

Craft Australia Library series: Reviews Selling Yarns 2: Innovation for sustainability

Amy Kerr 5 May 2009

Abstract: In essence, *Selling Yarns 2* gave many people the chance to share their 'yarns' of success, elaborate on their experiences and discuss new and innovative developments to create a sustainable cultural future for Indigenous practice.



Big Sister Basket workshop at Selling Yarns 2.
Untitled, 2009. Photographer: Leise Knowles

The hugely successful conference program *Selling Yarns 2: Innovation for sustainability* was held in Canberra from 6-9 March 2009 at the National Museum of Australia. The first conference, *Selling Yarns: Australian Indigenous textiles and good business* in the 21st century was held in Darwin in 2006 and focused specifically on Indigenous textiles practices. Following on from the success of this, *Selling Yarns 2* addressed the current movements and new directions within the broader contemporary Indigenous craft and design field.



Impiti Winton. Untitled, 2009. Spinning.
Photographer: Leise Knowles

Testament to the relevance and exciting nature of this conference program, *Selling Yarns 2* was fully booked more than a week prior to the actual event. With the assistance of the National Museum of Australia through the provision of a second networked theatre it was possible to enable eager participants above and beyond the capacity of the main theatre to attend the conference, a total of 228 registered attendees in all.



May Hinch. Untitled, 2009. Paper pulp.

Photographer: Leise Knowles

Image 3 of 4

The conference program began with a burst of energy on Friday 6 March as keynote speaker and designer Alison Page gave a passionate and empowering address. "Indigenous Australians have a proud tradition of design and innovation", she said. Speaking as an Indigenous designer, Page believes that the potential of Indigenous design is enormous and remains for the most part untapped. She enthused conference delegates with the thought that the progress and future of Indigenous design could be assisted by a national strategy and urged delegates to lobby for a national Indigenous art school.



Rhonda Brim. Untitled, 2009. Basket weaving.

Photographer: Leise Knowles

Image 4 of 4

Following this rousing introduction by Alison Page, a wonderfully full program featuring 40 speakers inspired delegates over a period of 2 days. The speakers at *Selling Yarns 2*, Indigenous, non-Indigenous and international alike, had travelled from far and wide to share their stories and experiences with other likeminded attendees. This gave the whole conference an invigorating air of sharing and collaboration. Speakers raised many important issues relating to Indigenous craft and design today including the ethical implications of trade, the call for a recognised and enforceable code of conduct and the dialogue and dilemmas that surround the shift from 'traditional' Indigenous practice to 'contemporary' Indigenous practice.

With conference participants having travelled from almost every state of Australia including remote areas of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, as well as a few international guests from New Zealand and Laos, this 4-day conference event saw a gathering of Indigenous designers and artists like no other. It provided a forum for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to meet and engage over pertinent issues affecting Indigenous craft and design practice today.

One of the most remarkable features of *Selling Yarns 2* was the vast array of opportunities that it offered to everyone involved. There was a real sense of the sharing and exchange of knowledge and information, both theoretical and practical. It was noted by more than one attendee that this collective transfer of skill and expertise would be difficult to replicate again and this contributed to making *Selling Yarns 2* such a valuable experience for those who came.

With the conclusion of the conference portion of the program on Saturday 7 March, *Selling Yarns 2* hosted a unique craft and design market and an amazing selection of demonstrations and practical workshops on Sunday 8 March. This vibrant day buzzed with activity and creativity as the public and professional artists came together to learn about the traditions of and changes to Indigenous craft and design.

The practical workshops, facilitated by recognised artists, gave participants a small taste of a range of crafts including needle felting, weaving, string and necklace making, the creation of possum skin cloaks, papermaking and basketry. It was a rare occasion that enabled Indigenous artists and designers from all around Australia to come together and provided the perfect forum for exchange and growth.

Free demonstrations were held in the foyer of the National Museum of Australia and were open to everyone. Conference delegates, artists and members of the general public were able to watch processes including screen printing on fabric, traditional spinning, weaving and stitching as they were displayed by practicing artists.

The Market Day was also held in the foyer amongst the demonstration tables, making for a busy and dynamic venue. It was a unique opportunity to view and purchase original and collectable works and individual pieces from remote areas of Australia which are very rarely seen in Canberra. Nothing could have prepared the stallholders for the flood of people who rushed to purchase these beautiful goods. Being able to speak with the artists, to hear the story behind the work and to learn about the practice and the processes was of great importance to the buyers and a key aspect of the sell-out success of the whole day.

A small trip to the Canberra Glassworks was also arranged for the benefit of visiting Indigenous artists from interstate and remote communities. Participants were taken on a guided tour of the facilities and were able to take part in a specialised kiln forming workshop. After this they were able to visit the Old Bus Depot Market in Kingston, where Jenni Martiniello of Kemarre Arts spoke to the artists about the process of establishing a small business.

Over the course of the weekend two mentoring workshops, Big Sister Basket and Creating Space for Indigenous Artists, gave Indigenous conference delegates the opportunity to dye, spin and weave yarn together in the Yowie Room at the National Museum of Australia. It was a comfortable exchange of knowledge and skills that transcended language barriers and established and strengthened friendships.

The final day of *Selling Yarns 2* on Monday 9 March offered a range of professional development seminars for conference participants. Creating and maintaining sustainable cultural practices was one of the main themes of the conference and these seminars addressed this through their focus on business development, teaching new business skills, honing existing business skills and discussing ethical consumerism and the ethics of Indigenous craft development.

Selling Yarns 2 was developed through a close partnership between Craft Australia, The Australian National University and the National Museum of Australia. It was proudly supported and sponsored by ArtsACT, the Australia Council for the Arts and Indigenous Business Australia and held in association with the exhibition ReCoil: Change and Exchange in Coiled Fibre Art.

In essence, *Selling Yarns 2* gave many people the chance to share their 'yarns' of success, elaborate on their experiences and discuss new and innovative developments to create a sustainable cultural future for Indigenous practice.

Amy Kerr

Amy Kerr, the conference coordinator for *Selling Yarns 2*, is a Canberra based textile designer establishing her own business, Moyou, and a sessional lecturer at the Australian National University.

View the short explanatory video record

(http://www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/presentation.php?id=selling_yarns_2_video) of the *Selling Yarns 2: Innovation for sustainability* conference.

Catrina Vignando 30 April 2009

The *Selling Yarns 2: Innovation for sustainability* conference held at the National Museum of Australia on the week-end was a huge success. The conference was fully booked and thanks to the Museum for opening the Studio to accommodate those who would have otherwise missed out.
