



close to the wind: LISA WAUP



## close to the wind: LISA WAUP

by Hannah Presley, Guest Curator

Lisa Waup has always had bowerbird tendencies when it comes to her art. She is always gathering little treasures that she cleverly incorporates into complex and imaginative artworks. Found materials have been central to her craft in which she offers each unique and often-discarded object a new life and the chance to be part of a bigger story. From old cords salvaged from long-broken Bakelite appliances to rope, beads, shells, and kelp found on her travels, Waup sees preciousness in the things that are left behind.

*close to the wind* is an exhibition of new works that weave together her experiences of motherhood, family, and Country. For Waup, art making allows her to give voice to the things that matter to her most. Her art comes from the heart and is a reflection of her understanding of the world around her. Waup's training as a printmaker has created a strong foundation for her work, which draws on her confident mark making and intricate patterns in a variety of materials.

Waup's first major solo exhibition, *A Journey's Edge*, was held at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne. This marked the beginning of a nuanced and loving articulation of her diverse cultural and familial influences. The exhibition comprised a series of works on paper, each page of which was tenderly adorned with handstitched details. Key works from the series incorporated documentation that outlined her complex history and separation from her biological mother and later adoption into her Australian/Calabrian family as well as her maternal connections to the Gunditjmara people of southwest Victoria and the Torres Strait Islands.

Waup's work incorporates processes and aesthetics picked up from her time living and working in Port Moresby and Lae in Papua New Guinea, the homeland of her children's father, Naup Waup. While teaching photography and printmaking at the University of Papua New Guinea, she was first exposed to *tapa* cloth, a soft bark cloth made in many communities across the Pacific by soaking and beating bark from the paper mulberry tree. It is of strong



Lisa Waup, *Chosen Before Birth*, 2016, mixed materials. Courtesy of the artist and Bayside Gallery - Bayside City Council Art & Heritage Collection. Photograph by Fred Kroh.

cultural importance as it is used to make ceremonial objects and garments and to document important designs. In Waup's woven work, *tapa* plays a key role and represents a connection between her and her children, and honors their place of birth and their ancestral connections.

Although printmaking is her first love, Waup has spent time perfecting her weaving techniques. She sewed her first intricately woven objects by stitching together feathers, wool, and colorful string with carefully selected found materials to form unique and delightful vessels. Waup first ventured into figurative weaving in 2016 with the hauntingly beautiful sculptural work *Chosen Before Birth*, which represents both her adoptive and biological mothers embracing the figure of Waup as a baby. The woven form deals with the fears and challenges of adoption while also conjuring a sense of belonging and connection. This powerful work marked an important shift in her practice as she chose to explore difficult histories that are significant to her and her family. She created a deeply personal work that embodied the protection, care, and love of family, which has become a unifying theme throughout her practice. In *Looking through time*, the woven form has been disassembled



Lisa Waup, *Looking through time*, 2017, mixed materials. Courtesy of the artist, Ararat Gallery TAMA, and Ararat Rural City Council. Photograph by Fred Kroh.

walking down runways for fashion events in Australia and internationally. Their collections united Verner's thoughtful "slow-fashion" designs and honored Waup's cultural influences. By drawing on her intricate weaving practice and her bold line work, they created runway shows that have gained well-deserved attention.

By 2019, Waup was drawn back into the world of printmaking. Guided by her love of paper, and with new ideas brewing, she decided to undertake a Master of Contemporary Art program at the Victorian College of the Arts, University

and reconstructed. The base becomes a void at the top of the work, which is adorned with intricately woven designs that represent family, cultural connection, and what is unknown.

Waup is a prolific artist who is hardworking, persistent, and focused. Central to her practice is a cherished visual diary overflowing with hand-drawn designs that inspire and inform her practice. She translates these pages of line work and patterning across many materials and projects. Together with Melbourne-based fashion designer Ingrid Verner, Waup borrowed from her visual diary to create three memorable collections that saw her designs

of Melbourne. When the coronavirus pandemic hit in the beginning of 2020, Waup was unable to engage with the print studios as she had planned. Academic writing on and critiques of her work encouraged Waup to consider her practice from different angles and gave her the confidence to create larger installations. Her ideas matured as she tackled challenging concepts, explored new materials, and reconsidered the scale of her works.

In the final year of her master's degree, Waup was invited to be a part of the *Blak Design* cohort presented by the Koorie Heritage Trust, RMIT University, and the National Gallery of Victoria. The *Blak Design* program is an initiative that fosters First Peoples cultural innovation within the design sector and provides a platform for nurturing sustainable First Peoples design practices. The program gave Waup the opportunity to work with professional jewelers to learn gold and silversmithing techniques. It was also a chance for her to further investigate the potential reflective qualities of newfound materials, such as street signs. This material exploration informed the suite of works developed for the exhibition *Redirected* (2021); her graduation exhibition, *hidden intersection*; and her jewelry work in *Melbourne Now* (2023) at the National Gallery of Victoria.



