

## THE ARTS

## Heart felt art

By **ANDRA JACKSON**

AN ANCIENT craft from Mongolia is helping the elders of an Aboriginal community preserve their story-based culture.

Swiss-born art therapist Margrit Rickenbach introduced elders from the Gumbaynggirr nation in the Nambucca Valley and the town of Bowraville in northern New South Wales to the technique of felting last year.

The craft, which originated in Central Asia, was a way of making insulation. Felt is made by layering cleaned, carded wool to a desired thickness, then wetting and rubbing it until the fibres mat.

Ms Rickenbach saw the craft being used to make clothes and to build the traditional Mongolian houses known as yurts during a visit to that country in 1995. She conducted workshops on the practice with elders and members of the Gumbaynggirr community in a project initiated by Beyond

Empathy, an independent organisation that uses the arts to build relationships between generations in disadvantaged communities. Fifty of the resulting works, which include wall hangings, go on exhibition today at Melbourne's Koori Heritage Trust.

Lizzy Jarrett, 32, a Gumbaynggirr woman working with Beyond Empathy, says the subject matter of the works is mainly "our lifestyle and our living".

"A lot of the pictures are animals, ocean, things that are strong to our people." They also include depictions of totems such as the rainforest owl and the platypus.

Jarrett says the project did wonders for her and for her community.

"Felting is not a traditional medium [for us] but traditional stories have been put into it," she says. "It is like part of our journey in the modern world. It is our dreamtime story, but modern dreamtime."



The exhibition *From the Rainbow to the Sea* opens today at the Koori Heritage Trust, King Street, and will run for three months.