

**From a tiny local craft show in the 1970s to a major national arts event now in its 34th year, the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial is a big regional arts success story.**



by ELIZABETH McINTOSH

**IN ITS RELATIVELY SHORT HISTORY THE TAMWORTH FIBRE TEXTILE Biennial has gone through significant growth stages. This has been particularly evidenced with the staging of the 17th Biennial at Tamworth Regional Gallery which closed in recent weeks, and the concurrent showing of *Textiles from the Collection 1975 – 2005* in the second gallery.**

As the new Director of Tamworth Regional Gallery, it has been a particularly exciting time to arrive at the gallery. Although I was aware that Tamworth specialised in fibre textiles, and that the Fibre Textile Biennial had been established some time ago, I have been reminded that events of national significance can evolve and flourish from the hard work and passion of a community based initiative.

The Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial has grown from a local event celebrating the work of our regional artists and craftspeople to a national survey of the work of Australia's most progressive and acclaimed fibre artists. The challenge now is to determine how to maintain a national forum and combine this with ongoing regional engagement.

A particular strength of regional galleries always been their specialisation in particular media, in part to ensure that they can collection systematically and build collections of significance. Tamworth has been fortunate to have fibre textile arts as its focus and one that is justified, particularly as the north west of New South Wales is a region renowned for quality wool and wheat.

The Tamworth Art and Craft Society's recognition of this fibre specialisation in the mid 1970s has been the catalyst for what we have today. Founding members of the society, Frances West,

Geoff Walker, Ruth Blakely, Ray Lane, Dawn McIntyre and Sybil Orr were instrumental in the establishment of an annual art and craft exhibition. On the advice of their judge Mr Rheinart who, in 1974, suggested that although he was disappointed with the quality of the painting entries, the fibre entries were very good, the members changed the exhibition to an open fibre prize with smaller sections for art and craft.

As with many art and craft societies, the prizes were acquisitive and so a fibre textile collection was established in Tamworth.

With the first exhibitions taking place in the society's workshop – a disused bulk fertilizer storage shed – there were many people who were involved in the exhibition and many more who extended the exhibition into a fibre festival. Fibre Fest in 1988 and 1990 featured street parades of wearable art, opera in the park and many other events that fostered community engagement in fibre art and are fondly remembered.

# Tamworth Fibre

*Susanna Castleden Abandoned (detail) 2005.*  
Photo: Robert Frith



*Beth Hatton As for man, his days are as grass... (Kangaroo Rifle) 2003 and As for man, his days are as grass... (Wool Shears - Second Series) 2004*  
Photo: Ian Hobbs



*Kay Lawrence No work for a white man 2005.*  
Photo: Michal Klavank



*Petra Meer Kreuz (Cross) 2004*  
Photo: Uffe Schulze

## January

19 – 28 January

The 2007 **TAMWORTH** Country Music Festival. One of the biggest country music festivals in the world, featuring the 2007 Golden Guitar Awards on 27 January. Tourism Tamworth Tel 02 6767 5300

19 January – 13 February

Belinda Mason-Lovering's *Intimate Encounters* challenges the myths around imaginative sexual lives, collaborating with people with physical, intellectual, learning and other disabilities. **LISMORE** Regional Gallery [www.lismoregallery.org](http://www.lismoregallery.org)

22 January – 3 March

Murray River International Music Festival & Performance. Attracts performers and tourists to over 50 regional communities along the **MURRAY RIVER**, showcasing fine international and Australian music, food and wine. Web [www.mrimf.com.au](http://www.mrimf.com.au)

23–24 January

Drawing Workshops for kids. Arts Space **WODONGA**. Free! Cnr Lawrence and Hovell Streets Tel 02 6022 9600

Top: Naomi Kantjuri  
Feather basket 2005.  
Photo: Michal Klvanek  
Bottom: Malpiya Davey  
Flash beanie 2005.  
Photo: Lou Farina

Barbie Greenshields, Slough 2005.  
Photo: Warren Bellette



# Textile Biennial

The annual exhibition continued to grow and, as its reputation spread, so too did the entries from across the country. In 1980 when James Giddey, the inaugural director, was appointed to the Tamworth City Gallery, the collection of the Tamworth Art and Craft Society was accepted and catalogued into the Gallery's collection as the Tamworth Fibre Collection and a policy for the development of that collection initiated.

