

Seeing Country

Seeing Country

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

30 June – 1 September 2019

Ways of seeing

- Freja Carmichael

This exhibition is held on Quandamooka Country. Aboriginal people see Country as interconnecting spiritual, cultural, physical, and historical relationships with the land, waters, sky, and all living things. Three clans make up the custodians of this Country, the Quandamooka people: the Ngugi, Noonuccal, and Goenpul. I am a Ngugi woman. Since deep time, our people have enjoyed complex and layered relationships with the sand, land and sea environments. Generations upon generations cared for, lived harmoniously with, and sustained the coastlines, salt-water bay, paper bark forests, swampy wetlands, freshwater lagoons, and the seagrass beds. Our Country is grounded in our ancestral origins and place of belonging.

Hidden in the banksia, cotton, and mangrove trees, our old peoples' campsites are revealed by the remnants of middens – oysters, shellfish, seafood and other animal bones that have been piled high over thousands of generations and seasons. Our ancestors knew that when the lorikeets gathered in large flocks, it meant the mullet fish was in abundance. Using their hands, spears and sticks to tap the water, they would call out to buwangan (dolphin) to bring the fish to shore. They learnt that when the strong fragrance of hop bush flower filled the air, the oysters were at their plumpest.¹ Gathering only the food required, and harvesting in rhythm with nature's cycles, they would share these gifts of Country communally and carry them across land in sturdy, finely woven bags of ungaire (swamp reeds).

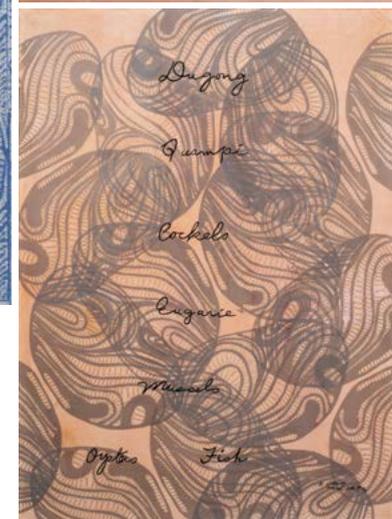
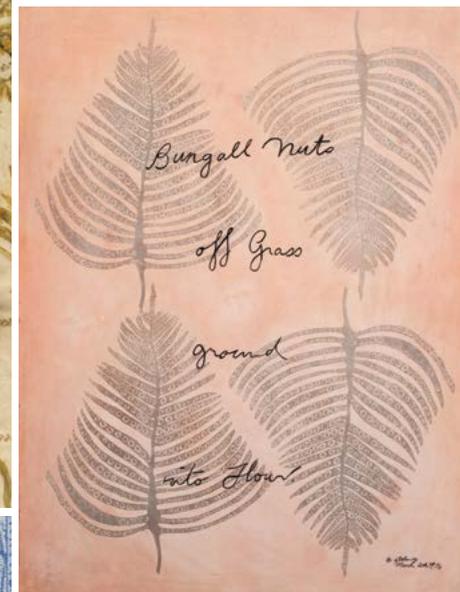
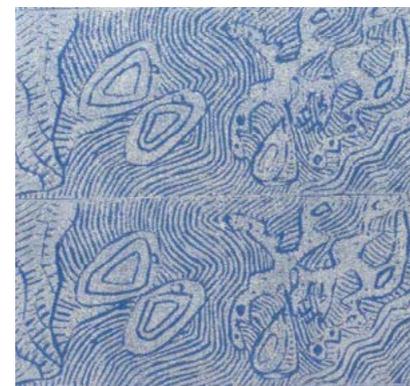
This multilayered knowledge of place held by Aboriginal people reveals an intimate connection to and understanding of the land, waters and their materials, one which persists strongly today through our connection to Country. 'Seeing Country' celebrates the resilience of this connection for Aboriginal people, bringing together Quandamooka artistic practices with those of Yidinji, Gunggandji, Kullilli-Wakka-Wakka, Gamilaraay and Wathaurung people. Demonstrating the shared connection with the land and waters for all of these people, this exhibition also highlights the unique aspects of each nation's relationship with its own Country.

