

Nagula Jarndu Saltwater Woman; impressions on an artworld

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As the largest town in the Kimberley, it's perhaps surprising that Broome does not have a dedicated Aboriginal art centre for local groups and the many people practising and selling art informally. The organisation which most closely approximates the function of an art centre is Nagula Jarndu Designs, the women's art and resource centre initiated and run by local Yawuru women.



Nagula Jarndu artist Cecilia Djiagween printing fabric in the studio © AGWA 2015

Nagula Jarndu has experienced several incarnations since its inception in 1987 with the initial goal of recording and preserving Yawuru oral histories, language and culture. It later expanded into arts development, particularly textiles, which continue to be the focus of current practice. Despite being subject to the same issues common to all small arts and culture-focused organisations, such as fluctuating art markets and inconsistent funding, NJ has managed to move beyond a series of looming threats of closure to approach its 30th anniversary with fresh energy and direction.

The group has recently moved to a new retail, workshop and office space. This offers far greater opportunity for studio and sales development as well as the possibility of permanency. It is also big enough to accommodate more artists. Whilst Nagula Jarndu is a Yawuru corporation, they have a policy of inclusion and their core group of artists include women with cultural affiliations beyond the Broome area, including Martha Lee, Maxine Charlie, Cissy Djiagween, Lorraine Hunter and Faye Manado (Yawuru); Cecilia Howard (Bard); Mangana Chiguna and Gabby Baxter (Walmajarri); Rowena Morgan (Gija/Gooniyandi) and Melanie Noble (Yamatji).

Knowing the women were working with renewed vigour and had also recently participated in workshops with Megan Kirwin Ward we were eager to visit and see for ourselves how the new space was functioning. The unprepossessing shopfront gave no indication of the feast of colour and texture awaiting visitors just inside the front door. Here is the retail space, newly renovated with pale wooden floors and stark white walls a neutral foil for the draped lengths of hand-printed fabric. Large framed printed papers were ready to be hung and a

table and shelves were loaded with an array of scarves, table runners, tea towels, woven baskets, hand-stitched dolls, tiny paintings and other experimental products.



Nagula Jarndu textile designs on display in the gallery space © AGWA 2015

A low wall divides this space from the workshop area, where visitors are also welcome. Large tables are spread with paint pots, hand tools and works in progress, the table tops themselves almost works of art in their own right, covered as they are in stippled layers of fabric paint. There is order in the chaos of bolts of fabric, mixed paints, colour swatches, printing blocks and experimental pieces which line the walls and a meditative demeanour to the women focused on their work. The fabric range is not extensive yet but does include enough high quality linens, cottons and silks of various weights to induce delirium in any textile aficionado. Printing is the primary focus and, unlike many other Indigenous textile producers, artists are choosing to focus on hand-stamping with carved blocks rather than screen-printing. Even when the same block is used more than once each piece bears unique impress and colour variation.



Nagula Jarndu artist Rowena Morgan printing fabric in the studio © AGWA 2015

The women carve their designs into blocks of polystyrene and also the more durable lino when a sharper, finer line is required. Each artist has developed their own range of motifs which are of personal cultural significance, some figurative, some abstract. These can be combined in novel ways to produce variations on a theme for each new work.



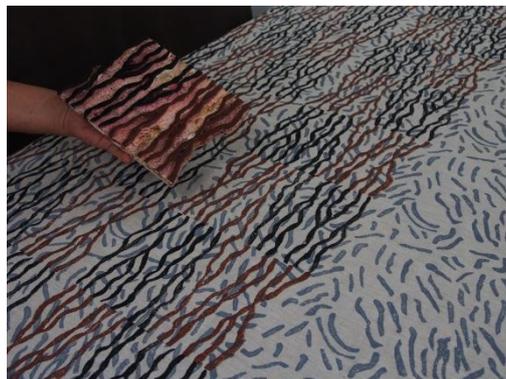
Engraved lino block by Martha Lee and paint brushes in the Nagula Jarndu studio © AGWA 2015

The saltwater Yawuru women carve marine fauna for example, as well as a number of abstract designs which refer to the patterns made by the wind on water and sand. It is interesting to note how these sometimes bear a remarkable similarity to the designs being carved on pearl shell by men from this area, which themselves have developed from early classical engraving patterns.



Nagula Jarndu textile design © AGWA 2015

Textural outcomes as well as colour choice are also important components of the design of each individual piece. Women will create designs appropriate to the seasons, of which there are six in the west Kimberley. Aesthetic considerations come into play, but dry season colours will generally be paired with motifs of animals and plants from that time, for example. As an extension of traditional practice, this method of recombining a limited number of design elements (whether colour, pattern or motif) to signify a range of meanings can be found in contemporary Kimberley art practice across most media.



Nagula Jarndu artist Cecilia Howard printing fabric in the studio © AGWA 2015

Clearly the cultural underpinnings and artistic drive of the Nagula Jarndu artists are not qualitatively different to their counterparts painting for the fine art market, yet their work is not likely to be readily accepted in that arena, given that they produce pieces which are categorised by function first. This might be slowly changing however. Textile production in northern Australia is increasing in quality and quantity and attracting commensurate attention more widely. Artists are invited to showcase work at Indigenous art fairs and enter art awards and the marketing of the work is becoming more sophisticated. The complexities inherent in narrowing the gap between the 'craft' and 'art' categories in the Indigenous art market are still evident however, despite this distinction being of little relevance to remote artists themselves.



