



Twinned and *Twined*: Karen Mills and Robyn Djunginy

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A MODEST, LIGHT-FILLED SPACE in Sydney's Kings Cross is home to The Cross Art Projects, started by director Jo Holder in 2003 to facilitate conversations between artists, curators, and the wider community. In July-September 2010, the gallery hosted *Twined: Weaving and Abstraction*, beginning a series of dialogues between Australian Indigenous artists around the practice and meaning of weaving. The exhibition was curated by Fiona MacDonald and featured artists Robyn Djunginy and Karen Mills.

Djunginy was born in 1947 in the remote Arnhem Land town of Ramingining, where she has lived all her life. From a family of respected artists, she was raised in the region's renowned painting and weaving traditions. Mills is a Darwin-based artist and curator with a growing reputation. She was born in Katherine, Northern Territory in 1960, but was adopted by a non-Indigenous school teacher and brought up in South Australia. She traces her fascination with weaving back to her adoptive mother's knitting as well as the Aboriginal heritage she began to explore when she returned to the Northern Territory as an adult. In 2006 Mills was the recipient of the inaugural Wenten Rubuntja Fellowship, which took her to New York, where her passion for abstraction was inspired by the likes of Pollock, Rothko and Serra. As a contemporary artist and a modern Indigenous woman, Mills's practice thus draws on a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous high art and craft traditions.

Djunginy is best known for her distinctive woven bottle sculptures. According to anthropologist Louise Hamby, Djunginy's bottles reference a water site¹ and a honey spirit² associated with the artist's mother's dreaming. Indigenous curator Djon Mundine tells a more prosaic creation story. It all started one day in 1983 when Mundine, then coordinator of Ramingining's Bula'bula Arts Centre, suggested to Djunginy that she encase a discarded gin bottle in weaving, Chianti-style.³ The result transcended the bottle altogether. Recognising the compelling sculptural quality of Djunginy's bottles, Mundine selected them for exhibition at Melbourne's Ewing & George Paton Gallery in the same year.⁴ Subsequently featured in the 1998 Sydney Biennale, Djunginy's idiosyncratic bottles became an important

catalyst for the recognition of Indigenous weaving as contemporary art, and also played a seminal role in the development of innovations in experimental fibre sculpture that have been much celebrated in recent years. Although Ramingining is a proudly 'dry' (alcohol-free) community, the darker side of the seemingly whimsical bottles is impossible to ignore, but above all they highlight the dynamic and adaptable nature of Aboriginal art and tradition.

Made using the local twining technique, Djunginy's early bottle sculptures, with their slim, elegant shapes and tonal colours produced by plant dyes, were aptly compared with Giorgio Morandi paintings by Mundine.⁵ However, as the pieces in this exhibition showed, in recent years she has favoured the more structural coiling technique, introduced to Arnhem Land by missionaries from the south. With a pronounced bulbous, somewhat conical shape, these bigger bottles, ringed with bands of yellow, black and red (much like their predecessors), are more like over-ripe fruit or bulging bee hives.

About a decade after creating her first woven bottle, Djunginy began rendering her signature forms in ochre on canvas. More akin to her early sculptures than their recent variants, Djunginy's painted bottles are long, straight, and streamlined, and appear to float on the canvas in wayward rows. They are evocative forms, with a wonderful quality often observed in the signature styles of the Western Desert and the Kimberleys: the visual lucidity of an image that reads in both profile and aerial perspective. *Six Bottles* and *Twelve Red and Black Bottles* are as many canoes, their slender and softly curved forms drifting in the shimmering *rarrk* (fine hatching). Associated with spiritual power and water, the traditional and distinctive hatching technique of Arnhem Land is also suggestive of a woven surface, perfectly translating the vessels into two dimensions. Sometimes the bands of hatching, in alternating ochre colours, echoing the rings that encircle their woven counterparts, run through the painted bottles unbroken; at other times they are displaced by them, like light refracted by glass. The dynamic shimmering of the *rarrk* creates an impression of constant movement and fluidity.



This quality also flows through Mills's paintings of string bags. With their loosely looped weave, swaying, fulsome forms and wiggly, long straps, they appear to float on water and drift off the edges of their small canvases. Like Djunginy, Mills has been painting her subject, the string bag, for many years, often in serial format. Two series of paintings were included in this exhibition. In the past Mills has focused exclusively on the weave, filling the picture plane with loops and voids, but in recent years she has put more of the bag on the canvas, though it still cannot be fully contained. The dynamic interplay of positive and negative space that animates her paintings has shifted somewhat from the weave to the strap, a powerful swathe of red or black in an otherwise white-ish field, as it carves its course across the ground.

