Cammeerangan Ngalin-ngur Gining | From Our Ancestors' Hands – Story Bags: Sonja Carmichael

Weaving is culturally embedded in our community, so making gulayi *again is a healing and positive process. The future is about continuing to share intergenerationally what was almost lost to colonization and to make sure it never comes close to that again.*

—Sonja Carmichael

Sonja Carmichael has been at the forefront of the regeneration of Quandamooka weaving. A Ngugi woman from Quandamooka Country, also known as the Yoolooburrabee (people of the sand and sea), she lives and works on Minjerribah (also known as Tjerrangerri)/North Stradbroke Island in southeast Queensland. Through weaving, Carmichael and her daughters have reconnected with the hands of their Ancestors. After unexpectedly seeing an ancestral *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bag) at the University of Queensland's Anthropology Museum, the artist was compelled to gain a deeper understanding of this weaving practice and commenced a journey of intensive academic study.

Carmichael has since become known for her *gulayi*, which are distinguished by their complex pattern of diagonal knots. In her flourishing artistic practice, the artist uses materials that she collects during her beach walks on Minjerribah. She weaves with *ungaire* (freshwater swamp reed), the same fibers that her Ancestors once used, as well as synthetic ghost nets. These abandoned fishing nets drift through the ocean for months, years, or even decades before they wash ashore. *Gulayi* are now a powerful symbol of cultural resilience and constant renewal. The artist shares stories through her work, bringing the cultural knowledge that she has reclaimed back to her community.

This exhibition is Carmichael's first international solo exhibition and presents a new direction in her practice. She has been exploring the presence and power of Giibum (the moon), which influences not just the tides but the cycles of all life on Quandamooka Country. She has created major new work that honors the seasonal migration of Yalingbila (humpback whales) past Minjerribah and the neighboring island of Mulgumpin to the deep ocean. Like Quandamooka weaving practices, the Yalingbila were almost eradicated, so the return of these significant ancestral spirits and their young to their sacred waters signals the revitalization of Quandamooka culture. The stories held by the artist's *gulayi* have been and always will be witnessed by the ever-present moon.

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LEFT

***To have both our freshwater and saltwater Quandamooka Country, interconnected across the land and sea, holds deep significance. Two completely embedded parts, bush and beach,* ragi yarabin.**
—Sonja Carmichael

In this installation, Carmichael has encased an assortment of found materials in *birrepi bunbi*, or tiny woven *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags), that hover above a bed of sand. The materials she uses amplify the stories of Ngumpi (home) that echo throughout the interconnected parts of Quandamooka Country, encompassing both land and sea. There are 238 *birrepi bunbi* in total, one for each year since 1788, when colonization began in Australia.

The artist has woven the bags with copper wire instead of traditional *ungaire* (freshwater swamp reed). Copper survived wildfires that devasted much of the island in 2013, around the same time she was commencing her study of *gulayi*. Just as copper plays a connective role in electrical communication systems, weaving connects Quandamooka people. She also used copper in a commissioned installation created with her daughter, Elisa Jane Carmichael, which is on view at the Embassy of Australia in Washington, DC.

SONJA CARMICHAEL
Born 1958
Ngugi people of Quandamooka, Mulgumpin/Moreton Island and Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island

Wunjayi Wagaringya Quandamooka Jagun (Carrying Quandamooka Country Today) – Yarabin Ragi (Sea and Bush) 2026

Installation of 238 *birrepi bunbi*, or tiny *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags)
Gara (shells): *quampi* (shellfish), *yugari* (pippies), *ginyingara* (oyster); *danggal* (banksia nuts); *tuckabin* (grass tree); burney bean seeds; driftwood; fishing line; and sand
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

I think it's really special, sharing our stories and our storylines together, and keeping them and passing them on intergenerationally.
—Sonja Carmichael

Carmichael and her daughter, fellow artist Elisa Jane Carmichael, worked together to weave these vibrant circular forms from synthetic ghost nets. They adorned the cascading nets with iridescent fish scales, reflecting tears of the sea that flow with the sparkling waters in Quandamooka Country. The concentric circles emphasize not just the interconnectedness of Country across land and sea, but the intergenerational learning that has kept Quandamooka culture strong for countless generations.

