

Lorraine Connelly-Northey

“Mum was born and raised on the banks of freshwater rivers, in the shanties constructed out of discarded scraps of rusty tin and iron, living off the land, its waterways and the government handouts.

Dad would take me out bush and teach me what he had learnt about Mum’s culture and the bush. He taught me about the river, its tributaries, lake systems, Aboriginal sites and tools and implements, nature, animals and plants, how to read rain clouds and the many aspects of water irrigation taught to him by his farming father.”

Lorraine Connelly-Northey, 2012¹

About the artist

Lorraine Connelly-Northey was born in Swan Hill, Victoria in 1962. Her Waradgerie [Wiradjuri] mother’s homelands were in central NSW. Her Irish father made sure that his children maintained a strong connection with

Waradgerie country and would take them rabbiting and foraging regularly. These experiences were invaluable for the knowledge and skills that would influence Connelly-Northey’s art practice. Connelly-Northey lived and worked in Adelaide for a while but returned with her family to Swan Hill and her parents. There she began her art practice.

Short Biography

Born, 1962, Swan Hill, Victoria.
Waradgerie [Wiradjuri], Irish
Lives and works in Swan Hill, Victoria.

In 1995 Connelly-Northey initiated a weaving workshop through the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery with the renowned Ngarrindjeri weaver, Yvonne Koolmatrie [1945]. This experience marked the beginning of the artist’s characteristic practice. The workshop experience raised a cultural conundrum for Connelly-Northey. “Out of respect, she felt it culturally inappropriate to collect and use materials from someone else’s country, stating that ‘I remain uneasy about collecting traditionally reputable grasses and sedges for weaving from both the Wamba Wamba and neighbouring Wadi Wadi tribal boundaries’. [AGNSW education kit Woven Forms] This conundrum inspired her innovative and highly personal repurposing of rusty metals, each with different connotations.

About the artwork: critical statement

Narrbongs, 2016

Connelly-Northey recontextualises farming detritus, rusty discarded wires and metals and transforms them into sculptural objects of cultural and personal significance. She bends, shapes, twists, stitches and merges found



¹ Gruber, F. & Ah Kee, V. (2015). The 14th Istanbul Biennial Interview. [Online] Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/istanbul-biennial/6773498>

materials to create contemporary works of art that “ transform European industrialised waste into culturally iconic sculptural forms while alluding to little known traditional weaving techniques and stories connected to her Country”.

<https://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/unDisclosed/default.cfm?MnuID=ARTISTS&GALID=33801&viewID=3>

The metals are loaded with colonial references. Rusty fencing wire symbolizes the fencing that prevented her mother returning to her land. The rusty corrugated iron is a reminder of the basic composite construction of Aboriginal fringe camps and mission homes that were made of corrugated iron and tin cut and flattened into sheets and lined with newspaper for insulation. Her mother lived in such dwellings along the river. *With the support of her father, she sought to create work that spoke to her direct experiences: being displaced from her ancestral country, being of mixed heritage and living in a rural environment.*

Connelly-Northey first made Narrbongs [dilly bags] in 2002. They were intimate and small. Reclaiming the detritus not only symbolises colonization and dispossession, but suggests innovation and resilience.

The Narrbongs in various forms were originally created by Waradgerie people for many purposes, from collecting food to carrying personal effects. Traditionally made from natural fibres, weaving these would be a maternal enterprise, skills passed down from mother to daughter.

Research underpins her work. Watch this video from the National Gallery of Victoria to hear the artist talk about her practice

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeO_je2NAT8

Art Critique – Nici Cimpston 2012²

There is a real sense of spirited struggle with Connelly-Northey's work. It is physically demanding and at times dangerous working with sharp, rusty materials, literally wrestling with them and using her body to press the metal into forms she had envisaged. In this process, she navigates the notion of dispossession and injustice to Aboriginal people – and commemorates their resilience and strength.

Other relevant works

Lorraine Connelly-Northey,
Three Rivers Country. 2010.
corrugated iron, tin, mesh and wire



Glossary

Missions/reserves: government sanctioned compounds established across Australia during the 1800s for Aboriginal people who had been forcibly removed from their homelands. Missions were set up and run by churches and religious groups, while reserves, often grouped together and known colloquially as missions, were administered by government and their agencies. Organised to administer the government's assimilationist policy, some missions encouraged the expression and commercialization of Aboriginal culture, while others repressed ceremonies, languages and cultural beliefs.

Waradgerie [Wiradjuri]: Language group from southern NSW. Historically Wiradjuri has a number of different spellings. Lorraine Connelly-Northey uses 'Waradgerie' as it is the spelling used by her mother's father, Alfred Williams, on his artworks.

K-6 Questions and Activities

Connelly-Northey creates her sculptures from materials she finds in her environment. Explore your own environment and find materials that could be used in weaving, tying and knotting to create a three dimensional object. Find plastic bags, string, wire etc and experiment to create a new version of a familiar object. Discuss the ways in which this familiar object has been made new and different. Think about texture, colour and scale.

7-12 Issues for consideration

Study the series of *Narrbongs*, 2016 by Lorraine Connelly-Northey. Describe your initial response. Analyse these sculptural forms in terms of shape, form, texture, surface and line. Discuss the physical challenges of working with these materials. What does it mean to re-make a traditional Aboriginal object in the materials of pastoralism and industry? What do their histories and symbolic qualities bring to the reading of the work?

Compare Connelly-Northey's work with that of other artists who have worked with found industrial material such as Rosalie Gascoigne [1917-1999] and Robert Klippel [1920-2001]. Describe ways in which this work could be considered a re[representation of the landscape. What significance does recycling discarded industrial materials have for each artist? Discuss these ideas in class.

Select a functional object such as your school bag and re-make it using another material. Assess the difference between the two versions. What qualities in the new version create new meanings? How have the changes changed the way people interact with this once familiar object.