hand] there you hear dogs singing out, babies crying. We went there for holiday with mum and dad and mum said, no dad said to us don't, don't talk*

*all night because you hear people singing out, dog was, people singing out and dog. And you can hear the little baby crying. Sorry. Policemen shooting at them, hey. Policemen shooting them. Olden days' time.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Personal loss is an ongoing theme in Taylor's life, apart from losing her twin sister at birth she outlived all her siblings 'And I lost my four sisters...all my sisters left me... I'm the only one now, alive, of the kids'^{iv}. As a young woman, Taylor married another Oombulgurri resident, Leo Taylor, and together they had 9 children. 'I had five boys... three passed away, three boys passed away. And two girls passed away and I got two girls and two boys now, Rosie and Margaret and Neil and Fonsie'. In 2005, after her husband passed away, she moved to Kalumburu to live with one of her daughters.

Taylor's ongoing connection to her husband and his country, particularly a place called Ōmari on the Berkeley River is undoubtedly her greatest inspiration for painting. After years of camping in and walking around this river, she is acutely familiar with its environmental and cultural essence. Her memories of that time certainly induce a happy nostalgia; 'The Berkeley now, he got nice river, he's good... River running down, freshwater running down, you have a swim there. Everyone holiday there, take their kids there, holiday time you know? Holiday time for kids, you all go there. Very good place...The kids would go and get all the stone and play on the bank with it...'^v

Describing a freshly finished (and soon to be exhibited) ochre work on paper (image below); 'This country from Leo, my husband's name Leo Taylor and this is all the pebbly rocks... This is my husband's land. So I don't do another peoples land I do my husband's land because when my husband was alive he was telling me do, telling me what the story.'^{vi}



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Aru' 2015 Ochre pigments on paper 76x56cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

When she first started painting Taylor was known to occasionally paint her mother's country, particularly *Jinangi* (Camera Pool on the Forrest River near Oombulgurri) However last year when we spoke with Taylor in Kalumburu she was adamant that she wasn't currently interested in depicting that subject matter; 'Yeah when my mother passed away and when my grandfather and grandmother passed away they told me there's too many pictures in mums country but I don't draw mums country I draw my husband's country. I don't draw mum country'^{vii}



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Jinangi' 2010 Ochre pigments on paper 76x56cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

One gets the distinct impression that her husband Leo played a crucial part in the story of her life. When asked how important it is to her to keep on telling her husband's stories, Taylor replies; *'I love it.'* Asked why it makes her feel good her response is a vociferous; *'So I can think about my husband!'* Taylor explains, *'...my dad passed away now, my mum passed away, so I'm just gonna do this land [gesturing to painting] this part here, my husband's. Because most of the time I think about my husband see...'* And further; *'What, I gotta think about my husband, because I don't have no man see. I have to think about him.'* Taylor not only thinks about but admits to sometimes chatting with her deceased husband while she's painting; *'When he, when I'm by myself at home see, he come out to me, in my little house over there...'*