These rings are part of a collaborative work that was commissioned for the exhibition *Legacy: Reflections on Mabo* (2019) at Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts in northeast Queensland. The exhibition celebrated the life and legacy of Torres Strait Islander Eddie Koiki Mabo, who became known for the legal claim in the High Court of Australia called the Mabo Case. The landmark ruling abolished the notion of *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one), which the British used to justify the colonization of Australia starting in 1788. The Mabo Case ruling recognized Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' traditional land custodianship in Australian law for the first time. This led Australia's Parliament to pass the *Native Title Act 1993*, which created a system for making native title claims.

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ELISA JANE CARMICHAEL
Born 1987
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Circles of Life and Light 2019

Ghost nets, wire, synthetic fibers, and fish scales
Courtesy of the artists and Onespace

We sat with* gulayi *made in the 1800s held in museum collections and they were full of stories, holding a deep connection to our Ancestors. I remember once we worked out that our Ancestors rolled the* ungaire *against their legs, making them more pliable, and knowing their body oils are in those* gulayi*, too. Because at first I didn't know what I was doing, it all took time and a lot of trial and error to get it. But it was lovely knowing that our* gulayi *had full-body contact then, connecting with our ancestral hands and spirit of those bags . . . and solving the knot, the continuous thread that binds us to our Ancestors.

—Sonja Carmichael

Gulayi are bags traditionally woven by Quandamooka women. Weaving practices on Minjerribah were banned starting in the 1890s during the period of missions and reserves, so Carmichael assumed responsibility for reviving *gulayi* weaving. As part of her academic research, she gathered oral histories from Elders, studied museum archives, and conducted fieldwork. She learned how to identify, harvest, and prepare *ungaire*, the freshwater swamp reed used to make *gulayi*. Carmichael then taught herself the unique diagonal knot, helping to restore this deeply significant cultural practice and carry it forward.

The distinctive diamond-shaped weave, marked by raised knots, both fortifies the *gulayi* and evokes enduring connections across time and space. These connections are also reflected in *ungaire*, which Carmichael describes as the "cultural heart of our weaving." Despite colonization and climate change, *ungaire* continues to thrive on Country, much like Quandamooka people.

LEFT

SONJA CARMICHAEL
Born 1958
Ngugi people of Quandamooka, Mulgumpin/Moreton Island and Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island

Mulgumpin Gulayi 2026

Ungaire (freshwater swamp reed) and shells
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

RIGHT

SONJA CARMICHAEL
Born 1958
Ngugi people of Quandamooka, Mulgumpin/Moreton Island and Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island

Yagabili Gulayi Wunjayi (Making Dillybag Today) 2024

Ungaire (freshwater swamp reed) and shells
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

Elders remember the grannies being instructed to make these during mission times to sell to the tourists. A boat would come in, the Miramar from Brisbane, and they'd get paid a stick of tobacco in return for their work. They also remember the grannies hiding behind trees on the mission and whispering in language to each other. This is my take on making them.
—Sonja Carmichael

The Myora Aboriginal Mission was established on Quandamooka Country in 1892. Known as Moongalba (Sitting Down Place), the site was forcibly renamed Myora as part of broader efforts to assimilate Quandamooka people and weaken their connection to Country. The mission operated until 1943 as a site of control that reshaped daily life, disrupting language, identity, and cultural practices. Imposed restrictions extended to traditional weaving practices.

The open weave of *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags) contrasts with these tightly coiled mission bags, which were made using mission-introduced techniques. Their closed, compact forms evoke the constraints placed on cultural ways of knowing and being. Carmichael's *Mission Bags* speak to resilience and repair, transforming imposed forms through Indigenous knowledge and skill into works that embody both disruption and continuity.

