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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

## **Weaving the past into the future**

Aunty Bronwyn Razem

Gunditjmara

Interviewed by Tabitha Lean

Poem by Tabitha Lean

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In the middle of a global pandemic, where we are seeing the world descend into chaos, economies fall, people fighting over toilet paper, and we've been forced into isolation and socially distanced from our families and neighbours, there is a little humble gift being offered to the world by Aunty Bronwyn Razem: Wayapawarr Watnanda Marangee, meaning we all come together in a meeting. Wayapawarr Watnanda Marangee is a calling together, a gathering around a virtual campfire, in a circle, weaving together old ways. Stitch by stitch, Aunty Bronwyn is connecting us all.

I first met Aunty Bronwyn Razem over the phone. We started our call with me gushing over her work. I tell her I admire her weaving and how I get overwhelmed looking at each perfect stitch, and wonder at each entanglement of fibre. It's all so beautiful, I say, and I think she is a master weaver. There's a very short silence, and then in her quiet, unassuming and considered voice, Aunt says, "Thank you, but no." She explains that weaving is a gift, a gift she received from her mother, and that she is enormously grateful for it, that it keeps her in line and focussed. I smile because Aunty Bronwyn's self-effacing sentimentality is absolutely what I should have expected from someone selflessly sharing her ancestral gift with the world. It makes me think of how my old kookoon would say that we only have knowledge in order to share it; it is never ours to keep.

And so, despite me being the writer and Aunty Bronwyn the weaver, it happens that Aunty Bronwyn weaves a most beautiful story for me. As we talk, Aunt tells me about her experiences of learning to weave, and it's like opening a window to the past, but being able to see beyond it to the future. I imagine long stretches of Gunditjmara country, the birds overhead and the ancestors breathing gentle breezes through our hair. Aunty takes me to the place where she would gather the long reeds with her mother. I listen intently and imagine those gathering times – a time to be one with the Country and feel the land beneath your feet: a meditation of sorts. Aunty tells me that before they could go home and retire for the evening, her mum would make her split the heads of all the grasses, and then lay them out to dry for a few weeks. When the time would come to weave, the reeds



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would be soaked to return their pliability for the craft. As I hear Aunty tell me this, I think what a gift of strength her mother entrusted to her, and how this knowledge transformed the student into a teacher. I am reminded that we are never just one thing. Aunty Bronwyn is not just a weaver, or just an artist, she is an entanglement of many things: teacher, knowledge keeper, craftswoman, engineer.

Our yarn circles back to the Wayapawarr Watnanda Marangee. Aunty tells me that COVID-19 has had a huge impact on her practice, not the least losing her studio space. Aunt talks optimistically about utilising the online workshops in order to employ 21<sup>st</sup> century technology to share an ancient craft, producing the most beautiful dialogues between artists, people and weaving. The next day I join one of Aunty Bronwyn's workshops. It is relaxed and engaging, each of us untangling raffia into methodical stitches forming never ending hypnotic swirling spirals that I think reflect the circular patterns we find on Country – ripples in a pond, growth rings on a tree or season cycles. It seems to represent a journey of perpetual becoming. I watch on in admiration as Aunty Bronwyn takes a traditional craft and transforms and recreates it anew. If I close my eyes, I think I could imagine us weaving around the campfire; damper in the coals, tea boiling and the wispy trails of smoke circling into the ether. I am relaxed and I feel at home.

It's the mindfulness of weaving that I enjoy most. Aunty says that weaving slows down your brain and lets your mind wander off. "It's like monkeys grab onto your thoughts and run away with them," she says. Aunty tells me how weaving can help you sort out the problems of the day, and if ever there was a time that I wanted monkeys to steal my problems, it's in the middle of a pandemic! It seems that the craft of weaving that Aunty teaches allows you to look back, especially when the present is so unstable and during a time of confusing clamour; it is perhaps that by looking back the present might regain its stability. Looking to the future, I ask Aunty what her dream project would be. She pauses again, and talks about an ambitious installation project that would challenge the eugenic constructions of Indigeneity. "As much as it gets questioned or disputed, us fair skinned black fullas know who we are and where we belong," Aunty Bronwyn says firmly. I reply that we are always accountable to our community. Quick off the mark, Aunty adds, "... and our ancestors." This sums up Aunty Bronwyn Razem for me: a woman armed with wisdom, an Elder with ancestral knowledge, a teacher of an ancient craft, a keeper of tradition, and a friend. A new friend who is using her cultural gift to create a movement that breaks the monotony and uncertainty of isolation, and brings us all to her meeting place to share.



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*It all starts with creation,  
the old people guide her hand,  
the soft touch of an ancestor  
merely a kiss carried upon winds drift.  
Each stitch she makes,  
each loop she knots,  
stitch by stitch,  
rush through needle eye break,  
infusing life and energy,  
the reeds pulse with the river's touch  
as she weaves together life,  
taming the wild,  
creating form from formlessness,  
shape from shapelessness,  
movement from stillness –  
she invites the past to intrude on the present  
while she stitches her steps into the future –  
the whole triptych of time  
caught up in nature's mesh.  
Interconnected patterns weaving  
a circle of life and death,  
flawed but perfect,  
stitch by stitch,  
over and over,  
circle by circle,  
unravelling the mystery of warped threads  
in every knot  
bringing life to beauty,  
weaving fibres into patterns of love  
where beginnings run into endings,  
where infinity becomes a reality,  
where our ancestors speak in stitches.  
She breathes life into our old ways  
weaving a web of connection,  
a warm embrace from the fire light,  
a gift ...  
an ancestral gift for the sharing.*

Tabitha Lean 2020

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*Aunty Bronwyn Razem, a Gunditjmara woman of the Kirrae Whurrong clan of western Warrnambool, comes from a long lineage of traditional weavers. She regularly conducts basket weaving workshops with Victorian Indigenous communities in order to facilitate the revival of cultural traditions. The*



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*workshops make an important contribution to reconnecting Aboriginal people with their culture and strengthening their identities, as well as showcasing cultural values to the general public and educational institutions. She was highly commended for the Deadly Art Award at the 2005 Victorian Indigenous Arts Awards, and short-listed for the Victorian Indigenous Arts Awards in 2006. Aunty Bronwyn has played a vital role in the revival of the traditional eel trap. In 2013, her eel trap with emu feathers granted her the Acquisitive Award in the [Victorian Indigenous Arts Awards](#). The [National Museum Australia](#) in Canberra and the Art Gallery of Ballarat have curated her eel traps for their permanent collections.*