JANET FIELDHOUSE: body ornaments

JANUARY 27 - MAY 21, 2017

KLUGE-RUHE ABORIGINAL ART COLLECTION
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Janet pays her respects to the Monacan people and their elders, past and present, and thanks her family and friends.

Joanna Bosse
Amy Boyd and Vivien Anderson of Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne.
The elegance and experimentation of the work of Australian artist Janet Fieldhouse distinguishes it among that of her peers both within Australia and internationally. Over the last two decades Fieldhouse has established a practice that crosses artistic genres and extends the concept of cultural renewal, re-embodying and re-imagining aspects of her Torres Strait Islander ancestry and achieving the delicate balance of individual expression with the authenticity of past traditions. She occupies a singular position within contemporary Indigenous art practice, as there are few artists who achieve such a seamless merging of beauty, innovation and technical experimentation while retaining the enigmatic sensibility of ritual.

Fieldhouse is an experimental maker who uses various clay mediums to create highly individual and aesthetically refined sculptures. A true ceramicist, Fieldhouse is dedicated to the medium; she is accepting of its capacious nature (it’s difficult to anticipate pyro-plasticity for example) in the same way that one accepts a loved but fickle family member. Fieldhouse is competent in a variety of media, however, her preference and passion is for clay - "to me it’s like a canvas" - a set parameter replete with possibilities. While she often pushes the medium to its limits, by deploying new construction methods and scaling her sculptures perilously large (often to the point of failure), the medium is never abandoned in her quest for an artistic outcome. Nor is her desire for aesthetic perfection put aside in deference to practical considerations. Clay is Fieldhouse’s medium - her language - and through it she speaks quietly of tradition, identity and the power of cultural connection in an entirely contemporary idiom.

Born in far north Queensland to parents of European and Torres Strait Islander descent, Fieldhouse lived her early years in Cairns and commenced studying visual art at Cairns Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college in 1990. It was here that she met and studied under renowned Indigenous artist Thancoupie (also known as Gloria Fletcher or Thanakupi, 1937–2011), a ceramicist, linguist and mentor who inspired generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists for over five decades. Thancoupie is credited with being the first Indigenous Australian to study fine arts at a university level and the first to forge a successful career as an independent ceramicist gaining international acclaim.
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As with Marriage pendant (2016), these works also have as their basis the double fishhook form. The elaborate feather additions recall other forms of women’s adornment, such as grass skirts. Remarkably restrained and stunningly dramatic in their scale and presence, these works beautifully illustrate Fieldhouse’s engagement with the artistic practices of her Torres Strait ancestors. Not seeking to imitate or continue ancient practices, Fieldhouse refers to her ancestral past obliquely to create new manifestations of what has been in the heart of the identity of her people for millennia.

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Marriage Pendant, 2016, buff raku clay.

Mark and Memory II, 2014, red raku clay with black and white charcoal.
form of the design and the human body in an entirely abstract way—a challenging undertaking.

In 2014, Fieldhouse included a substantial body of these sculptures in her major exhibition at Cairns Regional Gallery titled Mark and Memory. In the catalogue, writer Christine Nicholls describes the anthropomorphic qualities of these works: “quasi-humanoid red raku sculptural forms evoking abstracted, sturdy, red-ochre decorated torsos (or other highly abstracted body parts) of youthful dancing women, adorned with black and white ceremonial markings, and which refer indirectly to woven skirts fashioned from feathers and other textiles, bring to mind significant ceremonial occasions.” The works have a weighty, enigmatic presence.

