



# Spotlight

...le, arts & heritage



## Ashes and Ornament

Hannah Bertram

PICTURE:  
Dan Schulz

arts and culture

**HANNAH BERTRAM** p12-13

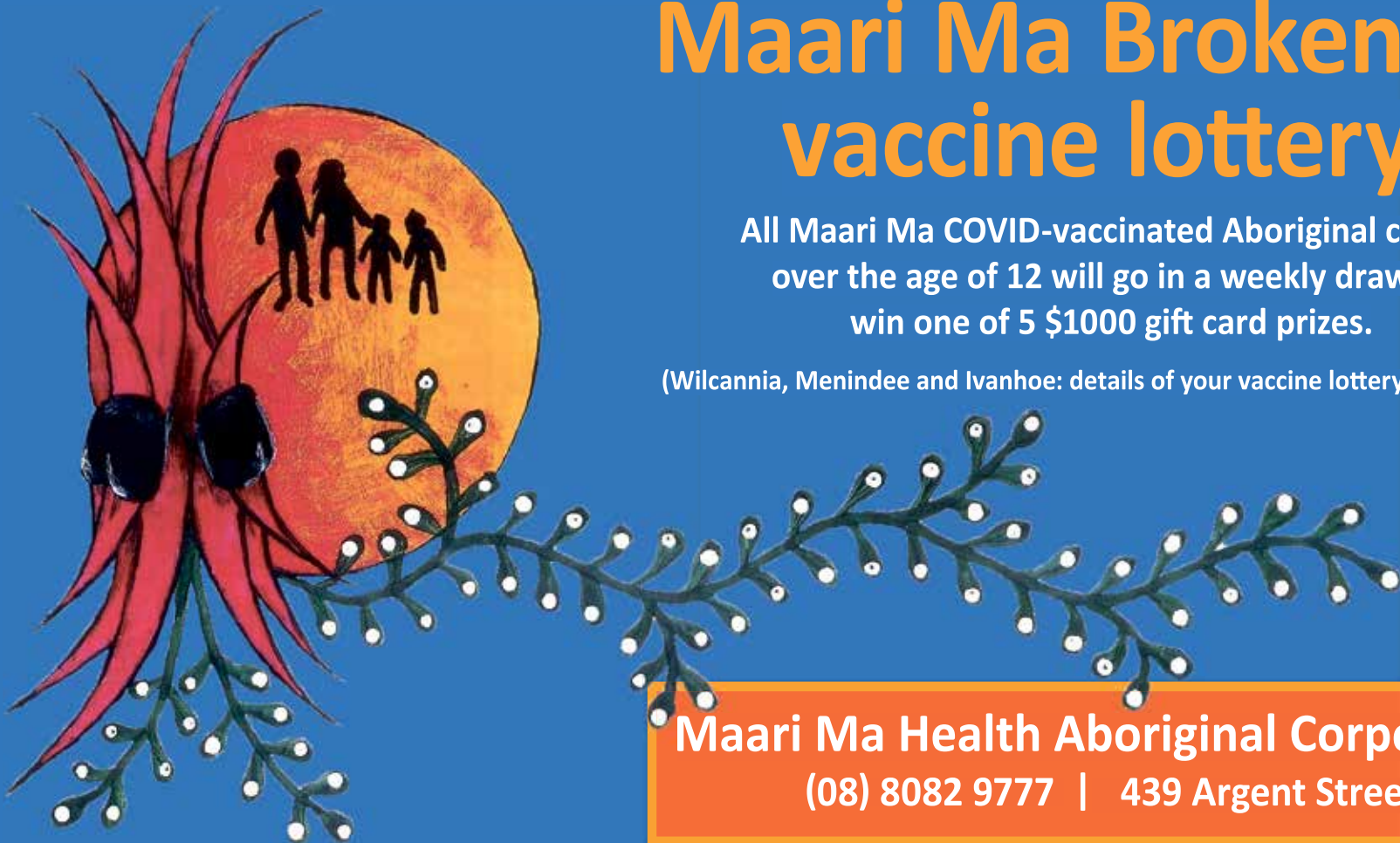
heritage

**ABORIGINAL AGRICULTURE** p14

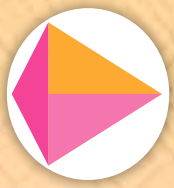
## Maari Ma Broken Hill vaccine lottery:

All Maari Ma COVID-vaccinated Aboriginal clients over the age of 12 will go in a weekly draw to win one of 5 \$1000 gift card prizes.

(Wilcannia, Menindee and Ivanhoe: details of your vaccine lottery coming soon)



**Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation**  
(08) 8082 9777 | 439 Argent Street



*'This Wild Song'* from Hannah Bertram's website.

