



View of the "Furnace Weave" exhibition of Jenni Kemarre Martiniello's work at the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

## FURNACE WEAVE Jenni Kemarre Martiniello

National Art Glass Gallery, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 17 October 2015 – 17 January 2016

FOR Indigenous artists cultural knowledge can be encoded in traditions and objects that have been handed down and interpreted through innumerable generations. Some of Aboriginal artists reinterpret objects and artefacts associated with their heritage and some work in altogether different ways, re-contextualising objects to open up new dialogues. Indigenous artists have explored a multitude of artistic media to express their culture: from the Hermannsburg potters, to the batik printers from Utopia, the multimedia artists of Yirrkala and the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, who wove up a Toyota Landcruiser out of desert grasses. They are masters of pushing the boundaries of technique and aesthetic innovation whilst retaining their cultural integrity.

Jenni Kemarre Martiniello is a Canberra-based contemporary artist of south Arrernte, Chinese and Anglo-Celtic descent. She has



PHOTO: DR TIM BROOK

'Large Green Reeds Eel Trap', 2014, blown glass, 34 x 99 x 34 cm

reinterpreted a number of Indigenous weaving traditions in glass for her latest solo show, "Furnace Weave" at the National Art Glass Gallery in Wagga Wagga, NSW. Martiniello came to the medium as a mid-career artist after working in sculpture, printmaking, textiles and photomedia. She became entranced by the aesthetic possibilities of glass as a medium for cultural expression after undertaking a residency at the Canberra Glassworks in 2008. These works

are a homage to her Indigenous heritage as well as to the history of European glass traditions. Traditional Aboriginal weaving reflects notable cultural diversity across Australia and Martiniello has undertaken extensive research into these techniques that include pandanus-fibre dilly bags from Arnhem Land, coiled baskets from many areas including her grandfather's Arrernte country, exquisite woven-cane bicornual baskets from Queensland and open weave eel

and fish traps. In her current body of work Martiniello is specifically inspired by the traditional weaving techniques from the Ngarinjerri, Kaurna, Gunditjmarra, Arrernte peoples and from north-east Arnhem Land. Their woven objects can be used in a number of ways from holding personal belongings, to gathering food and storage and for carrying babies. They are dyed with browns, yellows and ochres collected from plant roots. For Aboriginal people baskets and other woven objects are not only functional, they can have important ritual, ceremonial and social functions. Their history is also one of adaptation and innovation as new techniques and materials became incorporated over time.

According to Martiniello, 'Aboriginal weaving is the oldest existing weaving practice in the world, and they're just so stunning, and yet they were displayed in museums as if they were dead.' She saw them as a child in the South Australian Museum in Adelaide where she grew up. She reacted to seeing these beautiful objects gathering dust in colonial edifices, such as museums and galleries as if weaving was a dead practice. She sees it as a living, dynamic and spiritual practice and, like her glasswork, as a 'vehicle for cultural survival'.

Martiniello came to prominence in the Aboriginal art world when she won the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2013 with the elegant sculpture *Golden Brown Reeds Fish Trap*. It was the first time a glass artist had won the Award. Martiniello has stated, 'There's something quite nice about using one culture's technique to create objects inspired by another culture's tradition, one that is 10 times as old.' The artist has recently had other successes, including being awarded an Australia Council Fellowship and a Thomas Foundation Artist in Residency at Canberra Glassworks, where she commenced her exploration of Indigenous weaving using blown glass and kiln-forming techniques in 2011.