A central reference for Fieldhouse’s recent sculptures is the traditional form of the Torres Strait Islander “hooked triangle” which comprises an infilled triangle with two small curved lines emanating from either side of its tip. Variations of the design feature on drums, pipes, and wooden combs in the Haddon Collection, and were used for scarification. The work Mark and memory 3 (2014), included in the Body Ornaments exhibition at the Kluge-Ruhe Collection, illustrates Fieldhouse’s imaginative re-interpretation of this symbolic form in three-dimensions: the three small curved hooks extending on each side refer directly to the hooked triangle but in this context enhance the dynamism of the sculpture. Another traditional form that obliquely appears in Fieldhouse’s work is the double-sided fish hook, an ornamental and spiritual talisman which evolved from the tradition of a bride wearing multiple fish hook pendants made from turtle shells. This anchor-like form is used as a basis for the most recent work, Fieldhouse’s monumental Marriage pendant (2016). Constructed with buff raku, which has a sandy color and a fine grainy texture, Fieldhouse created a curved symmetrical form with small, double hook-like handles attached to either side of its smooth, voluptuous belly and a tall mast-like spire rising from its center with an eyelet at its apex. The talismanic object is an evocation, rather than a rendition, and it holds a captivating, mute power that comes from its aesthetic beauty and ritualistic underpinnings.

Scarification designs also feature more overtly in Fieldhouse’s porcelain light box works. Made with the flexible porcelain product Keraflex, which she also uses in her woven baskets and armband sculptures, Fieldhouse cuts designs — often a much more literal translation of scarification marks, or articulated images of pendants and combs — and layers these to produce different effects of translucency. Fieldhouse exploits the luminous quality of porcelain, showing Thancoupie’s practice comprised a wholly independent artistic vision that evolved through formal study and proficiency in technical skills, and was informed by deep cultural knowledge of her Wik (Aboriginal) heritage. She is best known for her spherical and egg-shaped ceramic sculptures incised with symbolic and figurative motifs associated with her coastal homeland. These works hold an earthy and otherworldly presence that is equally familiar and mysterious. It is a similar energy to Fieldhouse’s delicate yet robust raku sculptures and, while aesthetically different, the works share the same quiet resonance with the elemental and the transformational.

As a teacher and mentor, Thancoupie’s encouragement of Fieldhouse’s natural affinity for ceramics was foundational. The successful model of a professional artist and teacher, Thancoupie provided a leading example to Fieldhouse, then in her very early twenties, to pursue a serious career in ceramics (Fieldhouse is now a visual art teacher herself, currently working at North Queensland TAFE in Cairns). Following her TAFE graduation, Fieldhouse sought to formally enhance her skills and receive guidance in her conceptual interests by enrolling in a postgraduate ceramics program at Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra in 2007, which culminated in a Masters of Philosophy in 2010.

At ANU Fieldhouse was fortunate to have two outstanding mentors. Renowned ceramicists Janet Deboos (b. 1948) and Greg Daly (b. 1954) encouraged both her technical explorations in the studio and her re-connection to her Torres Strait Islander artistic heritage. In order to understand her own artistic lineage, Fieldhouse explored the little-known material culture of Torres Strait Islander women as part of her formal study.

One of the challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who wish to reconnect with their ancestral traditions is the loss of continuity and lack of material examples from which they can study and learn. The oral passing of information has been, and remains, the rich core of Indigenous living culture. However, for artists who are interested in the objects, imagery, and techniques of making, access to artifacts and the opportunity and freedom to intimately connect with them is essential. Torres Strait Islanders are at a greater disadvantage than other Indigenous Australians in this regard, as the largest and most culturally valuable early collections of Torres Strait Islander material culture are held by institutions outside Australia. The most comprehensive of these are at Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the British Museum, London, whose combined holdings comprise over 1,600 items amassed
by British anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon (1855 – 1940) during 1888 - 89 and again in 1898. The central aim of Fieldhouse’s research was to rediscover the art practices of Torres Strait Islander women, a task made more difficult by the fact that it was often the practices and artifacts of men that were privileged by (largely male) anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A number of contemporary Torres Strait Islander artists have visited Cambridge and London to study the objects in these collections first-hand, including printmakers Alick Tipoti (b. 1975) and Denis Nona (b. 1973). The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has also made much of the Haddon Collection available online, and Fieldhouse undertook extensive study of these records. It was through this process that she learned about the armbands, mats and baskets that Torres Strait Islander women wove for ceremonial, practical and symbolic purposes, becoming generally interested in traditional practices of female body adornment across the Torres Strait. This rich topic has occupied Fieldhouse since 2007 and she has progressively expanded her interest in reinterpreting ancient weaving practices to include scarification and the ritual pendants women wore for marriage and other life milestones.