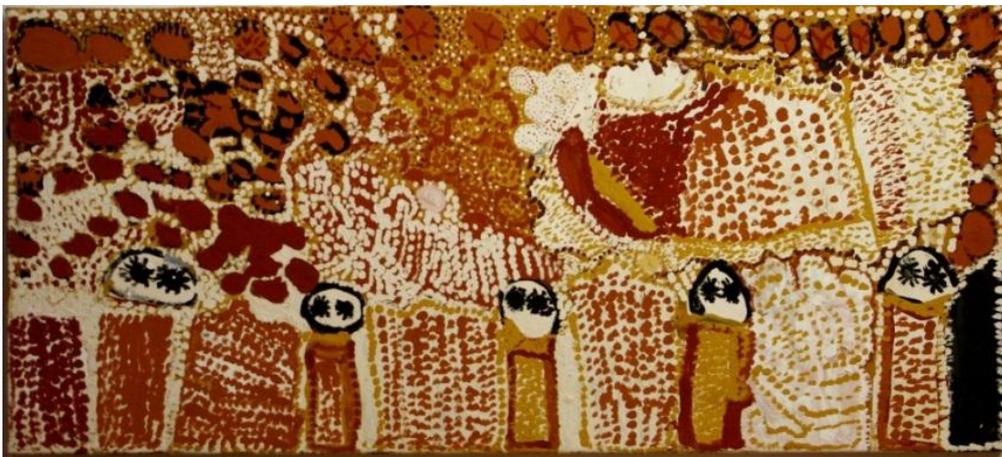
Taylor is one of a small group of senior women at the core of the small Kira Kiro art centre in the remote northern Kimberley community of Kalumburu. Formed in 2009 the art centre represents a handful of dedicated artists including two senior painters she calls her 'God-mums', Mary Puntji Clement and Betty Bundamurra. Kira Kiro art centre artists are remarkable in that they are painting with very little support. They work out of an old shed with extremely limited facilities; artworks have to be flown out by plane which is expensive but also impractical for large works, and art materials have to be flown in. According to Philippa Jahn, former Kira Kiro Art Centre Coordinator; *'There has certainly been a lot of interest from galleries in the city in the work of these artists, they're starting to really clamor for it and there's been some inclusion of their work in overseas exhibitions. This is all starting but it's very difficult from a community that is so very isolated and inaccessible... to their credit this group of strong women have managed to keep it going in the face of incredible adversity and I don't think they really get the acknowledgement they deserve for that.'*^{viii}

A striking aspect of the Kira Kiro artists work is that they have each developed radically different styles. These have flourished as a direct result of the establishment of the art centre and the confidence it's given them to paint in a way that is very individualistic but still strongly tied to what came before. *'The subject matter that the senior artists here paint has some similarities to what Aboriginal artists elsewhere are also painting, for example country features prominently. But this community has a mission background which has impacted somewhat on what subject matter they're free to paint and they're comfortable painting. They've done a remarkable job keeping this subject matter linked to identity, linked to their home here, linked to culture.'*^{ix}

Compared to other artists in the region and to her close contemporaries at the Kira Kiro Art Centre where she spends most of her time painting, Taylor's works are more abstract and less figurative. Perhaps the artist closest in style is Gwen Clarke, who likes to paint flowers and trees in her own somewhat naïve style but also incorporating more abstract circular motifs and images of water. It's interesting to note that like Taylor, Clarke also grew up at Oombulgurri and has traditional links to that country. Circular images like the ones painted by Clarke & Taylor are also found in the rock art of the region; these symbols are regularly linked with water, as they are for different Aboriginal groups throughout the country.

Her painting style is an uncensored reflection of her temperament; a juxtaposition of soft blended techniques alongside jarring charcoal black unbroken lines. In the same vein, one could draw the opinion that Taylor's attitude towards her art practice is unapologetic; her commitment to painting full-time is faithful yet one gets the sense that playing out the role of career artist with consideration for her audience seems to hold less appeal. Due to her completely uncontrived approach to painting, there's a somewhat moody inconsistency to the body of her finished works. Nonetheless, there's no doubting her talent and potential as an artist and more often than not Taylor produces artworks where all the best elements of her practice seem to combine effortlessly and with a touch of genius about them.

Her earliest artworks contain a wide range of subject matter including Wandjina and traditional artifacts such as boomerangs, stone axes, spear throwers and baby cradles. They are mostly depictions of her mother's country around Camera Pool, incorporating representations of bush flowers, trees and palms alongside rock formations. Fish also feature prominently, always depicted in the same stylized minimal form.



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Wandjinas' 2009 Ochre pigments on canvas 100x45cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Berkley River Country' 2012 Ochre pigments on canvas 45x45cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

In the past Taylor was known to paint on bark as well as canvas, indeed her bark paintings were particularly aesthetically admirable, the abstract style of her work complimented by the irregularity of the bark. These days, due to the difficulty of bark harvesting - the necessity to secure a vehicle and driver and the lengthy curing process, combined with the limitations of age and frailty, Taylor is now painting on large sheets of paper instead, more easily accessed via a supported supply from Waringarri Arts in Kununurra.



