

YVONNE KOOLMATRIE RIVERLAND

INTERPRETIVE GUIDE



YVONNE KOOLMATRIE

born 1944, Wudinna, South Australia
Ngarrindjeri people, South Australia

ARTIST OF THE RIVERLAND

Yvonne Koolmatrie was born at Wudinna on the land of her father's people, near the far west coast of South Australia. Her father, Joseph Roberts, was a Kokatha man and her mother, Margaret Roberts, was a Ngarrindjeri/Ramindjeri woman from the Coorong. As a child she moved around with her family for seasonal work, from the far west, up north, in the Mallee and Riverland, and visiting her mother's people near Meningie. Much of her adult life has been spent along the Murray River.

I get so much out of the river – it gives me my material, it gives me peace. And I really respect the river, the people who used to live along here years ago.

Yvonne Koolmatrie

A MAKER OF BASKETS

Koolmatrie is renowned as an expert in Ngarrindjeri basket weaving. Since first learning her **craft** from elder Dorothy Kartinyeri in 1982, Koolmatrie has been dedicated to refining her skills and sharing her knowledge. She studied old Ngarrindjeri baskets in the South Australian Museum and learnt to recreate historic forms.

In over thirty years of basket weaving, Koolmatrie has developed a unique expression of knowing and culture. What is so special about her work is its synthesis of traditional knowledge and contemporary innovation. Her baskets are highly valued as works of art – and as exquisite craft – with a timeless handmade quality. The maker's skill lies in repeating the patterns made for centuries while inventing new forms. Creating the baskets involves a rhythmic making, the same stitch over and over, repeated with precision to give unity to the form.

Weaving can connect people across time, from the past into the future.

Yvonne Koolmatrie



Yvonne Koolmatrie at Roberts's Camp on the Murray River in Lyrup, South Australia, 2015. Photo: Isaac Coen Lindsay

A DEEP CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

We can see in Koolmatrie's creative work her deep connection to country. The **material** for her baskets grows along the river. Koolmatrie harvests the spiny-headed sedge (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*) in a sustainable way by pulling the plant one by one, such that the land is cared for. She knows where and when to find the plants; she understands the rhythm of the seasons and the cycle of life. The scent and colours of the baskets speak to us of place, the river environment that the artist knows and loves deeply.

My material, the sedge, is known as bilbili ... and kayi in Ngarrindjeri, and also as spiny-headed sedge. It's a culturally significant plant for Ngarrindjeri people.

Yvonne Koolmatrie

Basket weaving stitches things together – the culture and the history, the people and the land.

Chris Koolmatrie

A CREATIVE ARTIST

Suspended in space, the pure forms of Koolmatrie's *Eel traps* (1990–2015) are elegant and balanced. We can appreciate them in their moments of stillness in the Gallery setting. Koolmatrie's ancestors used similar forms to trap the eels that swam into the Coorong after autumn rains.

As a **3D** installation in a contemporary exhibition space, the *Eel traps* invite contemplation, reminding us of both the powerful presence of the past in contemporary Aboriginal art and the ongoing strength of culture.

Among Koolmatrie's baskets are functional objects for carrying personal possessions, like the 'sister' baskets – two identical sides or 'sisters' are stitched together and a handle added. These continue and pass on a cultural tradition in a form refined by past generations and which has meaning and value today.

Basket weaving is used by Koolmatrie to reinterpret old forms and invent new structures. The artist uses her imagination and she works intuitively to experiment with the potential of her medium. A work in the South Australian Museum of a woven aeroplane made in the 1930s by Janet Watson prompted Koolmatrie to make her own interpretations, including *Biplane* (2001). Her creative innovations in basket weaving include native animals such as the *Echidna* (2004) and *Pondi* (*Murray River cod*) (2003), as well as *Hot air balloon* (2004).

Yvonne Koolmatrie is an esteemed Aboriginal artist who lives in the Riverland, a fragile changing environment. Her baskets are woven with dedication and are rich with meaning. They evoke a sense of place and inspire an appreciation of beauty and nature. Their message is deep and powerful – *respect the land and the past.*



Riverland: Yvonne Koolmatjie installation view, featuring *Eel traps* 1990–2015, dimensions variable. Photo: Saul Steed



Echidna 2004, Berri, South Australia, spiny-headed sedge (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*), echidna quills, 14.0 x 30.0 x 62.0 cm, Gabriella Roy collection, Sydney. Photo: Jenni Carter

RESPONDING

Koolmatrie developed skills in making things in her early life and from her father. *My dad was really good with his hands; he was able to create anything.* Are you or someone you know good with their hands? Perhaps there are people in your family who like to make things. Explain what they do.

