yarns of the heart

Noongar dolls from the Southern Wheatbelt
Foreword

As a proud Wíllman-Balardong woman who was born near the old Rusty Bridge on the Brookton Reserve, this is a project very close to my heart.

Yarns of the Heart is very special to me because it’s about Noongar people and it’s about my country, Gnûlla Booda, or as Wadjellas say, the Wheatbelt.

The art of making Noongar dolls may have been revived through the workshops of the 90’s and recent years, but creating dolls is a tradition that goes way back.

I can remember we made bush dolls out of pegs and balls and nuts from the Quondong tree. We used all sorts of things back in those days, from Sheoak nuts to sauce bottles! My mum used to help make clothes for the dolls. She would use old rags and string. We loved those dolls.

Pop Bolton ‘Old Frank Senior’ would cut wooden pieces and shape them into dolls. He would give them faces, but strangely enough, no arms! I can see him now carving away. The wood was green, so it was easy to shape the dolls.

My mum and old Aunty would sit with my sister Thora and me and we would make the dolls. Mum would paint their faces with lipstick and dress them up with rags as clothes.

I’m 77 years old now and I still have good memories of those days. Those dolls meant a lot.

I hope you enjoy this new generation of Noongar dolls and you appreciate that each doll tells a story – a story from my people and country.

Janet Hayden
Noongar Elder

Introduction

It is a real privilege to present to you the Yarns of the Heart exhibition, a partnership between the Western Australian Museum and Community Arts Network WA. As the title suggests, this is an exhibition where the raw and the delicate, the traditional and the contemporary combine to reveal the doll makers’ stories.

I am thrilled to see what began as a series of humble doll making workshops in the Wheatbelt, has accumulated into a major Western Australian Museum exhibition. This is testimony that the project has captured many people’s imaginations along its journey, and now we have the privilege of sharing the dolls and their stories with you.

Yarns of the Heart is part of a three-year CAN WA initiative, Strong Culture, Strong Community, that aims at creating opportunities for Southern Wheatbelt communities to have a voice through the arts.

The collection of dolls that you see in this exhibition evolved through a collaborative community arts process between the Noongar community, artist facilitators and CAN WA. The Noongar community brought with them their willingness to participate, their enthusiasm, stories and memories to each of the workshops. The artist facilitators Nalda Searles and Cecile Williams brought their skills, knowledge and generosity to share with each of the participants. CAN WA provided its capacity to facilitate and connect with communities, as well as its expertise as a creative producer.

Projects like these are very special; they create a collective space in which all involved can witness transformation occurring at many levels. Recycled clothing remnants, old buttons and straw become a unique one of a kind doll that speaks of cultural identity or depicts a personal memoir. Everyone who participated in this creative process learnt something new, either about themselves or about another person they worked alongside. Above all, Yarns of the Heart enabled the Noongar community to have a space to share in a creative process. This is precious. These creative processes are fundamental to our humanity, they nurture our souls and heal our hearts.

This project has been made possible through the support of Lotterywest, the Wheatbelt Development Commission, Town of Narrogin, Office for the Arts, the Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Department of Culture and the Arts and the Australia Council.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank all project participants from the Noongar community. You will be role models for future generations, inspiring others to use the art of doll making to create stories and memories.

I hope this catalogue acts as a gift to all involved and will be treasured long after the exhibition finishes.
The Story of the Dolls

The making of dolls by Noongar communities in the Southern Wheatbelt, has now been alive for almost twenty years. Yarns of the Heart, presented by Community Arts Network WA in association with Western Australian Museum, is an exhibition that showcases this doll making practice, from its birth to its recent revival.

History of the Dolls

In 1994, the Narrogin Aboriginal Corporation, along with the Town of Narrogin, hosted Nalda Searles and Pantjiti Mary McLean as artists in residence, as part of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). Through these workshops local Aboriginal adults and young people were taught traditional skills in painting, decorative wood burning, clay modelling, jewellery making, basketry, patchwork, appliqué and doll making. The project was established to further develop craft skills in the local Aboriginal community and help reconnect the participants with traditional Aboriginal craft practices via a committed Noongar craft group that was formed by the women.

A new style of Noongar doll making was also derived from the workshops based on the black figures present in Pantjiti’s paintings. This inspired the first dark-coloured dolls the women had ever seen, building a strong sense of identity and connection to what they were creating.

Made from the heart, telling the story of the creator and their connection to culture, community and family, the news of the dolls and their doll makers soon travelled. They were consequently invited to showcase their unique pieces in local, national and even international exhibitions, some travelling to Beijing for an exhibition on Pacific and Aboriginal Women’s History of the Dolls.

