

# Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store

**Denise Robinson**

**A**s I walk through Design Tasmania's front door to join those gathering for the celebratory launch of *Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store* I feel my body tense with anticipation. Through the glass windows I see community sitting outside and I head straight through to the hugs and hellos. We don't get opportunity to see each other as much lately – we're all too busy. I see one of the designers presenting her collection today, Takira Simon-Brown, and I smile. This is a big day for her and her co-presenters, Lillian Wheatley and Michelle Maynard.

'How are you feeling?' I ask. She replies, 'Yeah, great' and I can see she is: this is her space. She's with others she feels at one with – her family, her community – to launch this presentation. We look at each other and without words acknowledge what today means. It's been a pretty long road with some bumpy moments along the way, but she's held her nerve and stayed true to herself, and today is about celebrating her culture, her people and her creativity *on her terms*.

Some years ago, Michelle Maynard shared with me her vision to develop a Tasmanian Aboriginal design collective. At the time she was working with Terrapin Puppet Theatre in backdrop design and construction for Nathan Maynard's

*A Not So Traditional Story* alongside designer, Michelle Boyde. Tasmanian Aboriginal-led productions were on the rise and Michelle could see an opportunity for our own creatives to provide design elements to Aboriginal-led productions in Lutruwita. Expanding our artists' skillset to include design and fashion would strengthen capacity for greater self-representation in Aboriginal-led productions through set, costume, props, and background design.

Collaboratively, the two Michelles developed a two-year pilot program, *Ya'amin*, to deliver a series of fashion design and textile printing workshops for Tasmanian Aboriginal creatives. Each artist would emerge from the workshops with a design portfolio. Two artists, Lillian Wheatley and Takira Simon-Brown, along with Michelle Maynard, extended this learning by entering into a ten-month design intensive under the creative guidance of Gunditjmara and Torres Strait Islander artist, Lisa Waup, and Naarm based fashion designer, Ingrid Verner. The design development was the first in a continuing partnership between Walantalaniny Palingina and Design Tasmania towards expanding and elevating Tasmanian Aboriginal design.



**Designer:** Takira Simon-Brown  
**Model:** Carly Spotswood  
**Photographer:** Kishka Jensen



**Images:** captured throughout the workshop and development process of the Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store body of work.  
**Designers:** Michelle Maynard, Takira Simon-Brown and Lillian Wheatley.  
**Mentors:** Ingrid Verner and Lisa Waup (a collaborative duo working independently, also known collaboratively as Lisa Waup X Verner) + Michelle Boyde (Artistic Director at Design Tasmania)

Over the ensuing ten months Lillian, Takira and Michelle came together with their mentors to develop a creative brief and exhibition outcome sharing their thoughts, dreams and stories. What did they imagine as an outcome of this opportunity? What really mattered to them about design, fashion, making art and presenting work? What stories resonated with them growing up in and across Lutruwita and its islands? There was a collective desire to reconnect and honour the past with the present, through memories and stories that had been shared from family to family and generation to generation, and to especially honour recent generations and their experiences of island life. This generated the exhibition title, *Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store*, as a nod to a memorable era when families flocked to the islands for the mutton bird season. It was an influx so large it necessitated setting up a local store for staple provisions, one of those being silk stockings to complete specially fashioned outfits for the end-of-season dance.

I am fortunate to have some insight into Michelle Maynard's vision and determination: her deep love for and aspiration to be a part of the national First Nation's design and fashion landscape and, importantly, to 'take some of our mob' with her. She worked tirelessly, generously and integrally to draw together a program offering space for emerging makers to design, create and produce textiles and accessories that reflect themselves, their families and their unique stories. *Silk Stockings* is the culmination of this determination. As I sat among many from across our community you could feel the warm enthusiasm as we waited to witness what would unfold.

A blast of R&B rap lyrics from local musician, Rulla Kelly-Mansell, commands our attention and as the first model, Mae Ganambarr, walks through the curtains we feel the air shift. Four models wearing designs by Michelle Maynard walk with distinguishable pride. Emotions well up and tears begin to flow – not just me but for all of us. Our tears represent pride, awe and knowing that these garments – as stunning as they are – are more than fashion items. These carefully designed and created garments and accessories bring together stories shared and handed down through families over time. They represent and celebrate a proud community that has continued to strive for the recognition and respect they hold within but not always accorded beyond community.

