Colour Country

art from Roper River

Indigenous people are respectfully advised that the names and images of deceased people appear in this catalogue. These have been reproduced with the consent of appropriate family members and or agents.

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GINGER RILEY

Colour Country

art from Roper River

Cath Bowdler

Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

Tour Dates

Wagga Wagga Art Gallery
5 June - 2 August, 2009

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Gertie Huddleston *Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads* 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 143 x 134 cm
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Title Page Image:
Ginger Riley Munduwalawala *Limmen Bight River - My Mother's Country* 1993, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 190 x 191 cm
Private collection, Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

City of
Wagga Wagga

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Foreword

Wagga Wagga City Council is pleased to present *Colour Country: art from Roper River*, a significant Aboriginal art exhibition which will make a contribution to both local and national Indigenous culture. *Colour Country: art from Roper River* forms an important part the Wagga Wagga City Council's Indigenous Winter Program called *Mawang (Altogether)* - Celebrating Indigenous Culture. The traditional custodians of the Wagga Wagga region are the Wiradjuri people; *Mawang* means 'altogether' in the Wiradjuri language and this program of events represents a strong commitment to be both inclusive and showcase Indigenous Arts and Culture. *Mawang* brings together three months of Indigenous focused activity across all of the Council's Cultural facilities and demonstrates Wagga Wagga City Council's commitment to engagement with its Indigenous community. 2009 also marks the tenth anniversary of the opening of the new gallery complex at the Wagga Wagga Civic Centre. *Colour Country: art from Roper River* is one of a number of exhibitions that Wagga Wagga Art Gallery is hosting to celebrate this milestone.

Colour Country: art from Roper River also demonstrates the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery's commitment to developing and touring exhibitions of national significance. After premiering at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery in June 2009 *Colour Country: art from Roper River* will be exhibited at the Flinders University Art Museum in Adelaide, the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin, finishing in July 2010. The exhibition catalogue, produced, designed and printed in Wagga Wagga offers new and original scholarship about this often overlooked region of Arnhem Land.

I would like to extend my thanks to all the staff at Wagga Wagga City Council Art Gallery who have dedicated many hours to bringing this exhibition to fruition. I would also like to make special thanks to those private individuals and public institutions who have lent work without whose support such an exhibition could not be realised.

I would also like to thank the local indigenous community for their hospitality and warmth in connecting to and being involved with the project.

Colour Country: art from Roper River is an important exhibition and I am pleased to endorse it.

Cr Kerry Pascoe
Mayor of the City of Wagga Wagga

Djambu Barra Barra
Two Kangaroos and Two Dogs 2005
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 120 cm
Private collection, Sydney

Introduction

Roper Vista, Ngukurr
Photo: Cath Bowdler

Ngukurr community, the administrative centre of the Roper region, lies at the very south eastern edge of Arnhem Land. It is 400kms down 'the track' from Darwin past Katherine and on to Mataranka. Then another 240 kms along a thin strip of bitumen, then dirt, towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. The town is perched on a significant rise above a bend in the Roper River, with heavily wooded country stretching away to the distance. The Roper River marks the liminal edge of Arnhem Land. The lands on the south side of the river traditionally belong to the Mara and Alawa and are not considered part of Arnhem Land. This Roper country, with its wild escarpments and dense woodlands, billabongs full of lilies, magpie geese and crocodiles and its ruined-city rock formations, is as diverse as the artists and the art works in this exhibition. It is a place of stories and signs, a place that slowly reveals matrices of connection between people, country and the ancestral past.

Through the Ngukurr township, past the shop and the Yugal Mangi Council buildings is the Ngukurr Art Centre. Inside is an amazing sight. Art works are pinned up all around the walls and piles of unstretched canvases weigh down plastic tables. Competing with these are collections of beads, a forest of brightly painted didgeridoos, prints, small wooden sculptures and painted turtle shells. Ngukurr 'landscapes' are pinned on the walls, alongside canvases of discordant hue and images that mirror styles from further north in Arnhem Land and the 'dot dots' of the desert. The bold use of high key colour is the only common denominator.

In this way Ngukurr Arts is quite distinct from most art centres in Top End communities, the Kimberley and the desert, where there is some consistency of style and materials. At Ngukurr the overall impression is one of diversity and difference, a lack of cohesion and an 'over the top' abundance. This is evident in the work of individual artists as well as the group. At Ngukurr Arts today there is nothing that resembles a 'house style'; there never really has been. Art from this region is dynamic and innovative, but hard to define. It is contemporary, yet rooted firmly in traditional culture and representations of country, that is depicted as animated and teeming with stories. There is a predominance of largely figurative work with very little pure abstraction. Art from the Roper region consistently defies easy categorisation, and in this way it is a potent reflection of the society.

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It is just over twenty years since artists first started painting in acrylics at Ngukurr. Art from the community burst into public consciousness when bold, raw and very brightly coloured canvases appeared at the 4th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) in Darwin in 1987. Those early paintings from Ngukurr represented some of the most remarkable paintings in the history of Aboriginal art. They were the antithesis of the abstract minimalism of the desert and the 'classical' styles of Northern Arnhem Land. They presented a challenge to outdated notions of 'authenticity' in relation to Aboriginal art and were championed by dealers and collectors. In 1987, they were 'the next big thing'.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Willie Gudabi were there when the first painting workshops took place in 1987. These artists gained instant acclaim shortly after their propitious beginning. Gertie Huddleston began painting a few years later and quickly came to prominence. These artists went on to produce remarkable bodies of work that are represented in major public and private collections. Despite this their work has only been exhibited together in a public gallery once before. That was in 1997 when *Ngundungunya: Art for Everyone*, which accompanied

Ngukurr Arts, 2009
Photo: Cath Bowdler

the Ginger Riley retrospective, was shown at the National Gallery of Victoria.

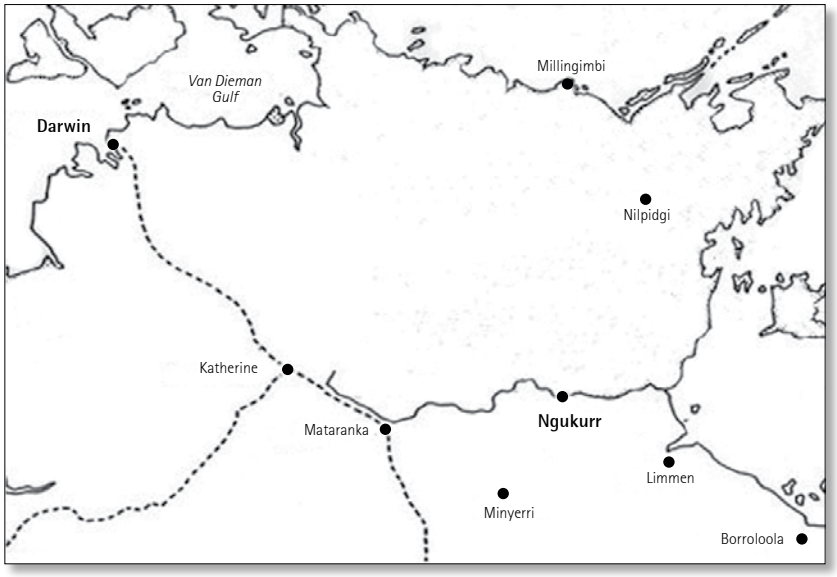
Colour Country: art from Roper River is not a survey of art from Ngukurr. Rather it is an exploration of the distinctive artwork of six individuals - Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson, Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie and Gertie Huddleston - who started painting in Ngukurr between 1987 and 1993. The exhibition highlights the extraordinary diversity of these artists' works and attempts to also show a range of styles and approaches within each artist's body of work. The artists worked together at Ngukurr from time to time, but most did not come from Ngukurr nor did they see the community as the source of their inspiration. Their work has been formed from their personal histories and cultural backgrounds which were surprisingly

different from one another.

The exhibition also features a small number of works by some of the other artists who came to prominence later and are still creating vibrant art in and around the Roper region. These artists are either related to artists featured in the exhibition or their work could be seen as a continuation of extraordinary cultural creativity. A comprehensive overview of art from the Roper region is for another time and place.

The term 'colour country' was reportedly used by Ginger Riley in a discussion Riley had with Albert Namatjira. Riley is quoted as saying that Namatjira's painting inspired him to see his 'colour country' and that he '...went back to Nutwood Downs and tried to paint' (Ryan 1997:14). Riley's attempts at that time were not to his liking, however the desire to illustrate the vivid colour embedded in his country stayed with him. The bold, dramatic use of colour is a major factor in the work of all the artists in this exhibition and is one of the major ways that the Roper region artists are differentiated from other artists in Arnhem Land.

In the Roper region contemporary painting produced for outsiders developed idioms not bound by the symbolic restrictions of law, and, in some instances, altogether new languages and responses. The artists' work has been informed by everyday life on the community and a host of other factors including the personalities of the artists and their experiences of various contact histories. The paintings are, in this way, contemporary representations of personal histories as well as



Two Laws

The socio-historical context in the Roper region

The legacy of intercultural contact is everywhere in the Roper region and is immediately evident on arrival in the Ngukurr community. The street signs are in Roper *kriol*, the local lingua franca that developed as a result of nine language groups living together at the Roper River Mission, and is still the official language of the community today. The names of the two dominant family groups, the Joshuas and Daniels are the result of baptisms in the Roper River in the 1920s. The Anglican church, still very active in the Ngukurr community, commands the most imposing position in town. The remnants of the massive, largely failed pastoral experiment, are also evident throughout the countryside today: it is full of feral animals, buffalo, brumbies and donkeys. The names of the old stations remain and peoples' surnames, like Thompson, Costello and Cox, are embedded reminders of the explorers and the pastoralists who, from the 1870s onwards, changed the way of life of the peoples of the Roper region forever. This legacy is rooted in the environment and in the hearts and minds of Aboriginal people in the area. However, the overriding factor in all art production from the region is the expression of Aboriginal culture.

'We got country, we got law'

This statement by Maureen Marangulu Thompson suggests the important link that Aboriginal people feel between their country and the complex social and cultural order through which it is understood and celebrated. The country around Ngukurr is criss-crossed with the tracks of ancestral beings,

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Limmen Bight Country 1992, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 153 x 181.5 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

still as active today as they were at the beginning of time. The people of the Roper region believe that during the creation period the features of the country were made by the actions of ancestral heroes, who imprinted their bodies, their tools and their actions onto the ground. When the ancestral beings awoke, they broke through the surface of the earth in places and travelled through certain sites which became imbued with power and energy. These actions survive as distinct landforms, which Aboriginal people see as proof of

Walmudja Hill, Ngukurr
Photo: Cath Bowdler

the ancestors' existence. Their movement through country, creating it and laying down law followed certain tracks, which may pass through vast areas of country and numerous language groups' estates. Those groups share responsibility for that country.

All life, the land and the law, which consists of moral, social and economic codes of conduct, are believed to come from the actions of the ancestral beings embodied in these places. The country itself is the font of social institutions and is viewed as active, alive and intrinsically powerful. Culture is therefore site specific in relation to complex narratives of creation. The ancestral beings can be in many places simultaneously, but their presence is seen as enduring at specific sites, existing simultaneously with the here and now of lived experience and with the distant past.

There is a semi-moiety system operating in the Roper region [1]. The two main Arnhem Land moieties of *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa* exist there but these are divided into semi-moiety groups: *Burdal* and *Guyal (Yirritja)* and *Murrungun* and *Mambali (Dhuwa).* All non-European phenomena including the ancestral beings and sites, plants, animals, people and land belong to one of these categories. An individual derives his semi-moiety from his father and marries someone from the opposite moiety.

In the regional context land ownership is vested in patrilineal clan groups. That is, ownership of land derives from one's father or father's father. Owners of land and the ceremony associated with it are called *Mingirringgi.* A different relationship to land and ceremony is inherited from one's mother, that of manager or *Djunggkayi. Mingirringgi* are often called 'boss' for the country, sacred sites and ceremony associated with that country. They are generally the ones who initiate ceremony, enact the dances and wear the sacred designs. *Djunggkayi* have a more managerial role as caretakers of country and ceremony. They paint the designs on the dancers and prepare the ceremonial ground. They can also act like 'policemen' and restrict entry to sacred places and fine people for inappropriate behaviour in relation to country. The same individual may be owner of one dreaming or ceremony and manager of another one. What this means is that, although people are given their repertoire of dreamings by their mother and father, in the Roper region they can only paint dreamings, ancestors and ceremony associated with their mother's and mother's mother's country. They cannot represent their father's country. For example Djambu Barra Barra is *Dhuwa* moiety and is manager for a *Yirritja* ceremony and can therefore paint the *Yirritja (Burdal)* plains kangaroo and the *(Guyal)* characters of Sandridge goanna, and devil devil. This 'rule' is fairly strictly enforced in the region and there are sanctions and considerable fear associated with

Willie Gudabi
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 83 x 62 cm
Helen Read Collection

painting the wrong country or ancestral beings, especially for women.

Despite the legacy of colonial destruction and control endured by Aboriginal people in the Roper region, ceremony remained strong, albeit waning during certain periods. There are a number of ceremonies significant to people in the extended region, which were regularly performed during the contact period and survive today. The major regional ceremonial cycles are the *Yirritja Yabaduruwa* ceremony and the *Dhuwa Gunapipi* ceremony. During these rituals the generative power, travels and other activities of the ancestors are enacted through dance, actions and sometimes song. Other less complex, shorter and more public ceremonies such as initiation, circumcision and mortuary ceremonies like the *Lorrkon* ceremony were and are still common. Djambu Barra Barra and Willie Gudabi were important ceremonial men in the community during their later lives, conducting many initiation and mortuary ceremonies for the community.

Numerous major dreaming tracks cross the area in the vicinity of Ngukurr, including the devil devil or *Nakaran,* the quiet snake, the Sandridge goanna, the crocodile, the plains kangaroo, the left-hand wallaby and the mermaids or *Kilyirringkilyirring*. All are associated with a number of specific sites and feature in ceremony. Knowledge about these sites and ceremonies is restricted. The maintenance of restricted knowledge is a major consideration in the Roper region and often the production of art is an expression of this knowledge and an assertion of authority. However, in Ngukurr, ceremonial power does not equate with political power, which very much resides with control and ownership of land. Many of the painters who could depict important religious subject matter and officiate in ceremony were neither landowners nor power brokers in the community.

In the Roper region, because of its sustained contact history and diasporic nature, a strong iconographic tradition was not readily available for most artists to draw upon. There was no history of bark painting or apprenticeship system as there was for the Yolngu and the Kuninjku. Also the traditional designs from ceremony, such as those mentioned above, have not been used as the iconographic starting point for these artists, as they have for artists in many other communities. Some artists were stylistically influenced by the rock art of their ancestors, or the experience of bark painting in other parts of Arnhem Land, but the paintings are not direct translations of such iconography. For these artists there has been a greater freedom to invent, incorporate and modify influences from outside the Roper region, rather than be bound by local stylistic conventions.

Nearly all the artwork produced at Ngukurr is figurative. Taylor suggests that '[t]he use of figurative forms in painting is a means by which artists control the interpretation of their works' (1996:16). As in the rest of Arnhem Land, figurative art is seen as predominantly 'outside' painting or the most obvious and accessible rendering of the ancestral form, which, on the whole, can be seen by anyone. Nonetheless the images may contain layers of meaning and associations, which do contain some 'inside' information but remain opaque and enigmatic to the uninitiated observer.

Nonetheless all of the male artists in this exhibition are either representing public aspects of the preparation and enactment of ceremony for which they are *Djunggkayi*, the ancestral beings aligned with that ceremony, or the creation stories associated with their mother's country. At Ngukurr each artist developed their own unique stylistic language with which to do that and to imbue their works with a sense of ancestral power. Like other artists in Arnhem Land, their

paintings stem from memory and experience of country and the actions of ancestors associated with it. Their paintings are not reproductions of traditional designs, but rather are images of events and actions in place. Most Roper artists see their representations as depicting 'true' events that happened in the past and present. The act of painting can be perceived as reawakening the past in the present and of rendering the invisible visible.

'They shoot us for game': the frontier war

The historical imperative that caused the migration of diverse groups to the Roper River Mission cannot be ignored as a major determining force in the diversity of styles and the content of art from the region, particularly in the art of Mara and Alawa artists. The pastoral invasion eventually drove a number of diverse tribal groups to seek refuge at the Christian Mission Society's (CMS) mission, founded in 1908, fifteen kms from present day Ngukurr. Some understanding of the socio-historical perspective is necessary in order to fully contextualise the artists' cultural, environmental and personal responses to artistic practice.

Sandefur (1985) estimated that prior to the 19th century there were nine traditional language groups in the area: Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Manggarai, Ngandi, Ngalakan, Nunggubuyu, Rembarrnga and Ritharrngu. It is hard to imagine the shock of the catastrophic and inexorable invasion by Europeans, which began in earnest from 1870 and radically altered the lives of the Roper region tribes forever. With the level of attachment and deep association to place detailed above, the destructive intrusion was devastating. Tony Roberts eloquently described the impact of the arrival of the pastoralists in the 1880s into the sacred ground of Roper country:

> Watching in stunned disbelief were Aboriginal peoples who had enjoyed quiet ownership of this land for thousands of years. Precious lagoons providing food and clean water were fouled by cattle; permanent living areas, fish traps and wildlife habitats were damaged or destroyed; and beasts bogged and died in the shrinking waterholes of the dry season, turning them into slimy swamps...Sites of profound significance were desecrated by the strangers and their livestock, either inadvertently or deliberately (Roberts 2005:2).

There are many accounts of early contact with Europeans and various reports relating to this period appear in almost all material written about the region. Most agree that the Indigenous peoples of the Roper region were the losers in a guerrilla war, over what Merlan called, the 'violent competition for land' and economic resources (1986:4). Conflict began with the first overlanders in 1872. Ten years later, Elsey station was established and soon the entire district was taken up by pastoralists, dispossessing the Aboriginal population of more than 2,500 people. Facing rogue station managers as well as the criminals and overlanders, the tribes fought back with increasing urgency. The scene was set for one of the most disturbing chapters in Territory history.

The pastoralists arrived along the infamous Coast Track, which passed right through the traditional lands of the Yanuwa, Mara, Alawa, Ngandi and Ngalakan tribes. By 1903 the invasion and expropriation of country was felt most severely in the areas occupied by those groups. Naturally Aboriginal people had to fight for their survival in the light of this wholesale assault on their way of life. Roberts (2005:101) found that this behaviour provoked a swift vengeance, resulting in massacres on most of the cattle stations, which led to a spiralling cycle of murder and revenge then anger and retaliation. There are

Gertie Huddleston
We all share water 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 169 x 120 cm
Karen Brown Collection

many examples of massacres in Alawa country. The most well known, the Hodgson Downs massacre, occurred in 1903 at Bailey Creek near the present day community of Minyerri.

The Roper region became an area where the interaction between traditional society and colonial contact was particularly disruptive and sustained. The Ngukurr community was formed from diverse clan and language groups under desperate conditions. The swiftness and intensity of the invasion of the traditional lands in the Roper region resulted in a situation of rapid detribalisation, population decline, linguistic disruption and social disturbance on a scale rarely seen elsewhere in the Northern Territory. It remains a zone of contact and intensive cross-cultural negotiation.