Embracing old ways through diverse and contemporary media, these artists make visible and celebrate the ongoing importance of distinct ecologies, ancestral connections, and practices of place.

In 'Seeing Country', the distinct environments, the resources, and the materiality specific to the geography of Country are understood through oral histories, artistic practices, and our contemporary experience of being on Country.

Place of abundance (2019), a video work filmed and edited by Nikki Michail, documents experiences of Quandamooka people and the interconnections of language, culture, and place. The film features contributions from **Sandra Delaney**, Nunagal, Goenbal Ngugi woman; my mother, Ngugi woman **Sonja Carmichael**; senior Noonuccal songman **Joshua Walker**; and **Keiron Anderson**, a Ngugi man and chef. Delaney speaks about the significant role of Jandai language as a carrier of knowledge and heritage and a connector to place. Carmichael speaks about the sensitive collection of ungaire to preserve customary weaving practices. Walker and Anderson both concentrate on the environment, with Walker focusing on signs from nature that prompt fishing, gathering and harvesting of resources. Anderson details the ingredients unique to Quandamooka Country – sustainably used in cooking and shared communally across time.

Artistic contributions from Quandamooka women **Belinda Close** and **Delvene Cockatoo-Collins** expand on salt-water relationships. Close, a Noonuccal, Ngugi and Goenpul woman, captures a lifetime of experiences living on Minjerrabah (North Stradbroke Island) in her printed textile work titled *Eugaries at Back Beach in my heart and soul 2* (2015). Brimming with replicated patterns, the fabric design references a regular activity for her family – collecting eugaries (also referred to as pipis) on Back Beach on the western side of the island, behind Goompi (Dunwich). As Quandamooka people, they know the best locations and the importance of gathering sensitively by only taking what is required. Eugaries continue to be important food and traditional medicine gifted by Quandamooka Country. Close depicts the shells on the shoreline. Just below the sandy surface, eugaries journey up and down the water's edge with the tidal flow.



Top left: Carol McGregor, *black seeds* (detail) 2016, possum skins, cotton, ochre, ash and resin.

Bottom left: Belinda Close, *Eugaries at Back Beach in my heart and soul 2* (detail) 2015, lino print with water based ink on cotton.

Top right: Delvene Cockatoo-Collins, *Bungall nuts ground into flour* 2017, paper, pigment, beeswax and charcoal.

Bottom right: Delvene Cockatoo-Collins, *Oysters quampi mussels eugarie* 2018, paper, pigments, clay, charcoal and beeswax.

Delvene Cockatoo-Collins, a Noonuccal, Ngugi, and Goenpul woman, also highlights the importance of eugaries in her works on paper. Her prints feature cursive handwritten typography, recalling the stories of Cockatoo-Collins' grandmother. The artist sourced quotes from personal letters and from community meetings where Elders shared their knowledge of Country to ensure important knowledge is maintained. In *Oysters quampi mussels eugarie* (2018), the text overlays a silhouette of a bed of oysters. The quotes provide a link between past and current generations. The list – dugong, quampi, cockles, eugaries, mussels, oysters, and fish – reflect the ongoing wealth of Quandamooka's healthy waters.

Cockatoo-Collins' print and ceramic pair *Bungwall nuts ground into flour* (2017) highlight the use of the Quandamooka bush tucker plant, Bungwall fern (swamp water fern). In his ground-breaking work *Dark Emu* (2014), Bruce Pascoe documents Aboriginal people's pioneering bread-baking methods of grinding grass seeds from the immediate environment into flour.² Our Quandamooka heritage sheds further light on traditions of baking bread. The tuberous root of the Bungwall plant was soaked, roasted, and ground on grinding stones to make flour for a type of bread called johnny cake.³ Cockatoo-Collins' text highlights the significance of the plant's use, while she visually captures the plant with detailed illustrations in print and sculpts the shape in earthenware.

