

“Defend the Oceans!” Ghostnet Art and Environmental Activism of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

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Abstract: Ghostnet art is an art movement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that has been gaining enthusiastic followers worldwide in recent years, not only because of its impressive artistic design, but equally because of the artists’ message behind the artworks. The ghostnet sculptures, made mainly by members of two Australian Indigenous communities in Erub and Pormpuraaw are constructed from old fishing nets. For the artists, it is both an expression of their environmental activism to protect the oceans and their close connection with their natural environment. Their close relationship to the land and sea is reflected in the artworks, which also create a connection to their history, cultural heritage, identity, and their totems. Their works are based on their myths, their land and their culture. In 2018, the Übersee-Museum Bremen (eng. Overseas Museum Bremen) presented these impressive artworks for the first time in Germany in a small special exhibition, the realization and background of which will be discussed in this article.

Keywords: Ghostnets, environmental activism, marine debris, Erub Island, Pormpuraaw, Torres Strait Islanders, Australian Aborigines

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Figure 1: Artists of Erub Arts: Lavinia Ketchell, Rachel Emma Gela, Ellarose Savage, Florence Gutchen, Nancy Naawi, Nancy Kiwat, Alma Sailor, Ethel Charlie, Racy Oui-Pitt.

Ghostnets drifting in our oceans and washing up on our beaches are now a well-known phenomenon worldwide. From August 24 to November 25, 2018, the Übersee-Museum Bremen (eng. Overseas Museum Bremen) showed a small special exhibition entitled: 'Australian Ghostnets - Art from the Sea' (German title: 'Australische Ghostnets: Kunst aus dem Meer') in which 16 works by ten different contemporary Indigenous artists from the Australian state of Queensland on this topic were on display for the first time in Germany. With their sculptures, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait artists want to draw attention to the immense threat posed to the oceans by ghostnets and thus lead a worldwide movement to protect the oceans and their inhabitants. In doing so, their environmental activism transforms the silent threat into stunning, colorful artworks that call us to action and protect endangered marine life: "Ghost net is a real menace to marine life. 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 and also something for yourself too" (Racy Oui-Pitt in MU Sea UM 2021). For these 'advocates of the sea', however, this is not only about environmental protection, but also about their cultural heritage and identity.

The first chapter describes the ghostnets and their origin as well as the danger they pose in order to create a basis for readers to understand the art from and the underlying message explained later. Following this, the implementation of the exhibition, the artists' communities, and the creative process are presented. Finally, the role of the artists as activists, which is central to their creative engagement with ghostnets, as well as their involvement with local art centers, are carried out. To understand the deep meaning of the sculptures the indigenous cultural concepts upon which ghostnet art is based are discussed.

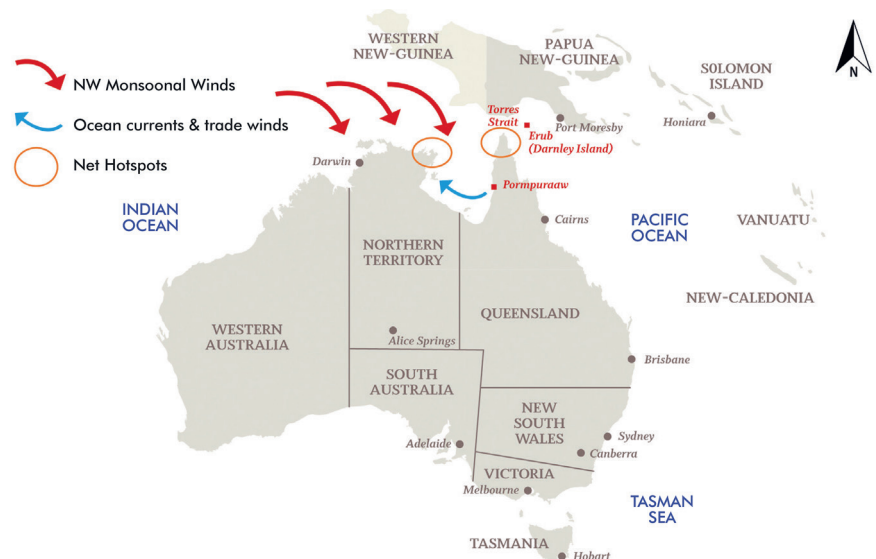
their perspective understandable. But also websites of other museums dealing with ghostnet art as well as those of indigenous initiatives and local art centers. Only by including these different scientific perspectives can a holistic, multi-perspective picture of ghostnets and their background be achieved.