'Jesus Is Alive' Fellowship building, Ngukurr, 2009
Photo: Cath Bowdler

'Reaching the Un-reached': The CMS Mission and its legacy

> The aborigines are disappearing. In the course of a generation or two, at the most, the last Australian blackfellow will have turned his face to warm mother earth, and given back his soul to God who gave it. Missionary work then may be smoothing the pillow of a dying race, but I think if the Lord Jesus came to Australia, He would be moved with great compassion for these poor out-casts, living by the wayside, robbed of their land, wounded by the lust and passion of a stronger race, and dying - yes dying, like rotten sheep - with no man to care for their bodies or souls. (Frodsham cited in McMillan 2001:87)

This famous speech delivered by the Anglican Bishop of Queensland, Reverend Frodsham in 1906 was the catalyst for the foundation of the Roper River Mission. The reports of massacres and 'dispatches' of natives along the 'Coast Track' and elsewhere in the Roper region had become more widely reported after the turn of the century and this passionate plea inspired a group of Victorian Church Missionary Society (CMS) evangelists to act. An exploratory survey party working with a Mara man, 'Old Bob' Gajiyuma, had chosen a site on the Roper River in 1907 and in the following year the missionaries, F.L.G. Hutchance, Rex Joynt and the stockman M.C Sharpe, set off to establish the first CMS Mission in Arnhem Land (Harris 1990:700). Their initial motives were clearly humanitarian and protectionist, in fact the provision of 'palliative care' for a dying race. But their over-riding agenda was in 'reaching the un-reached' and saving the Aborigines from their pagan darkness (Harris 1998:18).

From the moment of their arrival, the missionaries were welcomed by Aboriginal people in the area. Bern (1976:214)

estimated that around 200 dispossessed Aborigines sought refuge at the newly established Mission in the first year, many of whom would have been traumatised by an overwhelming sense of loss. However those that came were expected to move very quickly from one way of life into another. Sandefur (1985:211) noted that, 'Aborigines were encouraged to model their behaviour in all respects on that of the European missionaries and to leave their old ways behind.

From the outset the intention was that the Anglican Mission be run as an 'industrial and agricultural' institution as well as an 'educational and spiritual' one (Harris 1990:701). Almost immediately a church, school, cook-house and dispensary were established. Extensive vegetable gardens and a stock-yard followed shortly after. The old Mission exercised significant control over peoples' lives, and conditions on the Mission for the Aboriginal inmates have been likened by some commentators (Bern 1974, Graham 1988, McMillan 2001) to those of slavery, where people worked six days a week for little or no money, were deprived of their liberty and punished severely for misdemeanours. Graham noted that 'Church attendance was compulsory and that the missionaries controlled the amount of money people received and the amount and type of labour available' (1988:8). Missionaries also exerted a strict discipline, which was enforced by a variety of sanctions including fines, removal of privileges and expulsion.

Nevertheless many Aboriginal people look back on the 'mission days' with affection and nostalgia. The missions were a source of European goods, regular food, education, medicine and a sense of order, about which many older Aboriginal people wistfully reminisce. Aboriginal people such as Gertie Huddleston and her sisters also regard certain missionaries, who lived on the community for a long time with great fondness. Gertie is adamant that while she worked hard and was punished under the Mission regime, she also got a good education and she liked a number of the missionaries, who she thought did a good job caring for her people. Many Aboriginal people embraced Christianity and local people were baptised in the Roper River from the 1920s. Dinah Garadji and Umbarrai (who became Joshua) were baptised at that time, both becoming long-standing Christian leaders in the community. By the 1950s there was a generation of Aboriginal people like Gertie Huddleston, Maureen Thompson and Barnabas and Philip Roberts who had grown up under this regime and had become committed Christians whilst maintaining traditional practices to varying degrees.

Christianity has been and still is a major force in many people's lives in Ngukurr. It is clear that over the century of its engagement with the region, the CMS Mission had both a positive and negative impact on the lives of Aborigines in its care and still occupies a dominant place in the lives of many individuals in Ngukurr today. The strains of the fellowship sing-song can be heard wafting over the community almost every night, competing nowadays with the electric guitars of the Yugal band and the general din of televisions. The church bells peal every Sunday and the faithful attend the service, now held in Roper *kriol*.

'Tall in the saddle': Aboriginal people and the pastoral industry in the Roper region

At the same time that Aboriginal people were under strict control at the Mission, many other Aboriginal people lived under another form of social control on the stock camps on the pastoral stations. Between 1882 and 1885, twelve pastoral stations were established in the larger area south of the Roper, including Bauhinia Downs, Hodgson Downs and Valley

of the Springs and approximately one third of the land mass was occupied by pastoral leases. Soon after the turn of the 20th Century most Aboriginal people in the Roper River region became associated with station camps, worked for the Roper Bar Police Station or sought refuge at the Mission. In each case the adults and children worked in return for protection, provisions and shelter.

The Aborigines took an opportunistic approach to the stations, realising that there were benefits to be achieved from that interaction. Aboriginal people decided to move into the orbit of the stations, as they had to the mission, purely for the regularity of rations, including sugar and tobacco, for which many people had developed a taste.

Merlan (1978) pointed out that the decade between 1910 and 1920 marked the start of what the Alawa people refer to as the 'quiet time', when many people decided to 'come in' to the pastoral stations as the killings south of the Roper subsided. She quotes an old Alawa man called Kalduji, born on Bauhinia Downs station as saying: 'Quieten him now, like a horse. Work along cattle job now' (1978:165). Nonetheless there were still 'wild blacks' who refused to quieten down, who stayed living deep in the bush, living traditional lives and avoiding white men altogether. Some became the stuff of legend, like Willie Gudabi's 'grandfather' Gudang, a significant figure in his paintings.

Ginger Riley, in conversation with Judith Ryan (1997:14-15), related how he relished his work as a stockman, 'droving or working as a ringer on horseback; mustering, horse breaking and branding'. Riley, like Willie Gudabi, went droving in the outback and experienced the freedom and autonomy of the stock-workers life, which contrasted markedly with the lot of the Mara and Alawa who stayed at the Mission.

Nonetheless the sense of pride that many Aboriginal people had in their accomplishments as exceptional stock-workers and their struggle to gain equal pay was important to them and their sense of identity. Ryan commented that '[l]ike other former stockmen, proud of their time on the stations, Riley is rarely seen without his cowboy hat, shirt and boots'. It was an unfortunate outcome that, just as Aboriginal stock-workers had achieved due recognition through wages, many were sacked and the industry went into decline. Many people moved to Ngukurr and looked for new ways of generating income such as craft production. In fact, Ginger Riley and Willie Gudabi made conscious decisions to make art as a way of generating income in their later life after years of hard work in the stock camps.

Working on pastoral stations did not preclude ceremonial and other traditional practices as much as life on the Mission did. Asche et al (1998:16) noted that pastoral work was seasonal: 'The [wet season] layoff allowed people to return to their traditional country, perform ceremonies and pass on the necessary knowledge to the younger generation'. This was the season people also supplemented their diets with bush tucker and hunted on their country, encouraging the survival and transmission of significant traditional practices in the region. That these practices continued, and in some instances thrived, is a testament to the resilience of Aboriginal people in the region in the face of the history outlined above. So is the making of art.

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The enormous weight of the contact history has had effects on art production and cultural practices in the Roper region. The long control by the CMS Mission, in particular, led to a climate of fear and secrecy in relation to the control and

transmission of ceremonial information. There was of anxiety associated with transgression of the 'rules' associated with sacred knowledge. This situation also stemmed from the fact that most artists no longer had access to their traditional clan paintings due to the decimation in the region during the frontier period. In Ngukurr the little knowledge that remained was highly restricted. The impact of cultural disruption and dislocation resonates to this day.

1 The sources of ethnographic information include Land Claim documents and unpublished theses ie. Asche, W., et al. (1998); Layton, R. (1980); Morphy, H., and Morphy, F. (1981); Bern, J. (1974)

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
National Gallery of Victoria, 1997
Photo: Beverly Knight

‘Isn’t someone in charge out there?’

The history of art production at Ngukurr

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Sharks Liver Tree 1988, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 87 x 89 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

> When I first saw Ngukurr work, Ginger Riley and the Sambo [Djambu Barra Barra] crocodile that went outside the square, I thought it was amazing. They were chucking paint at the canvas, raw and straight out of the tubes and I thought, ‘Isn’t someone in charge out there?’

This off-the-cuff comment by Djon Mundine, reminiscing about the impact of seeing Ngukurr paintings for the first time at Mimi Arts in Katherine in 1987, exemplifies the initial reaction to those early canvases in many quarters: they shocked and excited people because they raised questions about what Aboriginal art could be. It was as if these paintings represented a completely fresh and an unmediated version of Aboriginal art, raw and unsullied by contact with the art world. In part this was true.

Beat Street: and the beginning of acrylic painting

The early 1980s was a boom time for Adult Education in a number of Aboriginal communities. Brian Burkett, a school teacher and Adult Educator, and his partner Gale Duell, arrived in Ngukurr in 1985 and stayed until 1988. One of the first things they initiated was a visit by a group from Ngukurr, including Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, to a video conference in Yuendumu in 1986. This trip was to prove pivotal as it boosted the understanding of some Roper River people of the economic possibilities of art making. Shortly after their return from Yuendumu, Burkett worked with the group to set up the Ngukurr Adult Education Committee, which became an incorporated body in 1986. This early phase was fruitful for the Ngukurr Adult Education committee, which successfully accessed funding to establish a number of projects. The period 1986 to 1988 saw an extraordinary period of cultural renaissance in the community, with the establishment of a bush medicine project, an oral history project and numerous language projects, all with video recording, photography and broadcasting components.[1]

Beat Street, Ngukurr, 1990
Photo: Beverly Knight

Burkett and Duell, who had also seen images of Tiwi design at Nguiu, hoped to support a similar enterprise in Ngukurr, as economic sustainability was a major goal of the committee. The committee submitted an application to Commonwealth Education in Katherine, and money was raised for the first art workshop. This was intended to be a ten-week screenprinting course, run by young Sydney artist Edie Kurzer. She had passed through Ngukurr in 1984 on a visit to Numbulwar and had some familiarity with the community. She stayed for about nine months, conducting two blocks of workshops in 1986 and 1987.

The program was conducted in the school and was open to anyone. Kurzer decided that stencilling with rollers, a deliberately simple technology, would be easier and more practical in the field. The group printed stencils onto T-shirts and lengths of fabric. It soon became a social event and older people, mostly women, became interested. Willie Gudabi joined the group and got involved because he was upset about the breakdown of traditions and wanted a means to pass on culture. The Ngukurr workshops, which had moved to the Adult Education centre, proved to be a great success with the locals, but were never commercially viable. Gale Duell recalls a large number of items being produced, such as curtains and T-shirts, but the items were made for local people rather than the tourist market and they sold for relatively small amounts of money.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Djambu Barra Barra were not interested in printing T-shirts. Ginger Riley, in particular, wanted to move away from Ngukurr and set up an outstation at Limmen Bight. He needed money to buy a truck so he could move his enormous pigs and other animals out there. With the encouragement and support of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra and others, the Ngukurr Adult Education Committee set about raising the funds, again through Commonwealth Adult Education, for the painting workshops. Edie Kurzer knew they needed a man to run painting workshops with the older men and she had an acquaintance with John Nelson, another young Sydney artist, who had done some remote work with the Flying Art School. Edie talked him into going to Ngukurr to teach the techniques of painting.

Nelson arrived in March 1987 and also stayed for about nine months. Matt King, employed as an instructor in printing techniques, arrived shortly after to replace Edie Kurzer and stayed for a similar period. The painting workshops took place

Beat Street, 1990
Photo: Beverly Knight

in what was once the hospital - an old, rundown shed with concrete walls, some large tables and a leaky tin roof. The derelict building had been a hangout for kids and was covered inside and out with graffiti of all sorts. On one wall was the phrase 'Let's rap dance, Beat Street, 1985', hence the name of the art centre (Ryan 1997:18). In contrast to the printing group, who were mostly younger people with a predominance of women, the painting group comprised older men, including Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra and David Nelson. Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Holly Daniels were the only women involved. (Willie Gudabi was content to stay with the printmaking group until 1988.) As the Beat Street 'art centre' was a hot, open shed most artists worked in their camps, but they came to Beat Street to deliver work, collect materials, see what others were doing and have their work documented.

Nelson and Burkett were astounded by the creative outpouring that ensued in the first year at Beat Street. Large numbers of paintings of extraordinary creativity, energy and innovation were being produced on a huge scale by the artists. Ginger Riley, in particular, moved very quickly from a halting mish-mash of styles in his first experiments to the extraordinary sophistication of his distinctive aerial landscapes, viewed as if from the eye of Ngak Ngak, the white breasted Sea Eagle. Djambu Barra Barra also produced luminous canvases of great sophistication and iconographic diversity, reflecting his prior experience as a painter. Others were not so accomplished but it was clear to both Burkett and Nelson that there was something very interesting going on and that the artists were painting with great enjoyment and hope for the future. Paintings poured in and were accumulated for as yet unorganised exhibitions. Most of the artists did not sell many paintings in the initial six month period and consequently, were not being well rewarded for their efforts. Burkett was very keen to get the artists more widely represented and see them paid for their hard work.

They tried unsuccessfully to market the work through Mimi, but the big breakthrough came when the Ngukurr Adult Education Committee decided to put works into the 4th NATSIAA at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin, which was held from 12-27 September, 1987. Judith Ryan described the impact of the first Ngukurr works:

> The Ngukurr paintings burst on the scene like something out of left field, providing the viewer with nothing familiar:

Djambu Barra Barra
Ceremonial Crocodile Dance 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 140 x 175 cm
Artbank Collection

> there were no fields of dots, natural ochres or meticulous rarrk…[Curators] were impressed by the Ngukurr exhibits which brought a raw edge to the contemporary Aboriginal art scene (Ryan 1997:19).

The work was vibrant and exciting and Margie West, Curator of Aboriginal art at MAGNT recalled that it caught the attention of gallerists and curators, including Gabrielle Pizzi and Annemarie Brody, who were interested in capturing the beginnings of new art movements. Matt King sent images to a number of collectors including Beverly Knight and Gabrielle Pizzi, who, at the time, was in the process of opening one of the only galleries in Australia specialising in Aboriginal art. Burkett made contact with Gabrielle Pizzi who was so interested that she visited Ngukurr in late 1987 to choose works for their first exhibition. This exhibition, the second in the new Gabrielle Pizzi Gallery, opened in March 1988 with five works by Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, twelve by

Djambu Barra Barra, including some collaborative works with Amy Jirwulurr Johnson, and one each by Willie Gudabi, David Nelson, Waratah Ward and Holly Daniels. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala went to Melbourne to attend the opening and speak about the work. Judith Ryan noted that those were heady days in the industry:

> That evening of high excitement, in Australia's Bicentennial Year…when interest in Aboriginal art was escalating, was attended by a farrago of private collectors, scrambling to reserve the best works (Ryan 1997:20).

It was the height of the 1980s art boom and there was money and optimism and a genuine openness to a new and exciting direction in Aboriginal art. The works from Ngukurr fitted the bill perfectly, offering that 'shock of the new' and the exhilaration associated with the genuinely original. So did the charismatic Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, the perfect spokesperson for the art to the sophisticated Melbourne crowd.

The first Roper show was a sell-out and the artists and the community were on a high. In order to maintain some of that momentum and realising that this could be big, the Adult Educators set about trying to put some professional practice behind the hype. Responding to the artists' wishes for professional development and autonomy in relation to the marketing of their works Gale Duell assisted the Ngukurr Adult Education Committee to secure Abstudy funding for the project 'Taking the Reins: Marketing and Management Practices for Ngukurr artists'. In May 1988 eight artists and Matt King went on a field trip to Yuendumu and other communities in Central Australia, to look into marketing their art. They saw the successes at Papunya Tula and participated in video workshops and recording of culture at CAAMA. This trip gave the artists insight into the importance of good management and as a result they decided to set up another association specifically to provide them with a distinct identity to manage their business. At the end of May in the same year the Ngundungunya Association of Artists was incorporated.

This significant move unfortunately coincided with the departure of the technical support staff. John Nelson left Ngukurr in April and Matt King left just after returning from the field trip in May. Also the artists' initial success was tempered as a Ngukurr exhibition in Brisbane at Kamarga Arts, (associated with the Aboriginal and Islander Studies unit at the University of Queensland) in 1988 was not very successful and attempts to sell work through an Alice Springs gallery were unproductive and works were returned to Ngukurr unsold. A second show at Gabrielle Pizzi Gallery in 1989 did not live up to the extravagant success and hype associated with their first foray into the marketplace. This probably had as much to do with a turn for the worse in the economy, which affected the Aboriginal art market significantly in the early 1990s, as with the departure of the art technical support staff. It became difficult for the committee and the artists to sustain a steady momentum. Brian Burkett and Gale Duell were feeling the pressure from the artists after the first exhibition and also from Gabrielle Pizzi wondering whether there was enough work for another exhibition. Burkett and Duell left Ngukurr at the end of 1988 and Ian Gumbula was appointed as the new Adult Educator. Beverly Knight remained public officer of the Ngundungunya Association of Artists and in direct contact with the artists.

Nonetheless something significant had germinated. Whether it was on scraps of board, old cupboard doors or remnants of canvas, artists like Ginger Riley scrounged materials and just kept painting.

After the demise of the Adult Education programs in 1991, there was a genuine desire by the Ngundungunya Association to see an art centre established in Ngukurr. However, it was not until 1998, more than ten years after the first painting workshops that an art centre on a very modest scale was established. In the intervening years between the excitement of Beat Street and the establishment of Ngukurr Arts, a number of other factors and individuals influenced art production, marketing and reception. One of the most significant factors was the long term interaction with the community of Beverly Knight and her husband Anthony Knight. The Knights were intrigued by the Ngukurr works they had seen and in mid 1989 Anthony Knight made what was to be a pivotal trip to Ngukurr. He arrived in the community with Martin Hardy from Mimi and apparently ran into Ginger Riley almost straight away. As the story goes, Riley took Knight to see a pile of his paintings that had been rejected for an exhibition and which were going to be thrown out. Knight promptly bought them all and then proceeded to Ginger's camp and bought the rest, about forty in all (Ryan 1997:22). Ginger is recorded as saying 'leave me with nothing, bark paintings, boards, kitchen cupboards, thin canvas' as Knight bought his entire output (Ryan 1997:22). This episode is the genesis of the famous 'tip painter' reference to Ginger Riley Munduwalawala: the rescuing of his work from being thrown out and the fact that he painted on anything he found from the tip after art supplies dried up after Adult Education ceased operating. Many of the paintings Knight acquired on this trip

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
The Four Archers 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 129.5 x 187.5 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Angelina George
Part of the ruined city area 2004, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 80 cm
Karen Brown Collection

have become iconic Riley works in major collections and which featured in his 1997 retrospective at the NGV.

This trip and the sale of the works cemented the long term relationship between the Knights and a number of Ngukurr artists. Beverly Knight became even more passionate about the work and decided, despite the difficulties associated with such a remote location, to represent the works of certain Ngukurr artists in Melbourne.

