Cath Bowdler

looking forward looking back

in the East Kimberly

My strongest impression of Peggy Patrick, Gija artist and matriarch of the Jirrawun mob, an image that is indelibly etched on my consciousness, came at the end of a dance performance at 24HR Art in September 2000. In the sweltering gallery, packed to capacity with an Art Award crowd, the Neminuwarlin Dance group, an off-shoot of Jirrawun, performed the closing of the *Two Laws, One Big Spirit* show. This was an excerpt from the moving Joonba (corroboree) that had opened the Telstra Art Award the previous night, the Bedford Downs Massacre story, which has been told in many guises by this group over the last five years. Peggy came to the front of the red ochre dancing square, the tracks of tears etched into her clay-stained face, and asked us to listen, to believe this story and to respect the notion of 'two laws'. It was the most open-hearted and direct plea, which left many visibly moved to tears. Everyone knew they had experienced something significant.

ABOVE: Peggy Patrick at Mistake Creek boab massacre site. Photo Peter Eve Courtesy Jirrawun Arts. **BELOW: Peggy Patrick** *Mistake Creek Massacre Boab* 2004, ochre on canvas, 10 x 120 x 120 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney. © Peggy Patrick/Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2005.

This plea and the desire to tell the stories of their country have resonated in all the subsequent work of this unique Aboriginal organisation. The context of that performance, marrying visual art, dance and inspirational rhetoric, has been one of the hallmarks of the Jirrawun Artists Cooperative operating out of Kununarra, one of the many things that sets this group of charismatic Aboriginal artists apart. As traditional people from the East Kimberley, they have been at the forefront of contemporary political debates and engaged with the outside world from their remote outpost in a number of unusual and ground-breaking ways.

The self-determined Jirrawun group includes some of Australia's best known artists; the enigmatic, 83 year-old guru, Paddy Bedford, whose favourite things apart from painting are Winfield Blues and fried kidneys; the laconic, cerebral cowboy and Vice President, Rusty Peters; the reserved, authoritative President Freddie Timms;o the passionate, outspoken Peggy Patrick and the quiet songman Rammy Rammsay. They started painting in the minimal colour-field style made famous by Rover Thomas, a relative of the Jirrawun artists, but they have each developed their own distinctive styles and concerns. This group and their artistic director Tony Oliver have created a particular symbiosis, and in doing so, have been mythologised, almost like rock stars, by some of the country's best writers, garnering accolades and many influential supporters along the way.

I first came across these artists at the NT University (now Charles Darwin University) in 1997 when they had undertaken a collaborative agreement with the art school where they painted on site for a period, interacting with the students and ultimately instituting a trip to their country. It was the first of many Jirrawun partnerships that sought cultural exchange. One of the defining aspects of this group is their desire not to be ghettoised in the purely Aboriginal art sphere and to take their art and stories to the wider world.

The formation of the group has been written about before, most recently by Nicholas Rothwell but it is worth reiterating. It started with the dream of Freddie Timms and his late uncle the Gija elder and visionary Timmy Timms. They wanted to build, in the heart of the Kimberley, a viable community based around a working cattle station run by Aboriginal stockmen, with school, art studio and dance ground. Rothwell summed up this ideal as 'nursery of culture and memory and a foundation for economic independence'.[1]

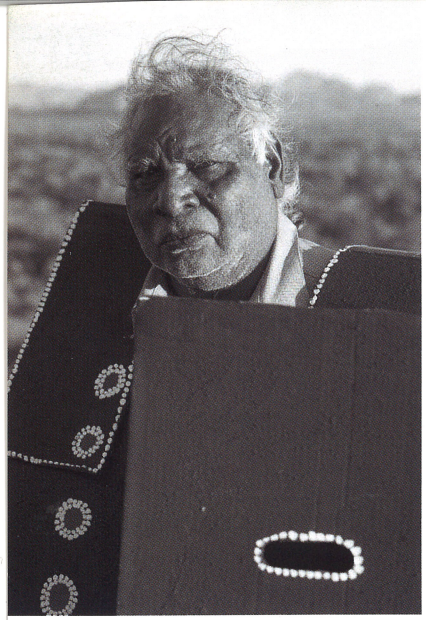
The group has been nurtured and helped by a great 'enabler' Tony Oliver, who oversaw the development of a totally different kind of Aboriginal art organisation. Timms asked Oliver to come to the Kimberley to help establish a business structure for local artists, which led to the formation of the Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation in 1998. Jirrawun, which means 'one', or 'unity' in Gija, is not like other groups or art centres in that it has no government funding as Oliver was instrumental in creating fruitful philanthropic, pro bono partnerships with the corporate and private sector, along with Argyle Diamonds and Rio Tinto who operate on Gija land. Timms' vision included creating a market economy that stood on its own feet and was 'not dependent on the poison of welfare and missionary paternalism'.[2] The group's eschewing of government funding has enabled them to act independently. This, combined with Oliver's top-shelf connections in the art world and the artists' willingness to experiment has made for a particularly fertile and experimental alliance.

