



Ngukurr's golden age

Colour Country: Art from Roper River

At ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Kingsley Street, Acton. Until April 11. Open Wednesday to Sunday, noon-5pm.

Reviewer: Sasha Grishin

Colour Country: Art from Roper River is a touring exhibition curated by Cath Bowdler, director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, which has opened in Canberra after having been exhibited at Wagga Wagga and Flinders University in Adelaide, before it travels to its final venue, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin.

Painting started at Ngukurr, the administrative centre of the Roper region in south-eastern Arnhem Land, almost 25 years ago. Then, seemingly overnight, two nationally significant artists emerged, Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Djambu Barra Barra, who have dominated the art of this region.

For most people, including this art critic, the major exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997, the *Ginger Riley Munduwalawala Retrospective* and *Ngundungunya: Art for everyone exhibition*, came as a major revelation. It was art out of Arnhem Land which defied expectation and the established orthodoxies and norms. The breadth of styles, the markedly figurative language, the colouristic boldness and the direct, simplified naïf vision came as a shock to the system and I can still recall the excitement of first viewing those exhibitions when I flick through Judith Ryan's original catalogue.

Subsequently these artists, accompanied by a couple of others from Ngukurr, have become established household names and frequent participants in the Telstra Art Awards and in exhibitions of Aboriginal art throughout Australia.

Colour Country: Art from Roper River is a timely reassessment of the art of this region, now that the two main practitioners have passed away and their heritage has been absorbed by the subsequent generation. For me, Barra Barra, who died in 2005, was one of the giants of Australian art, whose breadth of vision, absolute confidence of touch in design, chromatic brilliance and artistic sensibility, dominated this whole exhibition.

He was born in a traditional tribal community and had no contact with non-indigenous people in his childhood and youth, as he said, "Goanna dreaming

country. Stone spear country. Nilipidgi. Stayed there and grew up".

He started painting in 1987, when aged in his early 40s, after many years of ceremonial art – body painting, sand painting and possibly bark painting. He often worked on a monumental scale with compositions of immense complexity relating ceremonial narratives, where in a unique style with acrylics on canvas he combined some of the conventions of x-ray painting with the mesmerising rarrk (cross-hatched) areas.

Paintings, including his *Crocodile Men's Stories* (1996), *Hollow Log* (1993) and *Medicine Man* (1998), are masterly examples of his art. There is a rhythmic dynamism in his work where one senses echoes of a number of artistic conventions of Arnhem Land, but here unified within a singular artistic vision. His wife, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson, is an interesting case study of gradual emancipation from his dominating artistic influence, where in her more recent work she achieves her own distinctive stylistic language, one which is nevertheless of a very different calibre to that of her husband.

The strong pictorial style of Munduwalawala with his unbridled use of colour and stark ideographs has made him into one of the most recognisable of the Aboriginal artists. His *Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight*, (1994), with the white-breasted sea eagle, has become one of his signature pieces.

Perhaps this is not the strongest cross-section of his art that could have been assembled.

Angelina George, an artist in her 80s has a well-established reputation for her aerial landscapes, while Gertie Huddleston paints very direct transcriptions of scenes which can be read as combining Aboriginal and Christian world views. There are also a number of quite amazing pictures by the husband and wife pair, Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie.

Unlike some art communities where there is a recognisable house style, art from Ngukurr is characterised through its diversity, with few of the artists actually coming from the same region. There is also a sense in this exhibition that the golden age of art from Ngukurr is something in the past, although many of these art centres have the remarkable gift for regeneration, where quite unexpectedly, a whole new generation of artists will suddenly emerge.