In order to understand the artistic approach of the ghostnet artists in light of their commitment to their environment, it is useful to first address the cause of the threat posed by ghostnets. What are ghostnets and why are they called that?

The nets enter the oceans in very different ways. On the one hand, fishermen often throw their old and no longer needed nets overboard, since their disposal means a great (financial) effort. In addition, there are numerous fishermen who fish in zones where they are not permitted to do so. If they are discovered during their illegal activity, they immediately let their nets slip into the sea in order to cover their tracks and provide no



evidence of their offense, thus avoiding prosecution. Moreover, it often happens that the nets, due to their increasing weight and size, break free from the vessels and are thus inadvertently lost with their contents. Since the recovery of nets is very costly, the loss of such nets is usually not reported (WWF 2020a). At least a third of the plastic waste in our oceans is made up of old fishing gear such as nets and ropes. According to a WWF report, about one million tons are added each year (WWF 2020b). In the past, the nets were made of biodegradable hemp. Since the 1960s they have been using nylon, which is non-biodegradable, but grounds into small plastic particles (Habekuss 2018). The decomposition of these gears takes enormous time. Depending on the type of net, it can take 400 to 600 years for a plastic net to decompose (Shea 2014). By



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Photo: Lynnette Griffiths.



Figure 4: 'Archer Fish' by Sid Bruce Short Joe, 2016.

then, toxic plasticizers are released and the microparticles (microplastics) enter the ocean and our food web.

The nets found on beaches each have a different texture, the mesh size of the net, the length of the niche, how the knots are made (Le Roux 2016b). Thus, they can be easily assigned to different nations. Studies have shown that they originate mainly from China, Thailand, South Korea and Vietnam (Le Roux 2016b). Wilcox et al. (2013) estimate that 55% of the nets (gillnet, trawl and longline gear) in the Gulf of Carpentaria can be attributed to these nations and cite additional fisheries in Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia and Japan. Only 10% of the nets come from Australian fisheries (Global Ghost Gear Initiative 2018). However, it remains mostly unclear where exactly in the ocean the nets were lost. This would be due to the large number of illegal fishing activities in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Detecting the perpetrators of these activities and holding them accountable is therefore usually very difficult.

For marine animals, these nets are often visually imperceptible and so these death traps catch everything in their path. Researchers have found that sea turtles represent more than 80% of the victims of these death traps in the case of Australia (Wilcox et al. 2012). This is due to the ocean currents prevailing in the Gulf

of Carpentaria, which bring the animals straight to the nets. The resident sea turtles move with the current and are particularly vulnerable to the nets. Studies have shown that up to four sea turtles can get caught in every 100 meters of fine mesh nets (Wilcox et al. 2014). Some of these nets are up to 50 kilometers long, and there are tens of thousands of kilometers of nets floating around the world. If laid end to end, this would be more than enough to span the equator (Whale and Dolphin Conservation 2012). These kilometer-long nets with their deadly prey weigh an immense amount, very often a few tons (Global Ghost Gear Initiative 2018). Only when some of these nets with their senseless victims in them have finally become too heavy they slowly sink to the bottom of the sea. And there, too, the heavily laden nets destroy or kill the fragile corals and animals living on the seabed. Others, however, wash up on the beaches.

The exhibition and the ghostnet objects on display **The organization of the exhibition**

The exhibition 'Australian Ghostnets: Art from the Sea' was created in collaboration with the Paris gallery Arts d'Australie by Stéphane Jacob-Langevin, who since 1996 has been involved in the dis-

semination and promotion of paintings, sculptures and other art objects by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists. Stéphane Jacob-Langevin has been working with the ghostnet artists for a long time and is a well-respected expert in this field. Together with him I selected the sculptures, which were shown for the first time in Germany in the cabinet room of the Bremen Übersee-Museum, as well as receiving background information on the artists and their works from Arts D'Australie. Some of the sculptures had already been shown in other international exhibitions, but not in this compilation and setting.

In addition to the curator and her intern, staff from the Übersee-Museum's Restoration, Magazine Management, Workshops, Collection Technology, Graphics, PR and Marketing, Exhibition Coordination, and the Education departments were involved in the implementation of the small exhibition.