Installation shot of Lisa Waup's exhibition *Redirected*, 2021. Photograph by Emma Lou Byrne.





Lisa Waup, *moving tides*, 2023, screen painting with ink and reflective ink on Somerset paper, printed at Spacecraft Studio. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Tom Cogill.



Lisa Waup, *upwelling*, 2023, screen painting with glue on Somerset paper, printed at Spacecraft Studio. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Tom Cogill.





Lisa Waup printing at Spacecraft Studio, Footscray, 2021.  
Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Stewart Russell.

Key elements of the works in this exhibition, *close to the wind*, were printed at Spacecraft Studio, where Waup works with its founder, Stewart Russell. She first met Russell in 2017 when she began her collaboration with Ingrid Verner. Waup has since built a creatively rewarding and reciprocal relationship that has contributed greatly to the development and technical ambition of her work. Russell is a generous conversationalist, sharing with Waup his knowledge of art theories and material experimentation. She explains further:

*Working on big screens with Stewart really opened my eyes to the possibilities and the chance to splinter my works even further to represent fractured histories. I was seeing my work on a bigger scale and printing sections of the screen to find ghostly apparitions. We never quite know what we will get out of the “pull” [screen painting] until we see the result. A big part of my practice is left in the spiritually guided moments, the unexplained exposing of “coincidences,” unveiling what is not seen or expected to be seen.*

Together they continue to push the boundaries of printing by experimenting with new inks and printing on unusual materials, including kelp, custom-made reflective road signs, *tapa* cloth, and twenty-meter rolls of paper (66 feet).

A significant element in Waup’s practice is the First Nations concept of Country. The natural environment, which appears front and center throughout her work, grounds her practice and creates a narrative of respect and activism. This theme extends to the spiritual and cultural aspects of Country, encompassing the land, sky, and waterways as well as our individual responsibilities to the health and prosperity of native plants and wildlife. Many First Nations women hold important cultural knowledge for the wider community and there is an abundance of respect for women’s roles as nurturers, providers, and protectors that is built into culture. Across the world, women are still carrying water for miles, gathering grasses, and weaving fishing nets to feed their children. Waup connects with these universal maternal experiences, which manifests in her work as the link between water—a “force to be reckoned with”—and the fierceness she feels being a mother. Waup strongly associates water with women, birth, and kin. She sees the cyclical nature of water as a reflection of family and spiritual growth. Family is at the center of her practice and her three children are often referenced in various ways:

*I travel in interlocking circles of family, friends, and historical findings—journeys of self. My practice has a strong spiritual element. I have an intuitive connection to Country, of the earth and waterways being a living being. As the details of my history have always been blurred, and there are facts missing, this connection is a replacement for what is unknown. My spiritual connection to Mother Nature becomes a relationship that stands in for this loss of knowledge and forms the connection to my past without the facts being present.*

Water refreshes the lands—replenishing waterholes and rivers, washing the leaves clean, and making the rocks stand proud and sparkling. Water is the story of adaption and resilience, survival and connection. Waup responds, “Connections to the land and sea deliver me to a place of belonging and





Lisa Waup, *holding Country*, 2023, mixed materials. Courtesy of the artist and the University of Melbourne Art Collection. Photograph by Christian Capurro.

peace. It surrounds me, it nurtures me. It delivers me calm. It inspires me to do what I do as an artist. I can hear the old ones calling me.”

Waup’s recent work *holding Country* (2023) was commissioned by McClelland Sculpture Park and Gallery for the exhibition *CURRENT*, which will tour Australia over two years. For this work, Waup draws on a personal experience that speaks to the strength of water to highlight shared environmental concerns. While visiting family, longtime residents of Torrumbarry on Yorta Yorta Country in Northern Victoria, Waup experienced the build-up to a major flood. She remembers filling sandbags with the whole family in an effort to protect the property and being taken aback by how quickly the waters encroached. The floods were the beginning of a long process of recovery and regeneration, and their impact highlighted the ongoing destruction that has come from the colonization of our waterways. Due to this ongoing colonial intervention, scores of native flora and fauna were lost and ecosystems were forever altered. In the context of the more recent flooding events in the southeast of Australia, Waup created a work reminding us that we should

not wait for extreme events before we pay attention to Indigenous cultural knowledge and act on climate change, but that we should protect and advocate for our environment every day.