As family members (all models were family of the makers) walk the room, there is a perceptible presence within them. I am reminded of the old men and women of the islands who passed down the stories and fought the fight that laid foundation for this first: the first showcasing of Tasmanian Aboriginal fashion and design; the first 'runway' for Michelle Maynard; the first catwalk for all 13 models. In post-event reflections across community, it became apparent that this was felt collectively. The following week, a work colleague remarked, 'And what about *Silk Stockings*? I could not believe how emotional I felt – it was so powerful!' Clearly, one did not have to have the 'in' story to experience the depth and meaning embodied in the event.



**Designer:** Michelle Maynard  
**Model:** Ziggy Ganambarr  
**Photographer:** Kishka Jensen

*Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store* not only presents, for the first time, Tasmanian Aboriginal fashion designs from Lillian Wheatley, Takira Simon-Brown, and Michelle Maynard, it is an opportunity for them to share their experience, memories and deep knowledge of growing up as Aboriginal women. Woven into their garments are personal narratives that represent each designer, their families, their island homes and the interwovenness of community, country and culture. Michelle Maynard's designs, inspired by the beauty of Big Dog Island, pay homage to the tradition of 'birding' and all that surrounds the annual mutton bird season – the islands, family sheds, the travel, the preparations and the stories. Lillian Wheatley brings to life the bull kelp, limpets and ancestral rock carvings from coastal tidal zones. Her series of stunning outfits are reminiscent of times when island life thrived and women created clothes for themselves and family, with island dances being a high point for local fashion. Takira Simon-Brown has



**Designer:** Michelle Maynard  
**Model:** Janice Ross  
**Photographer:** Kishka Jensen

fashioned a collection of active wear inspired by her steadfast commitment to cultural sustainability and ethics, with the markings of the snake skin representing renewable and regenerative materials.

One cannot reflect on *Silk Stockings* without acknowledging the models, as they too inform the multi-layered significance of the event. Three generations of family were represented in the Design Tasmania launch: Lillian Wheatley with daughter Nindarra and grandchildren Lilyana, Jayla and Clay as models; Takira Simon-Brown with daughters Sky and Talia and extended family members Fiona Green, Eve Plank and Carly Spotswood; and Michelle Maynard with daughter Mae, son Ziggy, niece Aneeka Dickinson and cousin, Janice Ross.

'Something happens when our mob walk the runway,' says Michelle. 'It cultivates a pride and strength of magnitude and an experience that will stay with them forever.' Reflecting on the *Silk Stockings* journey Michelle states that, inspired by her



**Designer:** Lillian Wheatley  
**Model:** Jayla Booth

experience working on First Nations national fashion events and witnessing the empowerment mob embody when walking the runway, her intent was to provide opportunity and create space for more of her people to have that runway experience.

As the afternoon draws to a close, we've all hugged, laughed, cried and celebrated a resoundingly proud moment for Tasmanian Aboriginal fashion and design. I make my way to the door, bidding farewells along the way. As I hug a close friend I look over their shoulder and make eye contact with Michelle; we exchange a look that says everything and we both tear-up. *You did it, I say.*

Projects and events such as *Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store* represent a commitment and dogged resilience, not just from the principal driver, Michelle, but from all of those providing the support, input, energy and resourcing. Tensions, challenges and obstacles were confronted and overcome along the way. This collective resolve reflects yet another layer to



**Designer:** Lillian Wheatley  
**Model:** Nindarra Wheatley

the *Silk Stockings* story. It reminds us that the determinations of those who have gone before us ensures that this generation and those to come are able, in Michelle Maynard's words, 'to stand proud as the dignified, exquisite people that we are'.

