

## Rich stories and a great sense of humour



Emma Wynne



Posted: Monday, 3 December 2012 at 3:50pm

A new exhibition of art from the people of the Western desert is a bold, bright opportunity for Perth to explore Martu culture.

*We don't need a map: a Martu experience of the Western Desert*, is the product of a two year project by curators Gabrielle Sullivan, Erin Coates and Kathleen Sorenson, working with artists from Martu country in East Pilbara.

"The idea," says Sullivan, "is that the public get to see wonderful art but also to get a perspective of Martu culture from point of view of what the artists want to share."

The other key element to the exhibition, she says, was the Fremantle Arts Centre, with its gallery spaces surrounded by gardens.

"It's rare that you can have an exhibition in a space like this where it's very obvious that the artists are all very comfortable."

"Through the exhibition you get a sense of the humorous, human side of life in the communities."

That sense of play is evident from the moment visitors walk in the gates, where a bouncy castle, based on a traditional hand-made Western desert basket made by Thelma Judson, is set up on the grass.

Inside, the gallery walls are filled with the rich coloured Martu paintings as well as a number of installation works.

One commissioned especially for the exhibition is *The Phone Booth Project*, a collaboration between Martu filmmaker Curtis Taylor and Melbourne artist Lily Hibberd.

The installation takes an actual desert community phone booth (donated by Telstra and removed from its foundations with considerable difficulty, Hibberd says) and combines it with video and photographic stories projected on the wall.



Installation detail, *The Phone Booth Project*, Lily Hibberd and Curtis Taylor (2012, Fremantle Arts Centre)



"People tell their own stories in these films," Hibberd says.

"We wanted to create a situation where you feel like you're there, going into the experience and being out there in the desert, using a phone like a Martu person."

"It's an important way of understanding how people live in remote communities. It's a network of phone booths, and they're a hub."

Curtis Taylor says the installation reflects the modern history of life in the Western desert.

"In bushman days on Martu country they still lived a traditional, nomadic life and they used to communicate with Waru [fire], to talk with people from other country to ask for permission to enter their country and hunt on their lands, and also to send signals between vast distances," he says.

"This installation is about telecommunication and about how Martu talk to each other and how they used to talk to each other, and how it's changed and evolved."


Other highlights include *Karlamilyi*, a huge five metre by three metre painting by sisters Amy French and Lily Long which records their knowledge about their country and which is supplemented by an interpretive panel and recording of them singing; and *Cannibal Story*, an animation created using the paintings and storytelling of Martu elder, Yunkurra Billy Atkins.

- *Emma Wynne (ABC Perth)*

#### Related Information

*We don't need a map: a Martu experience of the Western Desert* is on at [Fremantle Art Centre](#) until 20 January, 2013.

#### Comments

 Add your comment