The exhibition was made possible partly through the funding from the Ostasiasischer Verein Bremen (eng. East Asian Association Bremen).

The ghostnet sculptures

The artists' works shown in the exhibition come from two different communities in the Australian state of Queensland: Pormpuraaw (west coast of the Cape



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Figure 5: 'Sea Turtle' by Elliot Koonutta, 2016.

York peninsula) and Erub (Darnley) Island (Torres Strait Islands) (see Fig.1). Already in the run-up to the work on the exhibition, representatives of the two communities had made it clear that they did not want their sculptures to be spatially mixed, since they also have different artistic approaches and different cultural backgrounds: "We have different experiences and different stories. They have theirs and we have ours. It's good to have a mix of cultures as long as we recognize and acknowledge differences. We are Torres Strait Islanders and they are Aboriginal. We are different" (Ellarose Savage in Le Roux 2016a: 48). Australia uses two distinct terms for Indigenous people: Those on the mainland are called Aboriginal and those living in the Torres Strait are Torres Strait Islanders (Le Roux 2016b).

To address this desire in the installations, the artworks from the two communities were each presented together as a group when realizing the spatial design, so that visitors could see where each sculpture came from not only through the text panels, but also through their installation in the space. For this reason, the ghostnet sculptures of the Erub community were presented as a cohesive school of fish, while the works of the Pormpuraaw artists were also hung or mounted in spatial proximity to each other.

A total of 16 ghostnet sculptures by ten different artists were shown in the exhibition, all of which made a strong impression in their three-dimensionality and texture. Presented from the Pormpuraaw community were a 1.50 m "Sea Horse" by Kim Norman, a 2.40 m "Hammer Head Shark", a 1.43 m "Sea Turtle" by Elliot Koonutta, an "Archer Fish" by Sid Bruce Short Joe and a "Stonefish" by Christine Yantumba. From the Erub community, the fish "Rupert" and "Sainty" by Ellarose Savage, "Cindy" by Racy Oui-Pitt, "Spyda" and "Bala" by Emma Gela, "Mabel" as well as "Cezanne" by Florence Gutchen, "Joseph" by Sarah-Dawn Gela, "Tagena" by Ethel Charlie were brought together to form a fish school installation. Complementing the Erub community's contribution was "Turtle" by Lavinia Ketchel and "Squid" by Emma Gela.

Photos and films

In addition to installations of the ghostnet sculptures, the exhibition also featured photographs of the artists making their works, taken by Lynnette Griffiths and Paul Jakubowski during several ghostnet workshops in Erub and Pormpuraaw. Emphasis was placed on presenting photographs depicting artists whose works were also on display in the Bremen exhibition, so that visitors could make a direct connection between ghostnet sculpture and

artist. In order to learn how the nets reach the coasts and to let the artists themselves have their say, several short films from the Australian Museum and the Art Gallery of South Australia were also shown at a film station in the exhibition, in which the artists explain in more detail their motivation for creating ghostnet art and the background to their artworks. For example, you can see Elliot Koonutta, Sid Bruce Short Joe and Simon Norman making ghostnet sculptures at the Pormpuraaw Art and Culture Center that were inspired by the myths of their ancestors. Erub artists also explain the deep meaning the ocean has for them and how they integrate this close relationship into their sculptures. Florence Gutchen, artist from Erub, describes this special meaning with impressive words: "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 in MU SEA UM 2021).

Innovations of the exhibition

What was innovative about this exhibition in Germany was the impressive combination of the cultural heritage of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, their advocacy for their environment and the fascinating artistic expression. With this approach, ghostnet art was a perfect

