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Magpie Goose

Weaving Indigenous stories into ethical fashion

Words by Erica Louise Photography Sarah Mackie & Kate Harding

Bright, bold and unapologetic. These are the three words Maggie McGowan and Laura Egan use to describe their social enterprise fashion label, Magpie Goose. Weaving Indigenous stories into wearable pieces of art, Magpie Goose showcases the lives of those who reside in Australia's Top End – including Aboriginal artists in WA, NT and QLD. Designs by Indigenous artists are screen printed onto the textiles used in all Magpie Goose collections. These symbolic narratives are then shared with the rest of the world through timeless, ethically made fashion collections.

How and when did the idea of a social enterprise using Indigenous designed textiles first take shape?

Maggie and Laura came up with the concept of Magpie Goose in April 2016. The two business partners met in Darwin. At the time, Maggie was working as a lawyer at the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA; an Aboriginal legal service). Laura had been working in business startups/grassroots enterprises in partnership with people in remote communities.

“The motivation for my transition into fashion stemmed from the work I was doing – I was frustrated by the work for the dole scheme that penalised remote Aboriginal people rather than supporting them to engage in the economy in meaningful ways. We started Magpie Goose to demonstrate that another way was possible”, explains Maggie.

When the two women caught up over a beer, Laura asked Maggie what she would be doing if she was not working as a lawyer.

“I said I’d love to do something with all the incredible screen printed textiles that are designed by Aboriginal artists in remote communities”, says Maggie.

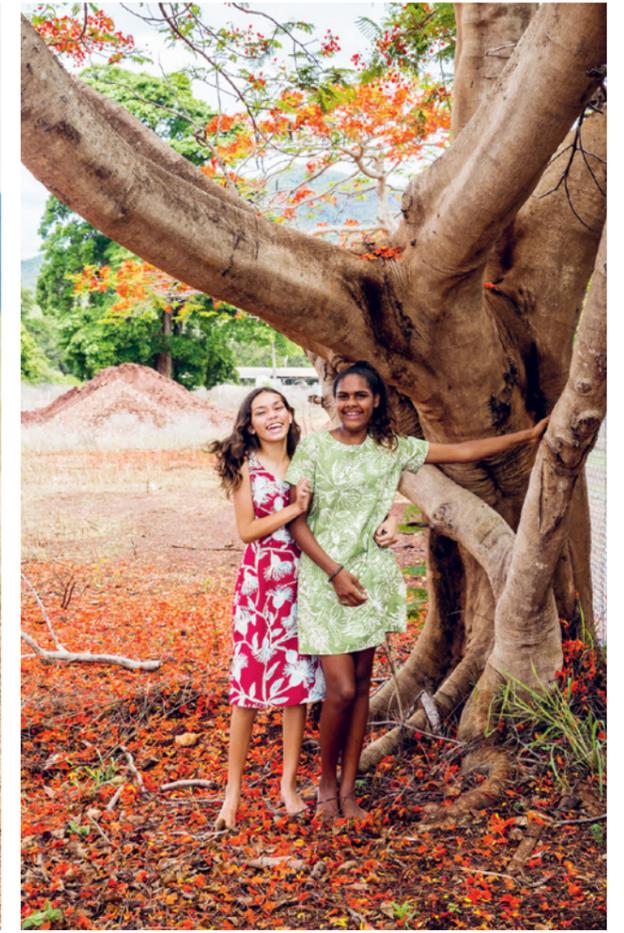
Thus, the seed for this dynamic duo’s fashion brand took flight in the beak of a certain Magpie Goose. Maggie and Laura brainstormed a business name – something quirky, classic and emblematic of the Top End. Magpie Geese are widespread in northern Australia, where they gather in huge flocks across the floodplains and wet grasslands. Magpie Goose was registered and the domain purchased. The foundations of this rather special fashion label, taking inspiration from the stories told on the red soils of Northern Australia, were firmly set.

When did Magpie Goose fly further afield?

Things moved quickly for Magpie Goose. Due to Laura’s and Maggie’s existing connections with remote Indigenous communities, they were soon developing samples with a Balinese tailor using screen printed textiles. Laura put forward a proposal to Enterprise Learning Projects, the not-for-profit initiative she was already involved with. This gave Magpie Goose the startup support it needed to launch as a viable social enterprise.

“By August 2016 we’d put a collaboration proposal to four Top End art centres who did screen printing and textile design, and commissioned about 200m of fabric (featuring about eight designs)”, Maggie tell us.

While working full time at their day jobs, these two entrepreneurial women were driven to see Magpie Goose succeed. They finalised patterns and styles for their first collection and commissioned around 150 pieces. After holding events for friends and family members, their first run completely sold out. This gave them the confidence they needed to launch Magpie Goose to a wider audience. Their first public collection was successfully crowd-funded using Kickstarter, an online global funding platform for creative projects.



“After that first ‘test run’ we launched a pre-order campaign on Kickstarter, and raised over \$100k in orders over the month. We knew we had a product that had meaning, had a story, and one that Australia was looking for. After the Kickstarter, I quit my job as a lawyer and started working on Magpie Goose full time”, says Maggie.

