

I am a Toronto-based ceramic artist and arts journalist. I am also someone who has invested a great deal of time and academia in dissecting society's relationships with "the other" with respect to art and artistic expression. With that in mind, I was determined to seek out the ever-growing Aboriginal ceramics communities in Australia. This past fall I spent three months in residency in Sydney, and a week in November in the Northern Territory. I not only saw the sights and hiked the awe-inspiring trails, but I spent quality time with the Hermannsburg Potters just north of Alice Springs in Central Australia. Unfortunately, logistics prevented me from visiting the Ernabella Arts Centre and artists Derek Thompson and Tjimpura Williams whom I had met at the Big Pot Factory in Jingdezhen, China in 2013. While in Alice Springs, I found out that Thompson's work was featured in a two-person show at the Art Gallery of South Australia as part of Tarnanthi, the biennial festival of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. I managed a side-trip to Adelaide on my way back from the Northern Territory to experience Tarnanthi. I came full-circle when I travelled to Canberra to see *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* at the National Museum of Australia and came face to face with the vessel that I had photographed Thompson making in China. Global synchronicity in the ceramics community never ceases to amaze me. Thompson is just one of the twenty-two Aboriginal ceramic artists who is showcased in the currently touring exhibition, *Clay Stories: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia*.

*Clay Stories* is a ground-breaking exhibition on many levels. Five different Anangu (Aboriginal) arts centres representing countless different language groups are represented: seven Ernabella Arts Centre artists from the APY Lands in South Australia; two Erub Arts Centre artists from the Torres Strait; seven Girringun artists from Far North Queensland; five Hermannsburg Ceramics Centre artists from the Central District of the Northern Territory; and one Tiwi artist from Bathurst Island. The sheer geography of the lands represented by these artists is awe-inspiring. The art produced in each centre has a specific 'style' or aesthetic way of making, and each centre's work varies radically from the others. Atypically, the written statements in the exhibition catalogue and on the didactics displayed in the show are in the artists' own voices. This breaks convention where Aboriginal artists had up until this point been filtered through the curator's lens. Apparent in the subtext of the artists'

# Clay Stories

Written by Heidi McKenzie



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statements is the shared deep appreciation and respect for land, nature, and cultural heritage. *Clay Stories* has only just begun its own journey. The vastness of the geography of the homelands of the artists is mirrored in the expansive and ambitious touring schedule planned over the next two-and-a-half-years as the exhibition criss-crosses the country to no fewer than six venues.

*Clay Stories* is a project of the Sydney-based Sabbia Gallery and the Remote Communities Ceramic Network (RCCN) which had its start at the 2002 Australian Ceramics Triennale in Brisbane. The project arose from the recognition that exhibitions of Aboriginal ceramic artists had been sporadic at best, and the public has had extremely limited access to their work. That is not to diminish the astonishing work that several curators have undertaken over the last decade to mount landmark Aboriginal ceramics exhibitions such as *Earthworks* in 2008, *Two communities: the language of clay* in Canberra in 2011, and the Ernabella Arts Centre's representation at the last Australian Ceramics Triennale in Canberra in 2015. While workshops were often spawned from these exhibitions, artists did not have access to one another's work, nor to one another in any kind of organized fashion. According to the *Clay Stories* curator Anna Grigson of Sabbia Gallery, there was a larger sense on the part of the arts professionals that a cohesive and sustainable vision was lacking in the current Aboriginal ceramics scene – a way to bring Aboriginal ceramics to the world stage, and to bring Aboriginal ceramic artists together in viable and ongoing ways.<sup>1</sup>

The first iteration of *Clay Stories* took place at Sabbia Gallery in Sydney in the spring of 2016. It was virtually a sold-out show, and on the heels of its success, Grigson curated the expanded, nationally-funded touring exhibition. Its first stop was the JamFactory's satellite venue, Seppeltsfield, in the vineyards of South Australia, just over an hour's drive outside of Adelaide. That's where I caught up with the host curator, Margaret Hancock-Davies, and the exhibition.