In 1989 Beverly Knight opened her own venue, Alcaston House Gallery. Her first exhibition, *Works from Utopia and Ngukurr* took place in October that year. However, she facilitated a Ngukurr exhibition at Christine Abrahams Gallery in 1990 as well as the first solo shows for Ngukurr artists at William Mora Gallery in Melbourne in the same year. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's first solo show opened on 20 October 1990, followed by Willie Gudabi's first solo show on 22 November. William Mora recalled: 'Ginger's show was a sell out. All 32 works were gone. The boards were so cheap...Willie's was not. It featured lots of representational imagery and only two paintings sold'. Ginger's career as an artist and the successes that followed were cemented by this show.

Back in Ngukurr the Ngundungunya Association led by Willie Gudabi lobbied hard with ANKAAA[2] and other bodies to set up an art centre, but to no avail. In 1991 Beverly Knight was representing Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie, Djambu Barra Barra and Amy Jirwulurr Johnson. During the early to mid 1990s there were many shows of Ngukurr artists at Alcaston House in Melbourne as well as associated shows at Hogarth Galleries Sydney and Gallerie Australis in Adelaide among others. Some Ngukurr artists also appeared in major Aboriginal art exhibitions that toured nationally and internationally, including *Aboriginal art and Spirituality* (1991) at the High Court in Canberra, *Flash Pictures* (1991) at the NGA and *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians* (1993). Ginger Riley Munduwalawala in particular had begun a stellar career and Djambu Barra Barra and Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Willie Gudabi's works were also in demand.

Darwin based gallerist Karen Brown also played a pivotal role in picking up and representing the Joshua sisters, including Gertie Huddleston and Dinah Garadji from 1993. Brown organised many solo and group exhibitions for the artists, through the Karen Brown Gallery. She has continued to represent the Joshua sisters to this day, most recently with a group exhibition in 2008 and series of luminous solo exhibitions by Angelina George. There were also a number of significant Ngukurr exhibitions at Framed Gallery in Darwin.

Ngukurr Arts: the formation of the art centre

Back in Ngukurr in 1998 the CEO Lynn Mott was trying to institute community development and felt there was a need to establish an art centre in the community. The new centre started out in similar conditions to Beat Street: in a shed, opposite the swimming pool, that also housed a second-hand clothing outlet, with no air-conditioning and no proper floor. Artists were not encouraged to paint there and it operated more as a depot where canvases and supplies could be distributed. It took a while for any of the more senior artists to come, but eventually Djambu Barra Barra and Maureen Thompson came to collect art materials to take back to their camps.

Brenda Gibson, who ran the art centre, continued the associations with Alcaston Gallery and Framed Gallery, resulting in numerous group exhibitions. Gibson also

Faith Thompson Nelson & Maureen Thompson, Ngukurr Arts, 2005
Photo: Cath Bowdler

organised a number of exhibitions at schools, including Canberra Grammar and Methodist Ladies College (MLC) Melbourne. Simon Normand, an MLC teacher who brought students to the community as part of an exchange program, helped Brenda organise two exhibitions: *Stone Country* and *Big Stories on Canvas* at MLC. There were also exhibitions at Canberra Grammar. These shows proved very successful and were sell-outs encouraging both the art centre and the artists. In 2000 the art centre moved into a much more appropriate venue in the old Library building. It was a secure building and a larger space that included an area where work could be displayed and people could paint together in relative comfort. In 2003 Christine Meizis, who came to the community when her husband was employed as a council mechanic, took the position of art advisor at Ngukurr Arts. The art centre provided the space and materials for artists to work but it was also an important space for social interaction and camaraderie. There was a small but steady stream of visitors to the community, including tourists from fishing camps across the Roper, who came in to look at work.

Christine Meizis organised a number of exhibitions during her stint at Ngukurr with Alcaston Gallery, Raft Gallery in Darwin, Helen Maxwell Gallery in Canberra and continued the association with schools. The sell-out *Stone country to Saltwater* at Jeffery Malesa Gallery in Sorrento and the accompanying catalogue *Stone country to Saltwater: recent artwork and stories from Ngukurr,* one of the only published

Alan Joshua Junior, Ngukurr, 2009
Photo: Cath Bowdler

works about the community, were facilitated by Ngukurr Arts and Simon Normand. Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation became an incorporated body for the first time in 2008. Alan Joshua Junior is the first Indigenous Chairperson. He holds hope for the future, despite the logistical and infrastructure issues that have dogged the art centre. Artists Maureen Thompson, Faith Thompson Nelson and Alan Joshua Junior continue to paint there and some young talents, such as Evan Wilfred and Patrick Ngalmi are emerging.

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Personalities such as Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Willie Gudabi and Djambu Barra Barra played a crucial role in the development of Ngukurr art, which should not be underplayed, as did the first art advisors and Adult Educators. The artists in the first painting group were not unsophisticated people, nor were they unused to working with whitefellas. Many of these men had worked for years in the pastoral industry, had travelled widely and were aware of the white man's world and its demands. They were also strong and independent people, perhaps not the power brokers in town, but confident and self-assured, certainly not the kind of men and women that young whitefellas straight out of Art College could be telling what or how to paint.

There was no sense that the Ngukurr artists were encouraged to paint in any recognisably 'Aboriginal' style or with any kind of homogeneity at any time. Their difference and individuality was fostered from the outset and promoted at a time when the art market was ready to accept more 'difference', individuality and expressionism in Aboriginal art in general. The most obvious trends in Ngukurr painting - strong, bold use of a wide colour palette, representational elements, syncretic styles and individual diversity - all had their genesis in the first year of painting and were never effectively edited out. In fact, these tendencies flourished and were exacerbated due to the lack of an art centre in the community.

The profusion of styles and colour in Ngukurr art is a clear indicator that the artists developed and continued to paint in their own unique ways with remarkably little intervention from outsiders. This has always been the case and often placed the Ngukurr work outside the bounds of market expectations. The community has never had a closely defined style, but rather certain tendencies. Not only was there no extant iconographic tradition or history of art making for outsiders in the Roper region, but the first art technical support staff fostered total artistic freedom and experimentation with little or no intervention or editing: Edie Kurzer had not intervened in any way with the printmakers, nor had John Nelson, who had what he called a *laissez faire* approach with the painting group. He was startled by the way some art advisors were controlling and mentioned that he had received flack for

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and John Nelson documenting paintings, Beat Street, 1987
Photo: Brian Burkett

'allowing' the artists at Ngukurr to use all the available colours and not stick to ochres as other centres in Arnhem Land had done.[3] He had been particularly criticised for the use of hot pink in one of Ginger Riley's paintings. It was clear that colour, the whole palette and the brighter the better, was important to the Ngukurr artists and Nelson imposed no restrictions on the colour, scale or content of any artists' work, as other art centre advisors had. Nelson related the story of Djambu Barra Barra asking for fluoro colours to achieve maximum impact. Amazingly Nelson ordered hot pink fluoro paint for Djambo to use on a number of canvases in 1987. Matt King also adopted the same approach after John Nelson left. These art advisors were also not overly concerned about neatness and encouraged the raw, the gestural and the painterly. This brief period from 1987-88 was the only time that any of the art support staff at Ngukurr were artists. Given that freedom of expression and exuberant, unrestrained use of colour is one of the defining characteristics of all the Ngukurr artists, the fact that the artists, the Adult Educators and the support staff were not interested in rigid and pre-conceived ideas about what could or could not comprise Aboriginal art, is significant.

The dealers who followed worked with individuals, the star artists rather than in the social space of the art centre. They understood the art market and exerted quality control, only taking works for exhibition, which were deemed good enough.

The major dealers who represented Ngukurr artists, such as Beverly Knight and Karen Brown have reputable galleries and developed strong and long lasting relationships with the artists and the community, to the advantage of those artists represented. The artists developed individually with no one exerting a sense of a community identity for the art. The artists were able to pursue their own styles without any pressure to conform. Which brings us back to the assertion in the introduction: 'Isn't anyone in charge?' Well, it seems it was the artists, who through their force of will and determination continued painting despite very difficult conditions at Ngukurr. They maintained their own distinctive styles and it is they who set their course and maintained the integrity of their distinct visions.

1 These videos are all in the AIATSIS archive under Ngarniyurlma Media Association

2 ANKAAA, the Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists, is an Indigenous run advocacy body supporting artists and art centres in the top end of the NT and WA.

3 Most communities further north in Arnhem Land had made the decision earlier on to stick to 'traditional' materials, only painting in ochres on bark. This, however, was a decision driven by the artists themselves.

Worlds Within Worlds

Willie Gudabi & Moima Willie

Between 1990 and 1995 in particular, Willie Gudabi produced a unique body of work with his wife Moima Willie. In his long life he had seen much of the contact history of the Roper region unfold. As a young man, growing up in Alawa country, not long after the massacres had stopped, he was drawn to the pastoral stations, like so many of his generation. He worked in that industry, but kept strong associations to his country and its ceremony. He spent time on the Mission, but was obsessed with rock art in his country and his connection to his ancestors. His body of work represents more than renderings of country and ancestor beings. It is also a secret personal history in which biographical and historical details are as much a part of the work as they are for many western artists. These elements combine with the sacred and the ceremonial to create a distinct painted world or more truly worlds within worlds, which operate on many layers and of which he is a part.

'Bread and beef time'

Willie Gudabi was born in about 1916 on Nutwood Downs Station in Alawa country, which lies to the west of Mara country directly south of the Roper River. The base for Alawa speakers at present is Hodgson Downs, or Minyerri, about 150 kilometres south west of Ngukurr, but Willie Gudabi lived at Ngukurr in his later years when he was painting. Alawa country is peppered with pastoral properties, including Nutwood Downs, Bauhinia Downs, St Vidgeon's Station and Roper Valley Station, many of which Gudabi worked at as a stockman before he took up painting. The history of the pastoral industry in the area and the intensive occupation by frontier pastoralists is a theme that resonates throughout Willie Gudabi's life and art.

Willie Gudabi was 'grown up' to age sixteen by Michael Connor from Turkey Creek, who taught him cattle work, horse work and, as he said, 'to speak properly with white fellas', a skill that stayed with him all his life. Before that, he had lived in a humpy in the bush and was initiated, in country near Tanumbirini Station[1]. He was a skilled stockman, first working on Elsey Station with Harold Giles for five years, then droving in Queensland with bullocks and cattle from Elsey to beyond Camooweal. He returned to the NT and over time worked on Hodgson Downs, Roper Valley and Tanumbirini stations, only ever being paid in rations, during what he calls 'bread and beef time'. That finally changed in the 1960s when he was made head stockman at Hodgson Downs and was paid properly 'like a white man'.

Gudabi got married at the Mission, 'white fella way', to Moima Willie, a Ngalakan/Ngandi woman. She was born around 1935 and grew up at the old CMS Mission, like Gertie Huddleston. Her father's name was Samuel and he was a Ngandi man from Ruined City country. She is *Bangardijan*, or *Burdal* subsection the opposite of Willie's *Murrungun*, or in Alawa, *Namatjulu*. Her country is Millwarrparra or Yellow Waters[2]. The relationship between Willie and Moima was very close and when Willie Gudabi took up painting, eventually, so did

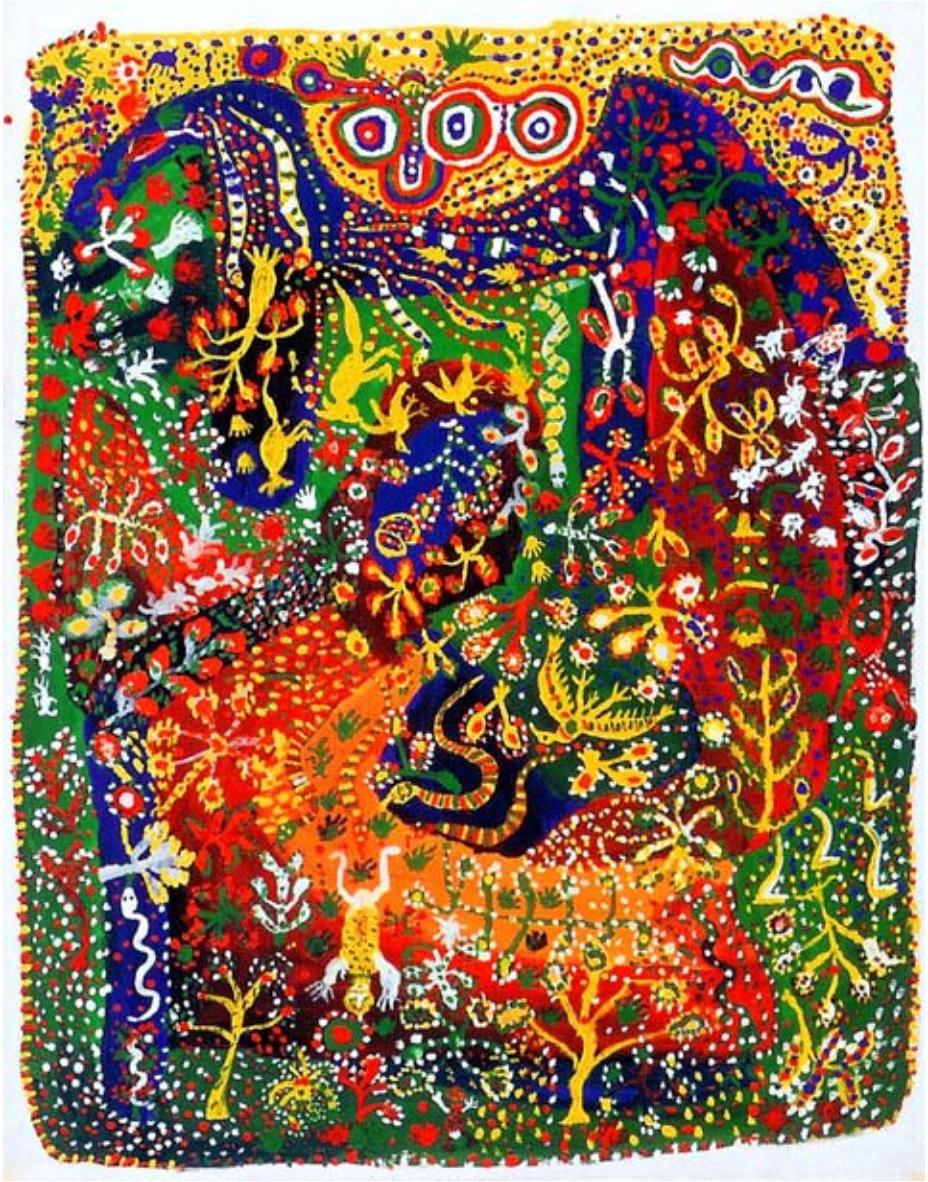
Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie, Ngukurr, 1990
Photo: Beverly Knight

Moima.

Moima Willie and Willie Gudabi had a son, Kevin, who was born and still lives at Hodgson Downs. Gudabi said he taught his son all about horses and cattle and, when he was twelve, Kevin went back to the Roper River Mission to school. The family then lived between Ngukurr and the various stations where Willie worked. Some time in the 1970s when Gudabi was almost 60 the doctor told him he had to finish with stock work. By the early 1980s he had begun carving boomerangs, which were sold through Mimi Arts and Crafts in Katherine, to supplement his pension. Both Willie Gudabi and Ginger Riley Munduwalawala made the conscious decision to become artists in their later years, when they had retired from stock work. They were instrumental in bringing about that opportunity in 1987.

'Bursting with life'

Willie Gudabi and Moima Willies' canvases form a complex mosaic of interweaving time zones and places, with a huge cast of characters. A whole multi-layered microcosm is represented where numerous stories, creatures and places intersect. Their style differs clearly from Djambu Barra Barra and Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, whose works tend towards the monumental, either in representations of country or ancestral figures. Gudabi's is a micro view looking down onto the ground, concentrating on a plethora of creatures that inhabit specific tracts of country and the ceremony that they enact. Everything is represented from the smallest to the most significant: the ants, the birds, the butterflies, the mosquitoes, the scorpions, the crustaceans, the wallaby, the goanna, a host of medicinal plants, spirit figures and the mysterious figure of Gudang. None of them are random or decorative and all have a role to play in his complex scenarios,



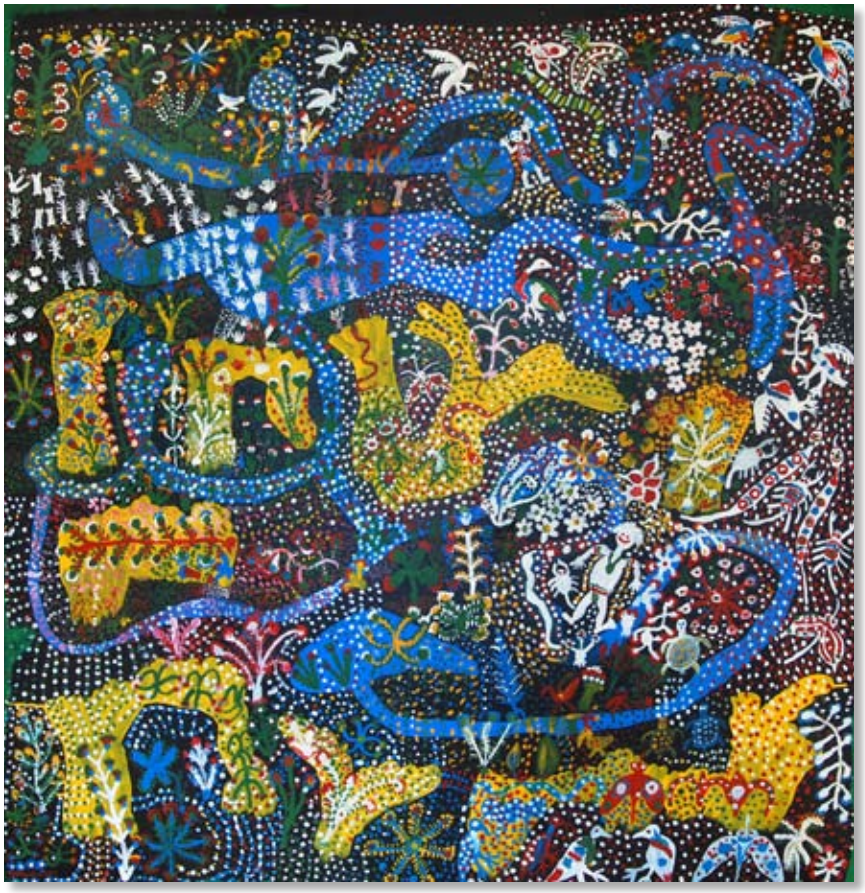
Willie Gudabi
Untitled 1990, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 119.5 x 90 cm
Helen Read Collection

which depict preparations and enactments of ceremony. It has been noted by anthropologists (Layton 1991, Avery 2004) that totemic objects or animals are often insignificant, small creatures, such as ants or butterflies. These creatures are represented en mass, while major dreaming figures are not explicitly depicted. Rather their presence is hinted at. The devil devil is only represented by footprints and the mermaids are suggested by numbers of mosquitoes.

While Willie Gudabi and Moima Willies' repertoire of creatures is huge and their canvases also usually depict more than one event or story. They are more akin to plays with various acts and sometimes require complex structural devices to organise the narrative content. Their paintings represent a kind of meeting place, a call to ceremony and action. They are also battlegrounds where ancestral figures, big and small, fight and plot to kill one another, steal ritual food and country. Bull ants are guardians of ritual territories, and can be seen massed at the edges of meandering paths, which underlie the detail and often provide the substructure of the paintings. In these dense narratives the artists sometimes depict whole song cycles and epic battles in multi-panelled, intricately layered vignettes, although this would not be obvious to the casual viewer.