How does this uniquely Australian ethical fashion brand help its partnering communities?

Magpie Goose creates new economic opportunities for the artists, whose work you see printed on all past, present and future collections.

The brand connects Indigenous Australia to everyday fashion buyers. Designs are created by Aboriginal artists living across Northern Australia. Artists learn about creating and licensing new designs, and are paid licensing fees per metre of fabric printed featuring their design.

The Magpie Goose business model provides a unique opportunity for all those involved in the fashion brand. The work of Aboriginal artists can be celebrated and admired in an accessible way, and this fashion enterprise also creates economic empowerment and independence for the artists hired for their artistic story-telling abilities.

Maggie tells us: “We create opportunities for income generation through buying fabric, licensing designs from artists, engaging models and showcasing the talent of remote communities. Magpie Goose is a platform that partner organisations (art centres, women’s centres etc) can utilise to launch off, and work to channel ongoing opportunities towards those we collaborate with”.

Maggie and Laura have connected with cultural centres in the Northern Territory, much like the Bábbarra Women’s Centre, which is governed by women, for women and led by the strong voices of the Bábbarra Women’s Board. The core of the work at the Bábbarra Women’s Centre is to enable women to gain economic independence. It is not easy for those living in remote communities to generate a sustainable income. Magpie Goose works to bridge this gap. The brand presents an opportunity for people to share their stories through a collection and leverage the exposure they get from Magpie Goose to generate further opportunities. This in turn not only provides a purpose and connection, but importantly, an income for their extended families.

A celebration of Top End designs is showcased in all Magpie Goose collections. Magpie Goose fashion collections depict the symbolic stories of Indigenous Australian culture, seasons, landscapes, celebrations, creatures and history.

Take the Bulgan Warra (Sacred Lake) print, for example. Designed by Madge Bowen, whose parents were both from the Stolen Generation. Madge’s design depicts her mother’s country of Bulgan Warra. Bulgan Warra stretches from south of Cook Town (Gundarr) up to Leggets Creek (a branch of the Endeavour River). In Madge’s own words: “This is the place of my ancestors. My mother and her brothers were taken from this country as part of the Stolen Generation – the white police came in and took them – the boys to Cape Bedford, my mum to Yarrabah. My mother’s brother who is also from this country tells me a lot of dreaming stories about this place”.





Models Aretha, Delankah Ross, Jahvarne Pearson, Chuva May, Presiah Ross-Hart, Alice Walker, Lykaia Bowen-Ludwick, Debra Ludwick, Summah-Roxe Ludwick & Anna Ludwick



Her print features a big mountain with a lake, which she explains is the northern boundary of Bulgan Warra. This area is filled with wildlife – kangaroos, echidnas, goannas.

“In the lake there’s long neck turtles, and lily pads growing. In the trees there’s lots of different kinds of birds. This tree – the curtain fig tree – has become famous now! Every time I’m asked to draw something, I have to draw this tree, this scene.”

“When I’m doing this design, I’ve got this feeling about it that’s hard to explain, like it’s something sacred. It’s hard to put into words”, Madge says. Madge Bowen’s design is just one of many rich stories seen on the textiles of Magpie Goose’s fashion collections.

Magpie Goose collections are produced in limited runs, so they often sell out. When asked which design has been their best seller, Maggie says that people find their favourites within each collection; the echidna print from Wadeye and the fresh water prawn print from Gunbalanya were definite crowd favourites in the first range.

But of course, no startup is completely void of obstacles. Laura and Maggie’s social enterprise is certainly no exception. Maggie admits the biggest challenge they now face is to grow Magpie Goose as a sustainable business.

“We’ve had a few challenges along the way, which have been good for us as they’ve forced us to look at what works, and make changes. Probably our biggest challenge now is making sure we grow a sustainable business, so that we can continue to make an impact and create opportunities for the future. We need to attract the right people with expertise in fashion retail to help guide our decision making, as we certainly don’t have all the answers to all the questions we’re facing”, she tells us.

A recent win for Laura’s and Maggie’s fashion label saw Magpie Goose partnering with the Hope Vale Arts and Cultural Centre in Far North Queensland. The concept took more than a couple of years to piece together.

“We brought the collection designed by artists in Hopevale back to the community to launch it there. It was December so we dodged floods and cyclones to get up there, but it was such a fabulous feeling to see the artists and the models get recognition at the community fashion parade. We also engaged about 12 young people to do all the modelling for our website/look book, and captured videos of the artists sharing the stories of their designs – it was a great week!” Maggie tells us.

“It is not easy for those living in remote communities to generate a sustainable income. Magpie Goose works to bridge this gap.”

What can we expect from Magpie Goose in the future? News has it that this innovative social enterprise will soon soar into new collaborations, this time flying into remote communities in Western Australia.

Celebrate one of Australia’s newest ethical fashion labels featuring the very best in Top End textiles by supporting Magpie Goose.