

Red Centre Garden artwork

The Red Centre Garden was opened on 31 October 2013 by Senator Simon Birmingham, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment. The site was originally the location of the Gardens' Nursey, which moved to new accommodation in 2004. After that the site remained unused until, following representation by the Friends, Parks Australia provided funds for its redevelopment. The Friends contribution is a work of art, *Grandmother's Country*, described below in an article by Margaret Clark for the April 2013 issue of *Fronde*. At the time Margaret wrote, the Friends' budget was \$100,000, but the final cost was \$115,000.

Making a Meeting Place

Margaret Clarke, *Fronde* April 2013

As our Centenary gift to the Gardens, the Friends have funded a commissioned public artwork to form the centrepiece of the Red Centre Garden. When the Garden is opened later this year, visitors will be drawn down one of the paths that radiate out from an 8 m diameter circular feature. Inside the circle a 5.6 metre square indigenous artwork pavement will give a stunning interpretation of country. This \$100,000 gift to the Gardens is our largest single expenditure since the Friends was established in 1990.

The planning and development of the pavement artwork have been directed by Pamille Berg Consulting (PBC). Pamille and her industrial/graphic designer, Wade Bartlett, have taken up the challenge of creating a form that is both beautiful and true to the concept of the Red Centre Garden while also being robust enough to withstand the rigours of the exposed site and the wear and tear of being trampled underfoot.

Pamille's solution was to select an artwork that allowed her to work with laser-cutting the design onto Lyten rusting steel plate—a weathering steel which forms a protective oxide layer of rust which then guards against further corrosion. This rusted look is evocative of the ochres of the Red Centre and the surface just continues to mellow and become richer with age.

The striking and detailed dot painting, *Grandmother's Country* by Teresa Purla McKeenan, provides the perfect combination of relevance, artistry and colour for the project. Against an ochre background, Teresa's patterns of delicate creamy white dots of varying shape and size, give depth and richness to her painting. Teresa was also willing to come to Canberra to advise on placing the artwork on site. Because the site called for a square artwork, she worked with PBC to redraw the edges of a selected square from her painting, to ensure the edges would not bisect a 'dot' while still remaining true to the painting's intent.

One of the first challenges in transposing Teresa's intricate design from canvas to steel was to create the computer files allowing the shapes to be enlarged (approximately sevenfold) to the size required for the precision laser-cutting process. As no two dots are the same, Wade Bartlett used Computer Aided Design (CAD) to magnify each dot on screen and to then trace around it. With many thousands of dots, that's a lot of mouse clicks!

To give further depth of colour and tonal variation and to increase the slip resistance of the surface, the steel sheets were first 'sandblasted' with copper slag at a factory in Queanbeyan. Even the choice of mortar to fill the cutouts, and also adhere the steel sheet to the concrete slab, required research and experimentation. Following PBC's detailed research stonemason Stephen Loughrey experimented with mortars which could fill the 'dot' holes and be smoothed to create a perfectly level surface with the steel, while also resisting 'bleeding' of the rust colour into the white-filled holes. The choice of mortar is important because, as well as meeting the 'smoothness' and 'bleeding' tests, it needs to be flexible enough to resist cracking in the extremes of temperature.

Producing this artwork has involved the skills of many talented people, from artist, to graphic designer, stonemason and sand blaster to precision laser-cutting operator and many others. All involved in the installation have been challenged to work at the limits of their trades to achieve the precision required for the perfect alignment of all the elements of the structure. With so many trades and experimentation involved (not to mention some extremely expensive high tech mortar), it was certainly a challenge to bring the project in on budget.

The finished artwork will build on the 'sense of place' inherent in the design of the Red Centre Garden. Combining a beautiful depiction of the red centre country with contemporary landscape design it creates a space that is sure to inspire and engage visitors.

About the Artist

Teresa Purla McKeenan (also known as Theresa Pwerle) was born in Darwin in 1964 into a lineage of distinguished artists; the daughter of Barbara Weir and granddaughter of the late Minnie Pwerle. She now lives in the traditional country of her mother and grandmother north east of Alice Springs on the outstation at Atnwengerrp, 40 km from the central Utopian or Alywarr community of Ampilatwatja. She is a serving member of the Ampilatwatja Council which has responsibilities for the surrounding communities in the Utopia region.

Teresa is known for her highly detailed, multi-layered and finely executed dot painting works. She has exhibited in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne as well as Paris and Copenhagen.



Artist Teresa Purla McKeenan
in the Red Centre Garden
Photo: Peter Byron ANBG