I believe it is fair to say that among Westerners, especially foreigners, there is a pervading and lingering stereotyping of Aboriginal painting as typically consisting of 'dot paintings'. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The variety of styles of painting varies from region to region and from artist to artist. Similarly, and I would argue even more

**Vases**, Jock Puautjimi, 2017, wheel thrown and glazed stoneware, tallest: 41.5 x 16 cm.  
Image credit: Heidi McKenzie.



dramatically so, with ceramics. What struck me most about the differing language groups was the diverse ways they chose to express themselves through the medium of clay: from the figurative to totems, from narrative scenic realism to shamanistic abstract representation, from traditionally patterned and conventionally decorative pots to non-functional poles and spears, and sculptural representation. It is impossible to address the work of all 24 artists; however, here are some highlights of each language group's work, organized by arts centre and in no specific order.

### Ernabella APY Lands

Ernabella Arts is Australia's oldest Indigenous art centre. Established in 1948, the centre boasts a roster of more than sixty Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara men and women, aged 16 to 80. Ceramics is the most recent media at the centre, which is also known for its history of batik, weaving, and pokerwork timber wood decoration. Notably, Sabbia Gallery has had a relationship with the ceramic artists at Ernabella Arts since 2011 with the inclusion of Alison Milyika Carroll and the late Carol Williams in the exhibition *Marking Making: Contemporary Australian Ceramics*. The relationship continued from there with two

major exhibitions of up to 15 Ernabella artists in 2014 and 2015, with the 2014 show touring to Canberra for the Australian Ceramics Triennale. Sabbia also represents the Ernabella ceramic artists as part of their stable of artists.

What sets Ernabella Arts apart artistically is their signature use of 'sgraffito', a mark-making technique that involves incised scraping or gouging through colored slips. The artists use clay that they harvest locally from the side of the road after it rains. Unlike its Western/Italian namesake's tradition, the practice grew out of the community's age-old custom of storytelling and drawing with their fingers or a stick in the sand. These artists tell their inherited family story(ies) on their pots with originality and flare. For example, a family's story could be a myth about how something came to be, or the genesis story of a specific animal, and they would pass that story onto their children to retell it in their own way.

Alison Carroll, a veteran of the group who grew up as a child watching other family members and artists work, speaks to the spirit of her community: "Our history stays with us, like a strong old tree it grows, [and] another branch is added. The new branch is supported by the strong trunk. This is Anangu way. This is how we keep going and will do for generations into

*Above Left: Tjwanpa, Rahel Kngwarria Ungwanaka, 2017, hand built terracotta and underglaze, h: 29 cm, d: 25 cm.*  
*Above Right: Boobook Owl, Kurrkurrka, 2017, hand built terracotta and underglaze, h: 24 cm, d: 19 cm.*  
 Hermannsburg installation.  
 Image credit: Heidi McKenzie.

the future.”<sup>2</sup> Two of the artists who are growing ‘new branches’ are Elizabeth Dunn and Lynette Lewis. Astonishingly they have only been working in clay for two years. Both women’s pots boldly display inherent exuberance and pride in homeland and tradition. Dunn’s depiction of bush tomatoes, the *kampurana*, are skillfully executed. Lewis is a third-generation artist who carves the wildlife of her local natural surroundings in her pots. Men took up ceramics after women at Ernabella. Thomas Tjilya, though more senior in years than Dunn and Lewis, has also only had his hands ‘in the mud’ since 2015. I found his pieces to be among the highest caliber and craftsmanship in the exhibition. He works differently from his peers by scratching into the clay before he paints down the underglaze to create an inlay effect. Rupert Jack, an elder and priest, integrates Christian and *Tjukurpa* stories in his work. Derek Thompson came to clay in 2011. Thompson’s family story is the snake story, and his carving of the myth is deft and self-assured. The *Wanampi* bottle-necked vessel is physical evidence of the imprint of a signature form of Janet DeBoos, one of Australia’s leading ceramic artists. DeBoos continues to play a pivotal role in the development of ceramics at Ernabella through her continued mentorship and on-going

material for sculptures. Ghost nets are fishing nets that have been left or lost in the ocean by fishermen. Their ghost net sculptures have achieved international appeal, and the group’s extraordinary underwater sea-world display was featured in this past year’s Tarnanthi at the Art Gallery of South Australia. Unlike the other arts centres who fire with electric kilns or use smoke pits, Erub Arts wood-fire their ceramics once annually – a practice that was introduced by Australian potter Diann Lui in the early 1990s. This is a time and resource intensive community-building activity where the stakes are extremely high for each firing. Erub Arts lost most of the work from its last firing, such is the fickleness of the fire gods.

