

Birds that walk

Yarrenyty Arltere Artists: Celebrating 21 years of the Yarrenyty Arltere Learning Centre, Araluen Arts Centre, Mparntwe, NT (2021)

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Walking out of the gallery

Eleven small soft sculptured birds nestle together on a low lying central plinth.

Standing tall among the flock is Dulcie Sharpe's 'Long Bird' (2021). Its thin light-blue body is visible through its minimal adornments: neck, head and beak totally bare of the yellow and red stitching across the rest of its body. The bird has two sets of stumpy wings. They don't seem particularly aerodynamic and I struggle to imagine them taking to the skies. I can, however, easily imagine *Long Bird* walking out of the gallery into Tjoritja (West MacDonnell Ranges).

Louise Robertson's 'Purple and Lavender Bird' (2021) is also loud among the flock. It's lower body is covered with bright pink threads and feather-like detailing. Clearly this bird shops for knitted jumpers at the op-shop: it's naff, but it works. The curves, details and textures of the bird give it life. There's energy in the eyes, starkly circled in white thread, as if they're popping out, or perhaps gawking at people passing by.

As I glance down to read the artist label I see pairs of cushioned feet, hovering above their welded platforms. Suddenly I'm thinking, the Sydney girl that I am, of pigeons in Taylor Square and gulls down at Coogee. The effect is impressive and shows what can be done working small and slow.

Walking on a tightrope

Marlene Rubuntja's 2015 'With my shopping bags!' stands solitary atop a plinth. She's sculpted herself performing what I view a boring chore, yet her domesticity revolts against the dull. Balancing a coolamon, as wide as she is tall, atop her head, Rubuntja enacts her imagined possibility. Bright red stitching layers her wide grin, a curve perfectly mimicked by her two arms, stretching above her head. Akin to a classical ballet dancer, her upper body is in fifth, and lower is in first, with both feet evenly turned out. Rubuntja, as both the sculptor and subject, is engaging in a balancing act, performed with ease and artistry;

"This coolamon, full of whitefella fruits. You know why? Because when I go to Woolworths I think, instead of trolley, instead of green bag, I would like to use a coolamon as my shopping bag. Now that would make you look!"¹

Dulcie Sharpe's commentary on balancing two worlds springs to mind;

"The art makes us think of our culture in another way and what we want people to know. It's good for everyone to have a place like this it helps us be part of both worlds"²

Walking alongside family

Three ink on paper figurative landscapes, again by Rubuntja, depict the ranges that frame Mparntwe. Her gestural lines layered upon washes of blues and reds serve as windows on the gallery wall. She knows these ranges well, which extend from Ntarpie (Heavitree Gap) to the peak of Alhekulyele (Mt Gillen), under which her home, Yarrenyty Arltere, is nestled. Aware of her lineage of a rockstar family of artists, I'm struck at how she has uniquely developed this inherited talent. Her pared back landscapes, with broad, sweeping brush strokes present a different perspective of this landscape than her father, Wenten Rubuntja, brother, Mervyn Rubuntja, and the detailed realism present in the broader 'Namatjira' style. Renowned watercolourist Albert Namatjira was Wenten's father's cousin and laid forth "light filled landscapes...framed by the curve of a ghost gum or viewed up close within the rocky outcrops"³. This style, now synonymous with the Central Western Desert, is one which Marlene Rubuntja zooms out of.

Using the same medium, Trudy Inkamala paints her grandmother, 'Old Laddie with Dilly Bags' (2021), and 'Kurrkurrka (Owl)' (2021), subjects she often sculpts. At first glance, displayed side by side, almost indiscernible in shape, the figures' feet serve as the most distinguishing feature. Simplified outlines define the contours, with rounded a dilly bag on each arm mimicking the shape of kurrkurrka wings. Rather than weighed down by the contents of her dilly bags, *Old Laddie* looks as if she could take to the skies, flying in formation with *Kurrkurrka*. Both figures are filled with layered strokes, large circular eyes, oblong facial features and wavy hairs. Their apparent similarities draws one in to engage with the works beyond first glance. To really look.

¹ M. Rubuntja, artwork label for 'With my shopping bags', 2015 in Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, 2021, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, NT

² D. Sharpe 'About' in Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, viewed 25 June 2021, <<http://www.yarrenytyarltereartists.com.au/about>>

³G. Vaughan, 'Director's Foreword' in 'Albert Namatjira' in M. McKendry (ed.), Publishing Section, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, p.8

Walking in the past

Played on loop, with audio interchanging between several languages, five short films by Yarrenyty Arltere are screened in the narrowest part of the corridor gallery (the main gallery space reserved for the naff annual Beanie Festival (another soft sculpture project of sorts?)) These films are easy to walk past without taking notice, yet are where the artists have their prolific storytelling abilities most on show. These films provide the historical, political, social and cultural contexts that have shaped the practices of Yarrenyty Arltere Artists. Animation is combined with powerful narration and live footage to bring soft sculptures to life. In these films Yarrenyty Arltere artists and residents tell their own stories, their own way and in their own languages.