Mary Teresa Taylor, Untitled 2009 Ochre pigments 80x30cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

Taylor's early works were much more subdued in terms of colour, she had a preference for more earthy hues. Over time, not one to be limited or constrained by the medium, Taylor has developed a masterful way of blending tones, managing to add a painterly effect to the ochre by achieving gradients and brushstrokes laden with multiple colours.



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Berkley Coloured Rocks' 2011 Ochre pigments on canvas 25x25cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

Taylor's use of colour is particularly striking in that her unorthodox combinations are sometimes surprisingly successful. She triumphs at pairing dense olive greens alongside translucent light blue washes, semitransparent calamine-esque daubs of pink incongruously balanced with opaque sections of dark brown. She is certainly adept at mixing ochre pigments into a remarkable spectrum, managing to create a complex palette out of red, yellow, black and white. The same can be said for all the Kalumburu artists and there is no doubt some influence and sharing of skills between the tight knit group working there.

Arguably the most successful characteristic of Taylor's art is her acumen for composition. She consistently uses to her advantage the stippled technique of applying spots, speckles and flecks in varying sizes and colour. Taylor's use of dotting goes beyond merely decorative infill; when applied densely these mottled marks influence the directional form and space of features in the composition, and when applied sparsely a uniform

pattern acts as a resting negative space. Her use of dots informs the overall design of an artwork by configuring and balancing the abstracted elements against each other.



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Jinangi' 2010 Ochre pigments on canvas 80x45cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

Her recent stylistic direction is linked to her increased focus on one particular subject, her swirling depictions of *aru* (rocks) '...*White rocks, black rocks, green...*'²⁸ These compositions are accordingly filled with concentric circles and roundels representing rocks, pebbles, pools, eddies and large flat riverbank stones. Equipped with insight into her personal background one can view these artworks as reminiscences, happy memories of a place and time spent with her husband and children. This may go towards explaining why they are so appealing and why Taylor can paint endless vibrant variations of this one subject.



Mary Teresa Taylor, 'Aru' 2014 Ochre pigments on canvas 140x100cm © Kira Kiro Art Centre

The broader appeal of her art is yet to be gauged. Classed as 'emerging' by the art industry, recognition of her work has slowly been gaining momentum. Fortuitously at the very beginning of her career she was selected for the 27th NATSIAA at the Museum and Gallery of Northern Territory. Since 2010 she has been exhibited in four gallery group shows, prominently featured at the Kira Kiro art centre stall at the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, selected for the 2012 TAFE Central Gallery Revealed Exhibition of Emerging Indigenous Artists from WA, a finalist in the Port Hedland Art Award, and has had an artwork purchased by the Artbank Australia collection. Undoubtedly, the indefinable allure of her artworks is catching on, audiences and art gallery dealers are now demonstrating their interest with prominent galleries in Darwin, Alice Springs and Brisbane having all recently

exhibited Taylor's works in the last 18 months. It will be interesting to see what this capable artist decides to do next.

With thanks to Waringarri Aboriginal Arts & Kira Kiro Art Centre for the artwork photographs accompanying this essay.

ⁱ Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor for Desert River Sea filmed with Indigenous Community Stories, Kalumburu, July 8th 2015

ⁱⁱ Green, N 1988, *The Oombulgurri Story*, Focus Education Services, Cottesloe Western Australia, p. 79

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor for Desert River Sea filmed with Indigenous Community Stories, Kalumburu, July 8th 2015

^{iv} Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor, loc.cit.

^v Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor, loc.cit.

^{vi} Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor, loc.cit.

^{vii} Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor, loc.cit.

^{viii} Interview with Philippa Jahn, former Kira Kiro Art Centre Coordinator, Kalumburu, 10th July 2015

^{ix} Interview with Philippa Jahn, ibid.

^x Interview with Mary Teresa Taylor, loc.cit.