Ellarose Savage’s ceramics practice at Erub Arts spans fifteen years. Her primary influence is tied to her family’s fisherman roots. The *Zeuber: Waves in the Dark Morning* triptych in *Clay Stories* stood out as abstract sculpture imbued with oceanic tribal-specific patterning. Two of her totemic works also signal her culture’s unique form of expression – with stacked hand-carved ceramics and ghost netting on poles. The other featured Erub artist, Jimmy Thaiday, reinterprets stories by referencing traditional Erub dances, both in his carving and in his figurative work. The curved lines of the patterns

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team artist visits to Ernabella, building bridges between western potters and Aboriginal artists.

### Erub Arts

The vastness of geography and diversity of landscape represented by Erub Arts centre is awe-inspiring. Spanning Cape York at the tip of Queensland and bordered by the Great Barrier Reef to the East and Papua New Guinea to the North, its members represent four tribal groups. What members hold in common is a deep spiritual connection to land, sky, and sea, and a belief that all of nature possesses a soul. The artistic expression of these spiritual beliefs is fashioned through totems and stories that find expression in multiple forms of media. Chiefly, the Erub use ‘ghost nets’ as the raw

he carves are evocative of the movement of the dance, and the figures themselves physically embody the dancers. Curiously, I find that there is something akin to Canada’s West coast Haida First Nations’ carving and imagery in both artists’ works, suggesting a mysterious intercontinental connection between indigenous peoples.

### Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre

The Girringun are rainforest people and the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre represents artists from nine Traditional Owner Groups and these groups cover an area of more than 25,000 square kilometres of Queensland. Of the seven artists in *Clay Stories*, six have 30–50 cm high roughly hewn *bagu* clay figures.

Traditionally, *bagu* are the bodies of the spirit of the 'firesticks'. Their mythical origin tells the story of a fire spirit who throws *jiman* (the pole part of the firestick) across the sky, giving rise to a trail of fire that is reminiscent of shooting stars. *Bagu* with *jiman* used to be made from *mudja* (wild guava tree) and *boogadilla* (milky pine). Today these artists' clay representations of the *bagu* are known internationally. Fire was a very important part of daily life for the old people. It was used for cooking, warmth, making traditional weapons, preserving and for ceremonies. Additionally, fire provided a central point for social interaction and activities. The form of the *bagu* itself is anthropomorphic, based on the shape of a man in spirit design and traditionally decorated with the full palette of ochres. Though possibly perceived as naïve in design to the Westerner's eye, the *bagu* are deeply steeped in tradition and culture with heightened spiritual meaning.

Girringun artists are well-known for their printmaking, weaving and basketry as well as ceramics. Abe Muriata is a self-taught weaver. He cobbled together his visual lexicon from childhood memories and museum specimens of the fine crafted woven cane basket known as *jawan*. Muriata created two such *jawan* out of clay for *Clay Stories*. He sees making these baskets out of new materials as a way of preserving his culture, a resurrection of the old ways: "The work is very fine and I am stubbornly dedicated, making an icon that you don't see any more."<sup>3</sup> The ceramic pieces are a joy to behold, their exuberant patterned colours and fine craftsmanship immediately evoke the old-style fishing baskets.

### Hermannsburg Potters

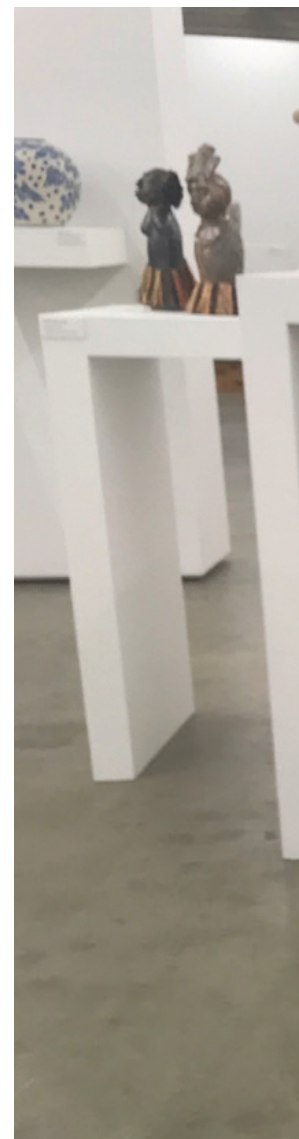
I met and spent a day with the Hermannsburg artists exhibiting in *Clay Stories*. My first impression of their work was that it is similar to 'regular painting', but that turned out to be a naive perspective. To truly appreciate and understand the narrative scenes 'in the round' painting of the coil-built decorative pots these women (and now one man) create, one needs to have some context: this is a small community of approximately 700 people from 37 regional outstations or 'homelands'. Everyone seems to have some connection to the infamous Albert Namatjira (1902–1959) who learned the craft of watercolour painting from Rex Battarbee. Battarbee is the Brit who famously saddled his camel with easel and paints and set about the outback of the MacDonnell ranges in the 1930s, about 130 kilometres west of Alice Springs. Battarbee trained local Aranda community men in the art of watercolour painting. Namatjira not

