

garaarr (grass)

r e a

3 June - 27 August 2011

Blacktown Arts Centre

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All images courtesy and © the artist

Acknowledgments from r e a:

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Image: r e a, garaarr (grass) 2011, video installation. Still images created by artist, all photographic and video work was collected during BAC weaving workshops. Image courtesy and copyright of the artist.



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Mayoral message

Blacktown City has a rich history and, with the largest urban Aboriginal population in NSW, is an important meeting place for creative and cultural activity. A high priority within the Council's Cultural Plan is to create opportunities for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander artists to develop and show their work through the program of Blacktown Arts Centre.

garaarr (grass) by artist r e a is a moving creative response to recent weaving workshops held for the Blacktown ATSI community at the Blacktown Arts Centre and Aboriginal Medical Service in Mt Druitt. A weaving tradition almost lost in this part of NSW has been revived and artfully documented by r e a.

An artist at the forefront of her practice, r e a has utilised new media and the newest technologies to celebrate and encourage an important and vital Aboriginal tradition.

Councillor Alan Pendleton
Mayor of Blacktown

Director's foreword

Through the exhibition *garaarr (grass)* we witness the transformation of garaarr - culturally vital and omnipresent indigenous plant fibres - into precious hand-woven repositories of ancestral and emotive connections to country.

Artist r e a's reworking of audio and video recorded during locally-based weaving workshops with Aboriginal women and men provides another layer of transformation. The resultant gallery-based installation of interlaced moving imagery and sound reveals a merging of personal reflections by the weavers and artist. It gently articulates weaving's intrinsic relationship to ancestry and country as well as its cultural importance for communities.

garaarr (grass) is a significant exhibition exploring local Aboriginal cultures and art practices. It illustrates Blacktown Council's ongoing commitment to cultivate and showcase Aboriginal culture through the transformative work of local Aboriginal communities and contemporary artists.

Sophia Kouyoumdjian
Acting Director
Blacktown Arts Centre

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Mostly, when you are an artist you never really know where a project will take you and sometimes this state of 'not knowing' becomes the best part of making the work because you have to let the work find its level, its flow; you have to watch in admiration as it evolves, changes, is driven, guided and inspired by the people, the space, the place and the environment that the project actually exists within and this hopefully then gives the work a 'real' sense of dynamics, aliveness and joy.

Last month I was invited by the Blacktown Arts Centre team to work with the local Indigenous community who were participating in a series of practical weaving workshops, which were set-up to revive both the art form and the skills of weaving for both men and women, with Steven Russell (Dharawal) and Kristine Stewart (Yuin) from the Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art & Culture Studio at Gerringong, within the Blacktown and Mt Druitt environs. Historically and traditionally weaving was an important part of the local Indigenous community's cultural and artistic practices but with the arrival of colonisation this beautiful and fragile art form was lost and consequently the traditions and the practices of weaving in the Blacktown area sadly disappeared.

I am a new media artist and I was invited to join the project to create a work, which responded to the extraordinarily visceral, tactile and almost meditative state that weaving seems to induce in those who engage in it. The material - grass is totally incongruous to those of us who view the world and make art through cameras, computers, waves, chips, cords and cards!

However, I was really excited about getting my hands dirty so-to-speak (even though I also spent much of my time during the project behind the camera) by getting amongst it all – grass is both an elusive and pliable material which when it is subjected to a set of specific techniques and skills seems to undergo a remarkable transformation. In only a few short hours, you seem to be looking at the beginnings of an eel trap, a fish trap, a net or a intricate basket. In fact as the object emerges the original material, the grass disappears somewhat slowly and seductively at first but then as if, by magic the grass suddenly seems to emerge in an entirely new form – it is not a linear process nor is it driven by time nor is it uniform

or predictable – the maker has to intuitively find their way through the weaving, they have to let the grass lead them to the next phase of the creative process, they have to become part of the material and the making and they have to let the memories and emotions that inevitably arise when you are in a group, especially an Indigenous group inform the object and the environment.

Each evening as I drove home from the workshop the day's activities and experiences would continue to resonate within my body and my thoughts. Some of the moments would return to me with a clarity that would see me smiling and laughing as I drove up the mountain alone (who was it that said artists are crazy?)

Or, alternatively I would physically feel the sadness move through my body as I remembered how we would somehow, collectively arrive at the moments in our lives that had been difficult, painful or challenging and then our tears would come as we expressed our sadness; still gripping our weaving grasses we would listen, identify and empathize with each other – our baskets, nets and traps suspended for a moment in time whilst we supported each others' experiences and stories quietly returning to our weaving when the time was right – silently weaving and reflecting on our lives, our hopes and our cultural losses.

Community art making processes are full of these emotional surprises because inevitably each person brings something which is truly unique to themselves to the workshop and then they willingly share their stories with the group who connected by the weaving grasses seamlessly move as the work continues from the isolated sense of the 'I' to the connected strength of the 'WE'.

I hope that my video '*garaarr (grass)*' gives you both an experience of and an insight into how special this journey was for me and I truly want to thank all the men, women and children who gave so much of themselves to make this project an extraordinary and empowering experience.

As always, we as Indigenous people achieve a sense of wholeness and purpose when we are connected to each other, to our art and to the land via the *garaarr (grass)*.