It is in the art and performance arenas in which Timms' dreams have been most fully realised. The artists have had a string of sell-out shows in major galleries throughout the country and have developed performance pieces and video works seen by large metropolitan audiences.

The *Two Laws, One Big Spirit* show is a good example of how these artists are willing to work outside the sphere of safety and the confines of a purely Indigenous art world. The exhibition presented a cross-cultural dialogue between Rusty Peters and white artist Peter Adsett. Rusty and Peter painted 14 canvases alternately over a period of fourteen days at Adsett's property outside of Darwin. During this process they engaged in contemplation and discussion about conceptual and formal issues to do with painting. Rusty depicted his country, his ancestry, his entire cosmology, as well as abstract ideas to do with the meeting of black and white culture and the formation of language. The exhibition was seen as controversial in the Indigenous art world where collaborations are often viewed with suspicion. However, it toured nationally and highlighted Jirrawun's concern with two-way dialogue and reconciliation.

This was to be the first of many shows in which the Jirrawun mob challenged the art world and engaged in national debates, presenting their art as a testament to their lives and history.

ABOVE: Rammy Ramsay *Warlawoon Country 1, 2 & 3*, 2004, ochre on canvas, each 180 x 150 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney. Photo: Paul Green.



Blood on the Spinifex, curated by Oliver, exposed what had been a 'secret history' of the colonisation of Gija land, presenting stories of 'the killing times' that occurred in the East Kimberley between the 1880s and the 1920s, as well as stories of spiritual strength and connection to place. This show at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne in 2002-3 presented canvases of raw power and authority which referenced specific massacre sites related to the artists and their families whose narratives have never been recorded elsewhere. Robert Nelson reviewing the exhibition in *The Age* wrote: 'Part of the shock of the stories lies in the modesty of the voice, the quiet economy of the storyline, the sober lack of sentimental or rhetorical elaboration. The simplicity of the accounts makes for credibility.'[3]

This exhibition articulated a direct rebuttal to the revisionist history of Keith Windschuttle. When former Governor-General Sir William Deane, on his last official engagement, expressed his personal grief and regret at the Mistake Creek Massacre site, the Jirrawun mob became implicated in the national debate in a quite specific way. Tackling this issue head on, Peggy Patrick was the only traditional Aboriginal voice quoted in the book *Whitewash* (2003), an academic demolition of Windschuttle's arguments.

At the same time an important exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, tellingly titled *True Stories: Art of the East Kimberley*, presented the Jirrawun artists' work in the context of the wider art movement from the Kimberley.

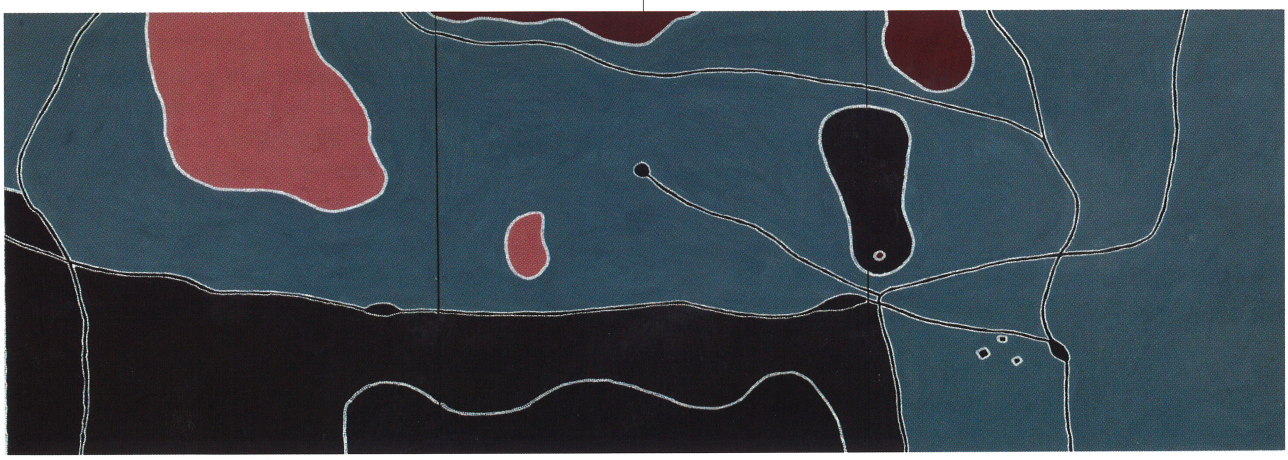
In tandem with these shows Jirrawun Artists Cooperative worked on another major project with the Gija people; the Joonba *Fire Fire Burning Bright*, which was first unveiled during the Perth Festival in February 2002 and launched the Melbourne Festival in October 2002. It presented the Bedford Downs massacre of Gija and Worla people during World War I as a theatrical spectacle, unlike anything produced in this country before. It amounted to a sophisticated and stylised, multi-media version of a traditional Joonba, which involved a large section of the Gija community and a host of other artists and supporters.

