At an artist talk on the opening Saturday of ‘Tarnanthi: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art 2019’ in Adelaide, the mood is casual with the audience squeezing into every available inch of space in a corner of the South Australian Museum. Brenda L. Croft is describing the overwhelming emotions that greet her on such occasions. ‘Bittersweet’ is how she describes the feeling of hearing so many First Nations artists gathered and speaking in language. The idea of listening becomes a keynote of her talk as she tells the audience how her exhibition ‘Still in my mind: Gurindji location, experience and visuality’ (which takes the historic 1966 Wave Hill walk-off as a starting point for a wider look at Gurindji culture) developed through hearing stories on Country. ‘Hearing is so different from reading words,’ she says.

At this year’s Tarnanthi, the third in a series of biennial festivals which radiate out from Adelaide to give a generous overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, Croft’s words became something of a leitmotif. Two years ago at the festival’s panpa-panpalya or conference, the idea was mooted for an iteration of Tarnanthi that foregrounded the Yolngu concept of cosmic interconnectivity, gurrutu. And festival organisers listened. At this year’s principle Tarnanthi venue, the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), much of its cavernous downstairs space is devoted to Yolngu artists. Here their cosmology is writ radiantly large, memorably rendered in magenta ink from discarded printer cartridges by Nonggirrnga Marawili or signed with rapster ease by Gutinarra Yunupingu in his two-channel video Gurrutu’mi Mala (My Connections) (2019). And, of course, made magnificently manifest in bark. As young Yolngu artist Ishmael Marika explains:

For outsiders, I want them to see and understand the connections the people here have, how we are connected, and how we are linked through the connections. Whether it’s our father’s mother’s side or our sister’s daughter’s side. We’re linked. Everybody is linked."
Elsewhere at Tarnanthi, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists compel us to listen. Upstairs at AGSA, ‘The Ballad of Billy Gardiner’ (2014–18) rang particularly poignantly. This suite of paintings by the late Nyaparu (William) Gardiner (1943–2018) display the hard-won cowboy swagger of an artist whose parents fought for Aboriginal self-determination in the 1946 Pilbara strike. And across the gardens at the Museum of Economic Botany, the sound coming from Jonathan Jones’s installation Bunha-bunhanga: Aboriginal agriculture in the south-east (2019) was just as insistently. Here the soundscape to the artist’s oversized grindstones echoed Captain Charles Sturt’s 1845 description of Aboriginal women grinding seeds – ‘the noise they made was exactly like the working of a loom factory’.

Down at the other end of North Terrace, at JamFactory, Regina Pilawuk Wilson further evoked this fabled loom factory with her exhibition ‘Pungungi Marrgu (Old and New)’. Collaborating with ceramicist Ashlee Hopkins and potter Mark Heidenreich, the senior artist from Peppimenarti inscribed her famous woven fishnet motif into textured vessels of clay. The translation seemed both unforced and poetic, heightened by JamFactory’s beautifully curated space. One of Wilson’s vessels perfectly captured the Tarnanthi experience for me. Leaning over and open, but redolent with memory and story, it resembled an ear.