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Fieldhouse’s academic research led her to spend time in her homeland of Erub (Darnley) Island. She learned in detail about the woven objects traditionally made from the split green leaf of the coconut palm or pandanus, and discovered the rich history of female artistic practices and body adornment that was missing from male-centric anthropological research. Based on the interlaced techniques of weaving and plaiting, in 2008 Fieldhouse began making the iconic series of porcelain armbands and baskets that are arguably her most celebrated works. These striking forms—impossibly delicate and refined, while alluding to their practical, utilitarian roots—are almost ethereal in presence. They gleam like shimmering bands of sun-bleached bone or coral. Fieldhouse combines her forms into groups, giving them a slight anthropomorphic sensibility as they lean, nestle and prop against one another.

Incorporating traditional weaving into her own work was the first step in reclaiming her ancestral heritage and reviving it by paying homage to these near-abandoned symbolic practices. Fieldhouse’s woven objects, however, are not straightforward to achieve; porcelain is a notoriously difficult medium to control during the firing stage, often slumping or folding during the high temperatures it requires for vitrification.1 Her woven pieces often gain a sensuous “collapse” in the kiln, a serendipitous elemental touch that enhances the work’s dynamic and mysterious qualities and one that Fieldhouse embraces, beautifully describing the potentially ruinous effects of firing as “the dance in the kiln.”

Around 2011, Fieldhouse began to incorporate the vanished Torres Strait tradition of women’s scarification into her work. Traditional scarification involved designs inscribed onto the arms, chest or torso by cutting the skin and deliberately infecting the wound to form scar tissue. These body markings had a strong aesthetic and ritual purpose, and were often done to mark coming-of-age, marriage or mourning rituals. It is a tradition no longer followed, but one that captivated Fieldhouse and led to a new phase in her practice: “My idea was to research and produce a body of work to bring back what had become an unseen tradition of skin marking, not heard of in my generation, so that the next will know that scarification was once a strong part of our heritage.”2 Fieldhouse commenced her endeavor by making hand-formed sculptures from white and red raku clay, which she decorated with traditional designs using paint or charcoal. Her attempt was to create a three-dimensional representation of a two-dimensional design, embodying both the

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JANET FIELDHOUSE: the sensibility of ritual
by JOANNA BOSSE

Janet Fieldhouse currently lives in Cairns and works as an Art and Culture Teacher at the North Queensland TAFE. She studied ceramics at the Cairns Technical and Further Education College (TAFE) before continuing her studies at the Australian National University in Canberra. She has participated in twenty-seven group exhibitions since 2000, in addition to four solo exhibitions: Unseen (2005), Woven (2009), Journey (2011) and Mark and Memory (2014). Fieldhouse has twice been awarded First Prize in the National Indigenous Ceramic Awards (2007, 2012), among many other accolades. Her work is held in the major public collections of Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia. Image courtesy of Kaela Arts, Shepparton, Victoria.

about JANET FIELDHOUSE

Joanna Bosse is a curator based in Melbourne, Australia. She has curated numerous exhibitions of Indigenous art including Country in mind: five contemporary Aboriginal artists (2006), Creation tracks and trade winds: Groote Eylandt Bark Paintings (2007) and Transformations: early bark paintings from Arnhem Land (2013) at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne. In 2016, she curated the Indigenous Ceramic Art Award at the Shepparton Art Museum, in which Janet Fieldhouse was a finalist.

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Bride Pendant Series 5, 2015, Mid-fire porcelain, feathers, string, shells.