

Colour Power: Colour and the aesthetics of ancestral power in the paintings of Sambo Burra Burra

From the late 1980s a number of artists working in Ngukurr, a remote community on the South East Arnhem Land border, developed distinct painting styles that exemplified originality and innovation in Aboriginal art. The early Ngukurr artists, including Ginger Riley, Willie Gudabi and Sambo Burra Burra, are from different homelands, different language groups and had divergent life histories. Their paintings did, however, share two major characteristics: that of extraordinary personal innovation and strong and expressive use of colour. Sambo Burra Burra was one of the first artists to take up the use of acrylics in the community and his body of work is unique among his peers and in Indigenous art in general. His most remarkable works feature monumental representations of Ancestral beings, in luminous acrylic paints on canvas, using idiosyncratic variants of x-ray styles and crosshatched (*rarrk*) backgrounds. There has been no real precedent for the use of *rarrk* in very bright colours on canvas, before or since.



In this paper I intend to explore how Sambo Burra Burra has interpreted and modified aesthetic traditions from other parts of Arnhem Land in response to living and working as an artist in Ngukurr. In particular I wish to explore what I think is his development of the use of colour to express the Yolngu concept of *bir'yun* discussed in detail by Howard Morphy in *From Dull to Brilliant: The aesthetics of Spiritual Power Among the Yolngu*, as well as other innovative uses of colour. I am interested in situating the Ngukurr artists within the context of Arnhem Land traditions as well as delineating their more obvious differences.

Sambo Burra Burra, a Yolngu man, was born in Wagilak country, near Ngilipidji on the Walker River west of Blue Mud Bay, about 200 ks North East of Ngukurr. This is significant as Ngilipidji is a point where a number of different traditions and art styles coalesce. Unlike most artists who painted at Ngukurr Sambo Burra Burra had virtually no contact with Europeans as a young man, nor did he work in the pastoral industry. He came to the Roper

River mission in the 60s when he was in his early 20s after living a traditional life in the bush. He left his homeland when his Wagilak father, Ritharrngu mother and, he says, all his family, were killed. After the loss of his family he embarked on a number of journeys travelling through Arnhem Land, following important ritual tracks, learning about the country, singing it and committing stories and places to memory. It would appear that he was collating a vast knowledge about ceremony, songs and art styles from various parts of Arnhem Land. He imbued his travels with a sense of intellectual engagement and interest in many traditions.

Sambo Burra Burra could therefore be seen as a migrant who brought specific and valuable cultural knowledge and experience to Roper River. He came with a different set of skills and ritual knowledge to most of the artists whose homelands were south of the river and not from Arnhem Land. He had learned ceremony and he had painted on bodies and bark as a young man, before moving to the mission. He was aware of painting styles from different parts of Arnhem Land and he understood the notion of Yolngu aesthetics. He became widely respected for his ceremonial knowledge in Ngukurr and other parts of Arnhem Land and in recent times had been the main funeral and initiation man in Ngukurr.

When the diverse group of artists from different homelands and language groups started painting in Ngukurr in the late 1980s there had been no history of public art making in the community, no predominant stylistic conventions. There was a set of rules about what could be portrayed and by whom as elsewhere in Arnhem Land, but not so many rules as to how. The content of Sambo Burra Burra's paintings is major Yirritja Ancestral Dreaming stories but at Ngukurr the making of the paintings was divorced from the ritual domain. Instead it was made in the art room, along with the T-shirts with an eye to the market and the European viewer. This freedom from the constraints of ritual and the use of Western materials instead of ochres and bark had a liberating effect on Sambo Burra Burra's style from the beginning. It is as if he had consciously needed to invent a new style of painting appropriate to this context. The stories and ritual themes were the same but their execution had to be different and bold. The creativity and adaptability that is inherent in Aboriginal artists, the negotiations with notions of 'tradition' and innovation was evident very early on in the Beat St art centre.

Sambo Burra Burra began his painting career in 1987 when the NT open college introduced fabric printing and painting courses into the community. Instead of focussing on printing fabric and T-shirts, both Ginger Riley and Sambo Burra Burra decided they wanted to paint on canvas. In fact they were so keen to get underway that they both started by applying screen printing inks directly onto bright, highly coloured lengths of lawn curtain material with a brush, which, according to Gale Duell, "was the cheapest material and screen printing ink you could find". This was all they had until the canvases arrived and perhaps this act of painting with saturated screen printing inks on vivid lime green, bright red and yellow curtain material may, in itself, have influenced the early inclination towards bright colouration that typifies most art produced in the community.

