

# My dreaming - past - present - future

## New artworks by Muriel Van Der Byl AM (Mumthelang)

The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre: Kerry Packer Civic Gallery  
22 February – 14 March 2008

### Mumthelang: Silk Magic Woman

Muriel Van Der Byl (Mumthelang) was born in 1943 in Adelaide and is a Yarraldi Aboriginal elder with ancestral ties to Kaurna and Laitji Laitji. Highly regarded for her creativity and social activism Van Der Byl became a Member of the Order of Australia on 26 January 2005 for “service to the Indigenous community through the promotion of art and culture and as an advocate for social justice”. Van Der Byl maintains a nothing’s-going-to-bring-me-down energy that is key to the success of her life’s work. It is an attitude that demonstrates resilience in the face of the oppression throughout her lifetime that has created psychological trauma for generations of Indigenous peoples in this country. Van Der Byl is a great survivor of her generation whose spirit continues to evolve through the vehicle of art creation.

Van Der Byl began painting on silk in 1992 after a dream inspired her to learn silk-painting techniques:

“When I woke up I looked in the yellow pages and found the contact for a woman who was working with silk - her name was Marie France and I was drawn to her name because it sounded quite exotic to me. I told her that I just needed some tips about how to work with the medium and she was so generous sharing her knowledge ... then I just got on with it”.

Van Der Byl’s inaugural silk-painting *Marrinhan* hangs in the Art Gallery of South Australia.

The artist continues:

“I always loved painting on things. It was a way of individualising my clothes and possessions – so I didn’t really see myself as an artist and even when I was older and was married to an artist I was resistant to practicing drawing or painting. I started to sketch and doodle and my husband encouraged it. It was only after I had this dream about painting on silk that I understood that I was being guided spiritually to the medium and that I needed to express my own understanding of my traditional culture artistically and in my own way”.

Linked to her survivalist approach, prior to and throughout her silk-painting career the artist has created painted works on a range of ‘modern antiques’ unearthed from thrift and charity shops such as wooden bowls, eggcups, jewellery, denim jeans and children’s jumpsuits. These object-works are a creative use of resources that have enabled the artist exploration of art-making possibilities literally outside of the square. Simplistically these works are described as retro-domestic-kitsch, but there are other intriguing functions worthy of investigation. The object-works on jeans and jumpsuits for example extend the ‘canvas’ into an around-the-body experience that explore notions of sexuality and fertility. The paintings on kitchenware articulate ‘tucker stories’ and rituals relating to food consumption. There are visual treasures to be discovered amongst Van Der Byl’s object-works that cost a fraction of the price of the artist’s more formal (in terms of high art) and celebrated silk-paintings.

The soft lustre materiality of the silk is a pre-prepared elegant surface structure; when paints are applied alchemy is achieved enabling luminous aesthetics. The softness of the silk lends itself to a beautiful drape ideal for wall hangings or paintings.

Van Der Byl says of the chemical process:

“I love the magic – alchemy of the way in which the paints and the silk work together”.

Dozens of Van Der Byl’s ‘magical’ silk-paintings can be located in Australian public institutions.

Since discovering a talent for painting on silk, the artist has been prolific in her manifestations, feverishly exhibiting new works in Adelaide, plus outreach and collaborative projects in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. *My dreaming – past – present – future* is the 11<sup>th</sup> exhibition of Van Der Byl’s art in the Adelaide Fringe festival. Indeed, Van Der Byl is a key figure in the history of the Adelaide Fringe, where she is both its most exhibited artist and longest serving Board Member of 13 years.

Van Der Byl’s imagery has been depicted on banners, posters, brochures, calendars and books for the promotion of juvenile justice, education, housing and other social justice issues affecting the well-being of Aboriginal peoples. Also connected to her politics the artist collaborated for the design of the 1992 National Reconciliation Week poster for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and has facilitated numerous arts and cultural workshops for children. Perhaps the artist’s most well known work is the mixed media public artwork *Yerrakartarta*. Constructed in 1995 and located on the lower forecourt of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in North Terrace, Adelaide, the work is through collaboration with principal Aboriginal artist Darryl Pfitzner-Milika, Stephen Bowers and ceramicists Jo Crawford and Jo Fraser. The narrative accompanying *Yerrakartarta* says the art “reflects the seemingly random order of the natural world”, “tells a story built upon other stories”, and is a “celebration of the ongoing and contemporary nature of Aboriginal art”. These descriptions provide clues for understanding the artist’s overall output.

The artist has adopted her grandmother’s Laitji Laitji name Mumthelang as a trademark for her visual production. The process of channelling and (re)presenting her grandmother grants the artist a freedom of incorporeal (to be both in place and out of place at the same time) allowing for a more liberating creativity outside of the contained structures and imposed models of expression that Aboriginal peoples are expected to practice within. Much of Van Der Byl’s work challenges the viewer’s concept of what is real or natural; some of the animals and people are cleverly observed inside out and depict ‘spirit warriors’. The Rainbow Serpent or ‘spirit warriors’ are opposition to the man-made western theological structure of the agreed nature of things. Through her artworks, Van Der Byl offers imagery that is beyond the scope of the four-dimensional world with which many of us border ourselves.

All of the works in *My dreaming – past – present – future* are new silk-paintings. Some of the imagery is of recurring motifs from the artist’s catalogue (fish, snakes, kangaroos, birds, women and men) as well as some intriguing multi-layered narrative works (extended kinships, mystical creatures). Overall these new silk-paintings present alchemy not only through the chemical physicality of the medium but also through the narrative imaging performed by this highly creative artist who is continuing to explore and enjoy the magic of visual art creation.

**Troy-Anthony Baylis**

Adelaide, February 2008