

Tjanpi Desert Weavers Story - WOMADelaide



Story by Aly de Groot, shown below
Photography by Marg Edgecombe and Tjanpi Desert Weavers, NPY Womens Council

Since its emergence in 1995, Tjanpi Desert Weavers, the dynamic arts employment programme within the NPY Women's Council, has made a huge impact on people's lives.

Tjanpi (meaning grass) began as a series of basket-weaving workshops held in the desert community of Papulankutja in remote Western Australia. From here women taught each other, and weaving spread. Today close to 400 women across three states and 28 communities are weaving.

Working with fibre in this way is firmly embedded in Western and Central desert culture. Tjanpi Desert Weavers are well known in Australia and now internationally as the winners of the 2005 Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award for their life-sized Tjanpi Grass Toyota, which delighted audiences with its wit and resourcefulness, and which has fast become an iconic and much loved piece of Australian art (see *Textile Fibre Forum* issue #81, 2006, inside front cover).

The Tjanpi work was the result of 20 women weavers working together. This is not the only large scale collaborative work these desert weavers have made however. During

2000, some of the women travelled to Hanover in Germany to exhibit a giant grass basket, and in 2002 they visited Manchester in England to make a larger-than-life goanna that was exhibited at the airport as part of the celebrations for the Commonwealth Games. Kantjupayi Benson, who conceived the idea of the Toyota, discussed this during *Cultural Strands, Woven Visions*, organized through FORM in Perth during 2006. *It was our idea and we made a really big basket. We didn't go to school and learn. We're just bush women. We started making emu, dogs, lotsa animals. We make other things too; canvas and artefacts and we really are the winners! Our weaving spread like wild fire, to all the communities, everywhere.* (Benson, 2006)

During 2007, the Tjanpi story spread to WOMADelaide (World of Music and Dance, Adelaide) where thousands of people who were enjoying the sun and sounds at the vibrant festival in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens were rewarded with a glimpse of desert life, Tjanpi stylin'. Over three days, WOMADelaide had six outdoor stages featuring performances and workshops by people from at least 20 countries. While moving from one magical musical event to the next, people could be seen strolling through the Tjanpi grass sculpture installation, mesmerised by the camp scene that unfolded before their eyes. An installation of *minyma* (women), *ijitji* (kids), *papa* (dogs), *kaiya* (emu) and *ngirntaka* (goannas) were encountered. The setting, around campfire, was in a prime position in the festival grounds; food and stories were shared.