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Mission Bag #1 2022
Mission Bag #2 2022
Mission Bag #3 2022
Mission Bag #4 2022

Ungaire (freshwater swamp reed)
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

My practice is informed by a deep respect for Budjong Djara, our Mother Earth, and our Elders' memories and ancestral knowledge. In our practice we use both traditional, natural fibers and ghost nets, contemporary materials.
—Sonja Carmichael

Carmichael wove these *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags) from ghost nets, or discarded nets from industrial fishing. Inspired by artists from Erub Arts Collaborative on Erub Island in northeast Australia, the artist began weaving with this synthetic fiber in addition to the traditional *ungaire* (freshwater swamp reeds). She finds piles of the colorful oceanic debris washed up on the beaches of Minjerribah and Mulgumpin.

Ghost nets resurface from the depths of the ocean with the tides, much like the memories of Quandamooka Elders whose cultural memory extends far beyond the relatively recent colonization of their homelands. Collectively, these twelve *gulayi* embody the strength and resilience of Quandamooka people. The Quandamooka people are made up of Ngugi, Noonuccal, and Goenpul, and they are the biological descendants of twelve family groups who are the Traditional Owners from Moreton Bay in southeast Queensland. The artist speaks intergenerationally through weaving, connecting with her Ancestors and passing on their ancestral knowledge to future generations.

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Giibum, Gulayi Murmurings (Moon) (Quandamooka Women's Bags) 2026

Installation of 12 *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags)
Ghost nets, wire, fishing lines, shells, and other marine debris washed up on the shores of Minjerribah during changing tides
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

Listening to the sounds of Country and feeling those footsteps of our Ancestors and being able to reconnect again. And also celebrate that and share it. It's been a really privileged experience working on regenerating our Quandamooka weaving.
—Sonja Carmichael

Carmichael drew inspiration from the celestial bodies over Quandamooka Country when weaving these "story bags." The lifecycles of Quandamooka weavers are deeply entangled with the cycles of Giibum (the moon), which communicates in a language that is not spoken. Stories resurface from the depths of the ocean with the ebb and flow of the tides under the moon's influence.

The artist wove these bags with ghost nets, or abandoned fishing nets and ropes, which she finds while walking the beaches of Minjerribah. The orange fibers come from a large bundle that she has slowly unraveled and used for many years. Carmichael allows the materials that she gathers on Country, both traditional and contemporary, to tell their own stories and create their own forms. These bags speak to the power of ancestral connection and the regeneration of Quandamooka culture despite the destructive effects of colonization.

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Born 1958
Ngugi people of Quandamooka, Mulgumpin/Moreton Island and Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island

Giibum (Moon Phases, Story Bags) 2025-26

Installation of 5 woven bags
Ghost nets, wire, fishing line, and other marine debris washed up on the shores of Minjerribah during changing tides
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

FAR LEFT

They reflect Yarabin (Sea) Country, feeling a sense of Yalingbila (humpback whales) presence, traveling through Quandamooka waters and past the headland . . . reflecting those colors in these three bags. You can see those bright colors, which show their beautiful footprints making their way across turquoise waters of the ocean and sparkle of life in Quandamooka saltwater Country. And seeing Yalingbila breaching and rolling, waving and slapping their fins so close to us on the shore . . . Yura Yalingbila (Welcome the Whales)!

—Sonja Carmichael

Carmichael extends her stewardship of Country and culture through these vibrant *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags). These are the colors she sees when Yalingbila (humpback whales) roll in the sacred waters of Quandamooka Country. Yalingbila pass through on their way to the deep ocean where they give birth before returning with their young.

The brightly colored nets are industrial fishing debris that wash up on the shores of Minjerribah. Carmichael unraveled the yellow fibers from a rope commonly used by the Australian telecommunications company Telstra. The local Starkey family gifted the white ghost net to Carmichael at the end of its working life, so it could begin another life instead of being thrown in landfill. While the colors may be beautiful, the nets negatively impact the ocean and the marine life it sustains. The artist honors her Ancestors through these *gulayi* by engaging with contemporary environmental issues, offering a powerful statement about the ongoing shared responsibility to care for and protect Country.