Carol McGregor's *black seeds* (2016) also addresses the traditional use of plants by Aboriginal people. An artist of Wathaurung and Scottish descent, McGregor embraces the historical legacy and cultural significance of possum skin cloaks. The cloaks made and worn by her Aboriginal ancestors were incised and painted with symbolism relating to identity, Country, and community. Similar traditions were maintained by Aboriginal people along the Eastern seaboard, from as far south as Victoria to as far north as central Queensland.⁴

In *black seeds* (2016), McGregor has depicted south-east Queensland Indigenous landscapes on a contemporary possum skin cloak. In developing the cloak, the artist researched available information in books and archives but most importantly consulted with local Aboriginal people. Therefore, the cloak embodies communal insights regarding plants and food sources from the environments connected to the Brisbane River. Country is seen and vividly translated through McGregor's illustrations that have been burnt and painted using only ochre and charcoal. The plants depicted hold historical and cultural value, as they represent food and medicine, and can be used to create many objects of daily life. Once again, the abundance of place is celebrated in this artwork.

Ancestral connections

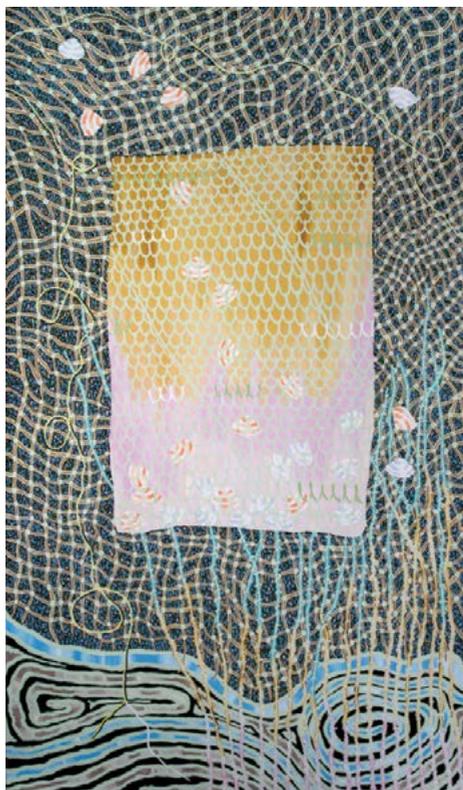
The works featured in 'Seeing Country' engage in spiritual, cultural and physical practices that traverse across time to honour ancestral connections.

The hand-built ceramics of Gamilaraay/Gomeroi artist **Penny Evans** emerge from her reflections on her own Country and its links to neighbouring areas. She explores contrasting ecologies of different landscapes. She bears witness to and senses the metaphysical signs of ancestral experiences:

I listen, observe, interact and decolonise these various neighbouring eco-systems, thinking of our ancestors and feeling the metaphysical traces of their existence through the relationship of animals, birds, plants, sky... totemic relationships and interdependencies.⁵

Evans' lifelike representation of both young and aged banksia in *Blue swamp banksia series* (2017–2018) relates to a visit she made to Yuraygir National Park in Yaegl Country, where a fire had recently swept through an area close to a pristine swamp. Evans saw the life cycle of Country from devastation to regeneration in the thick ash that carpeted the plants and earth. Her banksia forms are saturated in colour palettes resembling water, earth and fire. The resilience of the group of eight banksia plants mirrors the resilience of her people and the importance of connection and Country to survival.