PHOTO: ADAM MCGRATH

'Large Sargasso Eel Trap', 2015, blown glass, 39 x 119 x 38 cm

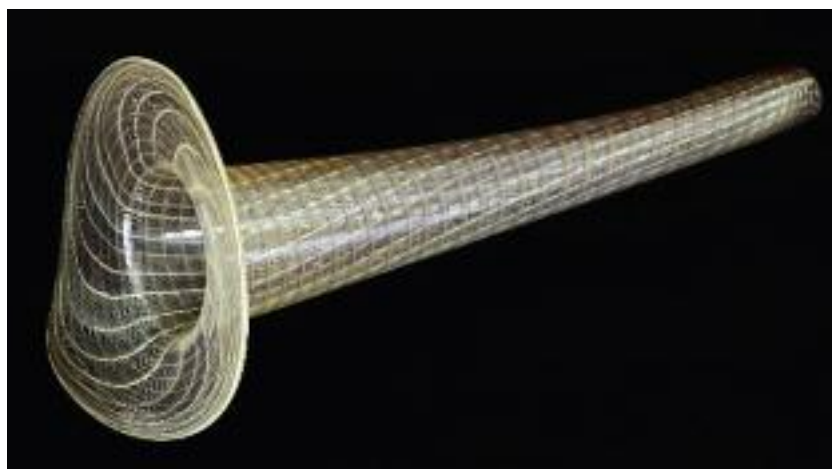


PHOTO: DR TIM BROOK

'Long Flax Eel Trap', 2014, blown glass, 29 x 90 x 29 cm



'Brown Reeds Fish Trap', 2014, blown glass, cane work, 76 x 17 x 18 cm

Although it may appear that the processes of weaving and glass-making are incongruous, opposite even – one hard, brittle and shiny, the other soft, organic and pliable – there are resonances between the media and the objects: their human scale, their transparency, the 'interplay of form and light'. To develop the glass weave techniques employed by Martiniello required substantial research and much experimentation in her studio. She has a dedicated team of skilled assistants who help her to achieve her complex and challenging artistic vision. It took two years of constant experimentation and exploration before the first long eel trap was created out of glass.

The exhibits in "Furnace Weave" were produced between 2012–05. The elegant forms she has created are intensely sculptural and have great presence. Some are subtly coloured and transparent, while others are densely patterned and opaque. The techniques used by Martiniello including single, double and triple, straight and twisted glass canes that mirror the weft and warp of baskets and the intricacy of different weaves. A lot of planning and experimentation was also required to accurately echo the natural and organic colours of the bush palette rather than the brighter and intense colours of the Venetian tradition.

For "Furnace Weave" Martiniello has made bicornual basket forms made from murine pulled from recycled glass that mirror the profusion of native grasses and flowers that occur at certain times of year. The surface of *Bush Flowers Bicornual Basket # 4* is a mass of organic and dynamic movement with delicate green and brown spi-

als, like the stamens of blossoms, floating in between swathes of red and pink fluorescence.

The *Large Sargasso Eel Trap* looks more restrained and quite formal in patination, however on closer inspection the warp and weft of canes are not totally regular. The piece is formed from a sequence of slightly disordered fine white



'Caption details required', 2014, blown glass, cane work, 76 x 17 x 18 cm

fine lines laid over cross-hatched black stripes. Fine green and dun coloured stripes finish off this exceptionally complex interweave. Similarly, the *Long Flax Eel Trap* feels soft and transparent due to the fine netting in variable patterns that over lays the warp and weft with great delicacy. There is also a lightness of touch like that seen

in the original functional and aesthetically beautiful objects which inspired them.

Martiniello said that her aim was, "To produce a body of traditionally inspired works that will pay tribute to our traditional weavers, and provide recognition for these ancient cultural practices". She has achieved this in this exhibition of technically complex and beautiful glassworks that presents Indigenous art to new audiences and explores groundbreaking ways of working with the medium of glass.

### Cath Bowdler

Dr Cath Bowdler is an arts administrator, curator and academic who has worked with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and artists over the last 20 years. She holds a PhD from the Australian National University in the field of Aboriginal Art and Culture.

### FOOTNOTES:

1. Sally Pryor, Canberra Times, published 17.4.2015.
2. You Tube video, Object <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsyJhQhim5Y>
3. Ashleigh Wilson, The Australian, published 12.8.2013.
4. *ibid*
5. Wall text, National Art Glass Gallery.



PHOTO: EULEA KIRALY

Jenni Kemarre Martiniello