

FULL CIRCLE - Judy Holding's Plastic Dilly Bags

One hundred years ago at Manunka Mission on the Murray River, a Missionary, Gretta Matthews was taught the technique of coiled bundle basket making using sedge grass by Ngarrindjeri women from the lower Murray riverland region. Matthews missionary work led her to Goulburn Island off the coast of Arnhemland where using pandanus fibre, she introduced the technique to the local Maung people. From there the technique of coiled bundle weaving travelled along the network of Methodist missions and customary trade routes via the Liverpool River and was adopted in Maningrida and Oenpelli and throughout Arnhemland including the area we now know as Kakadu. Victorian artist, Judy Holding has close ties with Kakadu and has been visiting and working in the area regularly for nearly twenty five years. It was there some fifteen years ago, her friend, Jessie Alderson, a Murrumburr woman and traditional owner of Kakadu taught Holding this same weaving. Last year Holding attended a workshop near her home in Victoria, at Linden Contemporary Art Centre in St Kilda run by the renowned Ngarrindjeri weaver, Yvonne Koolmatrie and revised her technique. In learning from these two women; Jessie Alderson and Yvonne Koolmatrie, Judy Holding had experienced the full circle of coiled bundle weaving.

Holding refers to the small bags she makes as dilly bags, although it is rare to find dilly bags made in the coiled bundle technique. The conical bags that early missionaries gave the name "dilly bags" are traditionally made from pandanus fibre by a quite different technique, twined weaving. Rock art shelters in Kakadu show human figures from the Dynamic period with woven dilly bags revealing that the making of conical shaped bags has been continuous for at least twenty thousand years. It is these twined weave dilly bags which are used for carrying bush food back to camp. They may be loosely open woven or densely woven depending on their use; dilly bags for carrying bush honey are tightly woven and lined with resin. The sacred or ceremonial dilly bag sometimes called a biting bag from its use in mens ceremonies is always made in the traditional twined weave mode and is often painted in ochre and has feathers woven into it.

The introduced technique of coiled bundle weaving is usually reserved for baskets of various shapes and sizes from Moses baskets to shopping baskets, table mats and wall hangings intended for sale to the **Balander**.# It is prevalent right across Northern Australia with particularly fine examples being made at Peppimenarti and Belyuen to the west of Darwin. Recently it has been taken up in desert communities using wool, emu feathers and dried desert grasses. Some writers on fibre craft dispute the term "weaving" for the the coiled bundle technique and argue that it is closer to sewing than weaving involving as it does the buttonhole stitch or the half hitch knot.

During the early 1980s it was believed the technique had died out amongst the Ngarrindjeri, however in 1982 Yvonne Koolmatrie learnt it from the late Dorothy Kartinyeri. Koolmatrie went on to study examples in the SA Museum and honed her skills conducting workshops in the Riverland region. Not only has there been a resurgence of interest in the technique, the elegant and austere sculptural qualities of Koolmatrie's work and her innovative applications have positioned it prominently as high art.

By the time that she attended the weaving workshop with Koolmatrie last year, Judy Holding knew she wanted to do coiled bundle weaving with plastic. The particular qualities of plastic appealed to Holding and it was a material already in her repertoire.

In her recent exhibition, **Weathers of the Mind**, Holding had made large open “string” bags by crocheting with recycled plastic bread wrappers. She was interested in referring to food gathering by Aboriginal women both in the bush and the town, and her own role as wife and mother and food shopper. Out bush, women collect food and wrap it in leaves and paperbark and put it in a dilly bag to carry home, in town they go to the shop and the supermarket, and the food is wrapped in plastic and put in a plastic carry bag. Holding does the same herself and like all of us she ends up with a lot of these plastic carry bags and is always looking for a use for so much plastic. Wastefulness plays on the mind.

To weave with plastic seemed a clear and simple response and surely it would be easier to work with than sedge grass and pandanus, it was easy to find, all the women she knew including herself had at least a year's supply, it didn't need dying, it already came in a dizzying array of colours and shades depending on where you shopped. Holding found to her surprise that the technique was intractable and that unless she followed the method of the fibre weavers and split the strands laboriously by cutting the plastic bags into thin strips, it was not possible to maintain the tension with the thumb and the weaving would not hold its shape. The first baskets she made were lumpy and bumpy but after more practice and refinement she could produce a tight, taut, regular coil and a well shaped basket. Holding experimented with larger baskets but was dissatisfied with how plasticky they looked; eventually she found that these small ones were just right. As always it is a balance between the material, the technique and the scale of the work that results in an aesthetically pleasing object. Holding's dilly bags are soft and squishy and she imagines we might use them as reticules to carry small personal items. Pandanus and sedge produces a pliable but essentially rigid basket, however Aboriginal women also make some soft baskets from unravelling woollen cloth and these are often used as personal dilly bags.