PICTURE: Illona Nelson

# Ashes and Ornament

## The Installation Art of Hannah Bertram

By Dan Schulz

***I have lived about 14,600 days and spent just half an hour as a single cell. Since then six billion three hundred and seven million, two hundred thousand cells in my body have died in my body. I have shed and regrown my outer skin 504.74 times. I have lost about 1,168,000 strands of hair and more than half my taste buds. My heart has beaten 1,471,680,000 times. I have walked the globe three times.***

***When I die my ashes will weigh about nine pounds.***

This is how Hannah Bertram prefers to describe her biography. She also has another biography on hand which lists her impressive accomplishments as an artist and educator – former lecturer at Deakin University Melbourne, PhD at Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, a Masters of Fine Art and a Bachelors Of Fine Art at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and her works have been widely exhibited throughout Australia and Internationally, including Europe and the United States.

But in describing herself as a nine-pound bucket of ashes, Hannah guides us toward a particular truth about life; time passes, things change, and we all die.

In order to explore this truth, Hannah makes temporal sculptures and drawings using the most

ubiquitous, omnipresent and banal of materials; dust.

We all have a relationship to this material - everyone has wrestled with the tyranny of its constant home invasions; we've wiped it from old photographs or notebooks; choked on it in cluttered sheds; some of us have intentionally snorted white versions of it; and others have stood videoing the apocalyptic clouds of dust that choke the skies of the Far West. Sadly, some have known friends and family who have died from the long-term health effects caused by the poison of asbestos or mining dust.

Having spent 15 years of creating exhibitions and installations, as well as writing and researching for a PhD about dust, Hannah Bertram brings an entirely new way of thinking about this quotidian phenomena - its properties, its history, its relationship to culture and gender, and its potentiality as a medium for sculpture and drawing.

Hannah uses dust to create intricate and colourful patterns on the floors or walls of galleries, where the work is left to be blown away, swept up or allowed to collect more dust, creating complex works about time, value and mortality. Hannah's work involves an interesting palate of colours and textures made from carefully sifting various kinds of dust; dust from Australian deserts, Parisian Catacombs, the basements of churches, burned drawings and museum archives. She's even created works using human remains.



*'Phoenix in Ruins'*

PICTURE: Supplied

"I go places and people hand me their vacuum cleaner bags full of dust," Hannah says, "and one time my mum handed me a tupperware container full of dust, and told me it was my Uncle Peter.

"That's my uncle up there on one of the shelves. That is Peter," she says, pointing to a jar with Peter written on it in permanent marker.

Hannah's studio and office is brimming with reference material; wallpapers, doilies, textiles, carpet

designs and decorative patterns; from Islamic architectural patterning to tag graffiti she has photographed in Melbourne.

"All decoration is about adding value," she said, "whether it be status or ownership. It adds something that is beyond functional or necessary, setting it apart as something special either through the labour required to make it or by the quality of the material."

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**'An Ordinary Kind of Ornament'**



**'Emerging From and Disappearing Towards Dust'**

**Continued from page 12**

By transforming dust particles into carefully laboured and intricate patterns, Hannah transforms the everyday, banal and worthless into something of immense beauty, fragility and meaning.

"I am able to transform dust as a material into something of value. To then make the work ephemeral, so it gets blown away or swept away at the end of the exhibition, that challenges again what we value in art, whether it be the object or the experience of someone accounting it."

The temporality of the work is important to its content, a metaphor for the ceaselessness of time which dust so perfectly is able capture by its material nature.

"Dust is the only constant in the universe," Hannah explains. "It's constantly gathering and migrating and transforming. It can never be fixed. It shows you that time has passed, so, in a way, it reveals the nature of time, but the material itself always existed and will be there at the end of everything. Sometimes you look at dust and see a little pile of dirt but then you realise what else is there, some kind of burnt out star from millions of years ago that's finally just descended into our atmosphere and landed on my studio floor."

Our attitudes and relationship to this constant reveals not only our mortality but the transformations in society and culture. Prior to the Victorian era, homes were often lavishly decorated with flocked wallpaper and various ornamental objects. It wasn't until advances in the science of airborne illness did dust become a symbol of uncleanness and poor health and, in response, the interior of houses began to transform functionally and aesthetically.

"People realised that all these objects and decorations in their house were accumulating dust and so they started getting rid of it all. There was a way in which dust was responsible for the abandonment of ornamentation through modernism."

This attitude to cleanliness also affected gender relationships, and Hannah ponders the role of women in society through our social relationship to dust.

"The dust that collects under your bed and looks a bit like tumbleweed was once called 'sluts wool,'" Hannah says, "- inferring that you're a bad

housewife because your not at home cleaning under your bed and therefore must be a slut. There's a lot about dust and morality in the Victorian era, the notion that cleanliness is close to godliness, etcetera."

How Hannah came to be in the dusty outback town of Broken Hill is something of an accident. After finishing her PhD, getting divorced, putting to rest a beloved dog, completing her employment contract as a University lecturer, and without a permanent home, Hannah came to reevaluate her values.

"You do a lot in the arts of getting a certain grant or meeting a certain curator or getting a certain show at a particular gallery - there's this constant pressure to be increasing your exposure and your success. I basically had a midlife crisis, quit the arts and went and got a corporate job at an office for a break. Which is sort of the opposite of what people generally do.