Evans' other featured work, *Balabalaa Yinarr (butterfly woman)* (2017), which combines ceramics, fibres, and echidna quills, references the large bunya nut gatherings historically held in the Bunya Mountains. Local and invited Aboriginal communities from northern New South Wales and west and east Queensland would come together at these gatherings for ceremony, trade, and exchange through the harvesting and feasting of the bunya nut.⁶ Evans' paired sculptures, rich in texture and materiality, pay homage to her female ancestors. These works imagine women leading their kin on the long travel route from home to the festival through thick clouds of yellow butterflies – a natural indicator of a bumper crop.



Top left: Elisa Jane Carmichael, *Coolamon #3* 2017 raffia.

Centre left: Penny Evans, *Blue swamp banksia 1 – 8* 2017–2018, white earthenware clay, copper carbonate, black slip, pooling glazes, translucent glaze, sgraffito and terracotta.

Bottom left: Penny Evans, *Balabalaa Yinarr 1* (detail) 2017, ceramics, dyed woven raffia, echidna quill, wire.

Above: Elisa Jane Carmichael, *Bringing her home* 2018, synthetic polymer on canvas.

My sister, **Elisa Jane (Leecee) Carmichael**, a Ngugi woman, also acknowledges matrilineal connections to Country through Quandamooka weaving practices. Our people enjoy a rich history of fibre work, as reflected in our exquisite and intricately woven flat bags. Ancestral weavings, with physical links to our Country, are held in numerous museum collections in Australia and internationally. These uniquely looped and knotted bags, with their distinct diagonal pattern, demonstrate the skilful use of ungaire, which grows in shades of pink and green in swampy areas on Minjerribah.

These weavings were important ancestral objects used to carry items such as seafood, shellfish, plants, berries as people travelled across Country. Carmichael visually unites these uniquely Quandamooka woven bags with our Country in her large-scale paintings *For the women in my life, past, present, future* (2017) and *Bringing her home* (2018). Invoking ancestral histories, Carmichael paints the bags' presence on the sandy shorelines filled with eugarie shells, placed among the growing swamp reeds. In these vast representations, she accentuates the skilful detail of the weave and saturates the canvas in movement and vibrancy.

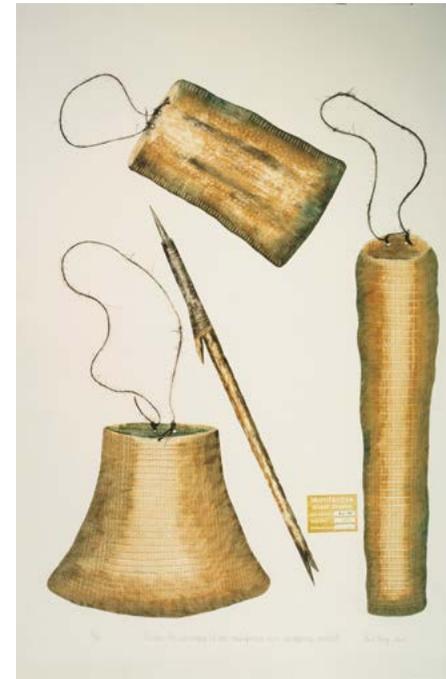
Carmichael is active with kin and community in regenerating local weaving practices through expanding upon customary techniques and experimenting with new forms and materials. The brightly woven form *Coolamon #3* (2017) is informed by knowledge transmitted across time, connecting our ancestors, current weavers, and future generations.

In 'Seeing Country', artists use natural and contemporary fibre mediums and reference ancestral forms that are specific to their background.

Kullilli-Wakka-Wakka artist **Kim (Brolga) Williams** demonstrates the transformative use of piccabeen fibre in *Urnin-beenak (woman basket)*. Piccabeen palm (also known as Bangalow) is local to landscapes within south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales. The plant's inflorescence and the sheath of the leaf underpins the emergence of distinct basketry forms. For Williams, the specific use of this plant represents her family's association with the land and matrilineal weaving practices. Created through a sturdy form of random weave technique, *Urnin-beenak (woman basket)* (2019) continues the intergenerational knowledge shared with the artist by her grandmother. As the artist states:

Our women would collect the piccabeen palm when it had fallen from the tree and would gather the flowers then head to the creek or river together. The piccabeen would soak in the water and when this recycled natural material was very wet, the women would weave beautiful baskets. They would weave as a group, tell stories and teach the young girls the techniques. The baskets were used for carrying food or babies.⁷

Yidinji artist **Bindur Bullin (Paul Bong)** also portrays basketry practices important to his family through his detailed prints. Specifically relating to the fertile lands of the rainforest, *Under the canopy of the rainforest our shopping baskets* (2016) depicts several varying fibre forms. Included in this collection is the brilliantly constructed Jawun (bicornual basket), which artists across the rainforest regions of north Queensland continue to make. Bullin's descriptive etching details its characteristic shape of two pointed corners at the base and the skilful and patient weaving of the lengths of split lawyer cane. The basket's ingenious construction was used for leaching toxins from poisonous plants, for fishing, and as an important trade item.



Top left: Bindur Bullin (Paul Bong), *Under the canopy of the rainforest our shopping baskets* 2016, hand coloured intaglio etching, edition 6/30.

Bottom left: Philomena Yeatman, *Bogey Bogey Baybaru* 2019, raffia, fishing line and commercial fishing net.

Top right: Bindur Bullin (Paul Bong), *The way my people lived* 2016, hand coloured intaglio etching, edition 6/30.

Bottom right: Kim Williams, *Urnin-beenak (woman basket)* 2019, piccabeen inflorescence.

Bullin's other featured work represents Yidinji shields. These powerful objects are unique to his cultural heritage and were an important item in battle, ceremony, and initiation. Inscribed on the individual shields are stories relating to cultural practices, significant sites and women's and men's business – all of which speak of his people's history of living in harmony with the land. Through vivid and contemporary representations of the shields, the artist reclaims their historical and cultural meanings.

Gunggandji woman **Philomena Yeatman** weaves her lifetime of experiences of living in Yarrabah, Far North Queensland, through energetic fibre forms. Yarrabah is surrounded by tropical bushland and mountain ranges, united by sandy coastlines and coral reefs. As a child, Yeatman collected pandanus palm leaves with her grandmother and learnt the weaving techniques distinct to her community. Her knowledge of collecting fibre when green, then drying, curling, and rolling the strands ready for use, reflects the skills passed on intergenerationally. This knowledge is applied in *Jurbal Mugaru (grass basket for fishing)* (2019), which innovates traditional grass baskets through extending and evolving their form and injecting colour by interweaving patterns of raffia with pandanus fibre.

In many freshwater and salt-water communities across Australia, fish traps reverberate with cultural and spiritual value. Aboriginal people customarily used them for sustainable resource collection and for ceremonial purposes. Yeatman's contemporary fish trap, *Bogey Bogey Baybaru* (2019), invokes the family fishing trips of her childhood. The artist explores the relationship between customary practices and recent adaptations by combining natural fibre with contemporary materials including commercial fishing nets. The use of discarded commercial fishing nets in this work comments on the environmental impact of current fishing practices and the debris that is left at sea. Collectively, Yeatman's woven forms highlight how the sea is a source of material, while providing cultural and spiritual sustenance to her people.

¹ Minjerribah Moorgumpin Elder-in-Council Aboriginal Corporation, *Minjerribah: An Indigenous story of North Stradbroke Island* (Cleveland, Qld: Redlands Tourism, 1998), 11.

² Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident* (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2014), 30.

³ Margaret Iselin and Lyn Shipway, *Plants: Bush Tucker Medicinal and Other Uses of Minjerribah* (North Stradbroke Island, Qld: North Stradbroke Island Aboriginal & Islander Housing Cooperative, 1998),

⁴ Carol McGregor, conversation with the author, May 2019.

⁵ Penny Evans, conversation with the author, August 2017.