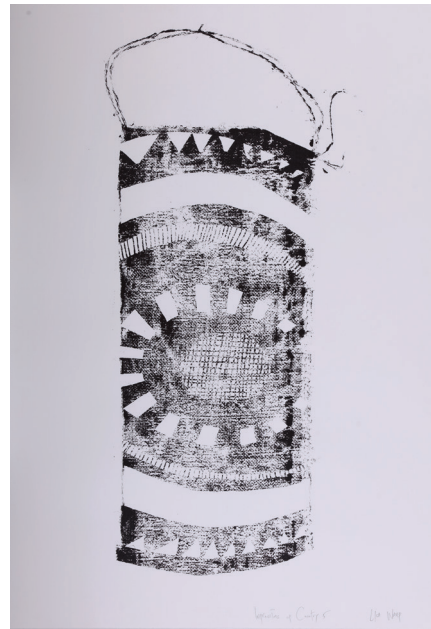
The work *holding Country II* continues this important dialogue. Composed of a series of hessian bags with unique woven handles—each elaborately decorated with designs printed on both sides in black, white, and reflective ink—the work pulsates with significance. Bags are an extension of the “vessel” that has been a recurring motif in her work, which conjures a feeling of care, inner strength, and the mother. Waup shares:

*I am extremely proud of the holding Country series. This body of work has been a long time in the making. The reflective ink on the bags illuminates when you shine light on them, and the process offers a reciprocal gaze—you can see them, and they can see you. Conceptually, this industrial material becomes a way of reflecting on the historical and ongoing injustices imposed on First Nations people since colonial invasion.*

Waup has built on the inked designs and concepts from *holding Country* in her new works *upwelling* and *moving tides*. The works come from the same starting point and are drawn from the designs in her visual diary that she holds close. In *upwelling*, we see a repeated print that is built up to reflect a stormy body of water. The inky palette she uses speaks to pollutants and the poisoning of marine life, which asks her audience to reflect on the future we are handing over to the next generations. In *moving tides*, the complex patterning conjures a dark and murky tone, which illustrates Waup’s frustration with the greed and self-interest related to climate change.

*Impressions of Country* bring us back down to earth and into the fertile dirt, dust, and mud of the land. Each design is unique and mirrors the diverse and picturesque terrain of Australia. With each work in this exhibition, Waup weaves a story that is universally relevant and that speaks of our collective need to take responsibility and care for Country. Waup encourages us to stand up and speak up for what is important and look to the future with courage and full hearts.





Lisa Waup, *Impressions of Country*, 2023, impressions of screenprinted Jute/hessian sandbags with ink and reflective ink on Somerset paper, printed at Spacecraft Studio. Courtesy of the artist. Photographs by Tom Cogill.



Waup is an artist who is grounded in her identity and confident in her ability to create work with an ever-expanding level of precision and technical skill across her eclectic assortment of materials. *close to the wind* reveals a new level of maturity in her career as each iteration of woven, printed, and constructed work expands and grows with her ambition and continues her underlying dialogue of resistance. Through her artistic practice, Waup bravely finds creative and respectful ways to confront hidden histories of adoption and dispossession—histories that are rarely represented in their complexity and nuance. She champions our natural world by sending out an alarm to transform the future by respecting our land and culture. The intimate threads that connect Waup's work within the scope of her current practice of material exploration foresee a promising future of creative output.



Photograph by Fred Kroh.

**Lisa Waup** is a mixed-cultural First Nations artist and curator who was born in Narm (Melbourne). Her multidisciplinary practice encompasses a diverse range of media, including weaving, printmaking, photography, sculpture, fashion, and digital art. With a deep connection to the symbolic power of materials, her work reflects her personal experiences, family history, Country, and broader historical narratives. Through her practice, Waup weaves together threads of lost history, ancestral relationships, motherhood, and the passage of time, which culminates in contemporary expressions that speak to her past, present, and future. Waup holds a Master of Contemporary Art from the University Melbourne and her work is held in both public and private collections in Australia and internationally. Currently, Waup is a lecturer in the Drawing and Printmaking Department at the Victorian College of the Arts and the University of Melbourne.



Photograph by Hayley Millar Baker.

**Hannah Presley** is an Aboriginal curator living on Taungurung Country in regional Victoria. Her father's family is Marri Ngarr and originate from the Moyle River region in the Northern Territory. She is currently the senior curator, Art Museums at the University of Melbourne and a director of Agency. Presley was recently curator of Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Victoria; curator of Primavera 2021 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; and assistant curator for Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon* at the 57th Venice Biennale. She was also the inaugural Yalingwa curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, where she curated *A Lightness of Spirit is the Measure of Happiness*. Presley draws on inspiration from her early experience working in the arts in central Australia. Her practice focuses on the development of creative projects with artists and working closely to learn about the techniques, history, and community that inform their making to help guide her curatorial practice.



# close to the wind: LISA WAUP

December 16, 2023 – June 30, 2024

Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection  
of the University of Virginia

400 Worrell Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22911

434-243-8500 | kluge-ruhe.org

Tuesday – Sunday: 10 am – 4 pm

Free guided tour every day at 10:30 am and 1:30 pm

ISBN 978-1-7353269-6-2

This exhibition is supported by Creative Australia and the Vice  
Provost for the Arts.



KLUGE - RUHE ▸ ABORIGINAL  
ART ◀ COLLECTION

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



Cover image: Detail from Lisa Waup, *moving tides*, 2023, screen painting with ink and reflective ink on Somerset paper, printed at Spacecraft Studio. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Tom Cogill.