

Redressing the imbalance:

Yulyurlu, Lorna Fencer Napurrurla

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At the entrance to the exhibition *Yulyurlu, Lorna Fencer Napurrurla* is a Redback Graphix poster titled *Walyaji Wankarunyayirni: Land is Life* (1983). It is an imposing image created from a photo of Lorna Fencer holding a large fighting stick. Chips Mackinolty, who took the photo, recalled that at the time, before he got to know her well, Lorna 'scared the hell out of [him]'.¹ Despite her diminutive stature, the force of Lorna's larger-than-life personality impressed itself indelibly on many people she worked with and has resulted in a long overdue retrospective of her work. The exhibition, instigated by Barbara Ambjerg Pedersen, coordinator of Mimi Art and Craft, Katherine, and curated by Margie West, is a revelation on many levels.²

Lorna's major subject, the Kuruwarri (Dreaming) she iterates over and over again, is the Yam complex – three interrelated elements of the ecosystem from her country Yumpurrpa in the Tanami Desert: the bush potato, the pencil yam and the caterpillars that feed on them. The climax of this Dreaming cycle involves a massive struggle between the protagonists where large numbers are killed in a violent battle. The action inherent in this story is played out on canvases alive with dynamic energy and striking colour combinations. This can be seen in *Yarla* (1998), a huge canvas, reproduced on the cover of the catalogue. In this work a sinuous, weaving network of lines, interspersed with layers of dots, spills out from a central roundel. The pink, orange, red and magenta lines cascade down the canvas, forming the web of connectedness that is the pencil yam. You can almost feel the vigour of the paint-laden brush brought down with urgency and speed. Colourful variations of this motif, a central roundel with radiating lines, are echoed throughout the exhibition. The assuredness of the painting speaks of ceremonial authority and years of painting up for dance.

Lorna did not always paint in this way. The exhibition offers one or two examples of her early work. She was a Warlpiri woman living in Lajamanu when painting classes started at the school in 1986. Her first works look like many others of that time – classical desert dot paintings in a largely ochre palette with familiar Aboriginal iconography. However even at this stage Lorna's works were loose and messy, regarded as 'rubbish ones' by the other ladies.³ Undeterred Lorna painted prolifically and was entrepreneurial in her approach to her career as an artist. Despite the temporary closure of the art centre at Lajamanu in 1992, Lorna made connections with galleries in Katherine and Darwin.



Spring Water at Yumurrpa, 2002, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 303 x 138cm.
Courtesy the Laverty Collection, Sydney. Unless otherwise indicated,
all images this article are of works by Lorna Fencer Napurrurla;
images courtesy the estate of Lorna Fencer, Mimi Art and Craft, Katherine.

Other dealers and gallerists soon followed, expressing their admiration for Lorna's work, which had developed along startling lines, leaving recognisable Aboriginal iconography behind and moving into expressive, gestural canvases of great sophistication, reminiscent of the work of Emily Kngwarreye (c. 1910-1996).

Like Emily, it seems that Lorna was driven to paint and painted obsessively. At times she worked on anything at hand – cardboard, rocks and even the concrete floor of the painting room. Ambjerg Pedersen recounts that Lorna was often so keen to get started, she would not wait for the canvasses to be taped around the edge, painting over the whole surface, making the paintings impossible to frame in the conventional way.

The use of strong colour combinations to make works vibrate with energy is a technique a number of Aboriginal artists use to convey the power of their country. Lorna used pretty well



1/ Chips Mackinolty, *Walyaji Wankarunyayirri Land is Life*, 1983, featuring Lorna Fencer Napurrurla, 98.5 x 72cm; screenprint: Jack Graphics, Darwin; printer: Redback Graphix, Wollongong. Private collection, Darwin.



2/ *Yarla*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 200 x 148cm. Courtesy the Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth.

every colour she could get her hands on, often splodged straight from the tube. But she experimented and created colour combinations of great refinement and specificity to make some elements jump off the canvas and others recede. In a number of works, including *Yam* (2000), the colours are striking. The general form of the yam is depicted with bold swathes of purple, yellow, luminous hot pink, teal blue and cream, applied over layers of bright underpainting, creating a palimpsest of rich textural depth.

Lorna's repertoire of Dreamings also included *Ngapa* (Rain) and *Mirtimirti* (the Lover Boy).⁴ One of the most intriguing pieces in the exhibition is a painted yam root, *Untitled* (1997), associated with the Lover Boy. This decidedly phallic object demonstrates Lorna's earthy, playful humour as does the story of how she presented it to gallerist Beverly Knight to encourage her to marry one of her sons.⁵ The *Warna* paintings are also associated with this theme. In *Warna (Snake)* (1997) pulsating serpentine projections radiate across a yellow field. Lorna used wet on wet layering here and the speed of her painting has resulted in hot pink dribbles running down the surface. It is an image of great immediacy where the sexual life force can be felt in an elemental way.