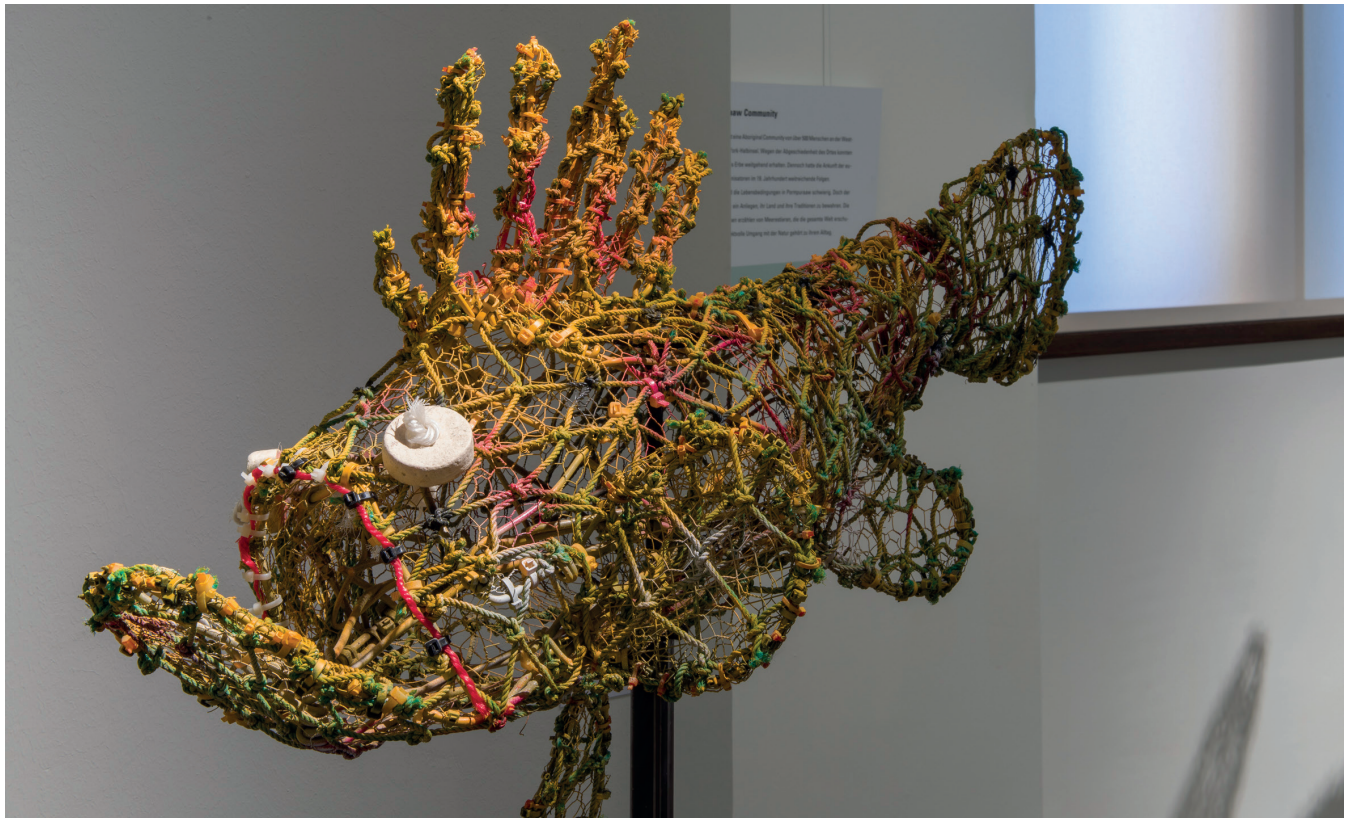


Figure 6: 'Stonefish' by Christine Yantumba, 2016.

fit for the Übersee-Museum, which is a three-division museum consisting of the departments of ethnology, natural history, and commerce history. In its exhibitions and projects, the museum often focuses on showing visitors the beauty and diversity of the world (be it biological or cultural), in order to encourage people to preserve and protect this beauty and diversity - an approach that ties in very well with the idea of the ghostnet artists, whose concern is to transform something fundamentally negative into something positive.

The sculptures encouraged exhibition visitors to engage in a dialogue about a frightening worldwide phenomenon, and they were mesmerized by the colorfulness and artistic execution of the works. At the same time, the artists' works created a colorful underwater world that delighted adults and children, and completely retold a traditional topic with modern materials that the artists recycle. The exhibition thus also valued the world's oldest living culture and demonstrated again the extraordinary ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to adapt to new circumstances while living their traditions.

The exhibition was already well received by visitors and the media on the day of its opening and was supported by an accompanying program in the form of, for example, curatorial tours, a theater play

and an upcycling workshop for children. This was due on the one hand to the current topic of marine litter and ghostnets, which are causing great damage not only in Australia but also in Europe, but equally to the impressive impact of the individual works, which most visitors were able to admire for the first time. According to their own statements, the exhibition visitors knew little about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, history, identity and culture and were impressed by the ghostnet artists' positive approach to a global problem. For some visitors to the exhibition, the dramatic threat posed by ghostnets and the brutal death of sea creatures on the one hand, and the often cheerful, colorful sculptures on the other, seemed incompatible. But it is precisely this combination of danger and beauty that can create awareness.

