



Yvonne Koolmatrjie harvesting sedge on the Murray River near Berri, 2009, photographs by Chris Koolmatrjie

list of works

**Yvonne KOOLMATRIE**

*Eel trap*, 2008  
woven sedge  
152 x 39 x 8 cm

*Eel trap*, 2008  
woven sedge  
235 x 44 x 8 cm



*Yvonne Koolmatrjie: Eel Traps*  
7 August – 6 September 2009

A commission for the University of South Australia Art Collection

Published by the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art  
University of South Australia  
55 North Terrace, Adelaide SA 5000  
T 08 8302 0870  
E samstagmuseum@unisa.edu.au  
W unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum

Copyright © the artist, author and University of South Australia

All rights reserved. This publication is copyright. Except as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced by any process, electronic or otherwise, without permission in writing from the publisher. Neither may information be stored electronically in any form whatsoever without such permission.

ISBN 978-0-9803661-8-1

Samstag Museum of Art Director: Erica Green  
Exhibitions and Public Programs: Emma Epstein  
Samstag Administrator: Jane Wicks  
Museum Assistant: Sarah Wall  
Gallery Attendant: Lara Merrington

Graphic Design: Sandra Elms Design  
Photography: Grant Hancock, Chris Koolmatrjie  
Printing: FiveStarPrint

The Samstag Museum would like to thank Tara Dodd, Assistant Collections Manager and Keryn Walshe, Senior Collections Manager, Australian Aboriginal and Archaeology Collections, South Australian Museum for providing the image of a Ngarrindjeri basket.



The Samstag Museum gratefully acknowledges its sponsors and the exhibition partners and ongoing supporters of the Samstag Museum; Dr Anna Ciccarelli, Dr Adam Dutkiewicz, Ann Preston-Flint, Julian and Stephanie Grose, Mariann R McNamara and the late Peter (Mac) McNamara, William Morrow, Professor Ian North and Dr RJ Ryan

Cover Image: Yvonne KOOLMATRIE, Ngarrindjeri language group, *Eel trap*, 2008, woven sedge, 235 x 44 x 8 cm. Image © the artist. Photograph by Grant Hancock



Yvonne Koolmatrjie: Eel Traps



# Yvonne Koolmatrie: Eel Traps

Christine Nicholls

A traumatic event in her family life led Yvonne Koolmatrie to attend a one-day workshop in traditional Ngarrindjeri weaving techniques. Grief-stricken and directionless, Koolmatrie listlessly decided that she "...might as well go along and see what's going on, just wander down..."<sup>1</sup> to a weaving workshop being held at the Meningie Area School, under the guidance of the late Dorothy (Auntie Dorrie) Kartinyeri.

That was in 1982 and her decision to attend that Ngarrindjeri weaving workshop was to change Yvonne Koolmatrie's life, and the lives of others too. In accordance with the 'Cleopatra's Nose' theory of history (described as such because Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*: "If Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the entire face of the world would have changed"),<sup>2</sup> sometimes history can be changed through the actions of a single person.

Yvonne Koolmatrie (née Roberts) was born in 1944 and spent her childhood travelling around rural South Australia with her parents and siblings. Her father Joseph, a Kokatha<sup>3</sup> man hailing from Ooldea on the eastern fringe of the Nullarbor Plain, and a member of the stolen generation, was an itinerant seasonal worker. Yvonne and her seven siblings accompanied their father and Ngarrindjeri mother Connie as they moved around rural South Australia in pursuit of work. Reflecting on those early days in the 1940s and 1950s, Koolmatrie says, "We kids grew up traditional. We'd travel and come back to places each year, to fruit-pick or stump-dig, bag sewing, chop wood, do fencing – we were jillaroos, wool-classes, everything... I went to that many schools, usually only two to three weeks at a time, and sometimes we did correspondence [schoolwork]. We lacked education but not knowledge. Mum was a really good teacher".

It is evident that Yvonne Koolmatrie's tough, loving, childhood endowed her with resilience and inner strength, qualities that she has since brought to bear in forging an international reputation as a weaver. Since her auspicious decision to attend the 1982 workshop, Koolmatrie has been active in reviving and maintaining her people's basketry and fibre-weaving traditions.

Over the ensuing years Koolmatrie has woven eel traps, baby baskets, burial baskets, fish and yabby traps and other diversely imaginative weavings including a turtle, an echidna, a biplane and even a marvellously inventive hot-air balloon. The raw material that she uses to make these works include a range of sedges and rushes which are tussock-forming riparian perennials that grow in abundance around the Coorong and along the Murray River.