At first inspection, Willie Gudabi and Mioma Willies' body of work appears celebratory and festive. There is a sense of fecundity and of sexual reproduction as well as of country full to bursting with life. There are stylistic parallels with the work of Gertie Huddleston, who derived her style from watching Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie paint. In both bodies of work canvases are filled with detailed renderings of flowering plants and animals cohabiting in country, as well as collections of implements, but in terms of content they are worlds apart. Willie Gudabi and Mioma Willies' paintings are

Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie
Gabal Ritual 1990, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 156 x 106 cm
Artbank Collection



Willie Gudabi
My Grandfather's whole story 1992, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 145 x 139 cm
Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

first and foremost about ceremony including public initiation and circumcision ceremonies and others, such as the Balgyin Ceremony. Gudabi also painted certain important dreamings, including the moon, the whirlywind and rainbow serpents.

In these ceremonies birds, insects and amphibians as well as the Moon and the Butcherbird are the main protagonists. Willie Gudabi and Moima Willies' work also depicts love stories between men and women. The women's participation in ceremony was an important aspect. The earlier paintings are about dancing and singing and moving through country; about teaching and laying claim to land. They are active and

Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie
Old Gudang c. 1996, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 188 x 167 cm
Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga

alive surfaces, with a plethora of intimate detail. This sense of activity is expressed also by the use of strong, dynamic colour combinations. As with Djambu Barra Barra and Amy Jirwulurr Johnson, Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie use all the colours available to them, creating different palettes and combinations of colours for different effects. They often use strong contrasts of complementary colours to create visual dynamism, as well as distinct palettes to suggest different times of the year, with lush green colours for the wet season and sombre ochre colours to suggest the dry.

Gudang

The figure of Gudang is central to an understanding of Willie Gudabi's art. The most common themes painted by Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie are those to do with preparations and enactment of circumcision rites. These initiation paintings often feature Gudang as he taught Willie about such rites and is credited as the originator of his spiritual instruction. According to Willie Gudabi, Gudang was his 'grandfather', who taught him ceremony and Alawa lore. He was custodian and painter of rock sites and the Balgyin ceremony from which Gudabi drew inspiration. In this way Gudang was an instructor but also became a character and signifier of spirituality and ancestral knowledge in Gudabi's work, linking him to place and his people's recent history. Gudabi talked about him in an abstract and metaphysical way at times and it is not surprising that there have been inconsistencies about who and 'what' he is. In the scant writings about Gudabi's work, this character has been represented variously as a mythological or ancestral being, the 'last wild Alawa man living off the land' and a figure, who came to Gudabi in his dreams. He has also been described as a figure who still inhabits caves in the area but also who was responsible for setting down the original songs and dances of regional ceremonies 'in the days not long after the country was created'. That is, Gudang has been presented as both inhabiting the present and the ancestral past at the same time. Gudabi said of Gudang:

> One old man used to walk from World War 1 to World War 2. 'Look son, don't forget this one, (he said)...Singing first, circumcise, men dancing'. Today I got shirt, boots - not that old man. He didn't like clothes, he didn't like swags. He used to live in the caves. That's what he taught me to do - this one- before he died. He took me back to a place called Nutwood Downs... 'You come visit me and see what I done in the caves'. When you go across the river, you see in the caves all what he done, his paintings, all about Alawa. You go right up to Limmen Bight, Hodgson Downs, his paintings. He left behind for his great-grandchildren,

that old man....(Isaacs 1999:220).

It appears that Gudang was in actuality related to Willie Gudabi, most probably his father's brother. He was an important ceremonial man and rock painter who lived his later years outside the domain of either Indigenous or white society, inhabiting the rough bush country and caves of his Alawa homelands. It has been suggested that Gudabi's cultivation of the mythic characteristics of Gudang was a deliberate reinforcement of his relationship to ancestral power.

Stylistically there are parallels between Alawa rock art and the composition of the Willie Gudabi's paintings. Many have the look of palimpsests, that is, not only paintings within paintings but also a layering of one area over another as in the manner of cave paintings. There is also extensive use of dotted outlines around figures and a general impression of fields overlapping and a multitude of things happening. Gudabi creates a sense of depth in many works through the contrast of light and dark, almost conjuring the tricks of light as one glimpses images on cave walls.

Looking at a series of ceremony paintings from 1990-1995 it is clear that his ideas progressed from depicting single or organically demarcated large sections of the canvas through to the more ordered and symmetrical vignettes of the later works, some of which have as many as twenty more or less equally sized, separate sections. However the seeds of his desire to compartmentalise his canvases can be seen in his earliest works. In some canvases the more organic sections refer to specific tracts of country or ceremonial paths. They seem to be like maps leading the ceremonial participants on their journeys of transformation. In the later works with multiple sections it seems more likely that the

Wilie Gudabi
Untitled 1993, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 127 x 108
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

divisions refer to the separate components of ceremony, the different songs and narrative journeys, rather like an order of service. They may be recurring themes in song cycles and there is a strong sense of repetition of forms and figures in these sectioned works. Layton points to the issue of repetition and re-iteration of song, dance and image in circumcision ceremonies. 'The...totality of ideas and symbols pertaining to this ceremony can only be communicated through repetition', adding that 'similitudes, metaphors and identifications drawn from the animal world fill the teachings that are given during circumcision rites and initiation ceremonies' (Layton 1991:9).

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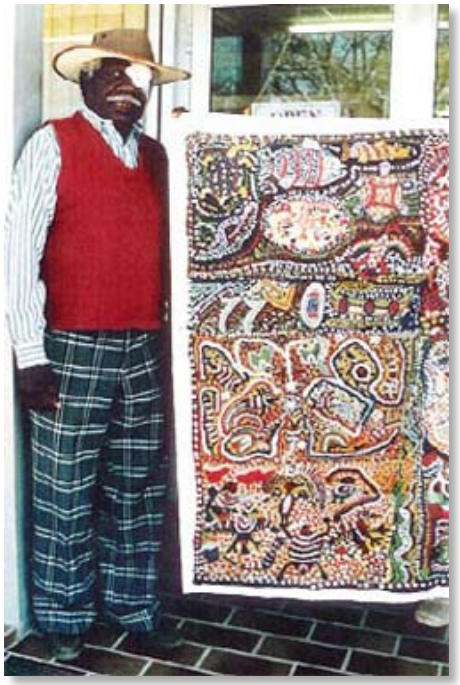
Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie created their own forms of pictorial syntax. Their work represents a particular vision and sense of personal innovation and invention. It is clear that Willie Gudabi and Moima Willies' paintings were generated out of the specific beliefs and life experiences that motivated them: in Willie Gudabi's case, his personal story, his impending death and his desire to inscribe culture, retrieve culture and teach culture. His driving force and personal motivation in later years, was the transmission of those beliefs to the younger generation of Alawa speakers. Stephen Muecke describes his understanding of this in a way that seems pertinent to Willie Gudabi's intentions:

> ...seeing country so full of traces of life that nature is second nature and history is transformational potential... as having a feeling of the immanence of life in and through worlds that fold in and through each other and across time, life being movement and growth...(Muecke 2004:4)

Willie Gudabi developed a unique way of depicting his country, which gives an insight to an Indigenous ontology and ideas about what country can be. This active, dynamic and multivalent attitude stresses the contemporaneous connectivity of ceremony, country and personal history.

1 Biographical information from an Oral History recorded for the NT Archives in 1986 (NTRS 219 7P 513.1986)

2 Interview with author, Katherine, 15/07/06



Willie Gudabi, Darwin, 1993
Photo: Anne Phelan

'Different from other mob'

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak and the owl at night 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 57 x 123 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

A pictorial style and adventurous use of colour set Ginger Riley Munduwalawala apart from other Indigenous artists. Riley's paintings of colour and light challenge our preconceptions of Aboriginal art, capturing popular imagination on the one hand yet not sitting easily with mainstream contemporary art on the other. His work does not belong with abstract expressionism, minimalism, geometric abstraction, conceptual art or op art. His work also comes from out of left field in relation to Aboriginal art, not according with the quiescent ochre tones and sacred rarrk of Arnhem Land, the planar

maps of the Western Desert or the tough works of politically aware, city-based Indigenous artists. As Ginger explained, his paintings even 'look different from other mob'[1], a reference to other artists from the Ngundungunya Association, Ngukurr.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's work was distinguished by an audacious and intuitive colour sense. 'The boss of colour',[2] Ginger's singular landscape manner, studded with icons of identity and place, was instantly recognisable. Riley forged his own way of encapsulating and celebrating in vibrant polychrome the grand sweep and minute details of a particular tract of land in Southeast Arnhem Land, over which he was granted native title in 2000 through his role as Djunggkayi [3]. In 1999 Riley revealed that his works follow guditja, a continuous song line, which he might sing in ceremony: 'guditja is a road — a line, you cannot make it up or steal it, you must follow that line. Guditja is about little pictures — you think this series of pictures in your mind.'[4] The guditja that Riley painted comes from the old people, the dreaming — it is law.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala came from coastal saltwater country of the Mara people, having been born in about 1937 on the point of a hill, near where the powerful snake ancestor, Garimala is eternally present. The hill, in country called Yuluru, was about eight kilometres from Riley's home station, Maria Lagoon (Wamungu), by the Limmen Bight River. Riley's strong sense of identity and place, of knowing where he belonged and where he came from — coastal salt water, not inland fresh water — provided an anchor or still point of certainty to which he always returned in his mind. Although Ginger Riley led an adventurous and independent life — open to change, not fixed in one place — once he took up the brush he did not deviate from his deep rootedness in his 'mother country', the area around the Four Archers, a geographical formation about 45 kilometres inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Limmen Bight River. Thus he said about his painting: 'my mother country is in my mind'. Riley knew this country and could sing and name it in ritual contexts, but not for outsiders.

A 'saltwater man', Riley grew up in the bush and intermittently went to school at the Roper River Mission, later the Ngukurr Aboriginal community. Seeking employment and the chance to travel, Riley worked as a stockman and labourer on Nutwood Downs Station and elsewhere in the Northern Territory from the 1950s. As a young man, Ginger Riley encountered the great Aranda watercolourist Albert Namatjira and resolved to be an artist. As he recalled, 'I saw Namatjira painting his colour country', admired the 'nice paint' and 'saw my colour country'. The meeting with Namatjira forged Riley's idea that

Ginger Riley Mundawalawala, Darwin, 2000
Photo: Beverly Knight

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

the colours of the land as seen in his imagination could be captured in art. But it would be over three decades before he was given access to paints other than natural ochres. When work declined in the late 1970s, Riley moved back to the Gulf country and to Ngukurr. Here, around 1986 or 1987, he began to paint, and quickly established the iconic form of landscape painting which earned him important recognition both locally and overseas.

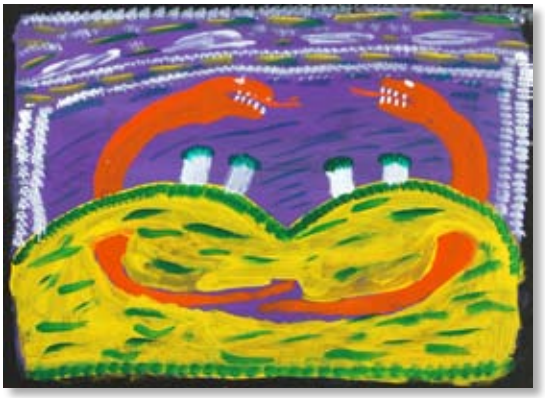
In 1992, Ginger Riley won the Alice Prize and produced a series of works for the new Australian Embassy in Beijing. The following year he won the First National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Commission Art Award and began to sign his paintings, after being inspired by his visit to London (for the Aratjara: Art of the First Australians exhibition) where he saw signed works of Picasso and other great artists. In 1994 Riley's work was included in Tyerrabarrbowaryaou II, an exhibition prepared for the Havana Biennale, Cuba. In 1996, in recognition of his outstanding achievements as an artist, Riley was awarded the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council Fellowship for 1997–98 and in 1997 Ginger Riley became the first Aboriginal artist to be awarded a major retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.

The iconography of Ginger Riley's art remained constant, being focused on a sequence of events which took place in his mother's country for which he was Djunggkayi but each painting was rendered different by the hand of the artist. It is this unique iconography and the infinite variations of colour, composition, design, and painterly mark making in each particular work that distinguish Ginger Riley's oeuvre and set it apart from other artists of the Roper River region.

The topography of Ginger Riley's mother country encompasses coastal salt water flowing into the mouth of the Limmen Bight River, which runs through mudflats, broadening and narrowing in a winding course through Mara country until it reaches Gurrialadagauwulu, the ravine in the middle of the Four Archers. The Limmen Bight River, like a clear, blue, undulating ribbon from the air, is a dramatic visual accent in much of Riley's work, most notably the majestic *Limmen Bight River – My Mother's Country* 1993. Central to Riley's art and multi-layered creation story are the Four Archers, which he describes as 'the centre of the earth, where all things start and finish'. From the air, the Four Archers, perfectly formed pyramidal hills, rise dramatically out of the surrounding plain. In accord with its profound significance in the scheme of things, the rock formation commands attention for its visual splendour and power and may be shown in close-up, cut off from surrounding country, like a detail of a map, or viewed from long-range perspectives in the one composition, so that it appears both in foreground close-up and in the distance.

The Four Archers were formed by a powerful supernatural

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne



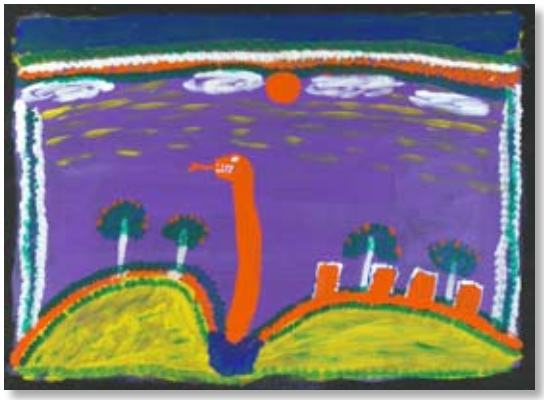
Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

being, Bandian, a creator-snake with several names, whose potent writhing and circling created the rocky hills, as well as a ceremonial rock, Ngamiyukandji, that is not painted or discussed. The significance of this rock is revealed in a less frequently represented, but closely related, narrative of a kangaroo, Riley's totem, who travelled to a billabong near Ngalama in search of a woman. Failing to find one, he was advised by the creator–snake, who was resting in a nearby waterhole, to look for a young girl instead. The kangaroo, the first being, needed a mate to begin populating the earth. This meeting took place by the rock Ngamiyukandji, near its confluence with the Cox River.

Bandian, a King Brown snake of the species *Pseudechis australis*, takes on various manifestations in Riley's creation story and art, but remains the same-creator snake. Most commonly, the snake appears in a double form known as Garimala. Although often depicted as two snakes, Garimala is only one entity. When the spirit being is shown as more than one, it means the snake is everywhere. Often the Garimala icons appear arched to face each other above the Four Archers or in heraldic symmetry on either side of a shark's liver tree.

The creator–snake travelled from far away in the guise of Garimala, a deadly taipan of the species *Oxyuranus scutellatus*, and lives in the waterhole or billabong that he created near the Four Archers. The travelling Garimala, shown as horizontal meanders moving through the land below the Four Archers, often forms a reticent understatement in a composition. Garimala travelled from the Four Archers to the rock Ngamiyukandji in the Limmen Bight River, disappeared under the water, and metamorphosed into the Rainbow Serpent, Wawalu. Wawalu, a great metaphysical power associated with the regeneration of the natural world during the wet season, is present when a rainbow appears in the sky.

In yet another dramatic transformation, the powerful creator-snake, now singular, becomes an angry, fire-breathing serpent–dragon called Bulukbun. Garimala, in this guise, is invariably angry: signs of his anger are the expanding scaly



Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

spines on his body and his fiery breath. Riley said that the more aggressive he becomes, the more he raises the spines on his back. Garimala's dangerous power and anger is also shown by the horn on his head, his forked tongue, and the streams of bubbles he sends as a warning sign when underwater. All these signs of his anger indicate that it is unwise to go near him.

Bulukbun is often depicted rising out of a cluster of small pyramid-shaped stones, shown located in the sea around Beatrice Island near the mouth of the Limmen Bight River. During initiation ceremonies held on the island, some young initiates misbehaved and their activities were betrayed when Bulukhun smelt their blood. Bulukbun, who had been hiding among rocks in the sea, made it rain, forcing the boys to take shelter in a cave. He then rose up, reached over the island, put his head into the cave and killed them with his fiery breath. Their bones are still in this cave. Some of the boys escaped by running through underground caverns and were dealt with later.

Another occasion on which Garimala vented his anger concerns a group of youths who killed some flying foxes hanging upside down along the ravine created by Garimala between the Four Archers. Garimala witnessed the youths killing the flying foxes and followed them as they ran through caverns under the mountain. He caught and killed some of them with his fiery breath, catching and killing others in caves shown on top of the mountain. Garimala was angry because, after their initiation, the boys did not keep themselves hidden, allowing the wrong people to see them and smell their blood.

Many of Ginger Riley's paintings represent the shark's liver tree, either alone or depicted more than once. This tree, which the artist portrays dead or living, is not a natural tree but a ceremonial totemic construction. Called the shark's liver tree because the shark gave his liver from which it was created, it is part of Riley's mother's creation story. Occasionally, eggs laid by Bandian are shown at its base. The tree is usually distinguished from other trees by the presence of two snakes shown heraldically guarding it.

The artist often depicts two heraldic message sticks (painted or engraved boards or objects), one announcing a circumcision initiation ceremony, the other inviting others to 'come down to my country'. As in the case of the shark's liver tree, the message stick is usually shown guarded by two snakes, occasionally by humans. The inclusion of 'number seven' hooked boomerangs and spears indicates the importance of the ceremony for which such objects are specially made.

Perhaps the most striking image in Ginger Riley's work is Ngak Ngak, the white-breasted sea eagle, shown singly or repeated, but almost invariably depicted in profile. He plays the role of a sentinel or guardian, protecting the country, quietly looking around as in *Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight* 1994, with

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 177 x 242 cm
Courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley, Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne and the Art Gallery of South Australia

its dramatic depiction of central protagonists Ngak Ngak and Garimala, the Four Archers and the red sun inside a cloud, which expresses the relationship between the artist (the sun) and his mother (the cloud). (The artist was entitled to paint sun and cloud but not moon, wind or stars.) Ngak Ngak created an island near the mouth of the Limmen Bight River when he flew over it. This island, associated with Bulukbun's punishment of initiated boys, is Beatrice Island or Yarramandji which means shark, Riley's mother's totem.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's career reads as a clear reflection of his statement: 'I do not look backward, I look forward.' He refused to paint on demand or produce replicas of what had gone before. For Ginger Riley, art issued directly from what he saw in his mind, not previous canvases from another point in time. As he explained, 'I see my country when I wake up, think what I am going to do — sometimes one colour, sometimes three'. This catches the spontaneity of his working method on which the vitality of each painting hinged. He chased after new paint, textures, perspectives rather than regurgitating formulas.