The work of the artists & their involvement in the communities of Pormpuraaw and Erub

As part of the cultural revitalization efforts of Indigenous people in recent years, the traditional arts in Australia have also experienced a revival (continuing through bark paintings, modern acrylic paintings and sculptures with deep symbolic content) (UNESCO 2018). This also applies to the people from Erub and Pormpuraaw.

The communities of Pormpuraaw and Erub

Pormpuraaw means 'entrance way to a house' in Kuuk Thaayorre language (Pormpuraaw Arts and Cultural Centre 2021) and is an Aboriginal community consisting of more than 500 people living on the west coast of the Cape York Peninsula. It is located about 650 kilometers northwest of Cairns, which takes 8-10 hours by car. During the monsoon season from January to May, it is often surrounded by water for several months, making it even more remote. During this wet season, access roads are often closed, so that Pormpuraaw can then only be reached by aircraft (Art collector n.d.). This remoteness ensured that the community members were able to largely preserve important parts of their cultural heritage. Even today it is very important to them to preserve their traditions and their land. Many myths of their ancestors tell of sea creatures that created the entire world, and respectful treatment of nature is part of their everyday life in Pormpuraaw (Pormpuraaw Land & Sea Management 2010). However, as almost everywhere in the Pacific, the arrival of European colonizers in the 19th century has had consequences that extend to the present, and living conditions in Pormpuraaw are economically difficult. In these remote areas, there are

usually few opportunities for residents to earn a regular income (Global Ghost Gear Initiative 2018), so artistic expression of their care for the environment is also a way to connect with the rest of the world and create a livelihood: ‘Our art is a bridge between our culture and community to the outside world’ (Pompuraaw Arts and Cultural Centre 2018). Their art is one of the few commodities they can export and therefore plays a significant role in Pompuraaw, not only socially but also economically. This benefits not only the artists, but the entire community (Arts Queensland 2018). In doing so, the people in Pompuraaw, as well as those in Erub, work closely with the local Art and Culture Centre. The Pompuraaw Art and Culture Center is a non-profit organization run by local community artists and people involved in cultural work and events (Pompuraaw Arts and Cultural Centre 2021).

The other community from which the sculptures in the exhibition at Bremen’s Übersee-Museum come is from Darnley Island, also known as Erub in the local language called Meriam. Surrounded by a fringing reef, Erub is part of the Torres Strait Islands in the Australian state of Queensland and is located 60 kilometers south of Papua New Guinea. The approximately 400 inhabitants are predominantly of Melanesian origin and call themselves ‘Erubam Le People’ (‘People of Erub’). They can be assigned to four different tribes (Erub Arts 2018). Their cultural tradition is based on a long history of seafaring with elaborately carved canoes, weapons, worked stone objects and detailed dance costumes (Erub Arts 2018). Creation myths and events of the past are passed down to succeeding generations through dances and songs (Erub Arts 2018). Their access to education is limited due to their remote location. For example, there is no high school in Erub and electricity is generated by diesel generators. Just like in Pompuraaw, there are few job prospects on their remote island, so their creative art-making is one of the few ways they can earn an income. However, the current Covid-19 pandemic hit both communities hard, making it very difficult for them to spread their art since spring 2020, with numerous exhibitions and workshops cancelled and museums closed.

The ghostnet artists involved may live in remote regions of our planet, but they now enjoy the attention of

art lovers worldwide and have won numerous awards. For example, various ghostnet sculptures from these two communities have been exhibited in New York, San Francisco, Singapore, Paris, Cluny, Monaco and Geneva. The world’s largest permanent ghostnet installation has been on display at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney since 2018. Ghostnet art is now also shown at international art fairs and festivals, and the works reach visitor numbers in the hundreds of thousands (Arts Queensland 2018). Not only do the artists share their art and message, but they also expand their skills and hands-on experience in the selection, cataloging, transportation, marketing and selling of artwork at a major event. In this way, they gain experience of the often complexities of the art market and how widespread in this world their art is recognized, for example, Europe (Arts Queensland 2018). In doing so, they share their cultural background and stories with an interested international audience while keeping their traditions alive (Arts Queensland 2018).