But it is for her woven eel traps with their characteristic trumpet or trombone-like forms that Yvonne Koolmatrie has become internationally renowned, and also revered locally as the indisputable queen of Ngarrindjeri weaving. In 1997 Koolmatrie's work was selected, along with that of Emily Kam Kngwarrey and Queensland Indigenous artist Judy Watson, to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in an exhibition titled *Fluent*.

For the Samstag Museum of Art exhibition Koolmatrie has woven two graceful, elegantly designed eel traps, using late-season sedge that she describes as "autumn coloured". When weaving eel traps, Koolmatrie always "starts at the small end" of the work, and "works up", meticulously weaving her way towards the broader, flared opening. This approach relates to the original function of the traps, originally designed to catch these sweet, rich, though unprepossessing freshwater fish, considered by many a delicacy. Koolmatrie explains that:

"...the big fish would chase the eels into the swampy mudflat areas – the traps would be tied onto a log, just lying there, and the eels would push their way in head first, with the rest of their bodies following. Their heads often got joined together at the skinny end of the trap and they'd be trapped. Once the eels' heads were well and truly stuck inside the woven baskets, Ngarrindjeri people would get rocks or big sticks and smash their heads in – it would be too dangerous otherwise!"

Yvonne Koolmatrie's vivid description of the 'take no prisoners' method of dispatching these repellent-looking, slimy, snakelike water creatures, is a function of the damage that eels are capable of doing to human predators who attempt to handle them.

The traps that Koolmatrie has woven for the Samstag Museum are objects of highly skilled craftsmanship and design that seamlessly combine form, function and visual and aesthetic appeal. While in recent years the purely functional aspects of these woven traps have mostly become subordinate to aesthetic considerations, and the traps are now mostly admired as contemporary *objets d'art*, it is important to note that the processes followed by Koolmatrie in their making remain deeply rooted in her Ngarrindjeri heritage and traditions. Yvonne Koolmatrie proudly attests to the unique nature of Ngarrindjeri weaving, to the fact that it can be differentiated from other forms of Aboriginal weaving. "In a workshop with Arnhem Landers, weavers from Maningrida", says Koolmatrie, "they really acknowledged us Ngarrindjeri, saying 'that's your stitch!' With our blanket stitch nothing is tied – you just add more string and wind it in".

Koolmatrie puts her heart and soul into her weaving. She is adamant that she would never watch TV while doing so: "When I work alone I just concentrate on my work".

She also often weaves in group situations that resonate with age-old Ngarrindjeri practices of 'yarning': "When we have a workshop we all sit around weaving, and I tell everyone the old stories. I do what the old people used to do, I tell stories while we're weaving... People say to me, 'Well, you're famous, but you're down to earth' ". In terms of passing her knowledge on to others, Yvonne is especially pleased that in recent years her son has not only taken up weaving but is excelling at the art.

Perhaps Yvonne Koolmatrie is most at home in what she calls "my garden", a beautiful and secluded<sup>4</sup> location on the banks of the Murray near Berri, where she lives and works. This is the spot, tantamount to a sacred site, to which she habitually returns to collect the special sedge that is the perfect raw material for her exquisite woven objects. The moment that Yvonne enters her special domain, her facial muscles relax into an expression of quiet radiance. This sense of Yvonne Koolmatrie



being at peace in this, "her place", was equally evident as she was bending down, painstakingly pulling up shoots of sedge suitable for her weavings, deft fingers working quickly and assuredly.

When Yvonne is weaving she experiences a similar feeling of transcendent calm: "When I'm weaving I feel no pain. For me, the weaving is meditation".

Yvonne Koolmatrie's exceptional ability and passion for weaving has resulted in the creation of many inspired woven artworks, of which the two currently on display at Adelaide's Samstag Museum of Art are fine examples. It is just as well that Koolmatrie overcame her initial vacillation and went along to that Ngarrindjeri weaving workshop back in 1982. In keeping with the Cleopatra's Nose conceptualisation of history, contemporary Australian art history would have been very different if Yvonne Koolmatrie had decided not to venture out on that fateful day, and had stayed at home instead.

1 Personal communication by Yvonne Koolmatrie to Christine Nicholls and Erica Green, Berri, South Australia, Sunday 12 July 2009.

Subsequent quotations and a good deal of the information in this essay also resulted from the same encounter.

2 Original quote in French: "Si le nez de Cléopâtre eût été plus court, toute la face du monde aurait changée". (Pascal, Blaise, 1972, *Pensées, Fragment 392*, Gallimard, Paris, p 243.)

3 A cultural and language group linked to the Pitjantjatjara (Western Desert) cultural and linguistic group.

4 In fact, this area is quite accessible, but is 'secluded' in the sense that the majority of people visiting nearby would be unaware of its significance.

#### Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the vitally important roles of Yvonne Koolmatrie and Erica Green, with respect to this essay.