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Yarns of the Heart – Reviving the Art of Storytelling

CAN WA established their second regional office (the first being in Kellerberrin) in Narrogin in 2010, employing three Aboriginal staff members to work within the Southern Wheatbelt towns of Wagin, Brookton, Pingelly and Narrogin. The original doll making project was discussed during consultations with the community. It was discovered that some of the original doll makers still made pieces occasionally, however it was the daughters and nieces of these women that were keen to see the practice revived.

Beginning in September 2010, CAN WA invited renowned textile artists Nalda Searles and Cecile Williams back to Narrogin to teach the skills to this new generation of Noongar women. CAN WA’s Aboriginal Arts and Culture Trainee, Sonia Kickett worked with the ladies, assisting them to coordinate their own weekly workshops at the Best Start Centre. Nalda and Cecile returned, teaching more complex textile skills as the workshops progressed.

As the project developed, stories and connections came to light, revealing the true significance of the dolls. CAN WA was supported by ScreenWest’s Indigenous Community Stories program, sending a crew from the Film and Television Institute (FTI) to Narrogin for a week to film and interview the artists and capture their stories. CAN WA invited Catherine Simmonds over from Melbourne to be the interviewer. Catherine had previously worked with the Narrogin community on a soundscape project, and is also the Director of the Brunswick Women’s Theatre.

During the week, stories of connection to family, community and culture were told as the women talked about their dolls and why they made them. They described dressing them in nice clothes, to represent their ‘ideal image of themselves and their families and the proud way they identified with these dolls, made only by Noongar people. When asked ‘What did you play with as a child – what was your doll’, the replies told of living on reserves, fashioning dolls from sardine tins and day, borrowed bottles, pegs and bound bush cuttings.

CAN WA has captured behind the scenes footage highlighting these significant themes, which can be found in the accompanying documentary. Prior to this exhibition at the WA Museum, CAN WA supported a community driven exhibition at the Narrogin Nursery Café and Gallery in May 2011. This two-day event was held so the participants could showcase their amazing work within their own community, before the dolls ‘go travelling’. Featuring Erica McGuire singing and playing guitar in both English and Noongar language, the opening night attracted both the Noongar and Wadjella community. Leanne Kickett won the ‘Community Choice Prize’ for her doll Mavoda – a representation of the strength of her two grandmothers – Mavis and Rhoda.

The Yarns of the Heart exhibition brings together a selection of the dolls created by the Noongar women, girls and boys from Narrogin and Pingelly. Almost every participant is represented, with over forty new pieces on show, curated by award winning Noongar artist and sculptor Sharyn Egan. In addition to this, almost thirty dolls from the original workshops in 1994 have also been sourced, and are on loan from the National Gallery of Australia, the WA Museum and private collectors.

Each doll in the exhibition is unique and each individual character tells the story of the creator. Whether it defines ‘freedom’ as taking your shoes off at the end of a hard day, depicts a traditional story, tells of the strength of grandmothers, sisters, fathers or self, the dolls have become a significant art form within the community.

The new doll makers share stories of how special it was watching their grandmothers making the original dolls. In bringing this art form back to life for themselves and their children, they are creating their own history as their story is captured in the heart of their doll.

Nicola Davison
Project Coordinator
Facilitator’s Thoughts

The women who began as the original Narrogin doll makers need to be aware of how far the ripples from their wonderful efforts have spread. The dolls are now placed in collections all over Australia, in museums, art galleries, in peoples’ homes and have even travelled as far as China.

In 1994 when artist Pantjiti Mary McLean and I were asked to spend several weeks with the ladies, it was a very open ended idea. We knew we had to give ideas and skills that were applicable to the Noongar community. Handcrafting appeared to resonate with individuals and consequently became an essential priority and still remains one. I think having Pantjiti present is what really inspired the doll makers. The lively figures she paints beautifully lent towards the making of three-dimensional forms using recycled textiles. The dolls soon began to resemble Noongar figures that had been closed away in their hearts for many years.

Now almost twenty years on, we have seen history repeating itself. Original doll maker Elizabeth Riley and I gave each other a hug and I said, “Did you ever think this would happen?” “No” she replied, during the 2011 doll making workshop.

Over the years we have lost count of the number of workshops, friendships, exhibitions and collections that have evolved, and it is wonderful that CAN WA has been steering the revitalisation of this program.

It has been a privilege to work alongside the many women whose exquisitely crafted, hand made dolls are represented in this historical and contemporary exhibition and I warmly congratulate them all.