Sambo Burra Burra's first attempts at painting in unfamiliar media 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. Right from the beginning it is apparent that he was interested in using strong complementary colours and a bold, figurative style. One of these first paintings features a large green figure straddled on either side by boomerangs and ritual objects. The background and objects are infilled with rarrk. The figure is reminiscent of the pose of the Devil Devil, a subject that dominates his later works.

After this assured start Sambo Burra Burra began painting a great number of large and small canvases using acrylic paint. Along with all the other fledgling Ngukurr artists, he worked in a blaze of excitement and energy and paintings flooded into Beat St. In this work the ambivalence and tension created by the control of the Arnhem Land tradition and the wild abandon offered in the Beat St environment with art adviser John Nelson, is evident. There were no restrictions on colour or scale and the artists were actively encouraged to experiment.

As with other artists from Arnhem Land Sambo Burra Burra painted the same set of subjects over and over again with what Taylor calls 'underlying organising systems'. He likens these to "syntactical or grammatical rules" for reproducing the same subject matter or story. (p8) Ancestor's actions exist in different spatio-temporal contexts and artists depict these stories within a set of rules which Taylor suggests are both enabling and constraining. (p9) Sambo Burra Burra worked in the figurative tradition, incorporating many forms of infill and other decorative devices including dotting, dashing and detailed rarrk in bright colours on canvas. This first body of work, painted in 1987, marks a period of sustained experimentation and innovation in which he very quickly adapts traditions learned earlier to new media and also to a new place and context. Overall his body of work presents us with an unprecedented example of stylistic diversity and innovation.

There are other freedoms to consider when a new medium is introduced. In his early life Sambo Burra Burra had painted in ceremonial contexts on bodies and on coffins in ochres and on bark. Painting in bright acrylic colours for a European market in a community removed from his homelands was a very different experience. Marcia Langton (Charlesworth p136) quotes Eric Michaels as he talks about the effect of the new colours on Papunya artists at the time of their introduction to the media.

Desert Aboriginal ground, body, implement, or rock art employs earth pigments, animal products and feathers. Each material...retains its association with its source, origin and locale, and brings into the work as elements of its meaning...Even the words for the elements used may signify all of the associations: red ochre from Karrku Mountain is called karrku, which may signify generally 'red'....But with acrylics colour is the only basis for differentiation. This radical difference in the semiology of materials can take some getting used to, but in the end,

may free the artist in another sense. Presenting new choices unavailable to the *bricoleur*...

The same could be said about the ways that Arnhem Land artists have connections to their materials. For Kunwinku ochres such as dalek, the white ochre shit of the Rainbow serpent, embodies its power and can be 'dangerous'. Acrylics are not inherently powerful. In this new context Sambo Burra Burra's colours are entirely liberated from any referent. There appears to be little consistency in the way he uses colours to represent specific subjects. He does however seem to understand the qualities inherent in colour combinations and juxtapositions to create certain effects. He experiments endlessly with this new power of unfettered colour to produce phenomena. He was after affect rather than using colour symbolically. He is trying to create a feeling in the viewer.

I would now like to look at a number of specific paintings which explore how Sambo Burra Burra has translated some Arnhem Land traditions to Ngukurr and how he has used colour and crosshatching to imbue his work with Ancestral Power. There are numerous examples of works that span Sambo Burra Burra's career that feature the Goanna and the Cyprus Pine. The Sandridge Goanna is one of the main ceremonial characters and an important totemic dreaming track that passes through the Roper region. The artist often paints the Cyprus Pine, or *Karnki*, in association with the Goanna who, as one story recounts "...was climbing a Cyprus pine when small protruding branches of the tree broke its claws". It also hunts in the shade at the bottom of the trees. (Telstra Book p 28)



Cyprus Pine 1995 (130 x 295 cm), is a monumental, almost three metre high painting held by the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT. The work depicts a large central tree in skeletal form with bare limbs branching from the trunk,

which is banded in alternating sections of yellow and blue. It is highlighted this way in many of Burra Burra Burra's works and suggests the dual role of the trunk both as tree and also in its role as log coffin 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. The background infill is stitch like dashes rather than dots or rarrk.