only mastered the craft, he took it to another level, interpreting landscapes, people, and places in subtle shadings and wild-life point of view that only an Aboriginal artist could see. Judith Inkamala and Anita Ratara are the most senior artists in this small arts centre. They recounted Namatjira's story of learning to paint in the bush with a white man with zeal; both claim direct family links to this internationally renowned artist, who was also famous for being the first Aboriginal (along with his wife) to be granted citizenship of Australia.

The Hermannsburg pots tend to be topped with figurative, often whimsical, lids of people, mammals or birds that resonate with the content of the stories depicted. Rona Rubuntja has been at the pottery for nearly three decades. She is deaf, and yet still manages to communicate with great gusto and assertiveness through hand gestures and the written word. Her pots show the abilities of a seasoned painter and storyteller. Rona's *Kaporylal Day* and *My Pot, My Story, My Family* are 'flat' and characteristically two-dimensional, yet they bely a subtly nuanced complexity of story, context and contemporary consciousness raising with respect to the ongoing struggle of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia for parity and respect. Hayley Coulthard is Anita Ratara's daughter, and in addition to her mother, her cousin, sister and son, she works more-or-less-full-time at the pottery. Ceramics is a family affair, and their work tells the stories of their land and their people, often with a cheeky sense of humour. Coulthard's *Palm Valley into the Night* depicts her homeland and the lands of her ancestors, which I passed through on my way out of town. It is evocative of place, and yet offers a sophisticated account of the Western Aranda appreciation for and relationship to wildlife and wilderness. I love the way the sunset explodes as backdrop and fills the clay canvas.

### Tiwi Design

With more than 100 artists, Tiwi Design on Bathurst Island, founded in 1968, is one of the oldest and most artistically varied art centres in Australia. The Tiwi are well known for their wood block prints and textile design, as well as painting, weaving and, of course, ceramics. The work characteristically employs geometric abstraction and patterns that relate to sacred sites and seasonal change. Jock Puautjimi is a multi-media glass, painter and ceramic artist. His work carries forward his family heritage and his inspiration is closely tied to his ancestral lands. The reds, white, black and yellow symbolize the various stages of the sun's daily



### References

1. Source: author interview with curator Anna Grigson at Sabbia Gallery, November 23, 2017
2. *Clay Stories: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia Touring Exhibition* – Digital Catalogue, 2017-2019, p. 7
3. *Clay Stories: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia Touring Exhibition* – Digital Catalogue, 2017-2019, p.67.

### About the Author

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Above: General installation. Image credit: Heidi McKenzie.  
 Right: Alison Milyika Carroll at work at the Ernabella Arts ceramic studio. Image credit: Ernabella Arts.



journey. The patterns deftly circle his sun totem with strength and a sense of resilience.

Resilience is a pervasive theme in *Clay Stories*; alongside diversity it is the staying power of these people and their culture. I felt privileged to bear witness to this watershed exhibition; however, I look forward to a time when all Aboriginal artists will be simply considered alongside mainstream artists, and we shed our need to highlight their work under distinct banners. That time may be decades in the future, but it is worth aspiring to. As Anna Grigson so aptly yet matter-of-factly commented, “I see no distinction between aboriginal artists and any other artists, they are all contemporary artists.” ■

*Clay Stories: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia* is supported by the Australian Government’s Visions of Australia program. It was exhibited at JamFactory, Seppeltsfield/Adelaide from October 7 to December 10, 2017, and is on view at the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs, Northern Territory from March 2 to April 18, 2018. At the time of writing the following venues were confirmed: Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre, Canberra; the Gladstone Regional Art Gallery in Queensland; and Coffs Harbour Regional Art Gallery in New South Wales. Subsequent details available at [www.claystories.com.au](http://www.claystories.com.au).