

ART MONTHLY ARTICLE

Thanakupi: Firsthand by Simon Wright

Thanakupi: A Gatherer's View, Craft Queensland Gallery, 6 July -19 August 2006
Thanakupi and Lila Watson, Marlene Antico Fine Art, Mary Place Gallery, August 2006

Thanakupi is a familiar figure throughout her homelands in Andoom country, Far North Queensland, as is the wattle flower after whom the great Thaynakwith potter is named. It seems almost everyone there knows of 'Aunty', such is her stature as the community's primary elder and most famous artist.

She is always balancing her multiple roles as teacher, advocate and mentor, active in both the community and business sectors. Weipa, aside from its status as a mining town, incorporates nearby country around Andoom and Napranum, which is Thanakupi's local community.

For those of us who are not already familiar with Thanakupi, or her work, she was Australia's first indigenous arts graduate, having studied at East Sydney Technical College in the early 1970's, and is now a ceramicist of international acclaim, widely recognised for powerful works in the medium of clay. She recently staged two important exhibitions of new works, and is in the running for a major Australia Council award to be announced shortly.

Public profile aside, Thanakupi is also something of a magnet for young kids, for it is difficult for her to go anywhere without an instant mob, many of whom will run out and cling tenaciously to her frame, and her every word. They hardly notice when cajoled into saying how great school has been lately, or appraised of some new words to sing in the Thaynakwith language.

Thanakupi is once again in the midst of re-prioritising her lifestyle. Since moving to the Far North from Cairns a few years ago, her focus has shifted even more toward pressing community matters, such as social cohesion and literacy among young people. She is still keen, however, to pass on her myriad skills and stories, gathered over almost 70 years, via the medium of her art. Ceramics, sculpture and the odd painting are now the optimal vehicle for her messages to travel and be heard *outside* the community, in many places at once, leaving her to stay at home where she is most comfortable, to pass local history and cultural knowledge on first hand.

I have stayed here to be with the people. Now it is for me to be here to support others to go on. I tell them we are all in the public eye, no matter what we do, people see, and there is a lot more to do everyday. I've seen how the Bouchat holiday camps I do for kids can do reconciliation work in real ways – even to make jobs and spark further education, but it might all stop when I stop. I'm worried I'm the only one now who can do it. I'm almost 70 so I can't sit down for fear of dying. When you go, you go. And lots have gone. I need to keep a bit of time for myself and not to forget that – I give a lot – to kids, friends, but I have to keep a little bit in me. I often joke with people that I have too much love to give!

Thanakupi is driven, in part, by the fact that protracted and ongoing negotiations about land use, shared access and ownership rights have outlived many relatives and elders in the community, to the point that she is now the sole remaining member of the community fluent in Thaynakwith. Another local language, Alnith, has not been spoken in the community for twelve months.

Driving negotiations forward is clearly important, but even more pressing, perhaps, for her community at present is the retention of local languages and history. Its traces invisible, language is the most powerful tool for awareness and understandings of self and culture. In oral traditions language disappears quickly and permanently with the loss of its last speaker.

I want to change the curriculum at school here now too. Mothers in town are asking me why local culture isn't taught at schools – other languages and cultures are. That's a big one... you have to crack your head to think that one through. They have Japanese in schools. Where you have language, that's culture. I want them to start talking proper, in their own language. Schools should instruct culture in the curriculum so not only black kids can learn, but white kids. It doesn't matter who learns about culture, we should be learning about each other. Of course, the best thing is to know yourself, so who you are makes you able to *do*, not just *dream*.

The decision to make less has also been driven by the physical demands of clay. From a modest kitchen table and a few buckets in her backyard, Thanakupi now works on only a few pots at a time, in between running school programs and negotiating land issues or overseeing the production of a major Thaynakwith language dictionary and history project for a forthcoming book.

I don't make them in big numbers all at once any more because my shoulders get sore. I'm not prepared to do a whole lot at one time – I make them a few at a time when I get time.

In small batches, her pots are ferried around the corner to a gas kiln owned by friend Lyn Bates. It fires the work of both potters. Bates and Thanakupi source and utilise local material, pigments and glazes, much of which can be found literally everywhere in this part of the country. Bauxite, in its various hues of yellows and red, through to deep burgundy, does not need to be dug out of the ground from any real depth – it *is* the ground and can be collected freely.

Thanakupi first started using bauxite sporadically in the 1980s. Her recent works show a concentrated effort to elevate it as a central conceptual aesthetic in her work, for both her traditional ceramic pieces, and her recently released range of cast metal work in bronze and aluminium.

Bauxite tells the story of my place, about the land, its qualities, about how they found it good for aluminium and then the mine, and all the changes that happened from that. I've used it from time to time since the 1980s. I really want it to be a bigger thing in my work now and to develop the glazes further. It gives a wonderful maroon red effect, depending on how much you put on. The red in bauxite also signifies men's initiation business for body paint, from before time. Oxides and clay slips link to body paint designs because that's what was actually used back then.

Thanakupi believes many people have found it difficult to see important links such as these in her work, owing primarily to mainstream market expectations that body designs are best known and discussed via canvas and acrylic paintings.

People find it hard to get because my pots are circular and spherical, not flat like a canvas painting, but the shape of my pots is closer to your body. The men and women would get wet clay from creeks, wrap and bake them and put them away in the smokehouses. It was dug out from places all over the ground because it was sacred for dancing and important for symbolic uses. Kaolin, white clay, was used everywhere around here too. For different ceremonies, like childbirth, we used white kaolin clays. So people would say 'Why are you doing pots? Aboriginals didn't do pottery'. Thanakupi would say 'Clay was important, very important as traditional material.'