Although it is impossible to be absolute about the artist's intentions I think by looking at the composition, the scale and the striking use of colour opposites, it is clear that Sambo Burra Burra intended to imbue this work with the notion of Ancestral Power and beauty. The Yolngu, as Morphy has shown, invest their paintings with power by the use of detailed crosshatching turning works from dull outlines to brilliant fields of shimmering energy. (Morphy 1989) For Yolngu these representations of Ancestral figures are seen as emanating directly from the Ancestral past and successful paintings hold this power within them. Morphy describes the creation of a painting from the rough outline or dull stage through to the application of detailed and fine crosshatching which give the painting *bir'yun*, its brilliance. He says, "It is the quality of brilliance that is associated in Yolngu art with Ancestral power and with beauty". (Morphy p28) The concept of *bir'yun* is associated with a 'flash of light, a shimmering sensation or a vibration. It is this sense that I believe Sambo Burra Burra has understood innately the power of complementary colours to create vibration and an oscillating surface. He uses colour instead of crosshatching to create this sense, although in many paintings he uses both. In this instance the visual oscillation is caused by the strong contrast of the saturated royal blue and orangey yellow of the striped tree trunks.

The creation of a sense of vibration can be explained by colour theory. Complementary colour as Clulow, (1972, 36) notes is hard to define but complementary colours produce black when combined and provide maximum colour contrast which, in the case of two really brightly saturated complementary colours, is usually glaring. Some complementary combinations are more potent than others. For example Verity (1980, 92) notes

Blue and yellow represent the extreme of chromatic contrast, since at full saturation these two complementary colours contrast in both hue and value, yellow being the lightest and blue the darkest of hues. Red and green complementaries are, by comparison of equal value, and for that reason, visually more confusing.

Other types of visual sensations can be brought by the manipulation of different complementary colours. The notion of colour fatigue occurs when one stares at a bright colour for a while then shuts the eyes and then stares at a white paper, the colour that appears is the complementary of the original colour. The clash of strongly contrasting saturated colours may cause the objects depicted to vibrate. (Clulow, 1972)

The use of contrasting bands of saturated blue and yellow in *Cyprus Pine* creates a feeling of vibration without the need for fine cross hatching. The other colours of red, dark magenta and a tertiary green on the lighter blue background do not destabilise the picture but are used as analogous or harmonising colours to create balance. Always with Sambo Burra Burra if there is a complementary contrast set up there are other harmonising colours introduced. He creates images that 'jump out at you', that vibrate and that command attention through both scale and colour manipulation.

For Yolngu the most sacred paintings are abstract. Sambo Burra Burra is painting in the figurative genre and I believe uses colour to create a sense of power. Ginger Riley also did this. In 1996 he painted *Ngak Ngak*, the sea eagle, in a bright lime green on a hot orangey red background. When asked why he painted the usually white sea eagle in these bright colours he said that was because it was beautiful but also because it made him look strong. It gave Ngak Ngak power. (Ryan) What makes this green so powerful is its contrast with its complement or opposite. The bird jumps off the canvas.

There is another way that Sambo Burra Burra created a sense of vibration and that is with composition as well as colour. Returning to Morphy's discussion of Yolngu painting, which he calls *miny'tji*, (1989, 24) he notes that this term refers to "two separate components...design and colour"... (the term) can also be used to refer to any regularly occurring pattern or design which is natural or cultural in origin". It would appear that in some paintings Sambo Burra Burra uses the notion of 'design' to also create vibrating optical effects. Whether these are 'natural' or 'cultural' in the sense that Morphy is referring to I am not sure but it would seem that the artist is still exploring ways of creating the sense of authority in his pictures.



The most extreme examples of this type of painting occur from 1995-6. *Goanna and Cyprus Pine* from 1995 uses a symmetrical composition and optical repetition of forms and light and dark colour to create the sense of vibration much in the way that op art does. The trunks of the Cyprus pine have been formatted into a repeat pattern, which borders the painting and cuts it in two, both horizontally and vertically, giving a strongly geometric quality. The branches, contrasting deep blue and mustard, radiate from these, almost covering the ground. The Goanna tails mimic the texture, colour and dynamic form of the tree creating an extremely strong graphic structure where

all the significant elements radiate from a central point. The two purple snakes are embedded in the vertical axes of the tree branches. The dark pink background, again contrasts with the mustard colour of the branches. In this painting Sambo Burra Burra is representing ceremony which is active and alive with power.

Sambo Burra Burra does not use these devices all the time but he uses an extraordinary number of colour combinations to achieve diverse results. He uses primary and secondary palettes as well as tertiaries. Sometimes setting up the glaring contrasts but also very unusual combinations of subtle pastel colours with strong saturated primaries. The most common device that he uses is a generalised sense of luminosity, where he uses combinations of very bright colour on dark backgrounds. At one point in 1987 fluoro paint was introduced because he wanted the brightest possible pigments. (interview John Nelson).

