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Many hands make bright work

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'They are amazing women and very generous and talented artists,' Monika Grzymala says of the indigenous collective she worked with to create The River. Picture: Sam Rutty. Source: News Limited

DURING an exhibition of her work at New York's Museum of Modern Art last year, Monika Grzymala heard whispers about a collective of female Aboriginal papermakers in northwest NSW.

The Euraba collective, based in tiny Boggabilla, population 600, was making paper from cotton fibre offcuts as an artistic response to the community's traditional lands having been taken over by cotton farming. The Berlin-based artist, herself an expert papermaker, wanted to talk.

A year and two visits to Boggabilla later, a work featuring 10,000 sheets of handmade paper will form a centrepiece to the Sydney Biennale when it opens next week on Cockatoo Island.

The River, which also comprises traditional weaving materials from the Boolarng Nangamai Art and Culture Studio in Gerringong south of Sydney, features oval-shaped parchments hanging on 4km of fishing line from the ceiling of the one-time convict prison's Turbine Hall on Sydney Harbour.

"It is a long way from Berlin to Boggabilla, but we have much in common," says Grzymala, 42. "They are amazing women and very generous and talented artists, and to work with them has been an honour." Twenty Goomeri women worked on the project in the past 12 months, making 7000 sheets for the work. The rest were made by Grzymala in Berlin.

Grzymala says the paper's oval shape is designed to represent faces or a "river of tears, the spirits lost".

On Grzymala's first visit to the town a year ago, when the collaboration began, she was embraced by female elders and taken to the community's sacred fishing place, a lagoon off the Macintyre River. "They adopted me," she says. "We have a very deep connection."

The Euraba collective began papermaking in 1998 and has generated a national profile through exhibitions across the country.

Grzymala, who is known for her paper 3-D reliefs, has been working solo 12-hour days for two weeks installing the huge work. Six heavily bandaged digits are testament to the workload.

"If I cut my fingers on fishing line, that's all right - it belongs to the process - what I really care about is the paper."

Heavy rain, a subsequent leaking roof and humidity during the past fortnight have wrought havoc with the artist's plans.

"It's a constant battle between the conceptual and the technical," she says.

At the conclusion of the exhibition, the paper will be returned to the Euraba collective and reused.

The River is one of hundreds of works by more than 100 artists that will feature at the 18th biennial event, which opens next Wednesday and runs until September 16.

Artists from around the world will feature in Australia's largest art event, directed by Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster. The Biennale, the theme for which is All Our Relations, also encompasses the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Wharf precinct and the Art Gallery of NSW.