

WUN-GA-LI NGURRAMBAA WINANGA-LI

By Debbie Taylor-Worley

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Winanga-Li is a Gamilaraay word meaning 'to hear, to listen, to know, to think and to remember'. In the space I find myself, where contact with community members and Elders has been restricted, I have found that listening to the nature of Country, and trusting the guidance of Ancestors and intuition, has facilitated learning.

Debbie Taylor-Worley

An extensive exploration of the histories of the Gamilaraay peoples, and the colonisers who crossed them, is unquestionably evident throughout the remarkable works of art created by Gamilaraay woman, Debbie Taylor-Worley. As a multidisciplinary artist and educator predominantly working with clay, earth and textiles, Taylor-Worley is determined to unite – culturally and spiritually – with the place of her ancestors.

Taylor-Worley's intangible gravitation toward Gamilaraay tree carvings, or dendroglyphs, has played a significant role in her artistic journey. Ancient Gamilaraay motifs carved into trees were once used to signify ceremonial rituals, such as initiations and burials, and also acted as boundary markers and notifications to other clan groups. In recent years, the artist has continued these ancient Gamilaraay carving techniques by engraving traditional motifs into her ceramic work; as a consequence, serendipitously re-enacting the movements of her ancestors.

For this exhibition, Taylor-Worley's focus is the colonial frontier marked between and crossed by wadjin (white women) and yinarr (Gamilaraay women). Taylor-Worley has created earth-based artworks while spending precious time upon her extraordinary

ancestral lands, places that many of us may know as Mehi River, Yarrie Lake, Nundle Creek and the magical point of confluence at the Barwon and Namoi Rivers. For countless First Nations people, to be on Country is to become Country, and to continue burning a fire that was ignited by our ancestors 120,000 years ago. Taylor-Worley continues the traditions of her ancestors by creating markings upon her homelands. And now, as she evolves as an artist, she skilfully adapts these markings to conceptually and intuitively create her own compositions. These new instinctively guided forms represent the recognition, presence and complexities of female Gamilaraay empowerment. In this body of work, she celebrates the enduring strength of all of the women in her family. Though once disempowered, they live today as conveyers of both colonist and Aboriginal pasts. Confronting this complex history is a situation that many First Nations people continue to work through.

Taylor-Worley is an alumnus of the prestigious Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA) at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Her practice commits to the continuation of her culture through ancient storytelling and by using natural



materials that are connected to the lands of the Gamilaraay. These threads of intergenerational wisdom are tools that she now uses to educate the next generation of CAIA students, as she completes her Doctor of Visual Arts, and lectures for the degree where she found her fire, many years ago.

Taylor-Worley's textile works of colonial-style dresses, based on patterns from the 1890s, reference her European lineage. She juxtaposes these colonial garments with Indigenous histories by covering them in ochre. She confronts her ancestors by ingeniously collaborating with her daughters, who wear the garments as fearless, young women, reinforcing their connections to land, culture and Gamilaraay waterways.

Taylor-Worley's multifaceted, organic canvas works mimic her land. Each canvas is washed in waterways on Country and then prepared on the ground with ochre, or developed as a tree rubbing, featuring layers of pressed colour and natural pigment. Her techniques ensure that the artist is connected to her cultural identity at all times. These actions also fulfil Taylor-Worley's Gamilaraay responsibilities to water: as she works with ochre and water, she collects plant fibres from along the water's edge, on river banks

and throughout her vast lands. Taylor-Worley creates string from her gathered plant material, and weaves this string into vessel forms with her daughters. These timeless and mediative rituals are essential aspects of Taylor-Worley's journey with her family; they are a reconnection.

The voyage home to create this remarkable body of work has been lovingly documented in an accompanying video for the exhibition, produced by the artist's nephew, Jackson Worley. Through Jackson's exquisite documentary, we can identify the community that the artist has shared with us; the community of the artist, her daughters, her nephew, the Gamilaraay land and all ancestors who lived upon it. Her responsive work builds on the synthesis of past and present, cultural respect and collaboration. Taylor-Worley communicates with her Country, and allows her intuition to lead her ideas. This provides her with a greater understanding of herself and her practice. As she guides her young community, ethically and following the protocols of the land where she works, Taylor-Worley understands her responsibilities to all First Nations people of our future.

By Shannon Brett

Cover image: *When the creek flows*, by Debbie Taylor-Worley, 2021

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Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.



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