TRAVELLER BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Wandering and adventuring across the world has characterised the people of the Scandinavian nations. Danish-born Elsebeth Nielsen, a fabric artist, ceramist and teacher, has been true to her kind.

After art school in England and working internationally as a photographic model, Elsebeth came to Australia by way of Asia. Since her arrival she has experienced aspects of Australia’s diverse life which few even of the native-born have shared.

At Ernabella in Central Australia she has worked with the women of the Pitjantjatjara tribe, passing on her skills in batik, screenprinting, fabric painting and ceramics, and taught other Aboriginal learning groups on the North Coast of N.S.W.
Originally, Aboriginal teaching was her way of making art serve political ends and arose from Elsebeth’s commitment to peace and environmental activism.

As a new settler on the Far North Coast of New South Wales in the 1970s, Elsebeth was part of the action to save the Terania Creek rainforest where the protestors took to the trees and bulldozers were stopped by a ‘human wall’. At the Franklin River in Tasmania she shared the exhausting existence of the weeks-long protest camps, the confrontations with loggers in the forests and the police arrests. Finally, in 1983 Elsebeth found herself with the Women for Survival group at Pine Gap in Central Australia: her ‘last stand’, as she saw it at the time.
'I had entirely given up my practice of art to be a peace and environmental activist. From the perspective of those days the life of the artist could seem self-indulgent, even completely futile. Throwing my efforts into the movements to save the planet from nuclear warfare and environmental rape was what I felt I had to do.'

But while she was camped at Pine Gap Elsebeth visited Alice Springs art galleries and became immediately 'immensely interested' in Aboriginal art.

'I thought I had never seen anything that I loved as much. It just spoke to me very directly—the colours and the sense of design.'

Also at Pine Gap was a group of Aboriginal women. At a meeting called with the white women who were demonstrating they wanted to talk about the way in which some of the women were conducting themselves. Elsebeth found the Aboriginal women expressing the same concerns she herself had.

'It was a very significant experience for me because at the meeting, with the white and black women sitting around at opposite ends of a big horseshoe, I felt a strong pull towards the Aboriginal women. They knew how to express their opinions and how to listen to others. I felt that where I really wanted to be was there, with them.'

Giving a week-long ceramics workshop for Aboriginal young people in Alice Springs confirmed Elsebeth's attraction to the Aboriginal people.

'When I came home, I thought, I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I want to spend time with the Aboriginal women. There was something I felt I wanted to learn from them, and I thought there was only one way I could go to an Aboriginal community and live amongst them and that was to offer something in return.'

What she decided she would offer were her art skills. In 1984 Elsebeth went to Ernabella in the Pitjantjatjara Homelands to teach under the joint auspices of TAFE Adelaide, the Aboriginal Arts Board and a federal government department.

It was an experience of yet another world within the vastness of the Australian continent; a world of extreme isolation.

'We had no telephones. We couldn't receive a radio station or television. Every scrap of material or bit of dye we needed for our work had to be ordered by two-way radio. Alice Springs was a six-hour drive away, with just one petrol station between us and them.'

At Ernabella everyone was under the enormous stress of trying to live in two cultures at once.

'Before long I realised the importance to the women I was working with, apart from what I had to pass on in my artistic skills, of the ordinary, everyday life skills which I had and which are taken for granted in our world. How to use the telephone, how to write a letter. I gave driving lessons to some of the women; I got second-hand clothes sent up from Adelaide and we ran our own op shop. Just the fact that I knew how to live in the white world was extremely valuable to them.'

Having spent several years living and travelling in Asia, Elsebeth had considered herself 'pretty multicultural'. At Ernabella she realised how much more close she was as a Westerner to the Asian cultures than to Central Australian Aboriginal life.
‘I think the only thing to compare with it might be the culture of the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert. What is unique about the Pitjantjatjara is that they never lost their land. They’ve always had and still have their Dreaming sites.’

Elsebeth was initiated into the tribe by the women and given the name of Jji, meaning ‘wilderness’.

‘When they want to initiate you, the first thing the women tell you is that you must not tell the men what the women do. It is all completely secret. Basically, though, in their ceremonies the women look after the welfare of the tribe. Their concerns are with human relationships, the structure of the tribe and the wellbeing of everyone in it. The men have responsibility for the land.

