Clay Stories : Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia

Education Kit

This education kit includes:
Images of some of the exhibiting artists and their artworks
• Background information on one artist from each of the five featured remote Indigenous communities
• Information regarding technique and/or artist’s art centre
• Information regarding the region from where the artist lives

All information has been sourced directly from the Art Centres and from the artists, in the formation of the exhibition, and most of the information also features in the catalogue ‘Clay Stories – Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia, 2017’ created by Sabbia Gallery

Artists featured in this Education Kit:
Elizabeth Dunn – Ernabella Arts, APY Lands
Ellarose Savage – Erub Arts, Darnley Island, Torres Strait
Nephi Denham – Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre, Cardwell
Judith Pungkarta Inkamala – Hermannsburg Potters, Central Desert
Jock Puautjimi – Tiwi Design, Bathurst Island

Exhibition & Education Kit has been created by Sabbia Gallery, Sydney
Images & information courtesy of Sabbia Gallery & the participating Art Centres

This exhibition features contemporary works of art by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from five remote communities in Australia. The exhibition allows students to experience the diversity of clay as a medium, and study it within the context of how Indigenous artists are using the versatility of the material to express themselves artistically and culturally. This is an area of Indigenous arts that have previously not been widely explored. All artists and art centres face limitations due their remoteness, and it is a testament to the Art Centre Managers that they have been able to help facilitate this exhibition.
Ernabella — APY Lands, South Australia

Elizabeth Dunn is from Ernabella, one of the oldest Indigenous art centres. She has been working in clay since 2015 and continues on the strong tradition of those that came before her. Her story or ‘Tjukurpa’ (dreaming/cultural stories and law) is of bush tomatoes.

She says “From the very start I have drawn my kampurara tjukurpa in clay. Kampurara are bush tomatoes, which in the old times were one of the main foods for Anangu. Today sometimes we still go out and collect them but not like we did before. Our country has been changed by cattle and weeds like buffel grass, so we can’t find all the old foods like we once did. I’ll keep telling the kampurara story in my work though, that keeps the stories, songs and dances about these important foods alive and strong.”

Bush Tomato (Kampurara) - are closely related to the tomato & eggplant, and are a low lying shrub that benefits from fire. They have a strong flavour and smell when ripe, and are found in the drier areas of central Australia. Over 100 species, only six are known to be edible. Rich in minerals, potassium & Vitamin C.

Did you know: Sgraffito is a technique used in ceramics to decorate the outside of the vessel or object. Contrasting layers of slip or glaze colours are applied to an unfired ceramic body, and then implements are used to scratch the surface, so as to reveal parts of the underlying layer. The object is then fired to set the glaze.

Kampurara Bowl by Elizabeth Dunn, 2017, 19 h x 47cm d
Erub Arts – Darnley Island, Torres Strait

Ellarose Savage is from the Torres Strait and lives on Darnley Island. Her people have a long history of seafaring and trading with Melanesians, Pacific Islanders, the Malays & Aboriginal neighbours. This has resulted in a rich history of culture.

Erub Arts is the only group that is wood firing their clay, and Ellarose often incorporates ghost net weaving within her work. Carving is especially important part of decorating the clay also, as it references designs used traditionally on canoes, carved stones, weapons & dancing costumes.

She says “I love all that lives in and under the water, the waves, the grace and beauty of this environment inspires me. When I am in the water swimming and diving I feel complete. My work expresses my relationship with the sea as I explore the links between people’s surroundings, objects and our culture.”

Ghost Net Weaving started in Erub in 2010 as an indigenous, non-indigenous art form. This collaboration is an important part of the Ghost Net and the ethos behind the movement. The collaborative works have been shown all over the world. They highlight the dangers of man’s impact on the sea and the importance of looking after the sea and its creatures. Collecting scraps of fisherman’s nets washed up on the island, Ghost Nets are woven into huge installations of sea creatures, most of which suffer the devastation of discarded nets.

Did you know:
Torres Strait and Mer (Murray Island) is famous for Eddie Mabo’s landmark court case which established that prior to English settlement the Indigenous people of that area had a form of land ownership. Previously Australia was deemed ‘Terra Nullius’ – No mans land, which gave the English settlers the ability to take the land that did not belong to them. This court case acts as a precedent in subsequent land rights cases across Australia.
Nephi Denham is a Girramay Traditional Owner of the North Murray Area. He is a speaker of language and currently lives in Tully. Nephi has been working with Girringun for several years now and has a wonderful grasp of form and line. He loves to work with his hands and has nurtured his creative talents over time, moving between painting, printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture. Nephi’s work reflects his Aboriginal heritage, traditional stories and the environment in which he lives.