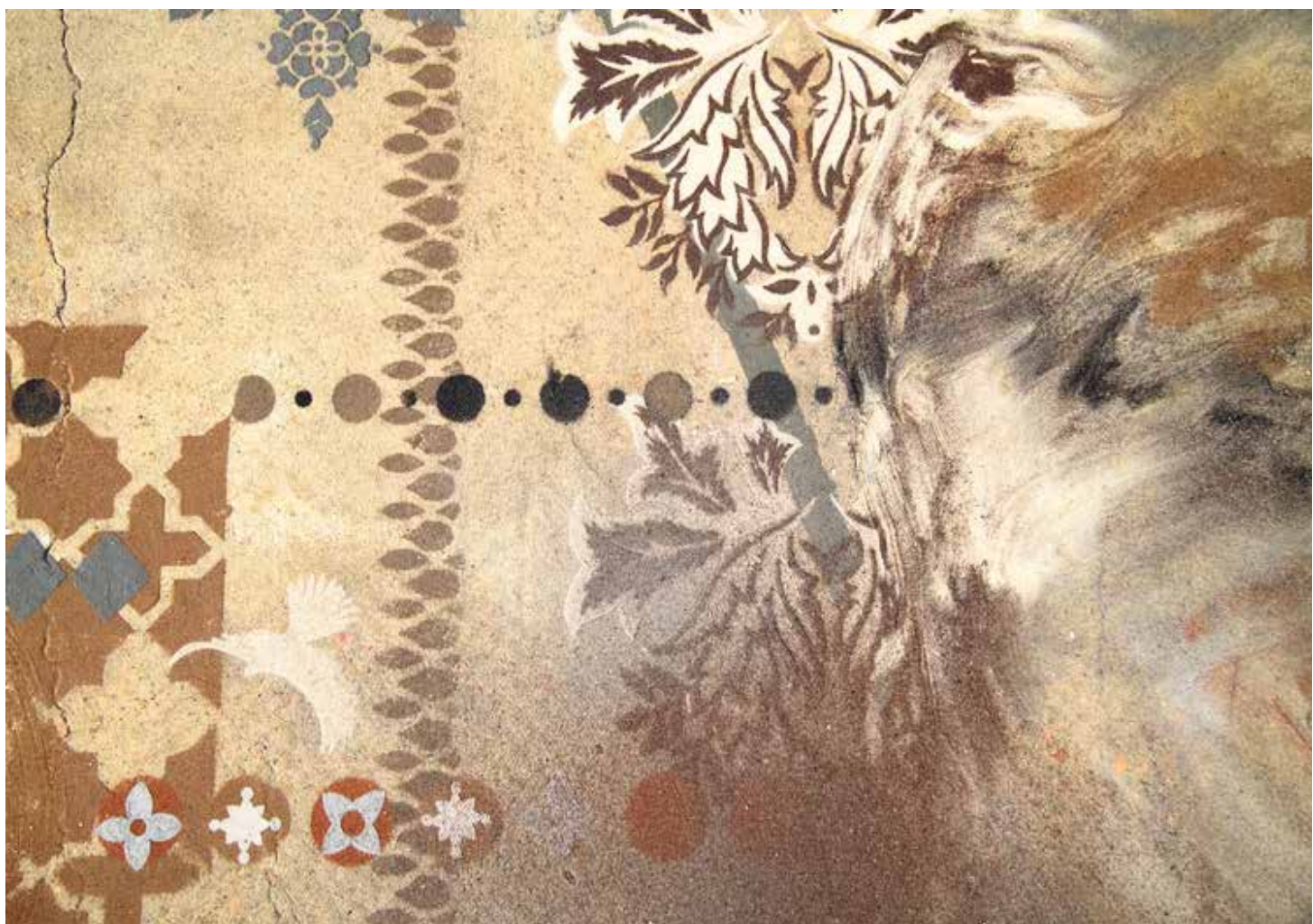
"Then my mum kept saying, you need to buy a house! You need to buy a house! And I'd resisted that all my life.

She then lent me \$20,000 to do that and I was looking at moving to the US, to some of the decommissioned mining towns which had established themselves as creative centres and it just reminded me of Broken Hill. So I came up here instead, found a house and went: lets do this!"

"My partner and I wanted a life that was creatively, financially and environmentally sustainable, instead of looking at outcome-based things. I'm not thinking about outcomes but only about a way of living. That's why I'm here. I'm surrendering my cynicism."

Having established her practice in Broken Hill, Hannah is keen to shed new light on our relationship to the ever-present and unceasing world of dust and death. For now, Hannah is enjoying spending alone time in her studio, sifting through the remains of stars and earthly things ground to almost nothingness by unceasing time, and strangely, she might be the only resident of Broken Hill looking forward to this summer's dust storms, looming just over the horizon.

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**'Enduringly Ephemeral'**

**PICTURES:** Supplied