Now under management of the City Gallery, the exhibition was only open to fibre artists with a pool of \$3,000 available for acquisitions. In 1982 the Biennial then became an exhibition selected by the gallery director, further defining its direction towards a national survey, but also taking it further away from its open community roots.

In 1984 a panel was appointed to select works, a practice which continued through to 1996 when the 12th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial became a curated exhibition, once again moving the Biennial further into a national arts forum.

Since 1996 the Biennial has received funding to employ a specialist curator to select the artists and develop the focus of the exhibition. It has grown in national and international stature to attract major artist participation, wide audiences and critical review.

This year's Biennial, the 17th, is a wonderful example of the skill of the professional curator to project the nature of contemporary

art practice in new ways. With artists drawn from five states, *In the World: head, hand, heart* has been curated by Vivonne Thwaites, an independent curator from Adelaide. At the core of her rationale Thwaites states, "Textiles are the oldest and most ubiquitous of humanity's expressive media, they are part of every person's everyday experience... This familiarity along with their long shared history with people, is what makes textiles such an effective medium for artists. Contemporary artists have used the intimacy and familiarity of textiles to make some of Australia's most interesting recent art."

Artists including Julie Gough, Dr Kay Lawrence, Beth Hatton and Liz Williamson are represented in the exhibition. That twelve of the participating artists traveled to Tamworth for the opening and following forum is evidence of the high regard in which the Biennial is held.

Ruth Blakely was invited to open *Textiles from the Collection 1975 — 2005*, an exhibition curated from the Gallery's collection and held simultaneously with the 17th Biennial. Her recollections of the dedication and passion that initiated the collection provided a stirring moment for those who remembered, but also for those of us who were not part of the Fibre Biennial's history. Her words and the emotional responses of those who have attended the exhibition over following weeks have led the gallery to undertake a project to publish a complete history of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial and the fibre textile collection.

From its volunteer beginnings, the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial continues to evolve with the changing times and the Gallery's capacity. It is an important time for us — our new gallery has appropriate storage facilities and space to become a more substantial collecting institution.

Gallery staff and supporters are mindful of ever increasing costs and competition for funding and are considering whether there may be alternatives to touring the exhibition; how best to meet and develop the interests of our own vibrant local fibre textile community; how best to ensure that the collection continues to expand and represent the best in contemporary fibre art, and how we can contribute to the knowledge and understanding of fibre art in the future.

With so many artists and craftspeople working in fibre textiles, the opportunities are phenomenal. ■

**Elizabeth McIntosh is the Director of the Tamworth Regional Gallery**

**National tour dates for Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial:**  
**18 March – 29 April 2007 Artspace Mackay, Qld**  
**13 July – 19 August 2007 Gippsland Art Gallery, Vic**  
**2 September – 14 October 2007 Mosman Gallery, Sydney**

## January – February

25 January

🎵 As part of Australia Day Celebrations the highly dynamic Gregg Telian Quartet will entertain guests at the Community Centre Gardens, **DUNEDOO** Tel 02 6375 1975

25 – 28 January

🎵 22nd Illawarra Folk Festival - Over 500 performers celebrate song, dance, verse and storytelling. **BULLI** showground. Tel 1300 887 034  
 Web [www.illawarrarafolkclub.org.au](http://www.illawarrarafolkclub.org.au)

26 – 28 January

🎵 Each year musicians and others gather to celebrate spontaneous bouts of music, song, poetry and bush dance at **NUMERALLA** Folk Festival Tel 02 6453 3282

26 January

🎵 An afternoon of traditional jazz music by the Northern Nighthawks, set on the verandah at Gleniffer Hall, **BELLINGEN** Tel 02 6655 1053