Describe the colours of Koolmatrie's baskets. Write a short poem to portray your feelings about the colour, form and mood you find in these works of art.

It has been said that Koolmatrie's work *honours the spirit of her ancestors*. Look for works that honour Ngarrindjeri history and culture through using traditional forms. Make a list of your favourite pieces. Later, you could research how the baskets were used in Ngarrindjeri culture. Compare and contrast these with the baskets made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in other parts of Australia.

Koolmatrie works with natural materials. Find out about other artists who *touch the earth lightly* and create works of art from materials found in their environment (for example, James Darling and Lesley Forwood, Hossein Valamanesh, Andy Goldsworthy). What are some of the reasons artists choose to work this way?

Investigate the geography of the lower River Murray. What are some of the impacts on this fragile environment that have occurred in recent years?

Research the spiny-headed sedge (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*) used by Koolmatrie to make her baskets and find out where it grows. What other plants and technologies are used by Ngarrindjeri in daily life?

MAKING

Look closely at the detail of the woven baskets. Make drawings of the pattern formed by the sedge and the stitches. Enjoy the experience of looking closely and feeling the rhythm of the repeated marks.

Collect some plant material from your home or a natural place. Remember to harvest it carefully. Experiment with what you can make by wrapping and twisting the natural fibres.

Fibre crafts are important in many cultures, with the traditions of stitching and weaving passed on from one generation to the next. You might like to find someone to teach you a traditional fibre craft. You could also search online as there has been a renewed interest in crafts like crochet and knitting in recent years. Take the time to practise and refine your making skills. You might want to find out about 'yarn-bombing'!

Koolmatrie sometimes weaves the seeds of the plants she has used into her pieces. This takes both the basket and the possibility for new life into the future. **Design** your own special container to protect and carry special plant seeds into the future. Find out about seed saving and why it is important.

Research the animals and water creatures that live in and along the River Murray.

Learn about the Ngarrindjeri dreaming stories and create a visual map to demonstrate your understanding.

Do you have a special place where you find peace? Make a work of art to evoke the mood of this place. Your work could be realistic to show exactly what it looks like, or abstract and communicate through colour and form.



Sister baskets, 2015, Berri, South Australia, 47.5 × 28.0 × 10.0 cm, 47.0 × 27.0 × 11.0 cm; Acquisition through TARNANTHI | Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art 2015, supported by BHP Billiton, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Photo: Jenni Carter



Pondi (Murray River cod), 2009, Berri, South Australia, 58.8 × 44.3 × 115.6 cm. Purchased 2009, Australian Museum, Sydney. Photo: Stuart Humphreys

GLOSSARY

3D: a work of art with depth, as well as height and width, such as sculpture and installation

craft: an intellectual and physical activity where artists explore the materials and processes to produce unique objects for the purposes of: experimentation with form or function; exhibition; production; and personal or community need. Indigenous cultures draw no distinction between art and craft and, similarly, contemporary culture values the interplay between art/craft, design/craft, the art/designer or the design/maker. The crafted and handmade sit alongside the manufactured design object as part of historical, national and cultural identities

design principles: accepted conventions associated with organising design elements and can include unity, balance, hierarchy, scale, proportion, emphasis, similarity and contrast

materials: physical resources, equipment including the technologies and information used to make a work of art

technical skills: combination of skills in control, accuracy, alignment, strength, balance and coordination in an art form. These develop with practice.

RELATED WORKS IN THE COLLECTION

Ian W. ABDULLA, Australia, 1947–2011, Ngarrindjeri people, South Australia, *Catching yabbies*, 1988, Glossop, South Australia. <http://bit.ly/1MZP5kz>

Jenni Kemarre MARTINIELLO, Australia, 1949, Southern Arrernte people, Northern Territory, *Large mustard eel trap #1*, 2012, Canberra Glassworks, Kingston, Canberra. <http://bit.ly/1PMI04q>

RESOURCES

Closer Productions 2015, Yvonne Koolmatrerie (video portrait, 01'44"), Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. <http://bit.ly/1RzQfIG>

Koolmatrerie, Yvonne 2015, *Riverland: Yvonne Koolmatrerie*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Other authors/ contributors: Cumpston, Nici; Koolmatrerie, Chris; Kean, John; Perkins, Hetti; Jones, Jonathan; O'Callaghan, Genevieve; Art Gallery of South Australia. <http://bit.ly/1iKlcrd>

