

CAROL E. MAYER

T-shirts and Turtles: Art and Environmental Activism on Erub, Torres Strait

Abstract

North Australia is one of the last remaining safe havens for endangered marine species. For Erub Islanders, sea turtles are both a traditional source of food and an integral part of their belief systems and culture. Between 2005 and 2015, up to ten thousand sea turtles across the globe have been entangled in “ghost-nets,” fishing nets that have been lost, abandoned, or discarded in the ocean. These nets trap marine wildlife invisibly and silently, hence the term “ghost.” Sea turtles are especially vulnerable to entanglement in ghost-nets. Erub Islanders began to gather the nets that washed up on the beaches and were caught in the reefs, often with dead animals ensnared in the webbing. They took the nets apart to see whether they could be used for crafts. They used the multi-coloured strands that run through the centre of the ropes to weave figures of small animals and full-scale figures of sea turtles and other large creatures of the Pacific. Today, ghost-net sculptures are part of a worldwide movement: the artists of Erub work with local and international museums to express their environmental activism by creating powerful art installations that bring awareness to the global destruction of our oceans.

Keywords: ghost-nets, Erub Island, art, environmental activism, Australia, Museum of Anthropology (University of British Columbia), endangered species

It all comes back to the sea. We are all connected by the world’s oceans. Making art is really making meaning. My art helps me understand and make sense of the world.

—Florence Gutchen, artist, Erub

In 2002, I travelled to the island of Erub, in the Torres Strait, north of Australia, to attend celebrations being held for a successful Native Title claim—a legal milestone that would have seen Indigenous land rights recognized over all the outer community islands in the Strait. At the eleventh hour, however, the federal court overseeing the case withdrew its consent, leaving the islanders with nothing to celebrate. On Erub, the people responded by choosing to take a positive step: they decided to go ahead and celebrate their traditional ownership of the Island despite the court proceedings being unsuccessful. For them, the legal win was just being delayed.¹ I was privileged to witness and film the daylong celebrations. A commemorative T-shirt had been made for the occasion; I bought one and it is now on display in the Multiversity Galleries at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology (MOA) (Fig. 1)—a tangible memory of both a great day and the islanders’ determination to respond constructively to challenges to their Indigenous rights.²

caught in the reefs, often with dead animals entangled in the webbing. They took the nets apart to see whether they could be used for crafts. They used the multi-coloured strands that run through the centre of the ropes to weave figures of small animals. They then decided to go big, creating full-scale figures of sea turtles and other large creatures of the Pacific.



Figure 2. Detail of exhibition *Ghost Nets of the Ocean*, Ethnography Museum Geneva, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Carol E. Mayer

I first encountered ghost-net sculptures in 2017, when they were installed in the exhibition *Ghost Nets of the Ocean* at the Ethnography Museum Geneva. It was a powerful installation; lifelike, colourful sculptures of sea creatures seemed to swim and cavort above the heads of visitors (Fig. 2). The creatures' playful, captivating appearance was tempered by the installation's wall text, which revealed they represented the thousands of endangered sea

animals killed by abandoned fishnets in the world's oceans. This wasn't just art, it was environmental advocacy seeking to bring awareness to the global destruction of our oceans. When I realized these creatures had been made by the people of Erub Island, I was struck by the similar messages between these sculptures and the Native Title T-shirt I had purchased so many years before: both reflected the tenacity of a small community of 400 people in deploying creativity to bring attention to global challenges, whether political or environmental. Clearly, this was a good reason to acquire some ghost-net sculptures for MOA, which has an ongoing commitment to exhibitions that advocate for Indigenous rights and address some of the globe's most pressing environmental challenges.³ With monies from one of the museum's strategic acquisition funds, I was able to purchase a hammerhead shark sculpture and commission a giant turtle for MOA.⁴ Both sculptures were intended for permanent installation in the Pacific area of the museum's galleries.