Ginger Riley will be remembered for his joyous paintings of light and colour, which made Limmen Bight country sing in the mind of the viewer. He declared, 'I have to see it: it must be bright'. An image-maker with a rare sense of space and a concern for the whole composition, rather than a mark-maker of abstract sensibility, Riley enjoyed working with paint, mixing, layering and experimenting with colours and different visual effects and therefore building up country. Since Riley started to work with acrylic on canvas in 1987, entering the Aboriginal art world like a maverick, his painting manner continually developed, becoming increasingly delicate and sophisticated over time as borne out by the body of work selected for exhibition in Australia at Arco 2002. Riley was proud to call himself an artist. As he avowed: 'I'm just a painter — I can do what I like — I like to paint.' His inspirational landscape of the mind unfolds before the viewer in a kaleidoscope of icons and colours.

Judith Ryan

1 Ginger Riley, interview with author, Ngukurr 1996: unless otherwise stated all other quotes are from this interview, and see Judith Ryan, Ginger Riley, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1997.

2 Australian artist and friend of Ginger Riley, David Larwill aptly stated: 'Ginger is the boss of colour'.

3 In July 2000 the Federal Court of Australia decided that substantial native title rights exist on the old St Vidgeon's Station and on lands adjoining the Roper, Cox and Limmen Bight Rivers near the Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory.

4 Ginger Riley, interview with Beverly Knight, 1999: Beverly's generous assistance with my research into Ginger Riley's life and artistic practice is gratefully acknowledged.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak the Hunter 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 96 x 96 cm
Collection of the Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.
Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne


GINGER RILEY

God's Country

Gertie Huddleston

Gertie Huddleston
Fresh water springs 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
156 x 122 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Gertie Huddleston started painting in 1993, six years after the first painting workshops in Ngukurr and her work is different in many ways from the other artists who worked there. She is the only artist to have been born in the vicinity of present day Ngukurr, at the site of the original Roper River Mission. In this respect she is also the only artist whose work can be seen to be 'of' that place and reflective of its history and culture. Whilst having a Mara and Wandarang heritage, Gertie inhabits an intercultural space and aspects of her biography, personal experience and religious beliefs are embedded in the fabric of her paintings, both in terms of content and style. Gertie Huddleston is a practising Christian, who also maintains traditional beliefs and knowledge systems. Her paintings represent an Aboriginal world view as well as a Christian one in which she depicts 'country' consciously and joyously as a 'Garden of Eden' and, as such, an abundant source of bush tucker and medicine. Gertie Huddleston's paintings reflect a wholly Indigenous experience of 'country' despite their Christian allusions and their superficial resemblance to Western landscape paintings. Gertie's story of walking between two worlds is reflected in her paintings.

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Gertie Huddleston's biography is crucial to an understanding of her paintings as many aspects of her life and experience are reflected in her painted world. In fact it could be said that Gertie, as well as painting her country and her beliefs, paints her own life story, inscribing and memorialising her history. Gertie's father, Old Joshua, was a Wandarang man and Mara speaker, whose country was centred around Boomerang Lagoon (Malanyboyboy), about 50 kilometres north of Ngukurr, with associations to Edward Island and Wagibah[1]. Gertie's paternal grandmother, a Mara speaker was from Limmen Bight. Gertie's mother, Elizabeth was Ngandi and Yugal and her country is around Numbulwar. Gertie is therefore Wandarang and Mara through her father and her paternal grandmother. Her skin group is Guyal and she can paint her mother's Wandarang country. Gertie's family's first contact with the Mission began when her grandfather and some other men walked south from Boomerang Lagoon to the Mission for tobacco and other supplies in the early days. Her father finally moved to live at the Mission full-time where he met Gertie's mother. Gertie related: 'Mum and dad got married at the Old Mission. Christian marriage. Mum worked on the sewing machines sewing dresses and nagas for the boys'. Gertie was born around 1930 and Elizabeth gave birth to four more daughters, collectively called the Joshua sisters (all since married): Betty Roberts, Angelina George, Eva Rogers and Dinah Garadji. All the Joshua sisters are artists.

Gertie grew up at the Old Roper River Mission and, like all Aborigines there, she and her sisters were subject to the gruelling disciplines of Mission life. They attended school in the morning and the evening after working at various tasks on the Mission during the day. Children of school age worked in the gardens and tended the animals. Gertie said she learnt a lot in school:

> ...spelling and sums and needlework and drawing. The teachers were strict and hit us on the knuckles with a ruler. But I love the missionaries. They taught us to sing. I'm very pleased with what they did for us.

The missionaries over time established large gardens to support themselves with fresh fruit and vegetables. Gertie remembered:

> They taught us to grow veggies. Biggest garden full of veggies: pumpkin, potato. Also fruit: banana, pawpaw

Gertie Huddleston
Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads 1997
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 134 x 143 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection. Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund

> trees. I worked in the garden with a shovel. We had lots of fresh veggies and fruit. People worked very hard.

Depictions of the neat and bountiful mission gardens planted in rows and drawn from memory are a recurrent theme in many of Gertie's paintings. In fact, the ordered and tiered structure of the gardens seems to have spread further in her work to represent sections of bush as well. Sometimes whole areas of country appear to be arranged as if planted in rows and bordered by neat boundaries. Gardens have been seen as a form of appropriation of nature, which have very strong associations with the concept of 'civilisation' in the Judeo-Christian ethos. Bain Attwood expanded on this idea in relations to Christian missions: 'Missionaries sought to change the Aborigines' notions of space and time. Fundamental to their reconstruction of Aborigines was a plan to produce a carefully defined and ordered social space... a didactic landscape, an instrument to transmit Christianity and civilisation' (cited in Langton 2004:27). These seemingly contradictory notions, of the wild bush and the civilised garden, are brought together in Gertie Huddleston's paintings. Like many aspects of her work they represent a synthesis of oppositional ideas and experiences, which reflect her complex intercultural subjectivity. For Gertie, they are not contradictory because both the bush and the gardens are 'god-made', both aspects of her experience of 'country' providing natural bounty and inspiration.

Women's work, women's business

Gertie Huddleston received a good education and enjoyed many aspects of school, particularly drawing and embroidery. She used sewing machines but she excelled at 'fancywork'. She said she wasn't good enough for crochet but was 'boss for embroidery'. The missionaries used to sell her fancywork down south in the mission shop in Sydney. Those who have written about Gertie Huddleston's work (West 1998, Croft 2000), have made the connection between her needlework and the look of her paintings. Some of the paintings are almost a translation of sewing, stitching and quilting. As Brenda Croft noted, 'She appears to almost embroider the canvas with paint' (Croft 2000:39). There seems to be a rendition in many of Gertie's paintings of classical forms of women's work. Echoes of patchwork, tapestry, quilting and embroidery are easy to see in her compositions, enhanced by the intricate detail and lace-like quality of her brushwork.

Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads, 1997 is a good example of a painting where the stitch like quality of the detailing is clearly evident. There are numerous sections with different textures, but it is the use of delicate dotting and the layered composition that gives the painting its 'embroidered' quality. Again there

Gertie Huddleston
Untitled 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas (framed), 33 x 57 cm
Private collection, Canberra

is a lovely sense of design throughout the painting where circular forms repeat throughout and echo other sections. Imaginary, wild-headed plants sit next to cycads and other trees merging with vegetable gardens as in other paintings of this period. Interestingly there are two small goannas and two painted boomerangs in the bottom right corner, almost lost amongst the other details.

Gertie Huddleston also has a particular love of painting flowers. Many were grown in the Mission gardens for church services and for funerals. She paints local wildflowers, bush fruits, cut flowers and the flowers that she embroidered using Semco transfer patterns, such as waratahs and roses. All of these, and others from her imagination can appear at times in the same painting.

Walking through country

Despite her Mission background Gertie Huddleston did not only have a 'white fella' education. She 'footwalked' extensively through the bush with her family when she was young and also during hard times when rations ran low at the Mission. She learnt about bush tucker and bush medicine during this time:

> Mum and grandmother taught us. Bogie [swim] for waterlily, mussel. Biggest mob went out there to collect food in the winter-time. Plenty though - blackberry, wild honey, green plum, black plum, waterlily root, fresh water mussel. Bush medicine - green apple. Leaves, get 'im and boil 'im up for a cough. But not the seeds, they're bitter.

Although Gertie never made traditional objects, her mother made pandanus baskets and mats. These and other traditional objects such as boomerangs and coolamons appear in many of Gertie's paintings. In 1994-5 Gertie painted a number of canvases that focused on decorated tools and other implements such as mats and coolamons, with no reference to landscape at all. Insects and other small animals proliferate

Gertie Huddleston
Untitled 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 100 x 90 cm
Karen Brown Collection

in these works reflecting the influence of Willie Gudabi, her mentor. In some of these paintings the birds, insects and implements are the main protagonists. *Untitled*, 1995 is one such painting in which traditional objects are arranged almost symmetrically on the canvas. Paintings such as this indicate that Gertie was interested in depicting Aboriginal culture and cultural objects that have been important to her, especially as reminders of her mother and her early life. Some paintings, while depicting the observed reality of the bush after fire, also include birds and animals as well as implements that indicate human intervention and interaction with the landscape. In some paintings Gertie also includes other acutely observed seasonal markers in paintings. Flowers in particular herald the different seasons and point to what bush tucker is around. She explained:

> We've got one tree we see when we go fishing. We call it *jirrilma*. Well it's got white flowers and that long leaf. We watch it for sharks, fresh water sharks. When it falls down and makes white on the ground - oh look beautiful - white on the floor - we know then shark fat one (West 1988:7).

The combination of the imaginary, together with a long-held, intimate knowledge of place, creates a numinous quality in the work, which downplays any sense of the decorative or the merely pretty.

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Gertie Huddleston's father was in the army during the Second World War, as was her then fiancé, Bill Huddleston, a Ngandi man. She was married soon after the end of the war and she, like her parents, had a church wedding at the Mission. Gertie and her husband moved to Roper Valley cattle station, about 60 kilometres west of Ngukurr, where he worked as a stockman and she as a cook for almost a decade. Many of Gertie's paintings refer to country she remembered from Roper Valley during this time. She recalled, 'I had to cook for 12 men, me and another girl. The boys would go out to collect wood for the fire before they went out chasing cattle and building yards. We got no money in those days, just tucker and clothes'. Like many other artists at Roper River, she worked hard for a living all her life and retained her Christianity alongside her traditional knowledge of her own country. The family moved back to Ngukurr in the late 1960s.

Gertie left Ngukurr in 1982 because her daughter, Miriam, had had an accident, which left her unconscious in Darwin hospital for seven weeks. After this incident Gertie ended up living in Darwin for about seven years, during which time her husband abandoned her, leaving her to raise the children alone. It was a hard time for her but it provided other opportunities and freedoms. She travelled widely to visit family members in other parts of the Territory and interstate. Images of her travels to places such as Oenpelli, the Flinders Ranges and even the deserts of Central Australia appear in certain paintings. *Different Landscapes around Ngukurr*, 1996 is a large multi-panel painting, which despite its title, represents remembered vignettes of landscapes viewed from bus windows, aeroplane seats and also from country well-known to Gertie around Ngukurr. Gertie spoke at length to Margie West when this painting was acquired for the MAGNT Collection from the 14th NATSIAA in 1997.

In the bottom panel second from the left is the old vegetable garden she used to tend at Roper River Mission. The next panel to the right shows the saltwater and the rocky escarpments of the Oenpelli region that Gertie has flown over many times. As she said:

Gertie Huddleston
Different Landscapes around Ngukurr 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 199 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection. Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund

> Those rocks, him Oenpelli area. I been to Oenpelli plenty times. I like desert country too you know I've been travelling by bus. I see red sand (third top right panel) and Lake Eyre. I come past through there by train - too big, too wide, couldn't see other side. You look at that mob, green grass, like spinifex with flowers in between and trees and hills. You can see. Lovely. But those spinifex! Western Australia is big, biiiig! (West 1998:np).

This painting contains a host of personal sources; from images of trips taken around Australia and local landscapes observed through the seasons, from family history and from the ancestral past; from memory and straight from the imagination. The reflection of this peripatetic aspect of Gertie's life is unusual in art from the Roper region where most artists only represent a very restricted range of country, usually their mother's country. Gertie does not specifically paint her mother's country like most of the other artists in Ngukurr. She does not paint specific tracts of land. Instead she paints a melange of different country, with which she had connections. Gertie sums up her desire to paint her whole life: 'Yeah, because I've seen a lot, everywhere I went. It's good to put something that you saw eh, in your painting'. In the late 1980s Gertie finally came back to Ngukurr from Darwin,

Gertie Huddleston
Garden of Eden II 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 132 x 120 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection. Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund. Winner Open Painting Award, 16th NATSIAA

where she settled.

Christianity

Gertie Huddleston, unlike some other Aboriginal people at Roper River Mission, did not resent the Mission time and looks back on the early days and the missionaries with affection and nostalgia. Her paintings likewise depict a positive and endearing picture of missionary life and childhood experience. Gertie has said that her depictions of country reference and perhaps even represent the Christian Garden of Eden. It is in that general sense of abundance and plenty with a sense of underlying order that Gertie's landscapes represent a vision of Eden. However, in some paintings, there are more specific references. *Garden of Eden II* was painted in 1999. Gertie explained what it was about:

> Myall Lookout. There are caves in this area and hills where they used to hide when the horse mob came long time ago, when I was a girl. We gather lily roots from the rivers and I use them for medicine on cuts. There are lots of different trees and bushes around this area. Ghost gums, cycads, palms and many others. Lots of different plants and a lotta bush tucker. Winter-time, after rain. I am a Christian and this painting reminds me of the Garden of Eden- like in the Bible (West 1988 n.p.).

The painting is a dense and layered rendition of country south of the Roper River. There is the usual profusion of detailed depictions of flora and fauna, the stitch-like textures and stylised plant forms and high key colour. Gertie makes historical reference to pre or early Mission times, which she could not have witnessed but which are part of the oral history of the area that refers to massacres that took place in the region. This is not obvious in the painting but only revealed in the story. The Christian iconography is also not overt in this painting, but rather it is in the depiction of the country as abundant and overflowing with beauty and bounty, which for Gertie recalls the Garden of Eden. For Gertie it is country rich with historical and religious connotations.

Painting the Country, 1998 is a monumental work painted in discrete vignettes. The sections do not form a linear narrative as such, but a way of structuring life experiences and beliefs. Each section is complete and self-contained, delineated by a dotted border. The whole piece is like an embroidered quilt. Brenda Croft says of this painting:

Gertie Huddleston
Painting the Country 1998
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
120 x 90 cm
Karen Brown Collection

> Vignettes draw the viewer inward, fine feathered brush strokes creating borders around sweet stories, as in a children's book...Vibrant oranges, pinks, blues, yellows and whites ripple across the surface of her canvases, filigree-like - wispy breaths of the lightest lace (Croft 2000:38).

The vignettes portray the Mission gardens and the collections of artefacts and objects her mother used to make. There are sections depicting caves, a canoe on the Yellow Waters billabong, small groups of people and different seasons and cycles of plants and animals that are linked to them. There are sections of bush, specific swamps and lagoons and the insects and birds that live there in profusion. And amidst all the beauty of the country there is also the image of an open tomb. Gertie explained: 'Grave empty. Jesus gone. It's when the women came and saw the tomb was empty and He had risen. Angels told him, 'He is with Him' [2]. The reference to the cross is totally integrated into the landscape and into the mind of the artist. This painting is a multi-layered palimpsest that presents Gertie's specific ontology. It is also like a mnemonic, a device to remember bits of past life and encode them in the plastic world, like a tapestry, richly laden with biographical and philosophical information.

In this way, Gertie's early paintings could be seen to be evangelical in nature. Her desire to spread the word of God

Angelina George, Gertie Huddleston and Betty Roberts, Darwin, 2008
Photo: Karen Brown

was a factor in her taking up painting and one of her personal motivations, but at the heart of Gertie's painting is 'country' as it is for most Indigenous artists. The notion of 'country' is not merely constituted around the idea of ritual and ceremony; of representing ancestral beings and specific tracts of land. The idea of 'country' can be defined in broader terms: an 'aliveness of place', rich with Indigenous meaning and experience. Her paintings express connection and are spiritual entities, albeit a complex hybrid spirituality, with references to both her belief systems. They offer a glimpse into a world of signs, of country animated with inherent vitality and layers of connection. These works are Gertie's conception of 'country', the one she is allowed to paint.

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Gertie Huddleston did not start painting until 1993. She used to go down to Willie Gudabi and Moima Willies' house and watch them paint. Gertie insists that Willie did not actually teach her to paint. Rather she watched avidly. She got some canvases and paints from the shop and painted at home. It was immediately obvious to the shop owners that she had natural talent and they encouraged her. She started selling works through the shop and participated in a Ngukurr exhibition at Framed Gallery, Darwin in 1993, with two small works.

Gertie was interested in getting her work represented. She invited Karen Brown to Ngukurr to see her paintings and those of her sisters. Brown could see that Gertie had talent and asked her and her sisters to paint for her through Karen Brown Gallery in Parap. The Joshua sisters, including Gertie were represented by Karen Brown from 1994 till 2001, during which time Gertie had her first solo exhibition Darwin in 1995 and a curated solo show with Gabrielle Pizzi in 1996. Brown also organised two Joshua sisters' shows at Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London in 1995 and 1998. In 1997 Gertie's work was included in *Ngundungunya: Art For Everyone* at the National Gallery of Victoria and her work was collected by a number of major institutions. Gertie really came to prominence in Australia after *Different Landscapes around Ngukurr* was selected for the 14th NATSIAA in 1997. Following this *Garden of Eden II* won the General Painting Prize at the 16th NATSIAA in 1999. Gertie participated in a number of other exhibitions of which the *2000 Adelaide Biennale: Beyond the Pale* at the Art Gallery of South Australia was the most important to her.

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Gertie Huddleston's body of work represents a challenge to outdated notions of Aboriginality and authenticity in Aboriginal art, which rely on narrow definitions of tradition and 'culture'. Gertie represents her life and identity through painting as a form of 'self-production', which constitutes the complexity of Aboriginal life today. Gertie's aesthetic and subject matter are purely of her making. Her oeuvre challenges the accepted wisdom that Aboriginal painting in communities is about ritual and communal forms of culture rather than about individual identity. Gertie grew up and lived in the mediated world of the Mission for most of her life and her Christianity is conjoined with her traditional beliefs. Her two belief systems are an integral part of her life experience and her way of making sense of the world.

1 Biographical information from interviews by author with Gertie Huddleston, at Ngukurr in 2005-07

2 Gertie Huddleston Interview with Author Ngukurr 18/08/05

Big Corroboree Stories

Djambu Barra Barra

Djambu Barra Barra was one of the first artists in the Ngukurr community to take up acrylics and his body of work is unique among his peers and in Indigenous art in general. His most remarkable works feature monumental, highly coloured representations of ancestral beings, using idiosyncratic variants of x-ray styles on cross-hatched (*rarrk*) backgrounds. He is one of the only artists to successfully render *rarrk* in bright acrylic paint on canvas and in this way his art clearly expresses tensions between innovation and tradition.