In places where pandanus is ubiquitous, plastic is a luxury and in coastal communities great use is made of bits of nylon rope found on the seashore, it is unravelled and respun into string and twine then woven into dilly bags that are used for keeping shellfish as the saltwater won't rot it. Holding was recently in Darwin and was told by Margie West, curator of Indigenous Art at the MAGNT that at the end of The Wet this year after the big tides had deposited the beach wash up, large quantities of matted black nylon rope were found and had been pounced on by the women in one coastal community, patiently untangled and unravelled and immediately turned into an array of useful and durable bags. Holding has experimented with unravelling nylon rope but found it very resistant, it reclaims its original twists too willingly; perhaps it needs to be broken down and softened, seasoned by the seawater and the tides.

All the materials Holding uses are recycled, and all are collected or as we would say, kept or saved by herself, her family and friends. And regional differences are recognised and valued, her mother in Boort supplies her with good blues and greens, another friend has access to browns, pinks and the occasional greys and mauves. Someone else has even found rare black and white striped ones. Sometimes there are crumbs and cash register docketts left in them.

They have all been filled and emptied and scrunched up then flattened out for cutting up. It is part of the finished texture of the work that they have all been used, touched and marked by somebody the artist knows, leaving traces of history in their creases. The social and anecdotal process of gathering and sorting the materials is an integral aspect to the work and connects the artist to her female community.

The focus of Holding's work is the landscape of Kakadu and she has become obsessed by the place, its people and especially its extreme weather cycle. Settler society in the NT distinguishes two main seasons The Wet and The Dry, a third less distinct, The Build Up which precedes The Wet and an even less distinct one after The Wet, known as The Let Down. Aboriginal people in Kakadu describe six distinct seasons, not arbitrary sequences of dates but times when things happen and change in a predictable sequence. Holding has developed her own palette of colours to depict the seasons in one yearly cycle or **nagudji andjeuk** which means literally 'one rain', and she brings her seasonal knowledge to the making of the dilly bags.

The cycle starts in October with –

Gunumeleng – the first storms, the big build up of clouds after the clear skies of the dry, the air is thick heavy and pregnant with rain, all greys and blues.

Gudjeuk- the wet season proper, the monsoon season . The rain sheets down in torrents, gathers and pours off the escarpment and spreads across the floodplains. Overnight everything seems to turn into a myriad of a brilliant almost fluorescent greens, and sings with sharp flashes of hot pink flowering plants.

Banggerreng – the last rains, the days of flooding soaking rain are over and the ground is beginning to dry out the green is not as bright and an intermittent sensation, the time of **namadjalowolmi**, the knock-em-down winds that flatten the fully grown spear grass, first coming from one direction then from the other .

Yekke- the early dry, when the mornings are cool and misty, heavy with dew but the days are still very sunny later on. The white and mauves are cool but tempered by the warm yellows.

Wurrngeng- the cold weather time when the skies at night are crystal clear and the stars are brilliant, all blues and silver and according to legend the Milky Way shows itself as a saltwater creek in the sky.

Gurrung- the hot weather, windless days, stillness and relentless searing heat , the land is dormant but almost on fire; reds, oranges and yellows.

Each season contains the remnants of the previous and the presaging of the next, always in flux, it is this transition between the extremes of the season that fascinates Holding. She has charted in colour modalities the passage between the wettest and greenest and the hottest and reddest by way of the whites, greys, blues, browns, pinks and yellows. Colour is not the sole seasonal signifier; the dilly bags for the wettest seasons are closed in at the top, contracted with the cold to keep the rain out and the insides dry , while the ones for the hottest times have expanded in the heat and are fully open to allow more air to circulate, keeping the interior cooler and maximising the shade they could provide.

Considering they are made of plastic, the dilly bags are surprisingly suggestive of the organic; loose threads and errant strips escaping from the coils are like foliage sprouting and budding, or bark drying and being shed. For Holding utility is not their purpose, there is pleasure in the bands of colour and the sedimentary patterning and the crosshatching of coloured thread joining each layer. These tiny vessels, gorgeously striped rain gauges serve as a reliquary of the passage of the **Bininj** seasons from one rain to the next.

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Balander/Balanda means foreigner, outsider, white person in Arnhemland, it is a borrowed word from the Macassans who used it for Hollander or Dutchman meaning White man.

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In 1997 she returned to Melbourne after a decade living in the Northern Territory, and like Judy Holding she regularly returns to the Top End.