It is not only in the political arena where this group pushes boundaries. Their stance alongside the Aboriginal art market has led them to engage with European traditions, paradigms and references. Encouraged by Oliver, this well-travelled group of artists has self-consciously engaged with tropes of Australian painting and nationalism. The appropriation of the iconic Ned Kelly image by Freddie Timms in the 1999 painting of the same name came about when the artist was visiting Melbourne for an exhibition. He saw Ned Kelly's armour in a museum as well as the Nolans at Heide. Timms became fascinated by this story and its resonance with his own family history. (Timms' grandmother was with Major, an Aboriginal bushranger, when he was shot by police.) In Timms' *Ned Kelly* painting the iconic black figure floats on a simple grey ground, the eye slit and rivets of the armour outlined in double rows of white dotting. His is a poignant figure, an absence staring back at us.

The conscious appropriation and translation of this image by a traditional Aboriginal artist is unusual in the world of Indigenous art. It is quite different to the accidental similarities between the late works of Emily Kngwarre and Abstract Expressionism. This tendency to consciously quote other art forms points to the dynamism of this group and highlights their desire to evolve artistically on their own terms.

The latest Jirrawun exhibition, *Beyond the Frontier,* at Sherman Galleries in Sydney is testimony to the artists' continuing engagement with political and conceptual issues. The show is full of monumental works with serious content. The elegiac, more painterly Paddy Bedfords are like variations on a theme. The musical analogy has been used before in reference to his work, and these images of his country, distilled, subtle and

ABOVE: Freddie Timms as Ned Kelly. Photo Peter Eve courtesy Jirrawun Arts. **Freddie Timms** *Blackfella Creek* 2004, ochre on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney. © Freddy Timms/Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2005.



sensuous, echo the sublime economy of Bach's Cello Suites. Freddie Timms' impressive aerial maps of country are less minimal and spare. Lines representing roads and creeks snake across the ochre surface of the canvas, intersecting and moving on. *Blackfella Creek* (2004), a monumental triptych represents the place where Major, the Aboriginal bushranger, was killed.

Rusty Peters' giant canvas is a meditation on 'culture' and the different ways white and black society think about it. Titled *Gamerre - What's This Museum* (2004), the triptych represents his country in one section whilst the other larger section represents a white wall with smaller images of Indigenous tools, ceremonial implements as in a museum. Rusty is commenting on the fact that while white people go to museums to get culture, his culture is in his country and not separate from his everyday interactions with the world.

Rammy Ramsay's ethereal, painterly canvases, painted wet on wet in ochre, represent *Ngarranggarni*, the great force, the essence of his country rather than its physical manifestation. Although these paintings also resemble 'high modernist' Abstract Expressionism, they are not directly referencing it and are not non-objective paintings.

Peggy Patrick's *Mistake Creek Massacre Boab* (2004) is a massive work comprising of 10 facsimiles of the iconic image, first seen in *Blood on the Spinifex*. The repetition of the image, each a different colour combination, recalls an Andy Warhol series. This time the similarity is not a coincidence. Tony Oliver introduced Peggy to Warhol's work because of her preference for a more graphic style of working. She immediately responded to his notion of series with subtle variations. As in Warhol's dark disaster series, these images also represent a tragedy. This tree with its spider-like limbs was the only remaining witness to the horrors of that massacre. Here repeated and reiterated on a massive scale is Peggy's retort to those who don't believe her story. Eloquent and forceful, Peggy is again asking us to listen and believe.

1 Nicholas Rothwell, 'Beyond the Boab – Diamonds from the Dreamtime', *The Australian*, April, 2003.
2 F. Kofod and Anthony Oliver, Jirrawun Artists Cooperative History Document.
3 Robert Nelson, 'Aboriginal tribal art tells hard story', *The Age*, Jan, 2003.

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TOP: Paddy Bedford, Jirrawun Studio. Photo Giancarlo Mazzella courtesy Jirrawun Arts. **LEFT: Paddy Bedford** *Mad Gap* 2004, ochre on canvas. 122 x1 35 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.