

Heavy Venice show for lightweight weaver

By ANNE LIM

YVONNE Koolmatrrie was listless and thin, weighing just 41 kilos, when she went to a workshop on weaving in 1981. She was grieving for her eldest son, who had died in an accident at the age of 18, and was not interested in anything.

"I had five little ones to look after, I was really struggling," she said. "But when I started weaving I never looked back. That healed me. And I thought, 'Well all my time's going into weaving.' That's when I became a creator."

Koolmatrrie, now recognised as one of the leading weavers in Australia, is one of three female Aboriginal artists who have been chosen to represent Australia at this year's Venice Biennale, the world's leading contemporary art exhibition, held from June 15 to November 9.

Koolmatrrie will be represented by two eel traps which epitomise her work in reviving a rare form of Ngarrindjeri weaving traditional to the Riverland country of South Australia.

The exhibition, curated by Ms Hetti Perkins and Ms Brenda Croft under the title *Fluent*, examines the connections between Koolmatrrie and two important female Aboriginal painters, Judy Watson and Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

Watson is one of Australia's most highly regarded young contemporary artists while Kngwarreye, who died last September in her late 80s, was considered by many to be the finest female Aboriginal painter.

Speaking at the launch of the exhibit-



Koolmatrrie . . . traditional

ion yesterday at the Art Gallery of NSW, Ms Perkins said it was the first time Australia had sent work by a deceased artist to Venice.

She believed the work, particularly the weavings, would challenge ideas of what contemporary art was overseas.

"I think it will be quite astonishing for people when they realise who is making these striking contemporary images," Ms Perkins said.

The Australia Council has invested \$650,000 in this year's exhibit, including about \$150,000 in repairs to the controversial Phillip Cox-designed pavilion.