⁶ Bounty of the Bunya Nut, 2019, <https://parks.des.qld.gov.au/parks/bunya-mountains/culture.html>.

⁷ Kim Williams, conversation with the author, March 2019.

In curating 'Seeing Country', I aim to share the depth and importance of our connections to the lands and waters to stimulate greater environmental awareness for all. Quandamooka, Yidinji, Gunggandji, Kullilli-Wakka-Wakka, Gamilaraay and Wathaurung people translate their ways of seeing Country through knowing Country, being on Country, and belonging to Country. The works shown and stories told here demonstrate the range of shared and unique connections. Commonalities and differences are mirrored in the diverse artistic practices united here. From abundant textiles and woven basketry, to powerful prints, paintings and spirited ceramics, these art forms carry knowledge of place and are imbued with contemporary lived experiences. Through these embodied works, Country is seen and vibrantly celebrated.

List of artworks

Bindur Bullin (Paul Bong)

Memories of Oblivion 1 (50,000 years of peace) 2016
Hand coloured intaglio etching, edition 1/20
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2017 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

My flag 2015
Hand coloured intaglio etching, edition 22/30
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Under the canopy of the rainforest our shopping baskets 2016
hand coloured intaglio etching, edition 6/30
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

The way my people lived 2016
Hand coloured intaglio etching, edition 6/30
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Elisa Jane Carmichael

Bringing her home 2018
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Coolamon #3 2017
Raffia
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2017 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

For the women in my life, past, present, future 2017
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Private Collection.

Belinda Close

Eugaries at Back Beach in my heart and soul 2 2015
Lino print with water based ink on cotton
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2015 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Delvene Cockatoo-Collins

Bungwall nuts ground into flour 2017
Paper, pigments, beeswax and charcoal
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Bungwall nuts ground into flour 2019
Wire, tawalpin (cotton tree fibre) and ceramic
Courtesy of the artist.

Oysters quampi mussels eugarie 2018
Paper, pigments, clay, charcoal and beeswax
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Penny Evans

Balabalaa Yinarr 1 & 2 2017
Ceramics, dyed woven raffia, echidna quill and wire
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Blue swamp banksia 1 – 8 2017–2018
White earthenware clay, copper carbonate, black slip, pooling glazes, translucent glaze, sgraffito and terracotta
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2018 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Silver bullets 2018
Buff taki clay, Irish black clay, slip, silver glaze, pooling glazes, emu feathers, raffia and steel cable
Courtesy of artist.

Carol Mcgregor

black seeds 2016
Possum skins, cotton, ochre, ash and resin
Redland Art Gallery Collection.
Acquired in 2016 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Redland Art Gallery and Nikki Michail

Place of abundance 2019
Video 12.35 minutes filmed and edited by Nikki Michail. Produced by Redland Art Gallery. Video featuring Sandra Delaney, Sonja Carmichael, Joshua Walker and Keiron Anderson.
Courtesy of the artists and Redland Art Gallery.

Philomena Yeatman

Bogey Bogey Baybaru 2019
Raffia, fishing line and commercial fishing net
Courtesy of the artist and Yarrabah Art Centre.

Jurbal Mugaru (grass basket for fishing) 2019
Pandanus and raffia
Courtesy of the artist and Yarrabah Art Centre.

Kim (Brolga) Williams

Urnin-beenak (woman basket) 2019
Piccabeen inflorescence
Courtesy of the artist.

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30 June – 1 September 2019

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Penny Evans, *Balabalaa Yinarr 1*. Image courtesy of Renae Belton.

Philomena Yeatman, *Bogey Bogey Baybaru*. Image courtesy of Yarrabah Art Centre.

Kim Williams, *Urnin-beenak (woman basket)*. Image courtesy of Renae Belton.

Artworks courtesy of the artists and Redland Art Gallery.

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Please note: The spelling of Aboriginal language words and names varies. In this text they appear as provided by artists and/or verified by appropriate sources.

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