

# Immersed in history

**Mungo Woman** exhibition by artist Brenda Runnegar. Belconnen Arts Centre Gallery, Emu Bank, Belconnen. September 27–October 13. Gallery hours 10am–5pm. Closed Monday.

**A**fter spending considerable time in the Australian outback working, researching and taking photographs, artist Brenda Runnegar says it is no accident that she finds herself immersed in a mysterious and fascinating world of historical significance.

It was this outback experience and, in particular, three extended visits to Lake Mungo that triggered Runnegar's affinity with open spaces and inspired her latest solo exhibition *Mungo Woman*, now showing at Belconnen Arts Centre.

Runnegar has a Master of Fine Arts from Monash University, has presented 13 solo exhibitions, and is the recipient of grants, prizes and residencies in Australia and overseas. Her exhibition of 37 large and small paintings, including a series of digital photographic images, is the culmination of three years' work.

Lake Mungo is part of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage area of far western NSW. "There's something about the region that speaks to me," Runnegar says. "It's very strange. It happens to me in certain places in Australia – in areas that have a special feeling."

It all began for Runnegar in 2000, when she managed the Anyinginyi Arts and Cultural Centre in Tennant Creek.

The notion of history and time passing has fascinated Runnegar and this has been something she has tried to convey through her paintings: "I was fortunate in Tennant Creek because I went on

to Aboriginal land and visited a place called Lost City up near Borrooloola beside the McArthur River in the Gulf area where the Aboriginal people took me."

Historic Borrooloola was declared a township in 1885. It was once a place where smuggling and grog-running activities took place and where pioneers such as William Sayle, one of the first Northern Territory drovers, and Roger Jose, one of the Hermits of Borrooloola who, it is said, was one of the first white men to legally marry an Aboriginal woman, were originally buried. Now, it's a popular fishing area.

In the late 1960s it was the discovery of ancient human remains at Lake Mungo that told researchers that Australia had been inhabited longer than the Americas. In 1969, Professor Jim Bowler, a geomorphologist from the University of Melbourne, discovered burnt human bones buried in the sands of Lake Mungo.

The bones, the remains of a fine-boned young woman, now known as Mungo Lady, renamed Mungo Woman by Runnegar, are thought to be some of the oldest human remains discovered outside Africa.

The fine-boned remains of the Lake Mungo people were compared with remains found in Indonesia – a possible indicator of the origin of the people of Lake Mungo.

Then in 1974 Mungo Man's remains were found covered in red ochre. Other burial sites, including those of children, are still being found today.



Brenda Runnegar with a collection of her works inspired by Lake Mungo. Photo: Katherine Griffiths

"The fact that they were there and now things are living on them – trees, plants, animals, people – it's about the layers of the life cycle for me and what emerges through the process," Runnegar says.

"Lake Mungo is a very rare archaeological site in Australia and, despite that, Aboriginal people have been allowed to re-bury the bones that were found there, which is very unusual for bones of that age. That's interesting because usually archaeologists take away the evidence for ongoing research but in this case they didn't."

And the story continues to unfold. In 1992, Mungo Lady's bones were returned to indigenous custodians at a ceremony at the Walls of China in Mungo National Park, marking a breakthrough in relations between scientists and local indigenous people. It was also an act of defiance of a wider claim by scientists for rights of access to past relics and the assumption that they belong to descendants.

Runnegar's brother, palaeontologist and astrobiologist Dr Bruce Runnegar, based in the US, also drew his sister's attention to the importance of the area because, as she says, "it was the place where some of the first

Australians were found 40,000 years ago. Some say it was more like 60,000 years ago – which to me is mind-boggling. There is also an area of fossilised footprints dating back around 20,000 [years]."

To date, 2013 has been a challenging year for Runnegar although a timely grant from artsACT meant she could afford to have her digital work printed on expensive rag paper in Melbourne.

"I was bedridden for three months but this experience became an opportunity and turned out to be a blessing in disguise," she says. "I subscribed to online training in Photoshop and digital image management and the time just flew."

"I had taken a lot of photographs while I was at Lake Mungo. Normally, for me, photographs are a means of note-taking and a reminder of colours. I got some good shots but never expected them to be finished works of art."

"I've incorporated some of the shots in my digital works and also used images of dolls. Ghostlike black figures over digital photographs and my dolls appear now and then. There is one doll I've used in my work a lot."

Runnegar's collection of antique dolls were the subject of her

1980 exhibition, *Left for Dead*, about dolls that had been discarded in rubbish dumps or discovered floating in rivers.

The doll fascination will continue a bit longer as Runnegar is working on small pictures of dolls for future exhibitions. After further digital training she will incorporate them into more paintings.

"I love Australian rock art and have been to Cape York and seen it there," she says.

"I'd also like to see the Bradshaw stick figures with headgear because they represent the first Australians that came. Strange environments really interest me and the dolls represent, for me, the colonisation of Australia by Europeans."

The Runnegar dreams are created in the tranquillity of her backyard yurt. This is where she is planning her next magical mystery tour – most likely to be a visit to Arnhem Land, the Kimberley and the Bungle Bungles.

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