#### Postscript

Following the *Ya'rmin* workshop series, Michelle Boyde joined Design Tasmania as Artistic Director, and Michelle Maynard was appointed as the national Manager of Indigenous Fashion Projects with the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Foundation. ▼

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**Denise Robinson** is an Indigenous Fellow Creative Arts with the School of Creative Arts and Media at the University of Tasmania. Actively engaged in Tasmania's creative sector for almost 30 years, she is currently undertaking her PhD exploring engagement practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agents within the creative sector.



Capture from exhibition launch and runway event

**Designer:** Lillian Wheatley

**Model:** Jayla Booth

**Image:** Ness Vanderburgh

#### Designers

Michelle Maynard is a contemporary Tasmanian First Nations designer and artist. Her creative practice moves across digital design, print, collage, installation, creative production, fashion and textiles. Through her work, she accentuates visual acknowledgement, memory in place and untold story. Empowering the memory of her people and breaking down false and oppressive perceptions inspires her approach.

Takira Simon-Brown is a Niyanta of Chief Mannalargenna of the Plangermaireenner Nation (Ben Lomond) and a luna of Paredareme country where the Moonmaireenner community once resided. Takira's art practice includes music, film and performance, painting and printmaking. She comes from a strong line of Aboriginal makers, including her grandmother and mother, each a shell stringer with work in state collections.

Lillian Wheatley is a saltwater woman (muka luna) from the Trawlwoolway nation, northeast Tasmania. She is a senior cultural practitioner, knowledge keeper, artist/designer and respected Elder in her community. Lillian's work is inspired by her country and life growing up on an island in the Bass Strait, where her ancestors were subjected to enforced displacement. Today, When Lillian gathers traditional materials for her work she is continuing the cultural practices that were taken from her old people.

#### Mentors

Michelle Boyde, a fashion and textiles-trained designer and BOYDE Studios director, currently serves as the Artistic Director of Design Tasmania, with a focus on advancing women in design and fostering the burgeoning Tasmanian Aboriginal fashion and design movement.

Lisa Waup is a mixed-cultural First Nations artist and curator, born in Narm (Melbourne), whose multidisciplinary practice encompasses a diverse range of media including weaving, printmaking, photography, sculpture, fashion and digital art. With a deep connection to the symbolic power of materials, her work reflects her personal experiences, family history, Country, and broader historical narratives.

Ingrid Verner studied at RMIT University and in 2006 won the MFF National Designer award for her first label, TV. Relaunching as Verner in 2012, the new label moved towards defining an Australian aesthetic beyond cliché. Verner collections employ contrasting techniques and disparate ideas, incorporating original hand-drawn and photographic prints as well as unique textile elements.



Capture from exhibition launch and runway event

**Designer:** Michelle Maynard

**Models:** Mae Ganambarr (front) and Aneeka Dickinson (back)

**Image:** Ness Vanderburgh

#### Models

*For Michelle Maynard:*

Ziggy Ganambarr (son)

Mae Ganambarr (daughter)

Aneeka Dickinson (niece)

Janice Ross (cousin)

*For Lillian Wheatley:*

Nindarra Wheatley (daughter)

Jayla Booth (grandaughter)

Lilyana Booth (grandaughter)

Clay Maynard (grandson)

*For Takira Simon-Brown:*

Sky Smith (daughter)

Talia Smith (daughter)

Carly Spotswood (extended family)

Fiona Green (extended family)

Evie Plank (extended family) –

photoshoot only



Capture from exhibition launch and runway event

**Designer:** Takira Simon-Brown

**Models:** Carly Spotswood, Fiona Green, Sky Smith, Talia Smith

**Image:** Ness Vanderburgh

#### Photography

Fashion shoot: Kishka Jensen

Launch and runway show: Ness Vanderburgh

Photoshoot at Studio Atelier Hobart (run by Remi Chauvin)

**Makeup:** Sophie McDermott

Silk Stockings at the Babel Island Store was exhibited between October and December 2023 at Design Tasmania in Launceston. Silk stockings at the Babel Island Store was the result of a Project partnership of Design Tasmania with Walantaliny Palingina (WAPA). Workshops were hosted at Design Tasmania. The project received support from Arts Tasmania, Creative Australia and RANT