One of the most wonderful aspects of this latest series of CAN WA initiated workshops is the ongoing relationships and friendships that I have made whilst working with the Narrogin ladies.

I first met some of these ladies whilst working on the CAN WA Noongar Seasons Gnarojin Park public art project and then again when I worked on the doll making workshops. I enjoy the sense of passing of time and stories, which we all share.

I particularly relish the opportunity to work alongside Nalda Searles in these workshops, as our friendship spans a long period of time, with Nalda acting as a mentor and now as a fellow arts worker.

The unique dolls which have been created during these workshops are evenly matched by the wonderful sense of story that underpins them. Life, family, community and sharing of experiences from past and present often comes through in the making of these dolls. They all have rich, individual personalities that reflect the town from where they have come.

It’s been very rewarding for me seeing this new generation of doll makers evolve and I hope through their ongoing interest, more and more generations will keep this art form alive.
Curator’s Thoughts

Since the original doll making workshops run by Nalda Searles and Pantjiti Mary McLean in 1994, a new generation of women have come together in 2011 to revive the practice of making dolls whilst continuing the ancient tradition of storytelling and the passing on of skills to future generations.

The Narrogin women have been creating dolls that represent their family and community members past and present. In the making of these precious contemporary forms there is a strong awareness of identity and a continuity of culture.

There are many challenges faced by the Noongar community of Narrogin, therefore I see the value in the workshops being therapeutic in nature. I hear lots of yarning and laughter from the women and their children during the workshops. Projects such as this are instrumental in bringing communities together. There is a strong feeling of personal accomplishment, a sense of belonging and a better understanding of ones own community achieved.

Sharyn Egan
Exhibition Curator

A selection of Noongar dolls with accompanying stories told by their creators
boodjarri jija  Emily Dolgety

(Doll features by Cherie Abednego & Senema Kickett)

Aboriginal sister growing up, she’s young and pregnant and she’s very proud.

queen  Nikki Littlecott

This represents a queen – a mother of them all, like being pregnant, having a baby. And see how she has no arms and that. Just was something different I did. I never did a mouth – did you notice that? I didn’t do a mouth. I did that on purpose. I don’t know why.

“...a queen – a mother of them all”
My doll represents a story from the dreamtime. The “Charrnock Woman” dreamtime stories you hear:

I thought it a good idea to make the doll and the babies to show the new generation another way of expression, through cultural dreamtime stories.
This is my first doll. Took me about six days to do it. I was sort of thinking about a Barbie doll, but a Barbie beach doll. It’s like me – imagining sitting at the beach, watching everyone swim and getting in the water when it’s hot. Sitting behind a bar, having a couple of cocktails. Somewhere like Fiji. A getaway doll – getting out of Narrogin. Lovely to be there, to get away from everything. To get away from the issues, and just stay there. I suppose wherever you go there’s always issues. The blue also reminded me of my nephew Warren, with blue eyes, he’s got nice blue eyes.

the lady from the mango tree  
Senema Kickett  
This reminds me of one of the ladies playing cards with my Nanna in Katherine under the mango trees.
I made one that’s blue, but it’s got a yellow dress on, with Aboriginal designs on the dress. I try to make them as easy as I can. Because she’s got no shoes on, she sort of represents freedom, she just goes and does her own thing, wears what she wants, because not many Noongar girls wear dresses and pretty colours, bright colours. So I put her in bright blue and yellow. So it’s sort of like letting her freedom out.

When you work all day, you got shoes on all day, and when I was working it was like you had to get the right shoes to go to work, and you had to be dressed the right way, so people can respect you for who you are, especially going into work where white people are working, and they’re all glammed up. It was hard deciding what you were going to wear for the day, you know. It would have been easier to wear a uniform to go to work. But when you’re home you can take your shoes off, and just be yourself, and that’s my point of view for the doll. She can just be herself, doesn’t matter what colour you are, and what you wear.

I began making this doll during NAIDOC week. My doll reminds me when all the Aboriginal women dressed up for the Ball. My Grandparents attended this event and they loved dancing and showing off their moves and skills.

She can just be herself, doesn’t matter what colour you are, and what you wear.

freedom doll
Noelene Olman

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silky
Leanne Kickett

I began making this doll during NAIDOC week. My doll reminds me when all the Aboriginal women dressed up for the Ball. My Grandparents attended this event and they loved dancing and showing off their moves and skills.
Sonia Kickett

This doll is my Grandmother Mavis Bolton, she is one of the original doll makers. Nan Mavis is the inspiration for making my dolls, and she is the only Grandparent living. I’m proud to do a doll of her.