Her recent solo exhibition, "THANAKUPI: A Gatherer's View" at Craft Queensland was a great opportunity to consider how recent forms utilise bauxite, grey and white clay and integrate these social histories and conceptual underpinnings. The show included Thanakupi's trademark 'Love Magic Eggs' and spherical pots, some large yam forms, exquisite examples of her new platters, and a modest publication. The project was timed perfectly to coincide with 'Verge', The National Ceramics Conference staged in Brisbane.

What initially presented from the street-front window as a fairly modest group of works, unfolded upon entry into the gallery proper as a beautifully cogent array of glistening oxide glazes and inscribed stoneware surfaces. Curator Eliza Cole achieved something of a coup in bringing together the most substantial group of recent works seen in Queensland since the artist's major survey show at Brisbane City Gallery in 2000.

It was an energising experience for Cole, who was able to travel and visit the artist, see Thaynakwith country and invite the artist to produce new works for the show. Through her discussions with Thanakupi and prior research, it became evident that Thanakupi was a strong educator and held keen awareness of the quintessential role of women within the community as gatherers. Cole worked with the artist to present a unique life experience that sometimes lay in defiance of cultural protocol, and these became focal points for the project.

Their efforts facilitated an important event for Craft Queensland and the artist, as it offered viewers, many of whom were interstate or regional visitors, rare insights into a practice that has taken exciting new directions. Collectors also had an opportunity to access the work, the show sold well, with several pieces going into local public and private collections.

A highlight of the show was a group of platters, made mainly from buff raku, and finished with oxides, bauxite and clear glazes as stoneware. Thanakupi has preferred raku for some time, owing to its inherent ability to resist sudden temperature changes, its ability to adapt to larger sculptural forms, and because it lends itself best to her pinch and coil techniques. The 'Knoolu Platter', named after the Mosquito Man ancestral story featured in Thanakupi's work for over 20 years, was of particular note.

That *Mosquito man corroboree platter* [2006] is a Bouchat place story. They're dancing with woomera and spears. You can see their movement in the corroboree, and I teach kids today about steps, sounds and beats of the drum. The mosquito corroboree, Knoolu, has dancing and singing that mimics droning sounds and has actions like smacking and catching. There's [sic] mosquitoes everywhere in swamps around the place where [the creative being] Wacombe comes from. He's in the boat arriving late to the big corroboree.... That platter has a clear body glaze, and I pulled back on it for a slight sheen. Not too glossy, with a little bit of bauxite. It's a new development that one, because it's double-sided. I can do the whole story over both sides, not just details of it. The other side has Thomom the water snake. I turned that snake into Australia. Australia is the blind snake, you know, because everyone lives in a beautiful country. We're interrelated, intermigrated but nobody can see it. We're all blind snakes! We're pushing and shoving people around. It's a real shame.

As curator Eliza Cole said, simplicity in the way the Mosquito story was depicted allowed continuation of movement and dance even after visual contact, provoking an extension of one's own imagination rather than ending solely with an interpretation of what the artist had intended.

An extension to some ideas bandied about in media coverage of the exhibition, perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the project for curator and artist, could have come from a more imaginative response to the work on offer. A constant refrain, that ceramics should only be trapped in a rhetoric belonging to craft practices, created a weird paradox, and contributed to an outdated view that craft itself was not valued as an art form.

Another recent development in her work will also be of interest for future exhibition goers, and it marked an important contrast between the Craft Queensland exhibition and Thanakupi's show presented by Marlene Antico Fine Art at Mary Place Gallery in Sydney during August.

There she exhibited alongside her friend Lila Watson, a painter, and showed a group of works including prototype cast bronze and aluminium sculptures based on her ceramics. These were produced in early 2006 by Urban Art Projects in association with Jennifer Isaacs.

We turned clay pots into bronze and aluminium. They look alright and I am getting used to the colours not being like clay, and no glazes, even though that shine works like glaze. I think it will be good to do other small ones, and platters this way. But it's only just started.

The new metal sculptures are essentially true to the ceramic work produced by Thanakupi's hand, and the aluminium casting offers a strong conceptual link between its source as bauxite and the artist's home in Weipa, between place and material, and the history of that material in the artist's country.

Although they appear to be a big departure from the surface texture, look and feel of clay, there is a strong possibility the new medium offers another important consideration for the artist. Should they eventually be editioned, as Thanakupi makes less and less in ceramic form, income would still be derived from her work. This could be in much the same way that senior acrylic desert painters and community art centres are turning to editioned works, such as etchings, as a form of annuity.

As objects, the metal works also neatly prompt thinking about the relationship between pottery and sculpture. This is a relation which Thanakupi has adeptly contextualised as exceeding simplistic opposition:

I think I put pottery into sculpture. I think with the overall idea of form, whether I create pots, or deliver a way for people to understand environmental sculptures, like the memorial poles on the beach at Bouchat, or big pots like the form of the yams, always using the legends. Terms like 'potter' and 'sculptor' don't really matter as long as I make beautiful pots and beautiful sculptures. A beautiful pot can lead on to lots of ideas, for enjoyment and teaching. Pots can go anywhere conceptually, but also physically — outside in the garden, your fireplace, kitchen. But you can't look at my pots without seeing symbols. They resemble my moods and character, and my understanding of ceramic history, but also carry my whole Thaynakwith story, so they are cultural as well.

It's her Thaynakwith story, and Thanakupi's first hand knowledge of the culture that she wants to reinforce in the local community, for future generations and potential leaders, and she does it with an increasing sense of *memento mori*. Throughout the rest of the Australia, her artworks will also keep on doing the talking.

[ends]

Endnote: All quotes from an interview between the author and Thanakupi. Conducted throughout Weipa and Napranum between 14-15 September 2006.

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