“Doing art is a part of who I am. It has allowed me to learn and to gain knowledge and cultural understanding. Younger people often ask me about what I do and I pass on my knowledge when I can. It makes me feel good to see my work when it is finished. We don’t use dots here and I stay with painting patterns like diamonds and lines to show my culture. I like working with ceramics - it is different to making traditional tools, and easy to work with.” Nephi Denham, 2017

Did you know:
Cardwell, on Girramay country features one of the first Aboriginal art installations in North Queensland. Commissioned by the Cassowary Coast Regional Council after Category 5 Storm Cyclone Yasi in 2011, these figures created by Eileen Tep and Charlotte Beeron have become an important statement about Rainforest Aboriginal Culture in the region and an icon for tourism. Can you think of any other ‘big’ icons that mark other Australian towns that were created by Aboriginal people?

Making Fire: Girringun Artists are among the most recent art centres to make their mark in clay. Their Bagu and Jiman sculptures have been a highlight of Queensland Indigenous art production over the past decade. The human-like Bagu forms relate to an ancestral spirit whose eyes are seen in shooting stars. Traditional wooden fire boards would be made in this form and fire drills would often be rubbed in the figure’s eyes. Wooden Jiman (fire sticks) are often included with the clay Bagu to reassert the importance of the original objects.

Bruce Johnson-McLean, QAGOMA Curator of Indigenous Australian Art
Judith Pungkarta Inkamala was born in Hermannsburg and follows in a rich traditional of art from her community, made famous by watercolour artist Albert Namatjira. She says “I remember people painting watercolours on paper. I was a little girl. After school we would go around, visiting the artists. There were a lot of people painting then. I was friends with Gillian Namatjira, Albert’s grand-daughter. We went to school together. I know, I saw, I was born here, I grew up here, I remember Namatjira, that’s why I paint on my pots.”

Did you know: Ntaria (Hermannsburg) the small community some 100 kilometres west of Alice Springs. In the early 1970s a small pottery studio was established where local young men Nahasson Ungwanaka and Joseph Rontji modelled figures from locally sourced clay. (3) In the 1990s, as a senior leader, Ungwanaka invited well-known potter Naomi Sharp to teach pottery to the community. Soon a strong group of women potters grew and today this group of women are known as the Hermannsburg Potters. Bruce Johnson-McLean

Albert Namatjira: Albert (Elea) Namatjira was born in 1902 at Hermannsburg (Ntaria) to Namatjira and his wife Ljukuta. He possessed a keen interest in learning traditional European watercolour techniques when in 1932 & 1934 artists Rex Battarbee and John Gardner visited Hermannsburg on painting trips. Although already a skilled maker of traditional artefacts featuring poker worked markings, painting land-scapes in watercolours held his interest. He was a very successful selling artist and won many awards and accolades, however persistent racism and discrimination impacted his quality of life and self determination. Courtesy of www.hermannsburgpotters.com.au
Jock Puautjimi: “I was a good painter when I was a little boy. Everyone would see that small pole, we all have different shapes and people could see the pole design and say, ‘This belongs to Gabriel’. It’s like teaching – the design has meaning, like body painting when someone dies. My designs are father’s land – red, white, black, yellow. Red represents the sun and because the yellow turns red after burning it is a bit the same. My totem is sun and dance is dingo.”

**Tiwi Design** is one of the oldest and most artistically diverse art centres in Australia. A characteristic element found in Tiwi art is the geometric abstract designs relating to sacred or significant sites and seasonal changes. Geometric abstraction is the basis for the shapes of traditional carvings such as **pukumani poles** used in burial ceremonies as well as basic imagery on barks and more recently, on fabric, paper, pottery, ceramics, canvas and jewellery. Abstract pattern give the works a unique formalised quality but also allows for strong personal interpretation.

Tiwi Design has become an intrinsic part of the Aboriginal art and craft industry in Australia. The organisation continues to support traditional and contemporary art practice, working with highly skilled artists to express their culture.

**Did you know:**

The **Pukumani** ceremony occurs approximately six months after the deceased has been buried. The performance of this ceremony ensures that the spirit of the deceased, the ‘mobiditi’, goes from the living world into the spirit world. Prior to the ceremony, in laws are commissioned to carve tall totemic poles. These are placed around the burial site during the ceremony. These poles symbolise the status and prestige of the deceased. The Pukumani ceremony allows Tiwi full expression of their grief. It is a public ceremony and provides a forum for artistic expression through song, dance, sculpture and body painting.

Courtesy of www.tiwidesigns.com
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Information has been sourced directly from the artists with assistance from the art centres that represent them.

These include:

Ernabella Arts, APY Lands
www.ernabellarts.com.au

Erub Arts, Darnley Island, Torres Strait
www.erubarts.com.au

Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre, Cardwell
www.art.girringun.com.au

Hermannsburg Potters, Central Desert
www.hermannsburgpotters.com.au

Tiwi Design, Bathurst Island
www.tiwidesigns.com

Catalogue essay was provided by Bruce Johnson-McLean
QAGOMA Curator of Indigenous Australian Art

Clay Stories is an initiative of Sabbia Gallery Sydney and the Remote Ceramics Community Network (RCCN).

More information about the exhibition, its touring schedule, the twenty-two exhibiting artists and five art centres can be found on www.claystories.com.au