Figure 3. Left to right: Racy Oui-Pitt, Florence Gutchen, Carol E. Mayer, Ethel Charlie, Nancy Naawi working on ghost-net sculptures at Erub Arts, 2018. Photograph courtesy of Lynnette Griffiths

The model for creating ghost-net sculptures on a large scale was set up with non-Indigenous facilitators who worked alongside community members, as opposed to just teaching them fabrication skills. Lynnette Griffiths, artistic director of Erub Arts, explains that

“the transfer of skills both ways, and of culture both ways, was really important.”⁵ The artists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, worked collaboratively, all participating in the development of the designs, shapes, and forms of the sea creatures and sharing roles in creating each sculpture (Fig. 3). “The net seems to bring people together,” says Griffiths. “It’s not just about the technique; your weaving process translates into your conversations.”⁶

These large sculptures soon caught the attention of the Australian Museum in Sydney, and one was commissioned for the collection.⁷ Today, ghost-net sculptures are part of a global movement. The artists of Erub work with museums worldwide to create powerful installations that oscillate between expressionist art and environmental activism, while also being a source of economic stability for their community. “Our art is raising global awareness around this destructive problem,” says Erub artist Jimmy K. Thaiday. “The environment is important to us. We are all connected by the world’s oceans.”⁸



Figure 4. Ghost-nets at Erub Arts, 2018. Photograph courtesy of Carol E. Mayer

In 2018, I journeyed back to Erub to document the making of MOA's ghost-net sculpture commission: a giant sea turtle. I arrived at Erub Arts, where the artists work, to see hundreds of metres of fishing nets strewn everywhere, all waiting to become works of art (Fig. 4). The metal framework for MOA's turtle, already welded together by Thaiday, lay on a table ready for other artists to begin their work with the netting. Griffiths told me that working with the nets grows on you.

We know nets are a menace now, but it started off catching fish for somebody's nourishment and for lives, for people. It's become rubbish, and it's become disused and a menace. But as you touch it and work with it, you think about all those things and they become really important to you; and then, as you weave it back together, you're weaving back life into something that had life in the beginning. I think that is very powerful and it's a powerful message. The oceans and waterways of all kinds are precious to us.⁹



Figure 5. Left to right: Ellarose Savage, Ethel Charlie, Racy Oui-Pitt, Florence Gutchen with unfinished sculpture *Eip Kor Korr* at Erub Arts, 2018. Photograph courtesy of Lynnette Griffiths

During my time on Erub I saw the sea turtle's shell, flippers, underbelly, and head take shape. About halfway through the process, the decision was made that MOA's turtle would be a medium sized female specimen. Florence Gutchen, one of the artists, said, "We are making this turtle for the museum in British Columbia. It is a middle-sized turtle. In Erub language we call it *Eip Kor Korr*; she is a teenager! I am making the flipper" (Fig. 5). There was no question of *Eip Kor Korr* travelling home with me, because she first had another journey to make. She was wrapped, crated, and shipped to Cairns where she was exhibited alongside other ghost-net sculptures at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair. She was then re-crated and flown more than 7,000 miles to Vancouver, where she was unpacked at MOA for her installation in the Multiversity Galleries opposite the Erub T-shirt from 2002. Today she swims above museum visitors' heads alongside a hammerhead shark, where she is, as Florence says, "a beautiful piece of art declaring the message that we must keep the water clean; we look after the sea and the sea looks after us" (Fig. 6).¹⁰



Figure 6. Installation of *Eip Kor Korr* (sea turtle) and *Irawapaup* (hammerhead shark) at MOA, University of British Columbia, 2019. Photograph by Ken Mayer. Courtesy of MOA