Like Djunginy's bottle/boat vessels, from above Mills's bags are transformed. With their figurative forms truncated, they become abstractions of curved and looping lines: land traversed by great sweeping rivers and curling tributaries; contour maps, contoured planes. The impasto weave and stuck-on straps physically form a terrain



P30: *Twined: Weaving and Abstraction*, installation views, The Cross Arts Projects, Sydney, with (left) work by Robyn Djunginy and (right, foreground) work by Karen Mills. Images courtesy the artists and Cross Art Projects.

P31: 1/ 2/ Fiona MacDonald, *Twining – Karen Mills*, 2011, woven inkjet prints, 40 x 60cm; shown in the exhibition's second version, at 24HR NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, 2011. Image courtesy the artist.

2/ Fiona MacDonald, *Twining – Robyn Djunginy*, 2011, woven inkjet prints, 50 x 40cm; shown in the exhibition's second version, at 24HR NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, 2011. Image courtesy the artist.

3/ Karen Mills, *Untitled*, 2011, mixed media on linen, 90 x 80cm; showing in the solo exhibition *texere – to weave*, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

embodying the stories and connections inscribed upon it. The land is not only embodied but also embedded in these deceptively simple paintings. The blue-ish-white that dominates Mills's paintings all but conceals the under-layers of vibrant ochres. Revealed where they wrap around the edges of the canvasses, these layers, for Mills, ground her work physically and spiritually.

Like markings on sand or skin, weaving encodes cultural knowledge and delineates identity. In traditional cultures around the world weaving is recognised as a vital means by which culture is handed down and social cohesion is maintained, and as an eloquent metaphor of this process. Not only practical containers and devices, bags, baskets, fishing nets and traps, even woven bottles also hold stories which contain important cultural knowledge which is transmitted together with the weaving techniques essential for physical and cultural survival.

The two artists featured in *Twined* may have come to weaving and painting from very different angles, however this

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was not the first time their threads had crossed. In 2007, Karen Mills was curatorial mentoree on the landmark exhibition *Re-Coil: Change and Exchange in Coiled Fibre Art*, which was curated by Margie West and included the work of Robyn Djunginy (see related article, AMA # 217, March 2009). Following on from *Twined* there are plans to bring together more artists from *Re-Coil* in future weaving 'conversations'. As the dialogue continues, there will be increased emphasis on the process of weaving (whether in pandanus or in paint) through the incorporation of photos of the artists at work. Curator and artist Fiona MacDonald, who curated and also designed the poster for this show, is well-known for her powerful woven images and bags, which often combine historic photographs and paintings of Indigenous people and colonists. For the second iteration of the *Twined* conversation, recently staged at Darwin's 24HR Art, MacDonald's own work was included, drawing together the practices of the artists in cross-woven images. This added element not only highlighted the shared process of creation, but also enhanced the overall depth and coherence of the conversation. 

1. Louise Hamby, 'Robyn Djunginy', in Brian Parkes (ed.), *Woven Forms: Contemporary Basket Making in Australia*, exhibition catalogue, Object: Australian Centre for Craft and Design, Sydney, 2005, p. 57.
2. Louise Hamby and Doreen Mellor, 'Fibre-work and Textiles', in Sylvia Kleinert and Margot Neale (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Culture*, Oxford University Press, Australia and New Zealand, 2000, p. 371.
3. Djon Mundine, 'Margaret Robyn Djunginy', *Every Day*, Biennale of Sydney catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, p.84.
4. Mundine, 1998: p. 84.
5. Mundine, 1998: p. 84.

Twined: Weaving and Abstraction, Robyn Djunginy and Karen Mills, curated by Fiona MacDonald, showed at The Cross Art Projects, Kings Cross, Sydney, from 24 July to 30 September 2010. The project's second iteration was shown at 24Hr Art, the NT Centre for Contemporary Art, from 11 February to 19 March 2011, featuring Robyn Djunginy, Karen Mills and Debra Dawes, with documentation by Fiona MacDonald, and co-curated by Fiona MacDonald and Karen Mills. A new series of related works by Karen Mills, *texere – to weave*, is showing at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 5 April to 6 May 2011.

Stella Gray studies art history and works at Melbourne University's Grainger Museum. She recently undertook an internship project based on The Melbourne Museum's collection of Indigenous baskets.

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