

The Honourable Justice Layton

Notes for opening of exhibition of paintings by Muriel van der Byl

“My dreaming – past – present – future”

Thursday 21 February 2008

This exhibition of Muriel's is a very happy occasion, as well as being importantly symbolic for a number of reasons:

- It comes within eight days after the Apology, which is such an important formal acknowledgement of the wrongs done to Aboriginal people over the generations to the present time. Hopefully this is the first important step to not simply recognising, but also redressing past wrongs.
- This exhibition is also symbolic as an expression by an Aboriginal woman of Aboriginality.
- The exhibition is especially symbolic because it is Muriel's expression of her own Aboriginality, indicated by her calling the exhibition “My dreaming – past – present – future”.

Having referred to the symbolism of this exhibition, I also say that the exhibition is very accessible and has enormous artistic appeal to any viewer, regardless of whether or not a person is educated about Aboriginal ways or trained in matters artistic. It is a beautiful exhibition.

In opening the exhibition, I'd like to focus on two things:

First, Muriel herself and a little of her history and her contribution for Aboriginal people generally. Second, a reflection on her particular contribution to art and, in particular, through this exhibition.

Muriel and her contribution to Aboriginal people

Muriel is a remarkable woman. For a start, she is prepared to acknowledge her age as being 65. She was actually born in the City of Adelaide and she is a Yarraldi Aboriginal elder. She has ties with the Kaurna and Laitji Laitji clans. In particular, she uses her grandmother's name as the name under which she paints, “Mumthelang”. Her family totem is the Rainbow Serpent and you will see this is strongly reflected in many of her paintings.

Unlike many Aboriginal people born a little after her, she describes her early childhood as extremely happy. Much of her early life was spent in the lower-Murray region along the banks of the river. She says that from time to time they lived in a humpy on the river. She has a special love of the river and, like all Aboriginal people, of being outside with nature. She also describes quite vividly how her mother and grandmother used to trick the children into being away from the camp at the time when white fellas were coming, in order to keep them out of the way of the authorities. She therefore escaped from being one of those who was not able to be brought up to live with her family.

Her mother, who did not paint, had an artistic flair in unstitching secondhand clothes and then refashioning them. Muriel certainly attributes some of her artistic genes to her mother. From an early age Muriel used to paint and draw. It was not until much later, however, that this gradually became a prime focus of her time.

For some 30 years of her life she has worked as a Community Worker or a Social Worker in support of Aboriginal families. She also worked for a number of years with the Aboriginal Education Foundation. She married a Dutchman who was an artist, and he encouraged her to express her artistic talents. This began tentatively, painting on just about anything she could find, whether it be second-hand goods or ones that she created. She would paint on anything from clothes to boots to making her own jewellery and, in various ways, personalising things she wore for herself. It was not until much later, namely in 1992 after a dream, that she came to silk painting.

Muriel has been passionate about the need for preservation of Aboriginal culture and community. She has been a great advocate for social justice in numerous ways. She has a strong sense of

purpose and vision about Aboriginal culture and its place in a predominately white community in Australia.

She was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia on 26 January 2005.

In the context of expressing herself in relation to prevention of suicides in regard to Aboriginal people, she expressed herself very eloquently as to aspects of being Aboriginal. In her own words she said this:

“Traditionally, we do not think of land, housing, health, education, recreation and so on as separate or distinct things. Aboriginal people see everything as a whole, like a circle. Problems were solved by thrashing out issues over a long period of time. Now we are asked to do things ‘yesterday’, without time to think or to get together enough ... We have to be able to plan how to look after our people – to restore the sense of wholeness. Over the years Aboriginal people have always been asked to walk to white man’s directives; what we are saying is that we all have to waltz together, but we must share in the composition of the music.”

Muriel has always remembered her mother’s advice which was to *know who you are, where you are and where you’re going.*

Turning now to the works that you will see shortly.

The works show a recurrence of themes, some being more obvious in one work than another.

- The notion of completeness and circle and wholeness is very much apparent in all of the works. There is great balance shown in the paintings.
- Protection
- Education
- Unity
- Humour
- Her love of the number 7, which has great symbolism for her.
 - Seven is linked to dreamtime and the dreaming of the Seven Sisters. Apart from that, she has always loved the number 7. It represents the seven days of the week; the north, south, east, west, air, wind and fire; the sun and the moon and the stars have always been symbolic. Often she is not even aware that she has indicated seven of various things. You will certainly see it in the expression of seven eggs shown in a number of paintings which reflect, of course, fertility.
- Hope for the future

The techniques which Muriel uses in the expression of her painting are strong but delicate. She uses often powerful colours which, in their combination, are joyous. The medium of painting on silk gives a special lustre. Painting on a canvas or other form does not have the same glow. She uses the medium beautifully.

Many of the animals represented could either be real or mystical or spiritual. Some of them are quite organic and reminiscent of Aboriginal works more generally.

In closing, I would say that you will have a very enjoyable experience in looking at her works and, hopefully, they will all be sold. It is nice to have work admired, but to have them go to much loved places is even better. She is an artist represented throughout the world and her artwork here is marked at very reasonable prices.

Thank you Muriel for giving me the honour and privilege to be able to open your exhibition, particularly as I am a Goonya Mimini.