In February 2019, MOA welcomed Griffiths and Gutchen to the museum as the University of British Columbia's Andrew Fellowship Artists in Residence; they would share their practice and meet as many artists and community members as possible. They were here for three weeks—a short time, but this was the maximum period of time that they could be away from the island due to family and other commitments. Florence and Lynnette also intended to use the opportunity to make contacts and build networks with others working in environmental activism. To this end they met Joel Baziuk, the CEO of the Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI) based in Steveston, British Columbia.¹¹ Erub Arts is one of 130 members of the GGGI, and Baziuk keeps them in touch with the status of ghost-net activism in other parts of the world. The artists also travelled to Vancouver Island, where they met Dr. Henry Choong, a scientist at the Royal British Columbia Museum analysing the sea life found in the fishing nets and other detritus that washed up on British Columbia's shores following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in March 2011. Griffiths and Gutchen agreed to send Dr. Choong netting from Erub for analysis alongside nets that had travelled across the Pacific.

Griffiths and Gutchen also visited the Vancouver Aquarium, where they visited *Vortex*, an exhibition curated by artist Doug Coupland examining plastic waste in the Pacific Ocean and specifically the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch." Coupland's intent, similar to theirs, was to "immerse visitors in a contemplative, emotive, and transformative experience at the nexus between art and environment."¹² In addition, they met Tofino-based artist Peter Clarkson, who is famous for creating art from detritus washed ashore. They exchanged fishing nets with him so that each could make art from nets found on the other side of the world from them. The artists and Clarkson have stayed in touch since the residency, and there is talk of an exchange visit.¹³

Workshops were an important component of the artists' residency. Both women held workshops at downtown schools, at the museum, and for the Musqueam Indian Band, a First Nations community on whose ancestral lands the museum is located. All these workshops enabled participants to share their thoughts about the art and environmental challenges while creating ghost-net "scales" for the metal skeleton of a large fish made on Erub. Underscoring the global relevance of the ghost-net sculptures, the creation of the fish's scales began in a workshop in Australia, continued with more scales added at each public program in Vancouver, and wrapped up in workshops at the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in England. Finally, the fish sculpture, named *Barry the Barracuda*, travelled back to Erub, where he was completed and gifted to the Sea Swift shipping company, which ships all the art from Erub to the mainland at no cost to the artists (Fig.7).



Figure 7. Barry the Barracuda workshop at MOA, University of British Columbia, 2019. Photograph by Skooker Broom. Courtesy of MOA

In her final report to the Andrew Fellowship, Griffiths wrote, “With the plight and growing awareness around ocean plastic pollution, this residency was timely and important—bringing people with shared values together across the Pacific has created a new pathway and network connections that has seeded ideas and allowed me to explore laneways off the major arterial. I look forward to building on this, spending more time exploring and producing a greater body of artistic work.”¹⁴ Gutchen commented, “It was challenging for me to be by myself in another country for three weeks. It is not very often an island person who is married with children and grandchildren gets this opportunity to focus on others’ knowledge and the environment. I have learnt much about other people’s culture and their history. AUESWAO (big thank you).”¹⁵

During the final days of their residency, Griffiths and Gutchen gifted ghost-net sculptures of a jellyfish, a small turtle, and a small squid to MOA. The squid was made for a presentation to the O’Brian Strategic Acquisitions Fund that included a request for the commissioning of a 12-foot-long giant squid ghost-net sculpture (Fig. 8). Named *Sauge* after

one of the women artists, she arrived at MOA in January 2021 and is now mounted outside the Australian display that houses the T-shirt acquired nineteen years ago. She is swimming towards the giant turtle, hammerhead shark, and five jellyfish.



Figure 8. Giant squid *Sauge* and her Erub creators: Jimmy J. Thaiday, Lavinia Ketchell, Rachel Emma Gela, Ethel Charlie, Racy Oui-Pitt, Ellarose Savage, Florence Gutchen, Nancy Naawi, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Lynnette Griffiths

The artists who created the sculptures in the attention-getting installation have reached far beyond the shores of their tiny island. Their environmental activism is expressed through these works of art, and provides a positive alternative to feeling overwhelmed by the current global environmental crisis. “Ghost net is a real menace to marine life,” says Erub artist Racy Oui-Pitt. “When you see the reef, you want to protect it. You want to pick up things and do something and make something out of it, anything, also something for yourself, too.”¹⁶ See for yourself: Pick up some garbage from the sea and make a turtle—it will help.