The collection of nets

How do the artists work and how does a dirty old fishing net become a ghostnet artwork? Every morning, local rangers collect the nets washed up overnight on their coasts and document them: “Recycling those little wires, recycling the ghost net, instead of just throwing it out.... we like to recycle. Everything that they throw at the tip we used to go and collect. The rangers are doing fine bringing in more ghost nets. Especially after monsoon, it’s all

over the beach. So we recycle it” (Sid Bruce Short Joe in Australian Museum 2014). From these nets the artists pick the ones they would like to use. In the past, the retrieved nets were all burnt or transported to local council landfill sites for disposal (Butler et al. 2013). The Indigenous rangers are funded through the Australian federal government’s Working on Country program: “It combines Indigenous traditional knowledge with modern techniques to protect and care for the land and the sea” (Country needs people 2021).

The artists now produce colorful artworks from the resulting mountains of nets of various colors and sizes. They deliberately avoid some nets because of their experience that they are too fragile (Le Roux 2016a). In Erub, artists also often receive nets directly from the art centre where they work, or relatives collect nets for them on the coast. Sometimes they also go searching on the coast themselves. In this way, ghostnets become part of a traditional system of collection and exchange: in the past, people collected trees washed up from Papua New Guinea, the wood from which was used to build houses; today, they are collecting nets (Le Roux 2016b).

Ghostnet making

When it comes to processing the nets, a sketch is often made by the artist first. Then, based on this, first the carcass of the respective marine animal is bent and welded. In the next step, the nets are then artfully woven around this framework and sewn and decorated. In this way, the artists give metal and nets the shape of different creatures.



Figure 7: Sid Bruce Short Joe working on ‘Batfish’.

In Pormpuraaw, weaving has always been one of the predominant craft techniques and was performed by both men and women. For example, Pormpuraaw artists often weave synthetic fibers in the same way they process palm or pandanus leaves (Le Roux 2016a). Some Pormpuraaw artists additionally use (acrylic) paint to give their works the right expression. Sometimes they paint or spray the sculptures or dip them, so that a completely different visual impression is created compared to the works from Erub where the artists don't generally use paint (Le Roux 2016a). All of the works are characterized by great vividness and, in general, the individual artists have their own preferences as to which nets are particularly suited to the artistic expression they desire for their particular sculpture. During their creative period, the artists also adopted different techniques of art installation as well as sculpture, adding to the typical ghostnet iconography (Le Roux 2016a). In this way, these artworks also gained more and more realistic expression through refinement of working techniques (Le Roux 2016a).

Artist Lavinia Ketchell describes the mood during the joint artistic creation process as generally exuberant and cheerful: "I enjoy making all kinds of different things from ghost nets. The colors, visible once you unravel the net, make my works bright and happy" (Lavinia Ketchell in MU SEA UM 2021). The artworks are often given nicknames by their creators, and there is much shared laughter (Le Roux 2016b). Here, once again, the basic resilient, optimistic, and forward-looking attitude of the ghostnet artists, who believe in the power of their works in the fight against the destruction of the ocean, is evident.

Other activities of the artists

Many of the artists are engaged not only in ghostnet art, but also in wood-carving, painting and printmaking. Works in ceramics, screen printing, lino cuts and drawings on paper are held in International and National collections (Erub Arts 2018). To deal artistically with their environment and their origin is of great importance for the artists. In doing so, they build a bridge from the past to the present. This is how Erub artist Nancy Naawi explains it: "I have always been interested in making things. I have always crocheted and enjoyed sewing and handcrafts. As a member of

Erub arts, I have gained confidence as an artist, and I want to do things that represent me, my family, and my surroundings from 'before-time' to modern times" (Nancy Naawi in MU SEA UM 2021). Even though Torres Strait Islanders naturally participate in modern life with all its technological possibilities, their island custom still plays an important role for them (Hamby and Kirk 2016). Working on their art strengthens their cultural identity and background: "My artwork gives me the opportunity to express the things that are important to me, my identity, and my culture" (Jimmy John Thaiday in MU SEA UM 2021).