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition features essays by people who knew Lorna well – Ambjerg Pedersen, Mackinolty, and Christine Nicholls. All were struck by her fervour, bossiness, humour, and need to paint. Reading these reflections on the artist, it is her persona that shines through and her effect on those whom she inveigled to work for her. Some aspects of her personality set her apart from many other Aboriginal artists. The most notable is her solitary nature. Nicholls, in her 'essay', 'Painting Alone', seems haunted by the image of Lorna removed from her fellow artists, totally absorbed in her work, not taking lunch breaks or interacting with the other women. This, as well as her fierce independence and tendency to 'go against the grain', was unusual for a Warlpiri woman. Perhaps there may be a key to this behaviour in the great personal suffering Lorna endured during her lifetime. Her daughter Judy Martin, now in her fifties, is her only surviving child out of ten. It is hard to imagine the grief of a mother who buried eight of her children and never knew the fate of another who was taken away. In the exhibition there is one small grey and white painting, titled *Grief*. Created in 1997 after her son's death, when Lorna had emerged from weeks in 'sorry camp', it is a tiny nugget of emotion and

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EXHIBITIONS

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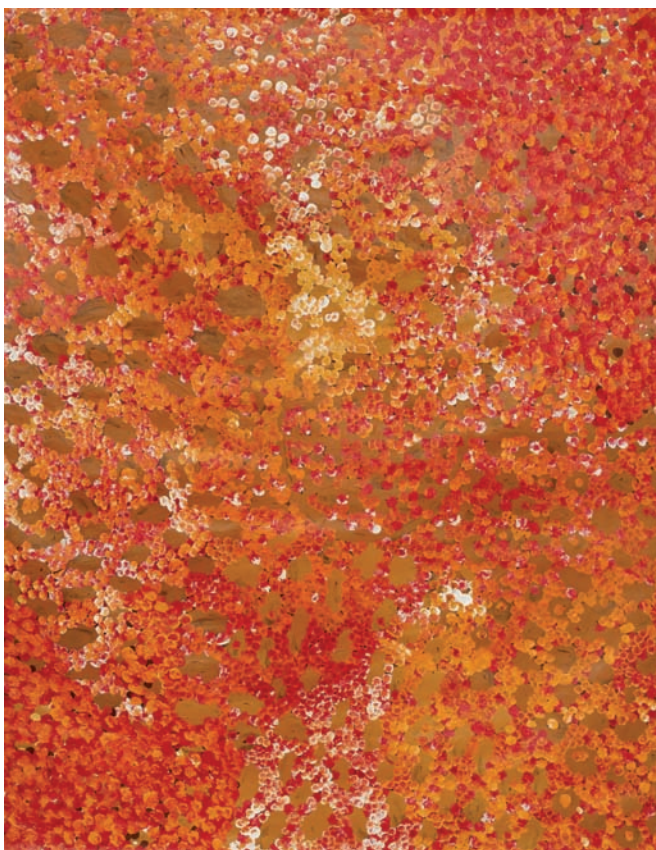
11 November 2011- 21 January 2012

Qian Jian Hua

11 November 2011- 28 January 2012

Barbara Newton

11 November 2011- 21 January 2012



1/ *Summer Yam (Wapirti, Little Bush Potato)*, c. 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 184 x 147cm. Image courtesy Adrian Newstead, Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery, Sydney.



2/ *Headdress*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on wood, 45 x 15 x 2.5cm. Courtesy the collection of Beverly and Anthony Knight, Melbourne.

3/ *Untitled*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on wood (yam root), 50 x 30 x 16cm. Courtesy the collection of Beverly and Anthony Knight, Melbourne.



appears to be an unmediated, existential response to the pain. It sits apart from the works inspired by her country and underscores a capacity for deep personal expression through her art.

However, the overwhelming feeling elicited by the works in this exhibition is one of joy. Painting after painting bursts off the walls rendered with freshness and *joie de vivre*. Even though Lorna completed some of her best works in Lajamanu and Katherine, the recollection of her youth in the Tanami and her connection to that country is palpable.