Carol E. Mayer, PhD, FCMA, is head of the Curatorial and Design Department at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia (UBC), where she is also responsible for the Pacific collections. Her research interests include the history of Pacific Islands collections in Canada, the exploration of intellectual property rights, and the building of collaborative networks between the Pacific and the Pacific Northwest. These interests are reflected in Dr. Mayer's numerous exhibitions, publications and conference papers. She has received several recognitions including the UBC President's Medal of Excellence, the Independence Medal (Republic of Vanuatu), the Malu Dala Award (Pacific Arts Association), and awards from the Canadian Museums Association and the International Council of Museums.

Notes

¹ Native Title was granted two years later. See National Native Title Tribunal, Federal Court of Australia, Tribunal file no. QCD2004/005, Federal Court Number(s): QUD6036/1998, <http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleRegisters>

² The author is head of the Curatorial and Design Department at MOA.

³ MOA has hosted four exhibitions related to the environment in the past few years: *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories* (May 10, 2016 – October 16, 2016); *In the Footprint of the Crocodile Man: Contemporary Arts of the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea* (March 1, 2016 – January 31, 2017); *Amazonia: The Rights of Nature* (March 10, 2017 – January 28, 2018); and *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia* (November 1, 2018 – March 31, 2018). See www.moa.ubc.ca/past-exhibitions/.

⁴ On Erub, sharks are viewed as totems and ancestors as well as symbols of law and order.

⁵ Lynnette Griffiths, personal communication, April 26, 2021. Lynnette Griffiths, a multimedia artist, and Marion Gaemers, who works with basketry traditions, have both taught and practised for many years in the Torres Strait, working collaboratively with the small communities across the islands. See Lynnette Griffiths and Marion Gaemers, *Final Curtain* (Townsville, Australia: Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, 2020), accessed March 21, 2021, https://umbrella.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Final-Curtain_eCatalogue.pdf.

⁶ Griffiths, personal communication, April 26, 2021.

⁷ The world's largest collection of ghost-net art is held at the Australian National Maritime Museum. In 2018, the commissioned sculpture was shown in the exhibition *Au Karem Ira Lamar Lu: Ghost Nets of the Ocean*. See also, Australian Museum, "Ghost Net Art from Darnley Island (Erub)," <https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/ghost-net-art/ghost-net-art-from-darnley-island/>, accessed April 24, 2021.

⁸ "Au Karem Ira Lamar Lu: Ghost Nets of the Ocean," Australian National Maritime Museum, accessed February 10 2019, <https://www.sea.museum/whats-on/exhibitions/ghost-nets-of-the-ocean>.

⁹ "Ocean Life 2," ReDot Fine Art Gallery, April 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFc7Hx6F3Ss>.

¹⁰ Final Report to the Andrew Fellowship, University of British Columbia, July 16, 2019, n.p.

¹¹ “The Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI) is a cross stakeholder alliance of fishing industry, private sector, corporations, NGOs, academia and governments focused on solving the problem of lost and abandoned fishing gear worldwide. We believe the solution to this problem lies in working together across all sectors to achieve maximum impact for our oceans and the life within them.” Global Ghost Gear Initiative, accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.ghostgear.org/>.

¹² Vortex, Douglas Coupland (website), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://coupland.com/vortex/>.

¹³ Pete Clarkson, The Art of Pete Clarkson (website), accessed February 10, 2019, <http://peteclarkson.com/>.

¹⁴ Final Report to the Andrew Fellowship, n.p.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Au Karem Ira Lamar Lu: Ghost Nets of the Ocean.”