Djambu Barra Barra's heritage was Yolngu, but his art, which represented an unusual amalgam of styles and influences, owes more of a debt to central and western Arnhem Land traditions. He interpreted and modified aesthetic traditions from many parts of the Top End, developing a style that represents a localised form of hybridity. His paintings express contact, not only between the Aboriginal and the European, but also between the different cultural traditions of Arnhem Land. Djambu Barra Barra's unique vision sprang from a deep knowledge of the rules and conventions of Arnhem Land representation, combined with cultural authority and personal creativity. His body of work exemplifies the fine balance in Aboriginal art between personal innovation and the bounds of tradition.

Djambu Barra Barra was also unique among the artists at Ngukurr. Most had extensive contact with white people during their early years and spent their working lives on pastoral stations or at the Mission, in contact with European spheres of influence. Djambu Barra Barra had virtually no contact with Europeans as a young man, nor did he work in the pastoral industry. He was born in Wagilak country, near Nilipidgi on the Walker River west of Blue Mud Bay, about 200 kilometres north east of Ngukurr. Djambu explained:

Djambu Barra Barra, 1990
Photo: Beverly Knight

> I was born in the bush, no doctors, no white fellas. Mother carried me in a paperbark coolamon. No anything, just piccaninny. Goanna dreaming country. Stone Spear country, Nilipidgi. Stayed there and grew up[1].

Nilipidgi, on the border of eastern and central Arnhem Land, is a point where a number of traditions and art styles coalesce. It is a significant place and the site of a famous quarry where stone spears had been mined and traded throughout Arnhem Land for centuries. Precise details of Djambu Barra Barra's biography are sketchy, but he was born around 1945. He left his homeland after his Wagilak father, Ritharrngu mother and the rest of his family passed away. After the loss of his family he embarked on a number of journeys travelling through Arnhem Land, following important ritual tracks, learning about country, singing it and committing stories to memory. He finally settled at Ngukurr some time in the 1960s. Djambu married Amy Jirwulurr Johnson in the mid 1970s at Ngukurr and they both spent time with her family at Costello outstation before finally settling again in Ngukurr in the early 1980s.

Djambu Barra Barra became widely respected for his ceremonial knowledge in Ngukurr and other parts of Arnhem Land. He brought specific and valuable cultural knowledge to the Roper region. He had painted on bodies and bark as a young man and it would appear he collated a vast knowledge about ceremony, songs and art styles from country other than his own. He arrived with a different set of experiences and ritual knowledge to most of the Ngukurr artists whose homelands were south of the river and not from Arnhem Land. He also adopted the semi-moiety skin system of the Roper region. He was *Dhuwa* moiety, *Mambali* subsection, *Wamut* skin group. He was aware of painting styles from different parts of Arnhem Land and he understood the notion of Yolngu aesthetics. At Ngukurr Djambu Barra Barra began working within conventions of Arnhem Land representation, whilst creating his own stylistic innovations and exploring the use of colour.

Painting business

Djambu Barra Barra began his painting career in his mid 40s at the first workshops in 1987. He and Ginger Riley Munduwalawala were so keen to start making art that they began by applying highly saturated screen-printing inks directly onto brightly coloured lengths of lawn curtain material, which according to Gale Duell, 'was the cheapest material and screen printing ink you could find'. They used these materials in the months before John Nelson could order artists' quality canvas and acrylic paints. This option of starting to paint with screen-printing ink on vivid lime green, bright red and yellow curtain material may, in itself, have had an impact and influenced the bright colouration that typifies most art produced in the community. Djambu Barra Barra's first works on lawn curtain material are complex compositions featuring figures surrounded by ritual objects and animals. They demonstrate a clear command of subject matter, colouration and composition and in many ways they bear a striking resemblance to paintings he produced later in his career. His previous experience as a bark painter was apparent as was his interest in using strong complementary colours and a bold, figurative style.

Djambu Barra Barra was prolific in his first year of painting, creating a great number of large and small canvases. One of the first paintings he ever painted is particularly interesting. *Untitled*, 1987 consists of a seemingly abstract, intricately cross-hatched section on the left hand side and a collection of animals and ritual objects, that Djambu Barra Barra called 'his

Djambu Barra Barra
Untitled 1987, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 155 x 122 cm
Private collection, Queensland

Djambu Barra Barra
Untitled 1987, screenprinting ink on lawn, 145 x 74 (irregular)
Private collection, Queensland

family', on the right. The image is framed by two didjeridos or *bambu*. This painting could be seen as a 'palimpsest' in that it appears to be a painting within a painting. It shows a reproduction of a Yolngu painting on the left with a translation of its imagery into the figurative on the right. The painting is an interpretation of classic Yolngu designs that combine abstract and figurative elements and depict a specific place. This work may represent a transitional mode as Djambu Barra Barra negotiated what and how he could paint under the cultural influence of a new place, experimenting with how to represent the sacred in another country and within a different set of rules.

He worked in the figurative tradition, similar in many ways to artists in western Arnhem Land where a large x-ray style figure or figures occupy the central space of the image. Many of his works feature one or a number of ancestral beings on a variety of backgrounds. He rarely depicted 'country' as such, favouring specific stories associated with the movements of ancestors enacting ceremony and creating 'country'.

Major Thematic Subjects

Djambu Barra Barra painted what he called 'big corroboree stories' almost universally associated with ancestral beings

and enactments of ceremony associated with his role as *djunggkayi* for the *Yabaduruwa* ceremony and for mortuary rites and initiation ceremonies. The *Yirritja (Burdal)* plains kangaroo and crocodile and the *(Guyal)* sandridge goanna, and the *(Guyal) Nakaran* or devil devil, as well as mortuary paintings are the constant themes throughout Djambu Barra Barra's oeuvre.

Many of Djambu Barra Barra's works have a graphic quality and feature strong contrasts of colour and tone. It is clear that he was interested in imbuing his paintings with a visual dynamism and spiritual power. Sometimes he used *rarrk* for backgrounds and figures, sometimes dotting or dashing, and at other times, combining all these styles together, as artists do in other parts of Arnhem Land.

Kangaroo & Crocodile Paintings

The plains kangaroo is possibly *the* major dreaming associated with the Ngukurr township. Its track crosses the Roper River at Roper Bar and continues on to Urapunga and Ngukurr where action takes place near the site of the current Church (Graham 1998, Morphy 1981). This important *Yirritja* totem featured in Djambu Barra Barra's earliest work, where the kangaroo is often paired with a dog, which is hunting it. In other renditions of the kangaroo story Djambu Barra Barra painted kangaroos in association with wattle trees or cyprus pine, though the majority of kangaroo paintings feature two kangaroos facing one another. His depictions of kangaroos are quite idiosyncratic. They feature dog-like heads with open mouths, always presented in profile, with outstretched arms and big paddle-like feet. Large feet reference the idea of travelling long distances, as these beings do on their journeys across country. However there is great variation in the rendering of their internal sections.

In *Two Kangaroos and Two Dogs* the kangaroos face each other with the dogs between them, surrounded by tree branches and bones. There is extensive use of fine *rarrk* in the background and on the bodies of the kangaroos and dogs, which have stripes of *rarrk* travelling vertically down their bodies contrasted with the solid red and blue stripes on their arms and feet. The style is precise, bold and dynamic, and Djambu Barra Barra creates a subtle, ambiguous interplay between the figures and the ground. The kangaroo is also an important link with another of Djambu Barra Barra's major subjects, the crocodile or *Baru*, which are sometimes depicted together.

The crocodile is Djambu Barra Barra's mother's dreaming, and another of the thematic totems that he painted throughout his career. Possibly his most famous painting is *Crocodile Story* which was exhibited in 4th NATSIAA in 1987. The painting caused a stir, not only because of its bold colouration and style, but also because a section of the tail and a foot protruded outside the square of the canvas. Djambu Barra Barra related the story for this painting, which is both enigmatic and poetic:

> Two ceremonies are held for the crocodile. One is secret, only for the initiated. There are names and songs for the movement of the crocodile. The crocodile has creative thoughts, like humans. He knows how heavy the floods will be. He builds a very clever nest. His eyes are no longer eyes. They are fire. He has eyes inside his head as well. He can see with his eyes closed. The crocodile has killed a man and is taking him to his nest. He eats the man. The fish and the crayfish also eat the man who was caught while swimming[2].

Crocodile Men's Stories, 1996 is a mortuary painting. The

Djambu Barra Barra
Crocodile Men's Stories 1996
synthetic polymer paint on linen, 191 x 181 cm
Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

crocodile's body is near a boy that it has killed and is incorporating. Around these figures in the water are nail fish and long-necked turtles. The painting has detailed sections of differently coloured *rarrk*, as in many other canvases of this period. As with the kangaroo, Djambu Barra Barra rendered the internal organs and the infill of the crocodile differently in different paintings, whilst the outside form remains consistent. The association of the crocodile and the long necked turtles appears in a number of other mortuary paintings.

Goanna, cyprus pine and hollow log

Djambu Barra Barra painted the goanna throughout his career. The goanna is another of the main *Yabaduruwa* ceremonial characters and an important totemic dreaming track that passes through the Roper region. There are many sacred sites and billabongs in the area associated with its travels. The goanna is specifically the Sandridge goanna, which he referred to as his 'mother'. The goanna is also associated in Djambu Barra Barra's paintings with mortuary rites and is usually depicted in proximity to the cyprus pine or *karnki*. The artist often paints these trees with the goanna because, as one story recounts, 'the goanna was climbing a cyprus pine when small protruding branches of the tree broke its claws'. The cyprus pine is also associated with other aspects of mortuary ceremonies. The long-necked turtle and the hollow log coffin or *lorrkon* are also associated with representations of the goanna in mortuary paintings. Djambu related the following story:

> This painting is about corroboree for that goanna, Sandridge goanna, mother. Sing song and dancing for this one when ceremony is happening. This painting has big meaning. If a person passes away who belongs to this dreaming, old way long time ago, put bones for that person in hollow log coffin. Coffin would be made from this tree, cyprus pine, where goanna lives and feeds. He looks for tucker around the bottom of it.

Hollow Log, 1993 dates from a period when Djambu Barra Barra was creating some of his finest works and brings together many of the elements of mortuary related characters. In this monumental, yet tonally delicate work, Djambu Barra Barra shows his mastery of composition and colour combinations. The composition features the hollow log, bones and goanna to one side of the canvas with numerous nail fish, diving ducks (*garrak garrak*) and small crustaceans arranged on the other side. The two goannas represent the person who has died. In this painting the animals, which would normally be painted on the surface of a coffin in ceremony, are depicted next to it with bones both inside and outside. This painting also features a delicate white dotted background and infill.

Paintings with similar iconography are painted throughout Arnhem Land and can be seen as part of a pan Arnhem Land discourse, associated with animals that represent the transition between life and death, transformation and regeneration. Nail fish being hunted by diving ducks are commonly represented in Yolngu mortuary iconography on hollow log coffins as they embody the dangers of the journey of the soul. These images are prolific in Yolngu painting and point to the fact that Djambu Barra Barra continued to paint *Yirritja* clan motifs from eastern Arnhem Land. He also created a number of these works in collaboration with his wife Amy Johnson.

Devil Devil

The image of the devil devil is the thematic subject in which Djambu Barra Barra seems to have invested the greatest intellectual and creative interest, particularly towards the

Djambu Barra Barra
Hollow Log 1993, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 225 x 125 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

end of his life. From the mid 1990s devil devils became increasingly prevalent subjects, so much so that of all the paintings executed between 2003 and 2005 devil devils occur in 30 out of 51. The devil devil, also called *Nakaran* in the Roper region, is an important ritual figure and another major character in the *Yabaduruwa* ceremony.

Nakaran's travels originated in the vicinity of Croker Island, passing through the Oenpelli region, continuing south through rough country past Ngukurr and towards the coast at Edward Island (Elkin 1972:126). The devil devil that Djambu Barra Barra paints is a 'giant man' and a 'sorcery figure' with a wide range of powers and the ability to transform himself into a number of different manifestations. He also has different roles to play as he travels across the country. Djambu Barra Barra developed a large repertoire of different devil devil stories and stages of his life.

Nakaran is a dangerous and malign being who is responsible for killing large numbers of people at the outset of his travels. He is depicted with spines or barbs protruding from his elbows, waist and knees and occasionally from his neck. He also has attenuated fingers and toes. Djambu Barra Barra described the danger associated with this figure:

> He fighting man with blades on knees and middle place on his arm. They can rip you open. Also feet can kick you. He fights with blades on elbows and knees - to kill whitefella or blackfella. The claw hands are same way used as weapons, they can tear away the ribs. And the teeth and the feet - they can cut. When he gets you by the ears you can't know anything.

This danger is magnified by his frightening visage with wide staring eyes and bared fangs. He is almost always depicted

in paintings with his arms raised as if ready to pounce and is a figure used to frighten children. The sharp projections at the joints of the devil devil's body represent dangerous points of destructive power and recall images from western Arnhem Land where such projections signify the power of lightning. The devil devil's magic powers include flight and the ability to hear and see things from a great distance. 'Devil devil can move around country. He can fly. He can be anywhere', according to Djambu. He travels vast distances and needs food so he has dilly bags round his neck. These carry ritual objects or food, particularly 'sugarbag', which is associated with the end of his journey when he fights off bees. In fact, the devil devil Djambu Barra Barra paints may be an amalgam of stories and characteristics of sorcery men and cult figures from various places in Arnhem Land, such as LumaLuma and Wuyal. This feature of borrowing iconography and subtle variants on traditional stories from all over Arnhem Land is one of the distinguishing features of Djambu Barra Barra's art and is in line with his practice of cultural engagement with a number of different traditions.

Djambu Barra Barra's devil devil paintings are images of power, and the artist displays intellectual pleasure in presenting all the permutations of the devil devil by deploying colour and form to delineate his character and fearfulness. In *Medicine Man* Djambu Barra Barra has combined a wide variety of coloured and textural elements into a complex whole. The devil devil's body, which is a livid green with a yellow dashing infill, dominates the composition as always. The strongly coloured figure stands in stark contrast from the red, pink and white of the finely cross-hatched background. Pastels are placed next to strong colours with different values and levels of saturation, areas of dotting and dashing infill sit on top of an unevenly cross-hatched background, patterned areas are contrasted with small areas of flat colour. It all works

Djambu Barra Barra
Medicine Man 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 240 cm
Hans Sip collection, Melbourne

to create a sense of power and unease. This use of unusual colour combinations can be seen in many renderings of devil devils, where Djambu Barra Barra accentuated their malign and frightening characteristics by the use of discordant, almost bilious colouration.

In many later works the devil devils are represented in skeletal form, for example the monumental 2005 NATSIA Award entry *Dead One*, Djambu Barra Barra's last great painting, before his untimely death. The story for this painting is an important one to the artist:

> Bones this one (*Ngakaran*) for me. The one between the legs - mother gave birth and the baby died. All these devil devil are dead, only the bones are left. The one in the middle is the women's old husband. The one on the side is their elder son. They had no spear, tomahawk, nothing to eat that's why they all perish, die. Ceremony for this one long time ago – when person passed away – bones from that person we sing song corroboree and put them away in log coffin, and take to the cave. Old culture.

The striking effect of this subject, which clearly combines the idea of birth surrounded by death is rendered almost perverse by the high key colouration. There are pastel pinks and lighter mauves in the striated body of the two smaller devil devils, but the painting is dominated by the luminosity of the bright orange, yellow and green hues of the two main figures. The bones are presented in solid colour and pull forward as the smaller figures blend in more with the fine red, blue and white bands of *rarrk* in the background. This theme and the celebration of what might be seen as the unclean and gruesome aspects of death and decay are celebrated as transformational.

Later in his career Djambu Barra Barra also created sculptural representations of this figure, the only sculptures he made. They are painted with the same imagery: divided body and skull, dilly bag around his neck, but the barbed projections are not included. There are many sculpted variations on the devil devil theme, but they are all painted finely, with detailed *rarrk* and dotting and interesting combinations of colours. Djambu Barra Barra had a solo exhibition at Alcaston Gallery in 1998, titled *Devil Devil* which featured a wide range of representations of devil devils, including sculptures.

Images of power: colour and form

Colour is a defining feature in Djambu Barra Barra's work and is the main way his work can be differentiated from other artists in Arnhem Land. He used colour to create affect in a phenomenological sense, to create movement and dynamism on the canvas. In particular, he interpreted and modified aesthetic traditions from other parts of Arnhem Land, most notably the Yolngu concept of *bir'yun*, or brilliance. He was attracted to, and moreover was able to, manage an amazing array of hues on the one canvas, orchestrating complex symphonies of colour and texture. He was particularly attracted to complementary colours that created the most vibrancy on the canvas, including the use of fluorescent paint.

The Yolngu, as Morphy has shown, invest their paintings with power by the use of detailed cross-hatching, turning works from dull outlines to brilliant fields of shimmering energy (Morphy 1989). 'It is the quality of brilliance that is associated in Yolngu art with ancestral power and with beauty' (1989:28). The concept of *bir'yun* is associated with a flash of light, a shimmering sensation or a vibration. Two of Djambu Barra Barra's paintings show clearly how he used colour and cross-hatching to imbue his work with this form of ancestral energy.

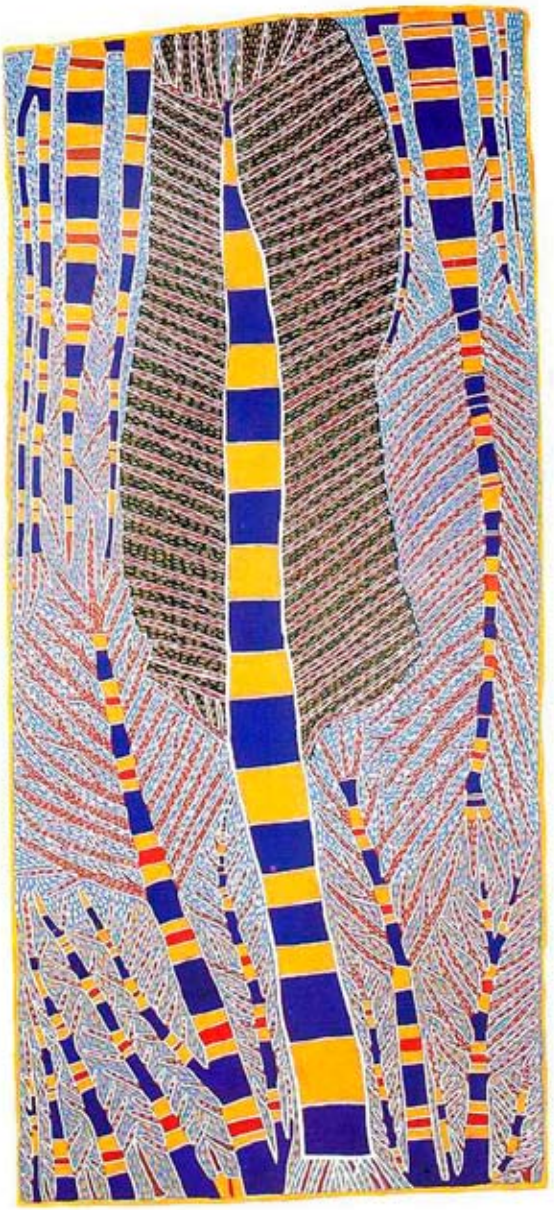
Djambu Barra Barra
Dead Ones 2005, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 295 x 130 cm
Courtesy of Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation and Total E&P Australia

In 1995 he painted *Cyprus Pine*, a monumental canvas, almost three metres high, which depicts a large central tree in skeletal form with bare limbs branching from the trunk, banded by alternating sections of yellow and blue. It is highlighted to suggest the dual role of the trunk both as tree and ceremonial post. The whole composition is filled with other skeletal tree forms growing from both the top and the bottom of the painting, filling the picture plane. The work is largely painted in bright, boldly contrasted primaries, giving a graphic quality to the image.