Framed prints on paper on display in the gallery space © AGWA 2015

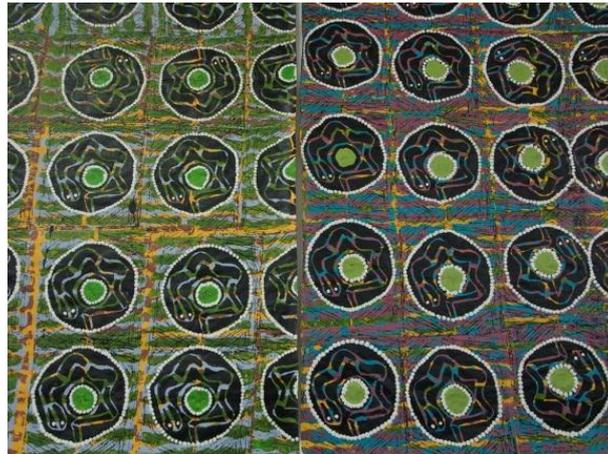
Further compounding this is the fact that Nagula Jarndu textiles often feature figurative designs, and figuration in Indigenous art (particularly representations of 'bushtucker') tends to be tarnished by association with tourist art. A preference for fabrics not bearing figurative designs has been voiced within the exhibition / art prize circuits of the arts industry. If such work is to be accepted as having cultural foundations specific to country and people, would this not constitute a breach of an artist's right to freely determine subject matter as well as undermine the intractable requirement for authenticity which adheres to Indigenous art production? These contradictions illustrate how remote art production must respond to market preferences to some degree and it will be interesting to see if NJ artists develop strategies to balance their own cultural and aesthetic preferences with the need for commercial success.



Nagula Jarndu textile design by Rowena Morgan © AGWA 2015

Sometimes merely changing how textiles are marketed can shift audience perceptions. Coordinator Sandy Darrington has been considering following the established art centre practice of attaching certificates of authenticity to each piece sold and this alone would affirm the cultural and artistic integrity of the work. While

we were at the studio Walmajarri woman Mangana Chiguna, whose ancestral country lies in the northern Great Sandy Desert, was occupied with a length of linen which she had earlier printed with her own four-colour snake design. She had progressed to painting the border of each motif with white dots, layering the introduced printing process with the marking technique traditionally used to give vibrancy to visual art work. The contrast between the imprecise dots and repetition of the print lent the work an unexpected vitality. Nominally this piece was a table runner, and was priced accordingly. It could easily be stretched on a frame and presented as a work of art in its own right however and certainly the hours of work the finished piece represented would justify a higher value being placed on it. Indeed, the same design had previously been worked on paper and framed behind glass, and the return to the artist was greater this way.



Nagula Jarndu textile designs by Mangana Chiguna with painted white dot motif © AGWA 2015

Sandy has been testing out various means of presenting NJ textiles to best benefit the artists and sustain the organisation. Nagula Jarndu has had work accepted in major art events, exhibitions and fairs including Revealed in Perth, DAAF in Darwin, Tarnanthi in Adelaide, as well as the Shinju and Port Hedland Art Prizes, all of which are inclusive of textiles. Two senior artists, Maxine Charlie and Martha Lee have also received public art commissions from Landcorp in Broome. There is an active skills development program with selected artists Megan Kirwin Ward and Bobbie Ruben, as well as a TAFE program offering allied practical skills. Sandy's own professional background in textile design and development has also been integral to the women's technical and artistic evolution. Women who don't have the time or the ability to devote themselves full-time to an artistic practice are welcome and catered for with some younger women engaged in the studio as part of Centrelink employment schemes, plus a number of craft activities such as soap and candle-making planned. These smaller items will also bolster the range of retail products available and ideally the income stream on which Nagula Jarndu depends.



Artists working in the Nagula Jarndu studio © AGWA 2015

The last word on the impact of Nagula Jarndu goes to younger artist Rowena Morgan from Halls Creek. Recently moved to Broome, Rowena is a painter who previously worked at the east Kimberley's Yarliyil art centre as their studio art assistant. She has a sophisticated feel for design and colour; her precise, multi-layered printed fabrics were the first to attract our attention. Her printing blocks are often carved from lino, which is more suited to her preference for precision and the rhythmic use of line. In the studio, she was finishing a sand dune print on lightweight linen; a layered ochre-toned abstract design which appeared to ripple with the movement of the fabric. Rowena takes the cultural element of her artwork very seriously; usually she works within the artistic idiom of her east Kimberley roots, especially reworking the landscape motifs she uses in her paintings. This piece however was an example of her experimentation with subject matter drawn from the unfamiliar Broome environment, and its success was borne out by the fact that the piece was sold before it was completed. She has quickly become one of NJ's most assured and voracious printers, proclaiming to us that she has become 'addicted to printing!'



Nagula Jarndu textile design by Rowena Morgan © AGWA 2015

Her enthusiasm is clearly shared by the other women and we look forward to giving an update next year on Nagula Jarndu's progress.