



# Threads of IDENTITY

History and craft merge to create a contemporary take on a traditional weaving form for Janine McAullay Bott – we trace her passion from Waikiki to home in WA.

TEXT: Nathan Sclaro IMAGES: Taryn Boot

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SCULPTOR UP CLOSE

NATIONAL TREASURES: (right) Janine’s award-winning *Dhalkatj-Bilby* was lovingly woven from palm fronds in tribute to her great-grandmother. (below) *Mother and Baby*, also made of palm fronds, is characteristic of Janine’s remarkable attention to detail.



It was while living in Hawaii, weaving a basket for the first time with some locals in a workshop, that Janine McAullay Bott felt a connection to her Aboriginal culture like never before.

“Something came over me,” she recalls. “I’d never weaved an object in my life, yet it felt like I’d been doing it forever. That feeling went from my heart right through to the tips of my fingers. I haven’t been able to stop since.”

During the 15 years that followed, Janine’s weaving style evolved in rare and remarkable ways, fast gaining her a reputation among the laid-back folk of Waikiki. When she returned to Perth in 1999 to look after her ageing mother Rena, a new side of her art revealed itself.

“I was surrounded by memories when I came home,” she says. “Photos of my past and my family were all around me. As I began to think about stories from my childhood, the weaves took on a new life. I started making native animals and human figures – symbols that were connected to my family.”

Janine’s intricately woven bush sculptures are today highly sought after by galleries, museums and art-lovers alike. She has pieces in the Kerry Stokes Collection, the Holmes a Court Collection and Museum Victoria collections, among others, and last year won the coveted Wandijuk Marika 3D Memorial prize (in the Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards) for her wonderfully spirited figure *Dhalkatj-Bilby* (pictured above).

What makes Janine’s sculptures so captivating is the freedom in her weaves, the attention she pays to character and form, and the individual personalities that shine through. *Mother and Baby*, for example, is a beautiful depiction of a mother’s love for her newborn child, capturing the soft, yet unyielding, maternal bond through simple silhouettes and detailed twines.

“I like to call a weave a thought I’ve had,” she says. “Sometimes I’ll just sit there and think about my grandfather or my mother and my hands will keep going – like they have a mind of their own. Then I’ll look down and what I was thinking about has taken on a real form.”



ANIMAL FRIENDS: (left) *Black Swan* – Kuldjak is one of Janine’s most recent works, taking prime spot outside her Beekingham home. (above) *Koala and Baby* – Kubang Nhoba. (bottom) *Rena – Protective Mother (Frill Necked Lizard)* is a piece special to Janine and a piece of her late mother’s hair resides in the heart of the work.

Janine uses a variety of twigs, vines, nuts and fronds – mostly from palm trees and agaves – to fashion the delicate fibre objects. Once she’s gathered the materials (family and neighbours are her main suppliers), she bundles them up and soaks them in water, so they’re malleable enough for weaving. The fact that the branches remain completely untreated is what gives the figures their natural beauty.

The actual weaving process is simple and unstructured, often seeing three or four layers for support: “The method is basically

send her children to foundling homes and orphanages throughout Perth. Although they were reunited some years later, Janine says hers was a very fractured and regimented upbringing, far removed from the cultural practices and traditions of her mother’s people.

“The weaves are my way of reconnecting the stories that were lost during our separation,” she says. “If dad hadn’t died, we would have been raised between Perth and the country because Nyoongar people travelled here often. We would have grown

“I’d just returned to Perth from Hawaii to look after Mum and she had a palm tree branch in the garden that had fallen off. She asked if I could make her totem (animal spirit) with it, so I did. Now, since Mum died, I’ve put a piece of her hair in the heart, so it really is her totem.”

Janine looks back on her 13 years in Hawaii with great affection. She moved there to be with her husband and came back with a whole new journey of creativity and self-discovery. Although she’s quick to point out her Indigenous culture was always part of her life, she admits it was that workshop – where she learnt to make baskets from the branches of a polka vine – that reignited a connection to her people that will live on forever in her weaves. ❶

Janine is represented by Artitja Fine Art Gallery (08) 9336 7787, [artitja.com.au](http://artitja.com.au). She is currently working towards a solo exhibition at Melbourne’s Alison Kelly Gallery in April. The *Menagerie* exhibition will be at the Western Australian Museum from October 30 to January 16, 2011.

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anything you go over has to go under,” Janine says. “I don’t stick to a definite pattern, it’s very free. And I think that comes from my upbringing. I don’t like anything that’s fenced off or constricting. It’s important for me that people know the weave holds up the weave – nothing else.”

When she was just three months old, Janine lost her Irish father to an unexpected illness. With few rights and no financial means of supporting the family, her mother Rena – a Nyoongar woman (from the south-west corner of WA from Geraldton to Esperance) – was forced to

up with a lot more freedom and had a stronger understanding of our Indigenous heritage.”

Janine is surprisingly at peace chatting about her past in the lounge of her Beekingham home. Her attention drifts occasionally to the memory-laden walls, where family photos, special ornaments and woven pieces of history come together like a patchwork quilt.

Most of the weaves, she tells me, are dedicated to her family. *Rena – Protective Mother (Frill Necked Lizard)*, which is touring nationally with the *Menagerie: Contemporary Indigenous Sculpture*, was one of the pieces made in honour of her mum.



# A WELCOME CHANGE



## TIMELESS TALES

Janine McAullay Bott shares the story behind her *Oldie Kangaroo* sculpture (pictured above)...

*Oldie Kangaroo* was the first animal sculpture Janine made on her return to Perth from Hawaii. It pays homage to her grandfather, Richard Farmer, who once rescued a baby joey after its mother was killed, and was kept in a chook pen. Here's an excerpt from the story, *The Kangaroo, the Egg and I*, which Janine wrote about the task of collecting eggs from her grandparent's farm.

*"We need eggs for breakfast," Gran says. "Where's my broom? Come on you kids." (I hated doing this!) We head for the chook run, Gran with her broom, Oldie chuckling at the back door. Gran opens the old wire gate, the chickens start squawking, AND THERE HE IS - in the shadows waiting, the KANGAROO!! - who grew up thinking he's a bloody rooster! The project is put to action. Joey moves towards Gran, she pokes him with the broom; he backs into the corner, sitting back on his tail. "NOW!" she shouts. And we run to the chickens. They jump up cackling and there are the eggs. We each grab some, cradling them in our jumpers, then bolt for the gate. Now I look back and there is Gran with her broom and the kangaroo is trying to grab it, the morning sun shining brightly on them. And I still hear Oldie laughing.*



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