Environmental activism and message of the ghostnet artists

Ghostnet art and marine conservation

In conceiving their works, the artists draw inspiration from the environment around them and, in the case of the ghostnet works, also from diving for a view of the underwater sea life. During the 1860s, the Torres Strait Islands were known for pearling and the gathering of *bêche-de-mer* (Hamby and Kirk 2016). Many female divers were so talented that they were even kidnapped and forced to dive for others outside their community (Florek 2005). In their current pursuit of their ghostnet art, the people of Erub continue to be inspired by common dives and the coral reef to create new artwork ideas that they incorporate into their work.

The unmistakable message of the ghostnet artists of both communities is universal and concerns the people in the Pacific as well as those in the rest of the world: "Defend the Oceans". The background to this message is that over 30 years ago, in 1989, the first ghostnet was found on the north coast of Australia (Global Ghost Gear Initiative 2018). Since then, the amount of nets washed up on the beaches there has increased dramatically. Due to monsoon winds and the resulting ocean currents, the Gulf of Carpentaria between Arnhem Land and Cape York has become a hotspot for ghostnets. The Gulf of Carpentaria is a bay that cuts into the coast of northern Australia and is bounded on the east by the Torres Strait. 90% of ghostnets found in Australia are washed ashore in the northern half of the Gulf of Carpentaria (Le Roux 2016b), making this

region the most affected by ghostnets within Australia. Unfortunately, this area provides an ideal habitat for numerous endangered species, such as six of the seven species of sea turtles, dugongs and sawfish (Global Ghost Gear Initiative 2018).

As early as the mid-1990s, locals along the Australian coast noticed the revered emergence of ghostnets (Le Roux 2016b). In 2004, the Australian government launched GhostNets Australia (GNA) to address debris from commercial fishing (Hamby and Kirk 2016). GhostNets Australia now works with rangers from 40 linguistic groups in Australia and had removed 13,000 nets by 2016 (Le Roux 2016b). The successes can be attributed to the good cooperation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups (Le Roux 2016b) of rangers, fishers, artists and environmental activists, who work hand in hand for their common goal: remove ghostnets from beaches, rescue animals caught in them, further research the phenomenon of ghostnets, and track the paths of animals affected by them. In the future course of the joint work, the aim was to promote and disseminate ghostnet art. In this approach, an ecological perspective is impressively combined with the artistic one. Between 2009 and 2011 the processing of fishing nets into artistically designed jewelry and baskets took off in Australian communities. The artists eventually sought greater challenges and ventured into increasingly complex, larger sculptures. In this way, the artists become advocates for the ocean ecosystem, reminding us of the importance of nature with their colorful art - and with very simple means: needles, soldering irons, knives, scissors, wire cutters and net cutters, and of course the discarded fishing nets as a basis.

Ghostnet art and cultural traditions

But the aspect of marine conservation is only one facet of their work: Their works also vividly demonstrate their unique approach to their cultural traditions. Ghostnet sculptures often also represent the artists' personal totem animals, with which they share a mythical kinship relationship that goes back to their ancestors (Le Roux 2016b). The concept of the totem stems from a belief that humans have a mythical kinship connection to certain animals, plants, mountains, etc. (National Trust

of Australia 2012). Ghostnet artworks are furthermore an important element of their identity and culture, as also vividly described by Le Roux (2016b: 14): “(...) ghostnet art is both inscribed in a contemporary and worldwide issue and portrays the strength of Indigenous values, depicting the core elements of family, land and sea, history, identity and culture”. This close relationship further explains the special significance of the artifacts for the artists: “The artistic appropriation of discarded nets reveals the intimate connections that Indigenous people have built with their environment and the economic, cultural and diplomatic strategies they have developed to protect it” (Le Roux 2016b: 2).

The connection with the sea and their land represents one of the cornerstones of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity, well-being, and spirituality (Australian Together 2021; Indigenous Working Group Workshop 2002). This relationship is often a very deep one and is characterized by reciprocity and caring: the country, in this case the sea, feeds the people and in return they care for their country. The artists described here accomplish this through the path of their creativity: “Even if not many ghostnet works represent the animals trapped by discarded nets, they express a strong connection to the sea environment” (Le Roux 2016b: 10). Sea turtles, for example, are an important part of Erub Islanders’ belief system and at the same time a traditional source of food (Mayer 2021).