Although it is impossible to be sure of an artist's intention, by looking at the composition, the scale and the striking use of colour opposites, it is clear that Djambu Barra Barra intended to imbue this work with the notion of power and beauty. He appears to have understood innately the power of complementary colours to create vibration and an oscillating surface. He used colour instead of cross-hatching to create this sense, although in many paintings he used both.

In some paintings Djambu Barra Barra also used the notion of 'design', that is composition and repetition of forms, as well as colour to create vibrating optical effects. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala also painted numerous canvases with strong juxtapositions of contrasting colours. He painted three versions of *Ngak Ngak,* the sea eagle, between 1987 and 1988 in bright lime green on a hot orangey-red and bright pink backgrounds. When asked why he painted the usually white sea eagle in these bright colours he said that the colours were beautiful and they gave *Ngak Ngak* power (Ryan 1997). What made these green *Ngak Ngaks* so powerful was the contrast of complementary colours, which make the figure appear to jump off the canvas.

The movement and brilliance Djambu Barra Barra achieved



Djambu Barra Barra
Cyprus Pine 1995
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 295 x 130 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

through the dynamic use of bright colours is augmented by the more traditional way of achieving such effects, namely *rarrk*. Djambu Barra Barra used coloured *rarrk* styles in a number of ways, more in the manner of Kuninjku artists, as a design element rather than as a reference to particular country, as it has in eastern Arnhem Land.

Painting as performance

Some notable patterns also emerge when considering form in Djambu Barra Barra's body of work. His compositions tend to be full, dense and complex rather than spacious with large figurative forms dominating the space. An underlying structure seems to inform many of his compositions as if the placement of figures on the canvas is not arbitrary but predestined by another less visible set of rules. As noted previously, he is not representing country in his paintings, but rather ancestral beings and their associated ceremonies, or more specifically the performance of these ceremonies, many of which he conducted. Symmetry is one strain that moves through Djambu Barra Barra's work, particularly in works after 1995. Many dance sequences are symmetrical and there are many canvases which have a symmetrical or centrifugal force where characters radiate around a central focus. In other works the symmetry is maintained by elements coming towards the centre from the edges of the canvas. For example in many of the kangaroo and goanna paintings there are two figures facing one another, separated by a central tree. Goannas are usually represented in pairs, often as if dancing around the base of the tree, creating a circular motion within the square of the canvas.

It is clear from Djambu Barra Barra's explanations of the paintings that there is a performative aspect which suggests the paintings work on more than a visual level; that the rhythms evoke other formats such as dance and music. For example, Djambu Barra Barra was explicit about the link between the composition and actions performed in ceremony in the painting *Sand Goanna*, 1999 which depicts a single tree with one goanna climbing its trunk. He said:

> Painting shows how the dancers spread their arms up like a goanna in a tree. Up high to start with, then moving down through the chanting and the singing. The corroboree for this ceremony is loud with lots of clapping and calling the goanna's name. Sand goanna is Ritharrngu.

The dancing and singing and the raising of arms mimic the images of the tree and the climbing goanna. This explanation stresses the performative nature of the iconography and the direct relationship to the performance of ceremony. The painting is a metaphor for this movement.

In this way the performance of the painting, the singing and calling it into being as well as the composition and visual appearance are integral in the conception of the paintings. They go beyond representation to depict the shock of transformation and revelation in ceremony. By creating energy through both colour and form, Djambu Barra Barra created a tension and ambivalence between static and dynamic form in painting. In this way, using the movement of ceremony as a building block for the composition, the scale of the ancestral being and the vibrating effects of *rarrk* and contrasting colour, Djambu Barra Barra creates canvases that emanate power and aliveness, which express his lived experience as a ceremonial leader.

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The paintings of Djambu Barra Barra challenge our ideas

Djambu Barra Barra
Two Goannas 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150 x 150 cm
Private collection

about what might constitute Aboriginal painting. His work is firmly embedded, in terms of subject matter and style within the relatively fluid traditions of Arnhem Land, whilst exemplifying great personal innovation. His style, whilst it borrows from many places, is ultimately his own. No other artist has so successfully translated conventional forms of Arnhem Land painting, including *rarrk*, to acrylics on canvas. His body of work inhabits an indeterminate space between the ethnographic roots of bark painting and the innovations inherent in the adoption of the acrylic medium. The diversity of his work and his use of colour and form to express the power of his religious beliefs also point to his personal creativity within the bounds of convention. Djambu Barra Barra's work reflects his knowledge and authority and his most ambitious works, deploying the most conspicuous of colours and scales, unequivocally call out to be noticed.

1 Biographical Information is from interviews conducted by the author with Djambu Barra Barra, translated by the artist Alan Joshua Junior in Ngukurr in 2004/05 and also from Ngukurr Arts documentation.

2 Information about painting stories comes from interviews conducted by the author with Djambu Barra Barra, in 2004/05 and also from Ngukurr Arts documentation.

Djambu Barra Barra
Devil Devil 2002, synthetic polymer paint on wood, 154.5 x 23 x 5 cm variable
Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Djambu Barra Barra, NATSIAA, 2005
Photo: Howard Morphy

Colour Country

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson

'When I paint, I think about that place'.

Costello Outstation, about 25 kms from Ngukurr, and the animals and birds that inhabit it, form the subject matter of most of Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's paintings. It is her mother's country and, just like all the other artists in this region, Amy paints stories and totems associated with her mother's country. Throughout her career, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson has balanced delicately between individual innovation and painting by a strict set of rules, as a female artist in Ngukurr. She depicted her totemic animals, initially under the guidance of her husband Djambu Barra Barra. However, as time went on she underwent a gradual artistic separation from her husband, during which she steadily modified and elaborated on earlier work and evolved into an artist in her own right with a number of distinct personal styles.

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Amy Jirwulurr Johnson was born in 1953 on Roper Valley Station, about 90km west of Ngukurr, where her father, Charlie Johnson, was working. He was a Rembarrnga man whose country was Makalawa. Amy's mother, Jessica Johnson, was a Ngalakan woman from Duck Creek (Jilkmillikan). She had links to that country as well as to Costello Outstation. Amy grew up and attended primary school on Roper Valley station while her father worked there. The family then moved to Roper Bar where Charlie Johnson got a job at the police station and her mother worked in the office. During that time Amy went to

Amy Johnson, Roper River, 2009
Photo: Cath Bowdler

Urapunga School and even then, she says, she was good at painting and drawing[1].

In the late 1960s the family moved to Ngukurr around the time the community moved from Mission control to that of government administration. Amy went to the Ngukurr School where a teacher encouraged her to paint and draw. Amy learnt to cook and sew, like the other female children at Ngukurr, and she continued with this kind of work in the community when she finished school. She also went to Darwin for a short time and engaged in further study at the Open College. She returned to Ngukurr and married Djambu Barra Barra at the

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Buffalo 2002, silkscreen on paper, 51 x 65 cm
Wagga Wagga Art Gallery Collection

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Busy Birds 2002, silkscreen on paper, 51 x 65 cm
Wagga Wagga Art Gallery Collection

Ngukurr Church in the mid 1970s. She kept her father's name. Amy and Djambo had three children - Helen, Gerald and Carl - and now Amy has eight grand children.

Amy Johnson and Djambu spent at Costello Outstation there when they were first married before they had children. They then moved back and forward, between Costello and Ngukurr over the next ten years, returning to the community to work and so the kids could go to school from time to time. Amy's mother passed away around 1990, after which they went to live at Costello for a few more years. Amy learned about culture from her mother as well as from her husband. She recalled:

> My mother lived there [at Costello] until she was very old. She was a Ngalakan lady who lived through the old Mission days. She used to walk through all Arnhem Land when she was young and she told me lots of stories about walking to Bulman, Burrungu and along the Roper River. She only liked to visit the Mission to buy food (Normand 2006:28).

Despite the privations of living in a remote outstation, Amy loved being in the bush, particularly living off bush tucker, which she preferred to 'shop food'. Amy and Djambu Barra Barra retained their connection to the place over the years, including hunting and fishing there any time they could get a lift.

In the early days, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's painting career mirrored her husband's and to some extent proceeded in tandem with his. From 1989 until 1997 both Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra were represented by Beverly Knight at Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne mostly in group shows, such as those in 1989, 1990, 1993, culminating in 1997 in *Beat Strit - ten years on*. They also participated in a number of group shows at other galleries including Hogarth Gallery in Sydney (1992, 1995, 1996), Christine Abrahams Gallery in

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Untitled 1998, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 97 x 182 cm
Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga

Melbourne (1992) and Gallerie Australis in Adelaide (1994), all held in conjunction with Alcaston House. Amy Jirwulurr Johnson also exhibited in a number of important exhibitions early on in her career. She was represented in *Aboriginal Art & Spirituality*, shown at the High Court Canberra in 1991 and in the same year, in the *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, which travelled to the Art Gallery of NSW, the National Gallery of Victoria, Tandanya, Adelaide, as well as *Ngundungunya: Art for Everyone*, National Gallery of Victoria. Amy also exhibited in Darwin in 1993 at Framed Gallery. Framed also facilitated an exhibition of Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra's works at Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London in 1999. In 1998, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra started painting for the new Ngukurr Art Centre. Amy was also regularly selected for entry into NATSIAA.

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Stylistic diversity is a key characteristic of Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's body of work. Amy paints in the figurative tradition, situating images of animals, reptiles, birds and plants associated with her country into compositions that sometimes feature an 'environment' but at other times comprise a collection of figures on a ground. Unlike her husband, however, she does not portray major ancestral figures as monumental characters performing ceremony, nor does she use cross-hatching or other stylistic devices associated with bark painting. Rather she portrays creatures associated with her mother's country and, her narrative involves the search for suitable sites to enact rituals surrounding young boy's circumcision. Like most Aboriginal artists Amy Jirwulurr Johnson paints variations on the same set of themes. Her first paintings featured compilations of species significant to her, animals she called 'culture ones'. They fall into the category of what the Yolngu call *Garma*, that is, public paintings of totemic species, that an

artist has the right to paint.

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson paints specific species depicting their outside or more mundane meanings. She paints those of the opposite moiety to her husband, as do all couples in Arnhem Land. For example the goanna Amy Jirwulurr Johnson paints is the water monitor and her turtle is the short-necked variety, the moiety complements of the goanna and turtles painted by Djambu Barra Barra. Most of the animals 'have songs', which means they have cultural associations to her country and her dreamings. Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's particular totem is the pelican, which appears in a number of her works, but other creatures are more commonly depicted. Paintings often include a short-necked turtle, a water goanna, a larger water bird or a whistling duck. She also regularly paints a wallaby, a number of fish species (including black bream and comb fish), as well as two types of snakes. Throughout her career Amy Jirwulurr Johnson also painted a large number of canvases in which animals and fish are arranged on backgrounds with detailed dotting or other forms of decorative infill, as if in a billabong viewed from above. Many of these works were painted in collaboration with Djambu Barra Barra and have mortuary references. Occasionally she produced paintings with significant narrative content, such as *Owl Story* or *Goanna Place* both painted in 2005.

Like her husband, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson also uses a wide variety of colour palettes in her work, from relatively

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra
Untitled 1995, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 125 x 165 cm
Courtesy of Framed – the Darwin Gallery

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Women Fishing 1995, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 100 x 128 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

simple canvases featuring large flat areas of bright primary colour, to those with many colours combined into complex compositions. Generally she prefers strong saturated colour contrasts so that her canvases appear vibrant and bright. Her work can also be seen to move from simple compositions to more complex ones with a corresponding increase in decorative patterning, however she moves between simplicity and complexity throughout her career. She often creates flat, organic areas in the backgrounds of her canvases to suggest topographical sections of country. These delineated areas or arenas, where her protagonists stand out clearly and perform actions, can appear to mirror foreground, middle ground and background, but Amy does not intentionally create any real sense of pictorial space. As her work matured over the years her environments became increasingly complex and detailed, to the point where the animals have been subsumed by the exuberance of the country in which they are situated.

The relationship between Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra is crucial to an understanding of her work because she started painting under her husband's direction and her work has been intertwined with his on a number of levels

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Costello Country 2004
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 116 x 120 cm
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

until quite recently. They collaborated on paintings for almost twenty years, but she deferred to her husband and he guided her as his wife and as a female artist. Unlike the collaboration between Willie Gudabi and his wife Moima, where Moima almost never painted autonomously, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson developed as a painter and evolved through a number of stylistic changes independent of her husband's influence.

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra collaborated on numerous paintings between 1987 and 1998, including *Untitled* 1995. These collaborative paintings are versions of a type of mortuary painting common in many parts of Arnhem Land, which depict wading birds hunting for fish. They suggest abundance and life in their country, both spiritually and literally. In some works Amy created graphic, schematic depictions of animals and birds on minimal, primary coloured bands. Some of these paintings have a Matisse-like simplicity, akin to paper cut-outs. In other paintings she returned to explore multiple variations of the 'billabong' pictures similar to collaborative works she undertook with Djambu Barra Barra. Some have dense clusters of animals inhabiting the restricted space, others are more spacious with animals arranged among

inventive decorative infilling devices.

In 1995, a particularly fertile year, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson built on the kernels of stylistic divergence already in evidence. She was prolific during this time and *Women Fishing*, exemplifies the development in her work. It was entered into the NATSIAA that year and was subsequently acquired by MAGNT. The works shows:

> two women fishing at a waterhole for *Mawuruku* - the Banded Grunter that belongs to the *Dhuwa* Moiety group, of the *Mambali* semimoiety. On the opposite bank are the women's bags, wooden dishes and cooked fish, lying below a camp fire. Birds fly in the sky around what appears to be the sun, but according to the artist's husband Sambo Burra Burra, is actually a hearth with a flaming fire (NATSIAA Catalogue 1995:28).

This is the first painting in which Amy Jirwulurr Johnson has located human figures in the environment, with women going about their lives fishing and hunting surrounded by their implements. The composition defies the symmetry of earlier works making swathes of organic shapes mirror those on the other side. The treatment of the sky, the complicated interplay of the birds and cloud formations suggest a development that can be seen in many of Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's later works. This painting represents the culmination of a period of real growth and experimentation as an artist.

'This is a good place' - Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's later works

The latest and possibly most fertile period in Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's career began around 2002 when she began to produce paintings of startling complexity and richness, elaborating on certain tendencies evident in earlier works. At this stage she also confirmed she was artistically 'separate now' from her husband and had moved away from his more direct influence in relation to her paintings. Amy Jirwulurr Johnson now felt able to present herself as an independent and autonomous artist. She referred to these later works as 'landscape paintings' and is quite specific about this description: 'landscape one, anywhere'. By 2002 it is clear that Amy Jirwulurr Johnson had forged another distinct personal style, which featured paintings with an even greater concentration of life, creatures, plants and activity, characterised by increasing compositional complexity, greater decorative detail and a more diverse colour palette. The overall feeling is one of profusion and particularity where the myriad elements combine to make a dense whole.

On the whole these works represent a break from the simpler and more austere works of earlier periods and also exhibit a desire to insert a sense of Amy's own experience and memories of her country into her paintings, reflecting a more personal approach. *Costello Country* is typical of work from 2004. Amy recounted the story of this painting:

> Around Costello there are many small billabongs that become one in the wet season. In the dry time the buffalo come down to cool off in the mud and cool water. There is green grassland for the kangaroo and brolgas to feed, and the goanna go down for a drink. Sometimes the goanna digs out the nest to eat their eggs. We catch lots of fish here too; sometimes barramundi, sometimes catfish and turtle.

The way Amy Jirwulurr Johnson describes this painting sounds very much like a reminiscence of country in the wet season. There is a 'nowness' to her description that suggests a

lived experience. It is a different and more personal expression. The animals are grouped on organic bands of coloured background as in most of her previous works, but now they are integrated into a memory and her vision of her mother's country.

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Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's work is neither secular nor 'simple', as has sometimes been assumed. Stylistically her work is diverse, experimental and unformulaic, very different from the Aboriginal artists who continue to produce the same works over and over again. Her paintings are not 'the day to day happenings in her country', but reference her mother's country, peopled with totemic ancestors and following a set of conventions, which apply to the work of all Aboriginal artists in the region. Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's practice is clearly informed by Indigenous conventions of representation and content, and she continued to experiment and grow as an artist, producing an extraordinarily diverse body of work rich in meaning and cultural significance.

1 Biographical Information is from interviews conducted by the author with Amy Johnson, in Ngukurr in 2004-07

Amy Johnson, Ngukurr Arts, 2005
Photo: Cath Bowdler

Imagined Country

Angelina George

Angelina George
Far Away Places 2008, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 190 x 260 cm
Karen Brown Collection

When Angelina George, youngest of the Joshua sisters, began painting the landscape of her country, the results were striking: the works she produced seemed both austere and fantastical: bleached out vistas, pouring torrents, elusive cloud-scenes, almost all viewed from a mystifying aerial perspective. Those first pieces on canvas had nothing in common with the Aboriginal art styles of the Roper River region; nor did they betray any clear connection with the paintings and preoccupations of her four elder sisters, who were already engaged in developing artistic personas of their

own. George's early works, painted for the Darwin gallerist Karen Brown, have not been widely exhibited, but they have clear affinities with the dark, synoptic mid-career landscape *Three Rivers*, 2004. George, in short, began her unusual evolution as an artist with a set of problems, and laboured for a decade and more to find a solution and a pathway ahead. This path was traced out only with the first of the majestic large landscapes that she is best known for today. When, in the last days of 2005, she painted *My Imagined Country*, a panoramic rendition of river and range systems, it was a bolt from the blue. The landscape was resolved, and recorded with an idiosyncratic sweep and freedom, while still capturing fine details and yoking together near and far vistas. Above all, the work possessed a lyric quality, a beauty in its harshness: its colours were lush and subtly applied: it was much more than a depiction of country: it caught a way of seeing and understanding the structure and variety of the natural world.

In a matter of weeks, George's status shifted. She had been a minor, unclassifiable "problem" artist on the fringes of a regional indigenous school. Now she emerged as one of the country's most ardently collected large-scale landscape painters. She won the 2007 Telstra National Aboriginal Art Award's general painting prize, and was highly commended the following year. All through this period she produced a succession of poised, expressive canvases, and with each one she broke new ground, giving vent to a startling, romantic vision. Almost all these large vistas showed the Ruined City region, inland from Roper River: a jumbled maze of peaks and ranges, bare, red-hued, full of forbidding grace. But the match was never exact. As the titles of her exhibitions suggested, those landscapes were transformed, re-imagined, adapted, and she took this approach for intriguing reasons, which lie at the heart of her new work's appeal.

