



Jayla Booths models an outfit designed by her grandmother Lillian Wheatley, from Flinders Island.



Janice Ross (Maynard Lowery) models an outfit by Michelle Maynard. It features an image of the mutton bird shed that both Janice's parents and Janice worked in. "It was a deep connection, it wasn't just about modelling clothes," Janice said.

# Silk stockings stir memories

By JILLIAN MUNDY



SILK Stockings at the Babel Island Store is more than a fashion runway show – it's an exhibition, a step toward a dream – and a story of kin, culture, country and connection.

Silk Stockings showcases works from a trio of talented Tasmanian Aboriginal designers: Lillian Wheatley, Michelle Maynard and Takira.

The *Koori Mail* spoke with the Elder of the designers, Lillian Wheatley, from Flinders Island, about the exhibition's curious title.

"Babel Island is a mutton birding island, just off Flinders Island. Back in the sixties, maybe earlier, there were forty odd (mutton bird processing) sheds, enough people to warrant a store," she told the *Koori Mail*.

It stocked haberdashery supplies and silk stockings. Women would buy fabrics to make their gowns for end-of-mutton-bird-season balls and dances, and silk stockings.

## Mutton birding

Mutton birding, was a predominantly owned and run Aboriginal industry back then, and fully owned Aboriginal industry now. For those involved the pay packet at the end of the annual season is biggest of the year.

"Catching up after birding, it was a big thing," she said. "The ladies would look just as beautiful as everyone else."

"It was fairly hard back in those days." She said assimilation policies were still in full swing. The Interstate Hotel in Whitemark on Flinders Island segregated Aboriginal people into a small cubical known as the snake pit.

"They had to fight their way and make their own clothes, we styled up, that was handed down through my mother," she said.

"I don't remember the store, I remember the stories of the stores and that's where Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store came from.



The family of Carly Spotswood who made her modelling debut at the Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store Runway Show.

**"It is an honouring of all that our old fellas endured, a celebration of them, a celebration of us, as the dignified exquisite people that we are."**  
– Michelle Maynard

"Michelle also has that connection to Babel Island, so does Takira.

"It's keeping old stories alive and handing them down through generations."

Michelle, who has studied fashion design, and curated the exhibition with former mentor Michelle Boyd, said the title symbolises that time, not so long ago, for island clans and island life.

"It is an acknowledgment of the joy and the love for community and Country through this very racist and oppressive



Flowers for the designer Lillian Wheatley, pictured with her daughter Nindarra Wheatley and grandchildren Lilyana Booth, Jayla Booth and Clay Maynard, who are modelling her outfits.

time for our people, the white Australia policy that tried to change us, to civilise us, to make us worthy," she said.

## Honouring

"It is an honouring of all that our old fellas endured, a celebration of them, a celebration of us, as the dignified exquisite people that we are."

Michelle's collection is made from upcycled textiles and features prints of mutton bird sheds.

Lillian's has a 1960s flavour, inspired by Aunties, and her island life and culture, the fabric features bull kelp, limpets and deconstructed symbols that were carved into rock by ancestors thousands of years ago.

Lillian has been an artist for many years, creating traditional and contemporary works with natural and recycled materials.

She was inspired to turn her focus to fashion design after going to the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair's Country to Couture runway show in 2018.

She has her sights firmly set



Fiona Green models an outfit by Takira Simon-Brown.

on next year's show. "I came out of there and I said to my Auntie Vicki – ok, we've got to have a collection in this Country to Couture," she said.

Before long an opportunity came up to do a series of intensive textile printing and fashion design workshops led by Michelle Maynard.

Lillian said it was a 'deep dive' – it included researching sustainability, production and properties of textiles, and pattern making.

## Hand-crafted

The Silk Stockings outfits feature hand printed and digitally printed textiles, others upcycled, and all patterns designed by the trio.

Lillian, Michelle and Takira also handcrafted all the accessories and the jewellery.

You could say they made most of the runway show models too – their children and grandchildren – others cousins, nieces or close family.

Ranging from 12 to 50 odd years, this was the first time modelling for every one of them. Carly Spotswood (46) reckons she might end up in Paris or Milan yet. (Watch this space!)

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"Being able to invite in an additional 13 family and community members to share in this experience that celebrates their story, has supported us to share inter-generationally and in a genuine spirit of self-determination," Michelle said.

Her vision is for a local, sustainable, ethical and social model for producing clothes, inspired by Country and expressing family and identity.

Takira, who designed the active wear collection, often feels conflicted with the issues of sustainability and cultural ethics in her artistic practice.

"Doing projects like this brings my attention to the excess in the world and confirms how I want to contribute to sustainability through my creative practice."

"I want to be able to live

and practise in a way that is more beneficial for our future generations, that is more a world connected and honouring Country, sustaining Country for the future as a priority, over building a new building."

In 2022 Michelle Maynard became Manager of Indigenous Fashion Projects with Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Foundation. The exhibition, a partnership between Design Tasmania and Walantanalinany Palingina, included mentoring from Michelle Boyde, Lisa Waup and Ingrid Verner.

Silk Stockings is the first time Tasmanian First Nations fashion and textile design has been showcased in a dedicated exhibition.

It is at Design Tasmania, in Launceston until December 3, 2023.



Designers and models – aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews, backstage where a gallery in Design Tasmania was sectioned off, moments before the runway show.



Ready to hit the runway in a collection by Michelle Maynard, modelled by her niece Aneeka Dickinson, her children Ziggy and Mae Ganambarr and cousin Janice Ross.



Model Clay Maynard poses at the show.



The designers: Takira Simon-Brown, Lillian Wheatley and Michelle Maynard.



Collection of active wear by Takira Simon-Brown, modelled by Carly Spotswood, Sky Smith, Eve Plank, Talia Smith and Fiona Green.



Tasmanian Aboriginal Arts leader Sinsa Mansell speaks at the runway show.



Excited to see family, community and friends make their modelling debut – model Eve Plank's grandmother Tahana Rimmer and mother Zoe Rimmer, with Denise Robertson, Nathan Pitchford and Darlene Mansell.



Models Eve Plank and Talia Smith on the Silk Stockings runway.



Models on the runway.



Model on the runway.