

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4087

Riley, Muriel

Occupation Artist

Summary

A member of the Barkandji people, Muriel Riley is an artist and resident of Broken Hill.

Details

Artist Muriel Riley is a member of the Barkandji (Paakantyi) people, and a member of the stolen generation. Her eldest brother is Badger Bates, also an accomplished artist, and formerly the Senior Archaeological Officer for the National Parks and Wildlife Service in Broken Hill.

With five brothers, Muriel was raised at Wilcannia by her aunty and never knew her father. As small children, Muriel and three of her brothers were taken into state institutions. Her grandmother rescued the elder two brothers by taking them up-river toward Bourke and Brewarrina by canoe. Muriel was held at institutions in Broken Hill, Adelaide and Sydney, but broke out of each one. She kept a photograph of the old bridge at Wilcannia, and at the age of 18 she managed to return by hitch hiking from Sydney.

By the time she was pregnant with her first daughter, Muriel was hitch hiking again with a friend, this time to Cairns in Queensland. The baby was born healthy but Muriel had been abandoned by her friend, and with no resources she risked being picked up for vagrancy. She gave up her baby for adoption. Back in New South Wales she had two more children, but her son subsequently died from double pneumonia. With her daughter Fiona, she lived at Wyalla, Wilcannia and Broken Hill as well as the Mutawintji National Park and the Kenchega National Park near Menindee. At Mutawintji she worked as a tour guide, explaining Aboriginal artefacts and telling the dreamtime stories. Conflict between different family groups since that time over traditional ownership has soured her connection with the park, and she no longer visits: 'we are caretakers of the land', she says, 'we don't own the land, the land owns us'.

Twenty-eight years after she gave up her first-born child, despite failed attempts to reunite through Link Up, Muriel's daughter found her by going through the phone book. Muriel was surprised to find herself with another six grandchildren in addition to Fiona's three children. Mother and daughter are now in regular contact.

In 2006, Muriel undertook a drawing course at the Broken Hill TAFE and began to focus upon her art. Her first drawing, a portrait of her grandmother, was given to her brother Badger as a gift. *The Basin Haircut*, depicting herself as a child in the institutions, was the first drawing she sold. In 2008, Muriel was awarded second place for both two and three-dimensional drawing in the Far Western Emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Prize. Her work has been exhibited in the Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery. Muriel is a member of the Darling River Action Group.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Unbroken Spirit: Women in Broken Hill, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/bh/bh-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Private Hands (These regards may not be readily available)

[Interview with Muriel Riley](#)

Author Details

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