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Yalingbila (Humpback Whales) Yarabin (Seas) 2026

Installation of 3 *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags)
Ghost nets and shells
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

For me, it's about our weaving practices and Yalingbila (humpback whales), which are of great significance to our people and Country. Along with traditional cultural practices, Yalingbila were almost eradicated when the largest whaling station in the Southern Hemisphere was established at Tangalooma on Mulgumpin. Yalingbila were nearly wiped out . . . slaughtered for ten years in our lifetime, and taken from the beautiful, sacred waters here, harpooned and hauled up on our Ngugi people's place of belonging . . . the destruction versus regeneration, the same with the intent to erase us, and practices like weaving, and eradicate our Yalingbila population for wealth.
—Sonja Carmichael

This is one of the largest hand-woven *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bag) that Carmichael has ever made. The scale of the work is befitting the enormity of Yalingbila (humpback whales) and their cultural significance. Known as the "Elders of the sea," these wise ancestral spirits inhabit the sacred waters of Quandamooka Country along their migratory path. While Yalingbila were nearly eradicated because of commercial whaling, the whale population has been steadily rising since the 1960s when they became a protected species.

After Carmichael began working with the white ghost nets, donated by the Starkey's, a local Minjerribah fishing family, she discovered another connection to Yalingbila. The whales rub up against the ropes as they pass through the ocean, fraying and darkening them with the oils from their skin. Feeling a deep connection while working with this material, the artist adorned her *gulayi* with special shells that she had collected on Country at Pulan/Amity Point. This is a special place of belonging for her family and those who have gone before her—including her mother, Joan Hendriks; grandmother, Bessie; great-grandmother, Ruby; and great-great grandmother, Emma—who were born on the island and lived on the mission. The shells remind her daughter, Elisa Jane Carmichael, of tears flowing down the front of the bag. Despite this sadness, as the seasons change annually, they celebrate the return of Yalingbila to Quandamooka Country and the continuing cycles of life.

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Yalingbila (Humpback Whales) Dungu (Tears) 2026

Ghost net and shells
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace

The difference in fibers, too, they're so different to work with . . . the natural and the synthetic. From the manufactured stuff, which is still beautiful to work with, to the natural fibers, combining* talwalpin *(cotton tree) traditional fibers with ghost nets, contemporary materials. Collecting both kinds of fibers feels good. I think they just merge together, symbolizing weaving as nurturing and healing . . . having that sense of still being part of Country, in more ways than one.
—Sonja Carmichael

These nine *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags) relate to the Quandamooka creation story of "The Lightning's Playground" on Mulgumpin/Moreton Island. As told by Elders, when both Sandhills are mentioned together, the two signify the legend of "The Lightning's Playground." Coonoongai is the female Sandhill and Gheebulum is the male. Both Sandhills hold a very strong presence and can be seen together looking across from Minjerribah to Mulgumpin, visible from many places on Country.

Carmichael has used materials from both land and sea that reflect the color of the Sandhills. The white ghost net was gifted by the Starkeys, a local fishing family that used them for deep-sea fishing. She made the handles from *talwalpin* (cotton tree), which she handspun into string and dyed with the bark of *kowinka* (red mangrove). She also used the string to adorn the bags with shells. Carmichael merges the different fibers together—the natural and the synthetic, the traditional and the contemporary—emphasizing the interconnectedness of culture and Country.

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Born 1958
Ngugi people of Quandamooka, Mulgumpin/Moreton Island and Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island

Yalingbila (Humpback Whales) Yarong (Sands) 2026

Installation of 9 *gulayi* (Quandamooka women's bags)
Ghost net, shells, and *talwalpin* (*Hibiscus tiliaceus* also known as cotton tree) string dyed with *kowinka* (red mangrove)
Courtesy of the artist and Onespace