



# Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial

## RUTH BLAKELY and FRAN WEST original organisers



**Ruth:** Ken Reinhardt was the judge of the 1974 Tamworth Art Society Exhibition. There was a fibre piece from a local person and Ken was toying with giving it the

prize, I think. He said, 'Why don't you think about doing a fibre exhibition?'

**Fran:** 'You're living in a country area and there's a lot of sheep around!' he said. So we discussed it at the arts and crafts general meeting.

**R:** And we all said, 'Let's go for it.'

**F:** I had a potting partner, Geoff Walker, and we headed down to Sydney to see the Craft Council and visit the people who were considered to be the leading craftsmen. We wanted to see if they'd be interested. They were very skilled fibre workers doing large works, but they hadn't got together as a group. They were so excited by the idea.

**R:** There was nothing else in any of the fibre mediums in Australia at that time. Nothing for people to actually exhibit their work with others of their calibre. Victoria had the tapestry workshop but I don't think there was any other collection.

**F:** And we made sure that it was an acquisitive prize. That was a definite. (I am a great aquirer!) And there wasn't much point if Tamworth didn't get something out of it!

**R:** It was a \$1000 prize that year. We sent out invitations via the Craft Council and we got about 80 entries. Big names: Janet Brereton, Victoria King, Rosemary Draper and Liz Williamson who's still weaving now. There was Dawn MacIntyre working in macramé which was very fashionable then and Robert Bell who was the curator of craft at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. We got this great big green weaving from him, I remember. It was so exciting when it all arrived. There were all these big, heavy, funny looking parcels. Things wrapped up and around and we thought, 'Ooohhh, this is going to be interesting!' There were about ten of us on the committee putting it all into this shed.

**F:** Council had given us an enormous old fertilizer shed...

**R:** It had a cement floor and huge cement bays and this soaring ceiling. So it was very exciting to put in these very big fibrous pieces which were so colourful. Like Margaret Grafton's *Jabberwocky* which was a large woven piece that hung from about four points on the ceiling. And somebody made what we called an oil slick, a Queensland artist, I think. And a big pair of woven boots.

**F:** The committee was very keen and everyone worked well together. Geoff and Ruth and I were really the hangers: Geoff decided where they would go.

**R:** He was highly creative.

**F:** Yes, he was young and eager and had plenty of oomph! And he had the eye. He was the arts advisor with the Department of Education which gave us a bit of authority. Tamworth was, and still is, a conservative town: a very mild

town and I think the Council thought we were just little old ladies. I was in my forties then.

**R:** The response to that first show was so positive that we decided we'd keep doing it. I remember in 1980 we moved the show to the Tamworth City Gallery and it was quite different because it was parquet floors and walls and I remember going in at night and hanging it and how different it looked with proper lighting. That was very exciting.

**F:** Ruth was a magnificent secretary/treasurer and she was such a good organiser that she was getting large sums of money from firms, you know, like Coates and the Tamworth Council. But by 1981 I think it was getting too big for us and we just couldn't cope with the organisation of it. It was a gradual handing over really. There was a gallery director employed by the city council.

**R:** James Giddy began pre-selecting and then it went on to become a curated exhibition. In our day, there were always works you didn't want to hang, obviously, but they were sent in and you sort of had to. The first curated exhibition was very different to what we had done. Well of course, it must be: it reflects one person's taste. And that's growth, I suppose...but sometimes I think you can lose the traditional work.

At the last exhibition in 2006, the director of the Tamworth Gallery brought out some of the older work and asked me to give a floor talk. And I got so excited because all these acquired pieces from 1975, 1976, 1978 are still as beautiful. And it took me back to hanging them in the old shed.

**F:** Everything brings back memories in Tamworth! There's still an active Art and Craft Society with the spinners and the weavers and the potters...the same faces...we're all still here.

**R:** The thing I like most is to think about how this came to be. How this fibre show that now travels all over Australia came from that tiny little exhibition... in that funny old shed.

**F:** Just yesterday I was trying to find the old minutes of the Art and Craft Society and I was laughing, you know, thinking about the touselles we had – as you always have. But thinking too, 'What a powerful team!' We were a very powerful team.



ABOVE:  
Admiring the 1975 winning fibre work in the Tamworth City Art Gallery, *Jabberwocky*, a woven sculpture by Margaret Grafton

Sybil Orr explains *Sandstone*, 1976 winning piece, to Ruth Blakely and Alderman Norman Lang McKellar MBE, Mayor, Tamworth City Council

Feather basket 2005, by Naomi Kantjuri  
PHOTO: MICHAL KLUVANEK