In the light of this retrospective the parallels between Lorna's work and that of Emily Kngwarreye are hard to ignore, particularly in paintings such as *Summer Yam (Wapirti, Little Bush Potato)* (c. 1990) and *Ngapa Manu Yapa* (1990). Aboriginal art dealer Adrian Newstead, one of Lorna's long-term supporters, commented: 'I thought that Lorna was another Emily incarnated – she was, like Emily, self-confident, totally unselfconsciously gestural.'⁶ A number of other commentators have also made the comparison. In the catalogue that accompanied the Emily Kngwarreye retrospective at the Queensland Art Gallery,⁷ art historian Roger Benjamin explored some of the reasons why Kngwarreye's works fitted so neatly into 'Euro-American concepts of the artist as genius and modernist formalis[m]'.⁸ In essence these traits included the lack of easily identifiable Aboriginal iconography, the tendency to produce works (he quotes Greenberg) with an 'all over, decentralised style of painting',⁹ the development of new and distinct styles, and the way Kngwarreye's story corresponded with the mythology of the lone artist, obsessed and driven to great productivity.¹⁰ I was struck when re-

reading this how many of these same traits applied to Lorna. Both artists shared elements of the same Dreaming complex and both were feisty, confident, and driven to paint. Both were also at the forefront of significant shifts in the Central Desert art movement. Their works have force and rigour and are not always easy on the eye. Like Emily, Lorna was an original and experimental artist who worked on a grand scale and invented a number of distinct styles which were unmistakably her own.

The fact that Lorna's work has not received anyway near the same scrutiny or acclaim as Kngwarreye's is unfortunate, but understandable. Over a career that spanned twenty years, from 1986 to her death in 2006, Lorna created a huge body of work, not all of which measures up to the calibre presented in this exhibition. Her independent spirit led her to work with dealers and gallerists of all persuasions, from the most ethical to the most shonky. She was happy to have control over her career and it was part of her character not to be constrained in any way. No doubt all this affected the reception of her work in the artworld. It is interesting to speculate what might have happened had she settled on one or two influential dealers to represent her and promote her work.



1/ *Untitled (Travelling Napurrurla and Nakamarra)*, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on cotton, 192 x 173cm. Courtesy the collection of Beverly and Anthony Knight, Melbourne.



2/ *Warna Jukurrpa (Snake Dreaming)*, 1986, enamel paint on plywood, 76.6 x 57.5cm. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; gift of Anthony Knight, 1990.

The works assembled for this retrospective, largely drawn from private collections, demonstrate the cumulative force of Yulyurlu as an artist. This exhibition redresses the imbalances of a wilful, sometimes wayward career so that Lorna Fencer Yulyurlu can take her rightful position as one of the most original and experimental artists of her generation.

1. M. West (ed.), *Yulurlu, Lorna Fencer Napurrurla*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, Adelaide, 2011, p. 22.
2. Mimi Art and Craft manages the estate of Lorna Fencer; Margie West is Emeritus Curator of Aboriginal Art, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.
3. West, 2011: p. 50.
4. 'Mirtimirti' is defined more broadly in the catalogue's glossary as relating to 'lovers, in love, girlfriend and boyfriend', and includes both sanctioned and transgressive relationships. Mirtimirti-related works however can emphasise one gender over another depending which narrative aspects are depicted.
5. Knight is Director, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.
6. West, 2011: p. 54.
7. *Emily Kame Ngwarreye: Albalkere: Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery, 1998; curated by Margo Neale and also shown at the Art Gallery of NSW and National Gallery of Victoria, with an expanded version presented at the National Museum of Australia and Japan's National Museum of Art, Osaka and National Art Centre, Tokyo, in 2008.

8. R. Benjamin, 'A New Modernist Hero', in M Neale (ed.), *Emily Kame Ngwarreye, Albalkere, Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery and MacMillan Publishers Australia, Melbourne, 1998, p. 47.
9. Benjamin, 1998: p. 48.
10. Benjamin goes on to explain that these readings could be described as a case of 'cultural misunderstanding'; that this approach provides an inadequate reading of Ngwarreye's work and that criticism needs to be more attuned to Aboriginal cultural values.

Yulurlu, Lorna Fencer Napurrurla, curated by Margie West, is an Artback NT touring exhibition (2011-2013) which opened at the Chan Contemporary Art Space, Darwin, 3 to 28 August 2011. Currently showing at the Drill Hall Gallery ANU, Canberra until 18 December 2011, the exhibition next shows at Benalla Art Gallery, Benalla, 11 February to 1 April 2012. Full touring details via: www.artbacknt.com.au

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Eva Richardson, *Water carrier*, 2005, bull kelp, tea tree, river reed, photo: Simon Cuthbert

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