‘I found the women totally fanatical about their spiritual life. At any opportunity they’d drop everything and say ‘Let’s go dancing’. They are incredibly strong and supportive of each other, meeting all each other’s emotional needs. I learned an enormous amount from them about how to be a ‘good woman’.’

The Pitjantjatjara women at Ernabella were already producing outstanding batiks on silk. There had been a European teacher there a number of years before.

‘What was so exciting for me, though, in working with the Ernabella group was the discovery of how creative the Aboriginal people are without being taught anything. One day a very tribal, traditional woman who lived on an outstation walked in. She was around fifty. She just pointed to the frying pans with the wax in them to indicate that she would like to try batik. So I gave her equipment and she started painting on a t-shirt. I only gave her technical assistance, with dyeing and so on, but what she produced was absolutely exquisite. The design was based on some Dreaming tracks; it was so spontaneous and original. After seeing her finished results, this woman became very excited and did a second one which also turned out to be a masterpiece, really wonderful. She had not so much as held a pencil in her hand before and yet she was able to produce incredible works of art.’

As coordinator and teacher at Pukatja Women’s Learning Centre, Elsebeth set up a studio where the work in batik, screenprinting and sewing could develop. She also supervised marketing. The following year was spent with the Eagle Bore Craft Group, another Pitjantjatjara Homelands project of the Aboriginal Arts Board and the Department of Education, Employment and Training. Both groups are continuing to produce.

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At Ernabella, Elsebeth discovered the
importance of teaching as a vital
balance to her own creativity. ‘It's like
breathing: if you don’t breathe out, you
can’t take a fresh breath, which is
inspiration.’

In her own strengths as a creative
artist, Elsebeth also discovered some of
her unique value as a teacher of
Aboriginal artists.

‘Aboriginal artists have tended to
produce the known. Traditionally, they
didn’t look for new ways to do things;
they stayed within the law. For the
Western artist, though, at least since
the Renaissance, art has been a
day of discovery. As well as
passing on my skills I am also passing
on that concept in my teaching.

‘Instead of saying, ‘This is how you
depict a compsite; this is how you
depict this, this is how you depict that’;
I would take my groups for walks in the
bush to see what they would find, what
they could see for themselves. I would
always say, ‘Okay, what will happen if
we do this?’, giving permission and
encouragement for experimentation
instead of repetition.’

Elsebeth’s vision for contemporary
Aboriginal art is to see it moving in the
direction of innovation, using
traditional concepts put together in new
ways. However, strong respect for the
inherent creativity and design sense of
Aboriginal people was established as
the basis for her teaching approach.

Elsebeth’s wilderness days became
days of learning about her own life as
an artist.

‘I realised that no matter how much I
might think the world needed activists,
and maybe needed me as an activist, if
I were personally unfulfilled I would be
unable to give the best of myself, and I
knew that I was happy when I was
creating and helping other people to
create. The experience of Ernabella
reaffirmed my vocation as an artist.’

Elsebeth trained initially as a potter’s
apprentice in Denmark at Sejer
Keramik near Odense. After studying ceramics at Harrow Arts School in London,
she was drawn into the world of high fashion. Later came the re-emergence of a
passion for design, established in childhood by learning traditional Danish textile
crafts.

At Bulawarti Batik Studio in Surakarta, Indonesia, Elsebeth learned Javanese batik
methods and as a partner and chief designer of the studio, worked on the
blending of traditional and contemporary styles in fabrics for the export trade.
Settled in Australia, she became absorbed in experimental studies in local clays,
ash glazes and wood firing, combined with studio production of sculpted and
wheelthrown ceramics as head potter at Barjuma Studio Pottery, Nimbin.

Under the label Iliti Designs which she founded on returning from Central Australia,
Elsebeth has developed her individual style in textile designs which express her
sense of her relationship with the natural environment.

She recounts how while out in the bush of Central Australia, on a food-gathering
expedition one day, she tried to express her admiration of a spectacular sunset.
The Aboriginal woman she was with said simply, ‘Yes—now, dig.’

‘By saying this, she returned me to the state of being one with the environment,’
says Elsebeth. ‘I had withdrawn from it in order to observe it, a very Western thing
to do. But from an Aboriginal perspective there is no distance, no separation of
people from the environment.’