The movement and brilliance he achieves through the dynamic use of bright colours is augmented by the more traditional Yolngu way of achieving such affects, namely rarrk. Sambo Burra Burra uses rarrk styles in a number of ways, including in the manner of Western Arnhem Land, as a design element rather than having any reference to particular country. Taylor (2005 p 192) describes some tendencies in the use of rarrk in Western Arnhem Land,

[The] way of varying infill...emphasizes the way that Kuninjku art is currently diverging from the art of eastern Arnhem Land. In eastern Arnhem Land cross-hatching elements are closely integrated with clan design elements that artists are constrained not to change. In the west, cross-hatching has become a decorative element and variations in patterns are one of a number of ways that artists lend vitality to their work.

Different types of coloured cross hatching have always been an integral part of Sambo Burra Burra's paintings. It can be seen in the background and on the ritual dilly bags in many of Sambo Burra Burra's *Devil Devil* paintings, a significant theme from the late 1990s. Also called Nagaran or Nakaran, the Devil Devil is another major component of the Yabaduruwa ceremony. In this region the Devil Devil is a 'giant man' or 'sorcery man' with a wide range of powers. He is a dangerous and malign being who is responsible for killing large numbers of people at the outset of his travels near Croker Island. He is depicted with spines or barbs protruding from his elbows, waist and knees as well as with attenuated fingers and toes. The sharp projections represent dangerous 'points of destructive power' and may recall images from further north in Arnhem Land where such projections signify the force of lightning. He is therefore an image of power and Sambo Burra Burra represents him as such in many guises. In fact his range of Devil Devil paintings shows an intellectual pleasure in presenting all the permutations of the Devil Devil as well as using colour and form to delineate his character and fearfulness.



In *Devil Devil* (1998) he is surrounded by multi-coloured bones. His body, which is a livid green with a yellow dashing infill, dominates the composition as always. The figure has six fingered talons signifying sorcery and his bones and internal organs are a reddish brown with white outline and dashing. The figure is surrounded by floating bones with bright yellow, pastel turquoise, mauve and ochre ends. The strongly coloured figure stands in stark contrast from the red, pink and white of the finely cross-hatched background. The cross hatching is done in sections which gives a more lively and unruly quality to the background. This is one of the examples where Sambo Burra Burra has combined a wide variety of coloured and textural elements into a complex whole. Pastels are next to tertiaries 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 area of flat colour. It all works to create a sense of power unease. This sense of visual dynamism can also be seen in the art of some Kunwingku artists ie whose innovative use of different textures etc is similar.

This use of colour to create a feeling of unease can be seen in many of his Devil Devil paintings, for example *Cripple Devil Devil* (2000) which has an illuminating story from Sambo.

Cripple fella this Devil Devil. Somebody been fighting him. They cripple him. He can fly. That's how he sees the country. He can take baby from camp when he wants meat. He can kill that piccaninny by biting that nose. He plays didgeridoo - his own song. Some people have seen him. He's a clever man. That dilly bag near his ear - it's the same as telephone - he can hear everything that way.

It shows the supernatural and particularly malign side of the Devil Devil that will kill babies for food and his ability to trick people. The colouration has unusual and uneasy combinations. Again the figure is a combination of livid green, blue and yellow. An unsettling and frightening figure made more so by the use of discordant, almost bilious colours.



Very few major Aboriginal artists have managed to paint rarrk convincingly in acrylics on canvas. There are many reasons why this has not been a common form, a major one being intervention from art advisers and the market demanding the appearance of 'authenticity'. Rarrk on canvas was deemed inauthentic and in the realm of 'tourist art'. Sambo Burra Burra developed a style of painting which transcended these rubrics. He experimented with many forms of rarrk in this early period as both background patterning and infill and he developed it on a monumental scale in acrylic painting. Sambo Burra Burra called on many sources for stylistic inspiration from all over Arnhem Land from Oenpelli in the west right across the top of Arnhem Land and into the central region, as well as Groote Eylandt. His art could be seen as a localized form of hybridity, combining elements from many Arnhem Land traditions that he became familiar with in his travels. Reacting to the freedom offered in the art centre at Ngukurr, combined with his innate sense of innovation and experimentation, he crafted these elements into his own distinctive style.

It is clear that Sambo Burra Burra used colour and form in a number of concrete and unique ways of to achieve specific ends. He used all the colours available to him, creating complex pictures with a never-ending variety and colour combinations. A true innovator especially in the context of Arnhem Land art, Sambo Burra Burra tragically passed away in December 2005 at the height of his powers. He left an intriguing legacy, which is only now beginning to be fully appreciated.