Ever since the first ghostnets landed with them, the people of the Pormpuraaw and Erub community have creatively transformed them into everyday objects, for example by making baskets, bags, or curtains decorated with shells. Then, in 2009, the first ghostnet workshop was held in Aurukun on the Cape York Peninsula, where local artists came together and made larger objects with dedicated staff from the GhostNets Australia organization (led by Australian artist Sue Ryan). They used weaving and other craft techniques that have always existed in the communities, now brought together with new techniques. To the delight of the elders, traditional knowledge of craft techniques are being passed on to the younger generation. These traditional ways of working merge with newer techniques and materials at ghostnet art. That same year the ‘Ghost Net Art Project’ was launched.



Figure 8: Michael Norman and his work ‘Dugong’.

Various workshops on the Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait Island soon produced artworks that quickly attracted the interest of collectors, museums and galleries.

Artists and art centers engaged in the ghostnet art movement

In Erub, the engagement with ghostnet art emanates from the Art Centre “Erub Arts” or “Erub Erwer Meta”. It is the first Art Centre run by Torres Strait artists and was established in 2005 (Hamby and Kirk 2016). The Erub Arts vision statement clearly states that: “We want our community to have a strong Erubian identity. Our Art Centre works to revitalise our traditional culture and promote it to the world” (Hamby and Kirk 2016: 166; Erub Arts 2018).

Every day, the artists at Erub Arts meet to work together on the sculptures, which leads to a strong sense of community (Hamby and Kirk 2016). They are supported and inspired in their artistic work by artistic director Lynnette Griffiths, who has worked with the artists for many years, undertaking workshops, public events, and research trips. This also involves spreading the word about ghostnet art in Australia and beyond, and launching similar projects in other parts of Australia.

Another important person in the fight against ghostnets is visual artist and former Cape York Indigenous art center coordinator Sue Ryan, who also works closely with GNA (Le Roux 2016b). Together they are trying to make people involved: at exhibitions of ghostnet art,

for example at the Cairns Indigenous Art fair the visitors are given the opportunity to collaborate on a large sculpture within a workshop or to make their own small ghostnet artwork for themselves. In this way, the visitor goes from being a “visitor” to a “spect’actor”, perhaps contributing to ocean conservation in the future (Le Roux 2016b: 5), as a connection is made between people, the ocean, and the artwork.

For the artists, artistic expression is an intrinsic part of their cultural practice and the transmission of traditional knowledge from generation to generation: “I am interested in expressing my relationship with the sea, and am currently exploring the links between people’s surroundings, objects, and heritage culture. Sea creatures are an important part of my heritage” (Ellarose Savage in MU SEA UM 2021). Other artists place special emphasis on their cultural heritage and its preservation in the form of their artistic expression: “I started making art seriously in 2002, and was a founding member of Erub Arts. I want to continue to make art that relates to my heritage and promotes our unique island way” (Racy Oui-Pitt in MU SEA UM 2021).

This process is now continued by contemporary artists using modern recycled materials. And with their works they want to encourage a dialogue with the rest of the world. They want to bring together people who care about the oceans. In this context the term networking takes on a whole new meaning. Therefore, it is all the more important to the artists to preserve them together.

Conclusion

The work of the various ghostnet artists originated in workshops they held in their communities, which have since spread widely throughout Australia. In the beginning, the artists dealt with smaller objects, and later these first steps developed into ghostnet art, which is now sought after on the art market. But there are also numerous artists in Australia who, inspired by the ghostnet movement, individually produce ghostnet art outside of workshops (Le Roux 2016a). In doing so, they aim to create awareness of the oceans while relating to their cultural heritage: "These objects demonstrate a very rich tangible and intangible heritage and provide a way in to the history and culture of Indigenous societies of Northern Australia: memories related to fishing; stories associated with totemic animals; or events related to colonial and post-colonial history, such as the construction of a church or working conditions in the pearl industry" (Le Roux 2016a: 22).

It is important to the ghostnet artists not to be perceived as helpless victims of the devastating situation, but to be seen as active agents in the protection of their seas. The special aesthetics and touching beauty of the works can make the viewer forget that they were originally created from deadly traps and discarded fishing gear. Their sheer vibrancy makes us look closer and realize what we will lose if we don't take care of our oceans. The artists give exhibition visitors the opportunity to see their art as a chance to rethink of our treatment of nature and its inhabitants, and the responsibility we have for our environment.

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