

Manburrba: Our story of printed cloth from Bábbarra Women's Centre
exhibition review by Louise Hamby

One of the bright stars in the 2023 lineup for August in Darwin is *Manburrba: Our story of printed cloth from Bábbarra Women's Centre* curated by Joanna Barrkman. This exhibition at the Charles Darwin University Art Gallery is a must-see for not only lovers of printed cloth but for its ability to tell the stories from Maningrida in a most appealing way. This exhibition was a partnership with Charles Darwin University Art Gallery and the Bábbarra Women's Centre. For those people who could not go to see *Aboriginal Screen-Printed Textiles from Australia's Top End* at the Fowler Museum at UCLA this shows zooms in on one of those centres with a long history of working with *manburrba* (cloth).

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication, *Manburrba: Our story of printed cloth from Bábbarra Women's Centre*. It has an informative catalogue of the works, many photographs and essays by Barrkman, Janet Marawarr, Lucy Yarawanga and Janita Yikara.

Dark feature walls invite you into explore the space. The cloth itself adds a softness to the space putting you at ease. Horizontal and vertical lengths are elevated by their positioning on the wall. The physical space created by the hanging devices makes the printed fabrics appear to float on the wall. This creates an atmosphere not unlike the concept of floating yawkyawk in the water.

This exhibition tells the history of printing on cloth interwoven with other objects created by the women artists. It is not just a chronological history though you can find this in the show through the display of old blocks and prints. In my years of coming to Maningrida block printing was a favourite because of the freedom of placement, additions of painting and the relaxed attitude of the women doing them. Screen printing has become very popular and is a mainstay of production. However, the block prints from lino are still there and now Bábbarra is moving to wood block printing with Tharangini Studio in India. The print on muslin from the wood blocks looks forward to new enterprises but the muslin itself harks back to the soft preferred fabric worn by the women at Maningrida.

For those interested in the processes of printing *Manburrba* excels in artfully displaying the screens and drawings necessary for the production using Deborah Kamanj Wurrkidj's *Wak Black Crow Dreaming*) screen print. The actual lino blocks by Nancy Gununwanga and Janet Marawarr also have fabrics on display that use these blocks like Marawarr's *Meeting Place*

A suite of works from early 2000s by Kate Kalidjan Miwulku illustrates the strong interrelationship between imagery and stories which form a basis for the production of work. Items made by women for everyday use appear in these works starting with an etching *Waramaléla (Fish Traps) II* in 2002. The following year she produced the screen-print *Baskets*,

mats, and catfish. In 2007 she painted a bark *Dilly bag, mat and basket.* All of these work together to depict the important objects from everyday life regardless of the media. In keeping with the inspiration for many of the designs there are actual objects that are depicted in printed cloths in the exhibition, from a mat to a basket to a string bag.

This exhibition is star-studded with artists and works and tells a great story about printed fabric by people who love the work and the process. I highly recommend it to all.

Louise Hamby

October 2023