Sonia Kickett

Nan Lizzy is Nan Mavis’ sister and she also is one of the original doll makers. I really like Nan Lizzy’s dolls, really down to earth. I hope one day I will be as good as Nan Lizzy and Nan Mavis.

Sonia Kickett

When I first began making this doll it was for the fun of it, then when it started to come together I started thinking I need to have a story to go with it.

The shape and features started to remind me about my Grandmother’s. My doll represents my Grandmother’s generation and how they became strong, proud and assertive women by caring and raising their children, assisting their husband by travelling with them to where the work was available and assisting their Aboriginal community while living on the outskirts of town.

I am grateful that my Grandmother’s passed on their strong values and morals to my father and mother in which it was then passed to me to make me the person I am today.

Leanne Kickett

Name given on behalf of my Grandmothers Mavis Bolton and Rhoda Kickett (dec.)

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aussie bloke  Cherie Abednego
This one is sort of more of an Aussie man, doing farmwork, like most of the Aboriginal elders used to do—help on the farms. The grandparents would say, they used to go from one farm, or their home—to a farm, to work and they’d go on a horse and cart and they used to get some work there. They talk about who they know, in the white community, that they used to work with, sort of grew up looking after their children as well.

Grandparents are our hearts, our future and our life. Without them we would be a little bit lost. All Grandparents raise their families with so much love. I miss my Grandparents heaps, their shoulder and their stories and their knowledge.
I thought that maybe this little doll would give me strength.

This is the first time I’ve made this doll, and I feel like it’s something strong — what our Noongar people carry with them, some strength in them. A lot of people think they’re weak, but I thought that maybe this little doll would give me strength, to fight battles. It reminds me of a strong leader — like Yagan, or a lot of our Noongar elders, who are pretty strong, and took a lot of put-me-down things, but they still stood up amongst them all. They might have killed the body, but they couldn’t kill the spirit.

bush boy  Cherie Abednego
When we go bush everyday it’s so relaxing, calm and peaceful. You look around and see lots of Grass Trees everywhere. You imagine they are Bush Boys out there with you.

bush girl  Telisha Kickett
This is my Bush Girl. This is how I like to walk around the bush, when me and my family go kangaroo hunting, wood cutting and BBQ out bush.
Unwara is an old spider-man, was guardian of his two nephews, Ngali and Balinga. He was also a very clever medicine man.

Ngali and Balinga fell in love with two sisters from the neighbouring tribe and asked the girls to come and live with them in their camp. In doing this, the youths were breaking tribal laws. Unwara and the other elders were very angry but said nothing of it that night.

The next day, the old spider-man sent his nephews off in one direction for a day’s hunting and the two sisters in another to collect seeds and grasses. As soon as the children were out of sight, Unwara changed the two sisters into emus and coaxed them to a nearby waterhole.

When the two youth returned, Unwara met them excitedly and told them that there were two emus down at the waterhole. Ngali and Balinga quickly stalked and killed the emus, because the girls transformed recognised the boys and made no attempt to run away.

When the boys brought the emus back to camp, Unwara laughed scornfully, saying they had killed the very girls they had wanted to marry. Because they disobeyed the law their uncle and the other elders banished them forever.
When I was a little girl, I used to always have white little baby dolls. So when I found the black materials, I used it. I love this little black doll. It is my first black doll - and the first doll I ever made as well. When I was making it, it was like a dark coloured doll, because Aboriginals always have a stereotype – you always gotta be dark coloured skin, and dark coloured eyes, and dark hair. And I got fair hair, fair skin, so this doll is about how you can be dark, and represent a blondie, with white, fair hair. That’s what I did it as.

I’m doing twins – boy and girl. My niece and nephew. They live in Perth. Their father is from Brookton, and their mum is my sister. She had seven kids, and then had twins. They’re good kids, they’re in pre-primary. The blue one is the boy, but he likes pink and things as well. They’re very different. The boy is very quiet, and the girl – she likes to climb, so she’d be on the fence, or wherever she could climb.
List of Participants

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Ezekiel Bolton
Heidi Bolton
Kelly Bolton
Mavis Bolton
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Christine Currie
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Mariah Edwards
Geri Hayden
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Chante Kickett
Kellie Kickett
Leanne Kickett
Nicola Kickett
Priscilla Kickett
Rae-Kee Kickett
Senema Kickett
Sonia Kickett
Teisha Kickett
Cheryl Lawrence
Nikki Littlecott
Alyssa McGuire
Kyle Mead
Grace Merritt
Noelene Olman
Elizabeth (Lizzy) Riley
Jean Riley
Kaine Riley
Lesley Riley
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