

Yalangbara: Art of the Djang'kawu

National Museum of Australia

Entering the First Australians Focus Gallery, deep in the bowels of the National Museum of Australia, one is welcomed by two elaborately painted sculptures of the main protagonists of the Yalangbara story: the Djang'kawu Sisters. The Sisters are flanked by a number of monumental barks painted by the great artists who have interpreted the Djang'kawu Sisters creation narrative over a sixty year period: Mawalan¹ Marika, Wandjuk Marika, Mawalan 2 Marika, Mathaman Marika and Wanyibi Marika. This comprehensive exhibition pulls together a number of significant paintings, sculptures, fibre works and prints based on this story, which takes place around the site of Yalangbara, near Yirrkala in north-eastern Arnhem Land. It also presents a history of creative and spiritual custodianship by the Marika family of the Rirratjingu clan and like all Yolngu art from eastern Arnhem Land, it is a declaration of rights to their land.

Yalangbara, famous for its enormous blindingly white sand dunes, is the site where the Djang'kawu Sisters first made landfall and began their epic journey creating country, animals and law and giving birth to the Dhuwa peoples of eastern Arnhem Land. The exhibition is unique in that it concentrates on this one grand theme associated with the Marika family's clan estate and complex of sites interpreted by three generations of artists.

The exhibition was first envisaged by custodian and artist Banduk Marika in 1989-90 as a response to her brother Wandjuk's passing. At that time Yalangbara was listed as a sacred site, however Banduk wanted it elevated to the National Estate Register to give the site extra environmental and cultural protection due to its proximity to Gove and the interest of mining companies in the site. Banduk worked towards this goal and Yalangbara was listed on the Register in 2003 after extensive consultation and research by traditional owners and anthropologists. Part of Banduk's research included collating and viewing all the art works associated with the site in national collections. She saw the richness of generations of cultural production by her family members and proposed an exhibition to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory with Margie West as co-curator. Banduk stated:

Art is really about our land and our heritage that has been passed down by our fathers and their fathers to their children, from generation to generation. This is our law and our strength. You could say that by showing the art, we're entering into our parliament – the Rirratjingu people's parliament.

The reference to parliament has another resonance in the exhibition. One of the key works, a ceremonial digging stick or *mawalan*, is on loan from the Parliament of Australia Collection. It resides in Parliament House next to the Yirrkala bark petition as a symbol of Indigenous land rights and Rirratjingu law. Echoing the symbolism of the parliamentary rod, this particular *mawalan* created by Wandjuk Marika is decorated with parrot feather tassels in

reference to the one used by the Djang'kawu sisters to pierce the ground, creating a freshwater hole on the beach at Yalangbara.

The exhibition features iconic, historically significant works including Mawalan Marika's *Djang'kawu Creation Story* 1959 and Wandjuk Marika's *The Birth of the Djang'kawu Children at Yalangbara* from 1982. These archetypal images of human fertility and abundance show the Sisters giving birth during stages of their journey from sunrise to sunset. All the works in the exhibition depict some aspect of the Djang'kawu Sisters story from the monumental barks from the 1950s that represent many parts of the story to more intimate works such as Mawalan 1's *Goanna*, one of the first works produced at the Yirrkala mission in 1939.

Yalangbara also includes rarely seen crayon drawings commissioned in 1947 by anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt who undertook intensive fieldwork in Yirrkala. Ronald Berndt encouraged men to reproduce the designs of bark paintings in coloured crayons on brown paper, now housed in the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of WA. Of the 365 crayon drawings made in 1947, eleven works related to the Yalangbara story are included in this exhibition.

Banduk Marika, one of the forerunners of Indigenous printmaking, is well represented with a number of prints including her iconic, *Yalangbara* linoprint from 1988. In 2005 she won the Telstra Bark Painting Award in the 22nd NATSIAA with another work titled *Yalangbara*, one of the first barks she ever painted. It represents, with minimalist austerity, a Rirratjingu clan design referencing the arrival of the Sisters at the site.

One of the unexpected joys of the exhibition is the prominence of fibre art pieces integral to the Djang'kawu Sisters story. The sisters carried and used feathered, finely woven *bathi* (baskets), conical mats, feathered armbands and digging sticks. In the comprehensive catalogue Margie West discusses these in the chapter titled 'The Sanctity of Ordinary Objects: material items of the Djang'kawu' in which she stresses that for Indigenous culture even the most mundane and domestic of objects can have a sacred dimension. There is no distinction between high and low art in such a context.

This is a fascinating exhibition in which the richness and complexity of a central religious narrative is embodied in many different ways and media. This theme has been a wellspring of creativity for generations of the Marika family and continues to inspire younger artists of both genders today, building on a rich tradition of innovation and interpretation.

Yalangbara: Art of the Djang'kawu is on until 14 August 2011 at the National Museum of Australia. Hopefully it will be in a more sympathetic, less noisy exhibition space when it is shown at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory from 26 November 2011 to 17 June 2012.