Hallucinogenic visuals transform the rocky descensions of Akeyulerre (Billy Goat Hill) and Untyeyetwelye (Anzac Hill) into rolling psychedelic slopes. As frequented places for sniffing, the topographical contours manifest through lines of rainbow colour, as if soft sculptures are stitched into the landscape. Through narration Yarrenyty Arltere's male art workers lay bare their personal and community histories, and in turn emphasise the transformational quality of their art centre and practice. 'Petrol been wasting all our lives' (2017) tells the origin story of their Learning and Art Centre, created as a community-led response to chronic social issues in 2000.⁴ It followed in the self-determination and re-empowerment that established the town camp movement, and consequently Yarrenyty Arltere (Larapinta Valley Town Camp) in 1978. This film reflects on the past to celebrate the present;

"When you sniff you get power. You see things coming to you"

"That Todd River, it was flowing with grog, that river. Grog, no jobs, fighting, nothing. So we made a camping place, another home, Learning Centre and Art Centre."

"We made this place for the sniffers, to help them and for us too. A home away from the things that still worry us. We still have this place, we're not ashamed to tell our story. We are proud because we looked to each other to work it all out."⁵

It's important to note, at this point, that artistic practice *did not* only begin with the establishment of the centre. In fact the opposite is true, existing artistic practice was the impetus for the centre. As Bell notes; "Aboriginal Art foreshadowed the establishment of community art centres".⁶

Dealing with similar themes, 'The Meeting Place' (2019), sees Rubuntja's black and white ink drawings projected onto a giant screen, with animated rolling ranges surrounding a simplified

⁴ C. Ebatarinja, D. Sharpe, M. Rubuntja, M. Petrick, T. Inkamala, 'Yarrenyty Arltere Artists' in *Tarnanthi 2019*, N. Cumpston & Patton B (eds) Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2019, p.137

⁵ 'Petrol been wasting all our lives', 2017, short film, Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, Alice Springs

⁶ Bell, R 'Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art is a White Thing!' in Koori Web, 2002, accessed 27 June 2021, <<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html>>

drawing of Caltex. Inkamala sits on the sand in front of the screen, carefully threading one of her sculptures. Their art practices offer an alternative to the accompanying narrations, playfully describing the 24 hour servo as the local nightclub. At least that's how the kids see it;

*"Caltex, we go to the caltex and walk around there. Every night they are wandering around, they just get together - which way are we going to go? I don't know why they started wandering around - they have nothing to do, they do whatever they want. Then they just like to walk around the stars until the morning star comes out and sends them home to bed, to sleep all day and start again at night. They are the back to front kids."*⁷

*"I just wanna do art, that's all, I just don't want to walk around in this town, look like those other people. I got my future, walking with my children. Walking with these soft sculptures."*⁸

Rubuntja, here, consciously uses walking in two different ways. The first is walking around space aimlessly and the second is a metaphoric walking in time, where we walk purposefully into the future, from a present in which the memory of the past is alive. This is a way of thinking that runs very deep in Aboriginal culture and something that Rubuntja and others at the centre return to often in their thinking about the intersection between their art and their lives.

Trudy Inkamala speaks directly to this in narration of 'Old Laddie' (2020). This act is performed out bush and under the guidance of family;

"I walked around with my grandmother, I was really happy looking for bush banana and tobacco. Old laddie knows everything about the bush, we grew up walking around here, long time looking for bush tucker."

Walking into the future

The 21 year show and the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists project as a whole is perhaps best approached in terms of a temporal understanding of walking. The artists themselves hold to this, as a form of cultural wisdom, wisdom that sees beyond the trap of only walking around in space. Their idea is one of time walking, walking with the sculptures in a collaborative, intergenerational and culture-led walking. Art, and the art centre, make this walking possible. If this is sustained, as it has been at Yarrenyty Arltere, then a situation defined by "*grog, no jobs, fighting, nothing*"⁹ is transformed into economic independence and international recognition.

⁷ 'The meeting place', 2019, short film, Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, Alice Springs

⁸ Marlene Rubuntja in conversation with Coby Edgar, Art after hours online, video interview, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and Alice Springs, 11 December 2020

⁹ 'Petrol been wasting all our lives', 2017, short film, Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, Alice Springs

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