Elsebeth’s most recent fabric designs draw on the European tradition of repeat
printing, but use motifs and colours from the desert inland. Scandinavian aesthetic
sense combines with what Elsebeth terms a Zen approach in the creative process.

‘When I design I’ll paint perhaps fifty images, trying to be as unconscious as
possible. There will be one which I feel flows better than all the rest. I’ll then reduce
that image to the simplest form that the image will permit.’

The symbiotic process of teaching, being a catalyst for change and being in turn
stimulated by her environment, continued for Elsebeth at Cabbage Tree Island, an
Aboriginal community near Wardell. Again within a short time the group was
producing highly original batik and screen-printed fabrics. In a co-operative
project with the Ballina Skillshare programme, a craft studio was built under
Elsebeth’s supervision where Bulimah Crafts began producing commercially. Group
exhibitions have taken place at the Lismore Art Gallery (December 1989) and the
Armidale Aboriginal Cultural Centre (December 1990).

Some additional benefits of the women’s learning have been seen in increased
prestige for the community and the consequent gains in self-confidence and self-
estem.

At Ballina, Aboriginal women craftworkers descended from a coastal tribe used
motifs of the sea and coastal landscape for designs for screenprints under
Elsebeth’s direction. While showing a recognisably Aboriginal approach they also
display a confident originality. Again, Elsebeth found the innate design sense and
the artistic quality of the group’s very first attempts were ‘stunning’.

As Bullinah Designs this group runs its own studio alongside other enterprises as
part of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Community
Development programme. Preparation for studio management was part of the
training provided by Elsebeth. ‘Because I was trained myself under the
apprenticeship system, I bring workshop management and work ethics into my
teaching very strongly. The fact that, for example, as a sixteen-year-old in Denmark
I learned to get up at 4.30 a.m. to be at work at a quarter to seven—in the winter,
A 12-metre cloth goanna representative of the totem of the local Bundjalung tribe produced in a fabric-painting workshop, Lismore.

too!—was formative for me as a practising artist—and also as a person. It’s the kind of experience which makes you aware that if something has to be done, you can achieve it by just going step by step until you’re there, until you’ve reached your goal. I try to impart this discipline and this understanding.

‘I very much want to take on apprentices in my own studio, to train them as I was trained. Apprenticeship is an age-old concept in Europe; whatever trade you chose you became an apprentice. Even artists. I think Australia hasn’t utilised this enough.

‘I really have a strong concern for our wasted youth. It’s a major problem in society and the saddest thing when young people do not have the opportunity to work.’

As chief designer, Elsebeth took part in a multicultural project at Kempsey, creating fabric and clothing for Black Opal and also teaching batik. The label is now being marketed in N.S.W. and Canberra; an exhibition took place at Parliament House in December 1991.

A small, isolated Aboriginal community near Coraki where Elsebeth taught in 1991 benefited from her adaptability to all teaching situations. A caravan containing students, instructor and several frying pans of boiling wax did not make an ideal studio venue in summer conditions. Nevertheless, the learning enthusiasm and confidence Elsebeth was able to generate at Box Ridge has taken the group through diversification into dressmaking skills and screenprinting and on to the marketing of handmade garments.

Currently coordinator at an Aboriginal youth centre (KYAAC) at Casino, Elsebeth is taking a mixed group, boys and girls, starting with basic handbuilding of ceramics and Nui Guini style pit-firing, and Aboriginal painting and design and screenprinting on fabric and posters.

The group has already decided on a project: a series of posters on the theme of violence and how it affects young people. ‘For young people the poster is a really immediate form of communication, so teaching them a technique such as screenprinting gives them a means of expressing their opinions. It is very empowering for them.

‘Some of the KYAAC young people are officially classified as ex-offenders, but I love working with them. I’ve found that Aboriginal boys who get into trouble with the law are usually lovely people! I am very happy to be able to help them with their self-expression.’ Elsebeth’s attitude is positive and one of unbounded optimism.

This kind of teaching is a matter of the heart. If learning by heart means taking learning deep into the self, teaching by heart means coming from the deepest level of feeling and knowing. Many have found only frustration where Elsebeth has found success and fulfilment.

Passing on her skills as well as using them in her own artistic work for Elsebeth establishes a flow. Her belief is that this flow guarantees an artist’s evolution through endless cycles of creative growth.

Pauline McKelvey