What, in the biography, explains this strange evolution? Angelina George was born in 1937 into a large family; her beloved father was the first indigenous pastor at the Roper Anglican mission. She painted flowers as a child in the schoolroom; she explored the verdant bush with her sisters. As a young woman, she worked in pastoral station camps, and one of the stockmen she spent most time in those years with was her relation, Ginger Riley, who went on to dominate the Roper River painting movement in the 1990s. When her older sisters began painting, she watched; she knew their work well. Yet there is little in common between her and them. All the sisters, in fact, are highly individual artists – none more so than her. We are dealing with that unexpected phenomenon that seems so characteristic of the Roper school: the fusion of distinct worlds. George is a woman steeped in law and old belief, formed by the thought patterns of her own languages, who nevertheless paints in a style of her own. The background is ceremonial, the sensibility is subjective. A critic keen to chase these things down would look at the balance between Christian faith and traditional beliefs in George's background; or at the effect of the various chapters, European and Aboriginal-influenced, in her life; or at the overwhelming impact on her of the varied landscape of the Roper region, meeting-point of clans and confluence zone of eco-systems.

But why not ask the artist, as she sits, cross-legged, dwarfed by the vast canvas she's working on? George is very much a conscious creative artist, with a program that can be described and explored in detail. At the same time, she is a meditative painter, who spends long hours staring at the blank canvas before she commits a brush-stroke to the waiting surface. Like many senior artists, she works in a trance-like state, a state of escape from cares, and circumstances: she is travelling back, to former times, and to distant places, for all her work is done far from the Roper region. This tone of nostalgia mingles with

Angelina George
Three Rivers 2004
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
60 x 120 cm
Karen Brown Collection

the quality of invention in the landscapes depicted. And why the invention? As she explains, there would be a danger in direct transcription. Her own country is full of sacred sites, and places of ritual significance. Many of these she knows, but not all: if she painted as a descriptive landscape artist, she would run the risk of revealing what should remain hidden. It was in order to avoid this risk that she began placing trees and ridges in front of certain sites, and soon she progressed towards painting wholly synthetic versions of country. The scenes she presents are, then, at once very like the Roper and completely abstracted from the specific contours of that region's topography. Her large landscapes are also conspicuous in their emptiness: no human beings can be seen there; no trace of man's hand. There may be birds, hawks in the distance, perhaps, or tiny cockatoos – but nothing more. In part, this is because the landscape has an abandoned quality, and also an Edenic feel to it. But at a deeper level, the landscape is not empty at all: for George, it is full of ancestral presences, it teems with life.

The western eye, glancing at these vistas, begins its comparativist scan: how not to think of Namatjira, who brought desert ways of seeing into the western watercolour tradition? How not to turn the mind to Nolan's vast desert scenes, or Drysdale's red, dark views of Outback New South Wales? But there are much more fruitful, suggestive parallels further afield. The landscape George shows is not a silent space of menace: it is hers, it is full of splendour, depth and beauty: the views of country painted by romantic landscape artists, artists of the 19th century sublime in Europe, seem much more kindred to her work. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich are artists on her wavelength. Look closely, though, and other

resonances show: the skies in many of her large landscapes are given a renaissance depth and gleam: their blues and pinks speak of a sharp delight in nature and the texture of the world. The loose brush-strokes, which code the scene, rather than representing it, have the freedom of Titian's last, baffling masterpieces. One reaches, and reaches, and yet the terms for apprehending Angelina George, and reducing her to a neat, standard place in the Aboriginal art canon always hover beyond one's grasp. This is because of her liminal position. She is impossible to encase within the confines of any school, or even any art family – let alone the family of her brilliant sisters. She is deeply embedded in a cultural tradition – from which she draws her strength and from which she departs with utmost force.

This paradox was what lay behind the "problem" of her early works, and the block that kept her so long from painting with the freedom and drama she now displays. When younger, George knew her way of looking at the world was specific, she knew she was a defier of convention: given brush and canvas, what she chose to paint was a series of apocalyptic views: the world collapsing, great ancestral battles. It was impossible, seeing these canvases, not to sense the fight and struggle inside the artist, as her different aspects clashed: religion and ritual, the personal and the traditional. Only when George had found a way to balance these conflicts, to contain them and master them, could her art advance. Hence the depth in her view of country. Hence the precise, all-seeing quality of her eye. Hence, too, the way the viewer is invited to share her own elevated perspective on the world, to look down, and see the many different faces of the country in all their contradictory, interwoven force. The sky she paints as background is not just the red of sunset, or the blue of noon, or bright yellow of refracted smoke: those skies are tonal settings, which lend their accents to the shimmering, light-drenched whole.

George herself gives something of this away in her brief glosses on the country that she paints. Her she is on her large red-skied version of *Ruined City*: 'A wonderful place: you can get lost here. The mountains look white, shining in the sunlight. The cliffs are rocky, sharp and very rugged. I remember and imagine the Ruined City all the time'. This is the note of complexity. The artist sees the landscape for what it is, and for its sacred presences, but also as a prism for the deep, multiplicit emotions of life. The meanings of places change, our understandings of the world and people change, we travel through a landscape that changes us, a landscape that is itself responsive, and bears our marks. Here is the artist again, on her work *Far Away Places*, 2008 describing the origins of her imagined landscape in a region to the east of the stone country. The precision of her word portrait of the cloud-covered terrain gives a clue to her method of envisaging and recapturing both the world and what lies behind its veil:

> The sunlight is creeping through the clouds, shining across the ridges, hills and treetops, bringing everything to life. This is the end of the dry season or winter time, and the wet season storms are threatening in the sky. Soon this area will change, huge water falls will cascade from the tops of these mountains pushing the water down to the rock holes below.

Dynamic country; transforming art. The crescendo of the Roper River landscape tradition; an individual master in full flight. The splendour of the country lies here, captured, still on canvas: reflected in the mirror of an all-adapting mind.

Nicolas Rothwell

Ngukurr Now

There are still a number of artists who paint at Ngukurr today, continuing the tradition of producing individualistic art practices and diverse styles. Maureen Marangulu Thompson and Faith Thompson Nelson are perhaps the most prominent, while Alan Joshua Junior, as the new chairperson of Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation, is encouraging the next generation.

Maureen Thompson was born around 1931 on Nutwood Downs station which was then owned by Lord Vesty. Her mother, Agnes Bardil Roberts, was Alawa and her father was a Mara man whose country was on the north side of the Limmen River. Her father was working in the stock camp there and her mother was cooking for the stockmen. Maureen says she ran around the station as, 'a naked picaninny'. The family had to leave the station when her father died, when Maureen was only five years old. They spent time in the bush and walked to St Vidgeon's Station and then to Limmen Bight country, sometimes travelling by canoe down the Roper River. Those early days, walking with her family through country form the basis of the subject matter of Maureen's paintings. She recalls:

> We had a house and canoe made of paper bark. We never stayed in one place, we go here we go there, looking for sugarbag to eat, sweet one we get from trees, or something for breakfast might be fish or cheeky yam. This is how I lived when I was 12 years old. My stepmother brought me up.

Maureen remembers being told by her father of, 'running away from whites with guns', but despite this, the family remained living in the bush for some time. They finally came to the mission at Ngukurr after the big flood of 1940. Maureen learnt English as well as other subjects but still speaks Mara despite the missionaries trying to stop the children spending time with their parents and speaking their own languages. Maureen got married and moved to Darwin when her husband, Titanboy Thompson, began working for the police there as a tracker. Altogether she had 12 children although two of them died. Five of them were born in Darwin.

Maureen Thompson moved back to Ngukurr in the late 1980s and started painting after watching Willie Gudabi and his wife Moima paint. Maureen had painted for a short while in the early 1990s but she really only took up painting seriously after the art centre opened at Ngukurr in 1998. Maureen only paints her mother's country around the St Vidgeon's region, which she says is goanna country. Her paintings recount 'the old ways', in a plethora of detail: the times of her ancestors, hunting and gathering and the traditional way of life, a vast cast of characters doing a multitude of things. Also she records the traditional implements that people used ceremonially and in everyday life. She represents a compendium of artifacts: grass skirts for dancing, hair shirts and belts that the men wore, coolamons made from paperbark, grinding stones, stone axes, dilly bags made from pandanus 'for carrying everything', boomerangs, spears, armbands, nulla nullas and digging sticks, as well as bush plants and medicine.

Maureen Thompson
Our Culture 2005, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 199 x 109 cm
Private collection, Canberra

Like Gertie Huddleston, Maureen also represents both Christian and traditional elements in her work, but Maureen is more open about discussing the 'cultural' aspects of her painting and the process by which she accommodates her two belief systems: 'Two fella law, what God gave us. We must gotta have both'. Many of her paintings contain references to cultural stories of the region as well as to passages in the Bible. Maureen learned how to read *kriol* from lay missionary Lance Tremlett, who, with his wife Gwen, was completing the translation of the *Kriol* Bible or *Holi Baibul*. Maureen helped specifically with the translations of Old Testament books (Nehemiah, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus). Maureen also studied at Nungalinya Christian College in Darwin.

Maureen often uses the segmented canvas technique learned from Willie Gudabi to organise her complex narratives. In *Our Culture* the painting is divided into a number of uneven segments. The subject is the natural environment and cultural life she enjoyed as a young girl in the Limmen Bight area. There are ancestor figures, spirits, bush tucker and medicinal plants as well as references to a host of cultural activities performed in the past and to this day. Maureen applies paint in a feathery motion with a very light touch, overlaying one detail with another, building up layers and infilling detail to create a complex, abundant whole. Maureen is now the most senior member of Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation.

Faith Thompson Nelson is the youngest of Maureen's twelve children. She was born in Darwin when Maureen lived there in the early 1970s. Faith's father, Harold Nelson, was from Utopia in the central desert. Consequently Faith is able to paint country around Utopia as well as her mother's country in Limmen Bight. Faith is *Djunggkayi* for the area on the coast on the south side of the Limmen River, the same country that Ginger Riley paints.

Faith Thompson Nelson
Four Sisters 2003, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 123 x 175 cm
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

Faith is most well known for two distinct styles. One is based on a series of wavy lines which snake across the canvas producing fields of pulsating energy, such as her bush fire paintings. These paintings, in fiery reds and ochres, are inspired by seeing people burn off country around Utopia. Faith also paints other canvases in this style with variations of bluish hues that represent the sea.

The other style of painting for which Faith has become known consists of sweeping aerial views of the Limmen Bight area, which are painted in great detail. These paintings, such as *Four Sisters*, feature the same landforms and dreamings that are represented in Ginger Riley's paintings. This is Garimala country, but Faith also paints other snakes and the tracks that they leave on the ground when they crawl. These paintings featuring Faith's characteristic striated rock formations, minutely detailed trees and flowing watercourses echo Ginger Riley's epic vistas but are rendered in her own unique

Alan Joshua Junior
Left: *Brhoong Gidj Gidj* 2004, 75 x 8 x 8 cm
Right: *Mimi* 2004, 70 x 12 x 10 cm
synthetic polymer paint on wood. Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

style. Faith Thompson Nelson's painting career continues to develop. After featuring in numerous group shows of Ngukurr artists, and winning the Katherine Art Prize in 2004, Faith's first solo exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery opened in London in June 2009.

Alan Joshua Junior is also continuing to develop his career. Alan was born in Ngukurr in 1965 and began painting and carving in 1996. Although he began painting under the guidance of senior men using ochre colours, Alan branched out into a number of styles experimenting with European landscapes, elaborately patterned abstracts and a number of brightly coloured works featuring intricately tessellated, forms representing his totems and other creatures such as Mimis. In recent years Alan has created a series of works about cultural genocide and the themes that concern him about his community and the difficulties facing his young family. He is a thoughtful artist known for his many styles. Alan Joshua Junior's carvings are renderings of spirit figures, finely wrought and painted with rarrk. They represent his attachment to continuing traditional forms whilst experimenting in different media.

Artists from the Roper region were motivated by the desire to sustain relationships between the dreaming, law and country and the need to represent these relationships and their own personal interpretations of them for the European market. Their paintings express contact between cultures: not only between Aboriginal and European culture, but also between the different, though related, cultures in Arnhem Land. They also show how the artists influenced and inspired one another, as all artists working together do. They elucidate the conditions under which Aboriginal life has been transformed by its engagements with Europeans and each other.

Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie, Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson, Gertie Huddleston, Angelina George and others embodied the tensions and possibilities of an intensely intercultural arena, both historically and in more recent times. They came from different places and brought to their art different languages, beliefs and influences. The profusion of styles and colour in art from the region is a clear indicator that the artists developed and continued to paint in their own unique ways with remarkably little direct intervention from outsiders. They were able to pursue their own styles without any pressure to conform.

These artists created paintings of startling refinement, originality and contemporaneity that reference their Indigenous world view, but also talk to the western viewer. Their works are site specific, alive with meaning and essentially metaphysical and religious in conception. As Aboriginal artists, they tread a fine line between constraints of subject matter and style and negotiate culturally specific forms to produce aesthetically sophisticated and meaningful works of art. Each of these artists developed a unique style, which they own, and yet their stylistic innovations fit completely within local contexts and are informed by a particularly Indigenous sensibility and aesthetic. These works talk to each other and to us, expressing a world that we may never see or understand and yet one with a numinous presence that is alive and vital.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

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Contributors

Nicolas Rothwell
Nicolas Rothwell lives and writes in the NT. He is the northern correspondent for The Australian and is the author, most recently, of the novel The Red Highway. He has known Angelina George for many years and her painting *Near Ruined City* illustrates the cover of his new novel.

Judith Ryan
Judith Ryan is the Senior Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Victoria. She has written extensively about Aboriginal art and artists and has curated numerous exhibitions including the Ginger Riley Retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997.

Notes about Aboriginal names

There are a number of accepted ways of spelling the names of some Aboriginal artists in this exhibition: Djambu Barra Barra is also known as Djambu Burra Burra, Sambo Burra Burra and Djambu Barda Barda; Willie Gudabi is also known as Willie Gudapi and occasionally as Willie Gudupi. Moima Willie is sometimes known as Moima Samuels and Gertie Huddleston is sometimes called Gertie Huddlestone. There is also variation in the spelling of Aboriginal place names in the Roper region. The most commonly accepted spellings for these names have been used.

List of Works

Willie Gudabi
c. 1916 - 1996 Alawa Language

Wilie Gudabi
Untitled 1990
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 119.5 x 90 cm
Helen Read Collection

Wilie Gudabi and Moima Willie
Gabal Ritual 1990
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 156 x 106 cm
Artbank Collection

Willie Gudabi
Untitled 1991
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 83 x 62 cm
Helen Read Collection

Wilie Gudabi
My Grandfather's whole story 1992
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 145 x 139 cm
Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne
Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Wilie Gudabi
Untitled 1993
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 127 x 108
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie
Old Gudang c. 1996
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 188 x 167 cm
Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga

Gertie Huddleston
Born c. 1930 Wandarang/Mara Language

Gertie Huddleston
Untitled 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas (framed), 33 x 57 cm
Private collection, Canberra

Gertie Huddleston
Untitled 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 100 x 90 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Gertie Huddleston
Different Landscapes around Ngukurr 1997
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 199 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection
Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund

Gertie Huddleston
Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads 1997
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 134 x 143 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection
Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund

Gertie Huddleston
Painting the Country 1998
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 90 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Gertie Huddleston
Garden of Eden II 1999
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 132 x 120 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection
Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund
Winner Open Painting Award, 16th NATSIAA

Gertie Huddleston
Fresh water springs 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 156 x 122 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Gertie Huddleston
We all share water 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 169 x 120 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
c. 1937 – 2002 Mara Language

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Sharks Liver Tree 1988
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 87 x 89 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
The Four Archers 1988
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 129.5 x 187.5 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991
synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991
synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
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Untitled 1991
synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Untitled 1991
synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Limmen Bight Country 1992
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 153 x 181.5 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Limmen Bight River - My Mother's Country 1993
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 190 x 191 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 177 x 242 cm
Courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne and the Art Gallery of South Australia

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak and the owl at night 1997
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 57 x 123 cm
Private collection. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak the Hunter 2001
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 96 x 96 cm
Collection of the Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne. Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Djambu Barra Barra
c. 1937 – 2002 Mara Language

Djambu Barra Barra
Untitled 1987
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 155 x 122 cm
Private collection, Queensland

Djambu Barra Barra
Untitled 1987
screenprinting ink on lawn, 145 x 74 (irregular)
Private collection, Queensland

Djambu Barra Barra
Hollow Log 1993
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 225 x 125 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

Djambu Barra Barra
Cyprus Pine 1995
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 130 x 295 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

Djambu Barra Barra
Two Goannas 1995
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150 x 150 cm
Private collection

Djambu Barra Barra
Crocodile Men's Stories 1996
synthetic polymer paint on linen, 191 x 181 cm
Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Djambu Barra Barra
Medicine Man 1998
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 240 cm
Hans Sip collection, Melbourne

Djambu Barra Barra
Devil Devil 2002
synthetic polymer paint on wood, 154.5 x 23 x 5 cm variable
Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne. Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Djambu Barra Barra
Two Kangaroos and Two Dogs 2005
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 120 cm
Private collection, Sydney

Djambu Barra Barra
Dead Ones 2005
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 295 x 130 cm
Courtesy of Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation and Total E&P Australia.

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Born 1953 Ngalakan language

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Djambu Barra Barra
Untitled 1995
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 125 x 165 cm
Courtesy of Framed – the Darwin Gallery

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Women Fishing 1995
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 100 x 128 cm
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Untitled 1998
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 97 x 182 cm
Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Busy Birds 2002
silkscreen on paper, 51 x 65 cm
Wagga Wagga Art Gallery Collection

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Buffalo 2002
silkscreen on paper, 51 x 65 cm
Wagga Wagga Art Gallery Collection

Amy Jirwulurr Johnson
Costello Country 2004
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 116 x 120 cm
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

Angelina George
Born c. 1937 Wandarang/Mara Language

Angelina George
Part of the ruined city area 2004
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 80 x 120 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Angelina George
Three Rivers 2004
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 60 x 120 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Angelina George
Far Away Places 2008
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 260 x 190 cm
Karen Brown Collection

Faith Thompson Nelson
Born 1971 Aranda Language

Faith Thompson Nelson
Four Sisters 2003
synthetic polymer paint on linen, 123 x 175 cm
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

Maureen Thompson
Born c. 1931 Mara Language

Maureen Thompson
Our Culture 2005
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 199 x 109 cm
Private collection, Canberra

Alan Joshua Junior
Born 1965 Wandarang Language

Alan Joshua Junior
(Left) *Brhoong Gidj Gidj* 2004, 75 x 8 x 8 cm
(Right) *Mimi* 2004, 70 x 12 x 10 cm
synthetic polymer paint on wood
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

Acknowledgements

The Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and Cath Bowdler, are deeply indebted to the artists in this exhibition, who shared their experiences and insights about their art and lives, particularly Djambu Barra Barra, Amy Johnson, Gertie Huddleston, Maureen Thompson, Faith Thompson Nelson, Alan Joshua Junior and Moima Willie.

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TOTAL

Total E&P Australia sponsored Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation in 2008 to enable them to purchase Djambu Barra Barra's *Dead Ones* from the artist's family. This sponsorship has ensured the painting is owned by the community in perpetuity. The sponsorship came about through Total E&P Australia's involvement with 2008 Crossing Roper Bar Tour - featuring the collaboration between the Australian Art Orchestra and the Wagilak songmen and dancers from Ngukurr.

Colour Country thanks Tura New Music (WA) for initiating and facilitating all above arrangements.

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Djambu Barra Barra
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