Baskets made by Ngarrindjeri people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be viewed in the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery at the South Australian Museum. <http://bit.ly/1MOR5Dh>

ReCoil – change and exchange in coiled fibre art, 2007, Artback Northern Territory Arts Touring. <http://bit.ly/1VqO4RJ>

Menagerie, 2012–14, Australian Museum (features outstanding contemporary and traditional animal-themed works of art by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from across Australia). <http://bit.ly/1Rfd4uD>

Terrain: A landscape of ideas and possibilities, 2014, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. <http://bit.ly/1VqOw2t>

Clarke, Philip A. 2014, *Discovering Aboriginal plant use: the journeys of an Australian anthropologist*, Rosenberg Publishing, Sydney. <http://bit.ly/1O721W0>

Clarke, Philip A. 2012, *Australian plants as Aboriginal tools*, Rosenberg Publishing, Sydney. Available as an ebook. <http://bit.ly/1OFuPVy>

Perkins, Hetti 2010, *Art + soul: a journey into the world of Aboriginal Art*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne. <http://bit.ly/1KKgnYr>

Based on the television series about contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art; a DVD is also available. <http://bit.ly/1O74os0>

Schools and community groups can organise to visit the Adelaide Botanic Garden Aboriginal Plants and Aboriginal Science and Sustainability Discovery Trails. <http://bit.ly/1G0dfqR>

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) promotes the knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures, traditions, languages and stories, past and present. <http://bit.ly/1KQZVDJ>

Culture. <http://bit.ly/1YNV5AG>

Garwood-Houng, Alana 2015, *Baskets Hold a History* presentation. <http://bit.ly/1OFx5Mw>

AIATSIS Collections online. <http://bit.ly/1PMLXpG>

YVONNE KOOLMATRIE RIVERLAND

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TARNANTHI | Festival of Contemporary
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art
12 September 2015 – 10 January 2016

Open daily 10am – 5pm, FREE ENTRY

Information and quotes have been derived from the
accompanying TARNANTHI exhibition catalogue.

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of this resource.

Warning: Members of Aboriginal communities are
respectfully advised that some of the people mentioned
in writing or depicted in photographs within this resource
have passed away. All such mentions and photographs in
this resource are with permission.

Note to the reader: Unless otherwise noted, all
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words mentioned
in this resource are spelled as advised by the relevant
cultural authority. Approval for use of 'Tarnanthi' has
been granted by Kurna Warra Pintyanthi.

CREDITS

All works were created by Yvonne Koolmatrie, born
Wudinna, South Australia, 1944, Ngarrindjeri people,
South Australia, lives and works in Berri, South Australia.
Unless otherwise noted, all works were woven with
spiny-headed sedge (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*), known to
the artist as bilbili (rushes used for baskets and mats) and
kayi (grass to weave with) in Ngarrindjeri. Measurements
are in centimetres to the first decimal point, as provided
by the lender, and standardised to height x width x
depth. As the artist's work is sculptural, measurements
are approximate. All works are © Yvonne Koolmatrie,
courtesy Aboriginal & Pacific Art, Sydney.



Riverland: Yvonne Koolmatrie installation view featuring (left) *Biplane*, 1994, Berri, South Australia, 50.0 x 113.0 x 135.0 cm, Purchased 1995, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; (right) *Hot air balloon*, 2004, Berri, South Australia, 155.0 x 74.0 x 74.0 cm, Acquired 2004, Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria. Photo: Saul Steed



Riverland: Yvonne Koolmatrie installation view featuring (front left) *Cockle basket*, c.1990, Berri, South Australia, 38.0 x 66.0 x 30.0 cm, Purchased 1992, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney; (front right) *Weapon bag*, 2011, Berri, South Australia, 65.0 x 50.0 x 37.0 cm, Purchased 2012, Santos Museum of Economic Botany, Adelaide; (back left) *Weapon bag*, 1999, Berri, South Australia, 85.0 x 50.0 x 13.0 cm, Private collection, New South Wales; (back right) *Weapon bag*, c.1990, Berri, South Australia, 71.5 x 44.0 x 18.6 cm, Acquired 2006, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art Collection, National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Photo Saul Steed

Cover image: *Coorong Dreaming*, 1995, Gerard, South Australia, spiny-headed sedge (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*), dyed natural fibre, 125.0 x 117.5 x 1.0 cm, Purchased 1999, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

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