

Mumeka to Milmilngkan: Innovation in Kurulk art in Canberra

CATH BOWDLER



Jimmy Njiminjuma, *Ngalyod*, 2001, natural ochres and pigments on bark. Private collection, Sydney.

Jimmy [Njiminjuma] and I have changed the *rarrk* [cross-hatching] and started to paint in a new style. Jimmy told me: 'we leave the old fashion way of painting and we get new *rarrk*'. I said 'yes, we can change it and we've changed it'. We are new people...¹

This enthusiastic affirmation from John Mawurndjul highlights one of the major themes of the exhibition *Mumeka to Milmilngkan: Innovation in Kurulk art*, currently on show at the Australian National University's Drill Hall Gallery, which is the exploration

of innovation within the constraints and conventions of Kuninjku bark painting from Western Arnhem Land. *Mumeka to Milmilngkan* presents a unique window on a group of Kuninjku artists, specifically the descendents of Anchor Kulunba: three important artist brothers of the Kurulk clan, Jimmy Njiminjuma, John Mawurndjul and James Iyuna, and their extended families. The exhibition follows their artistic trajectories and the distinctive nature of their stylistic innovations within the continuing legacy of Kuninjku art.

Mumeka to Milmilngkan is aesthetically and conceptually rich, coming from a long and serious engagement between the curators and the artists, their work, and their country. It builds on the stunning *Crossing country* exhibition curated by Hetti Perkins for the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2004, of which John Mawurndjul was the undisputed star. Mawurndjul is currently one of Australia's most famous artists internationally, and has recently returned from installing his work in the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris; last year his retrospective exhibition *Rarrk – John Mawurndjul: A journey through time in northern Australia* was seen at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland, and this year it travelled to the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, Germany.*

The curators of *Mumeka to Milmilngkan* – Jon Altman, Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, and Apolline Kohen, Arts Director at Maningrida Arts and Culture in Western Arnhem Land – were advisers to *Crossing country* and to *Rarrk – John Mawurndjul* in Europe. Altman and Mawurndjul have had a long professional collaboration and friendship, dating back to 1979, and this exhibition was initiated in part

by Mawurndjul's desire to reciprocate Altman's numerous visits to his country, the Maningrida region. And although Mawurndjul has now visited Sydney and Melbourne a number of times, he has been to Canberra only twice, in the 1980s. *Mumeka to Milmilngkan* is also a tribute to Mawurndjul's brother Jimmy Njiminjuma, who mentored him and who passed away in 2004, shortly after *Crossing country* opened.

The three brothers, all members of the Kurulk clan, lived together at Mumeka outstation when they started painting in the 1970s. This exhibition challenges the



John Mawurndjul, *Bambil*, 1979, natural ochres and pigments on bark. Private collection, Canberra.

idea that all clan members are constrained to paint in the same way, despite the practice of families living and working together sharing skills and developing particular repertoires of subject matter.

Jimmy Njiminjuma, John Mawurndjul and James Iyuna paint a wide variety of subject matter. One of the most prominent themes in Arnhem Land art is *Ngalyod*, the Rainbow Serpent, and in the brothers' range of interpretations of *Ngalyod* one can chart changes and developments in their painting. Representations of such ancestral figures are seen as emanating directly from the ancestral past, and successful paintings convey this power. In this exhibition the earliest depictions of the Rainbow Serpent – from the late 19070s and early 1980s – are small barks that feature the lithe body of the snake on stark ochre backgrounds. In Jimmy Njiminjuma's *Rainbow Serpent with buffalo head and horns* 1980 the transformational aspects of the being are clearly seen, as the sinuous pointed buffalo horns overlap and echo the movement of the snake's body.** John Mawurndjul's *Ngalyod and the Yawkyawk girls* (late 1970s) fills up more of the bark as the body of the snake folds back on itself and intertwines, passing the figures of the *Yawkyawks*

that float on the ochre background, as if suspended in water. A later bark from James Iyuna, *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent* 1991 is a much larger work. This imposing version features the rampant body of the snake rearing up with its forked tongue extended. The bands of Iyuna's distinctive diamond shaped *rarrk* form a complex and mesmerising pattern as they fight between a sense of order and unruliness, which is never tight or predictable.

In 1989, for complex interpersonal, local political and social reasons, Jimmy Njiminjuma moved to a new outstation he established with his family at Kurrurildul. John Mawurndjul moved to Milmilngkan shortly afterwards, leaving James Iyuna and his family at Mumeka. From this point onwards their works begin to diverge, and travel in more individual directions. Nonetheless there are still many commonalities. The later works of all three are on a larger scale, and there is a tendency towards more ambiguity between figure and ground as the figures occupy more of the surface and their complexity increases. In Jimmy Njiminjuma's *Ngalyod* 2001 the figure fills the space almost entirely, its head and crocodile tail are the only clearly discernable features in a complex, almost abstract jumble of sections. In fact, there are two serpents intertwined – the smaller almost invisible as it merges with the body of the other, creating a dense interplay of patterning and fine *rarrk*. Compared to it James Iyuna's *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent* 2001 is more controlled. The two serpents are easier to discern, as are the lily pads that grow from their backs, which provide a recurring organic device echoed throughout the painting. The *rarrk* here, formed into Iyuna's trademark diamond patterning, is finer and more restrained.

In the artists' later works the frameworks of the paintings have become more complex, with numerous asymmetrical divisions between which undulations or waves of fine *rarrk* are painted. Individual styles are evident where the *rarrk* is delineated by different colours and in distinct patterns and rhythms within these divisions. Luke Taylor notes in his catalogue essay for *Mumeka to Milmilngkan* that Kuninjku also invest their paintings with power by their use of *rarrk*, which forms brilliant fields of shimmering energy and an oscillating energy.²

And so, finally, one is drawn to the exquisite *Mardayin* paintings by John Mawurndjul at the end of the main Drill Hall gallery space. In these paintings of ceremonial designs used in the *Mardayin* ceremony Mawurndjul has defined his own style. They appear to be entirely abstract renderings, yet one can see their genesis in the earlier barks. Of course these paintings are not abstract in the western sense – they are a refined synthesis of ancestral power and ceremony in reference to specific places. They represent a general move from the figurative to the abstract, where figures merge into landscape, and what surfaces is the energy of country created through the generative acts of ancestors. In *Mardayin design at Kakodbebuldi* 2002 undulating fields

George Tjungurrayi 183x153cm (detail)

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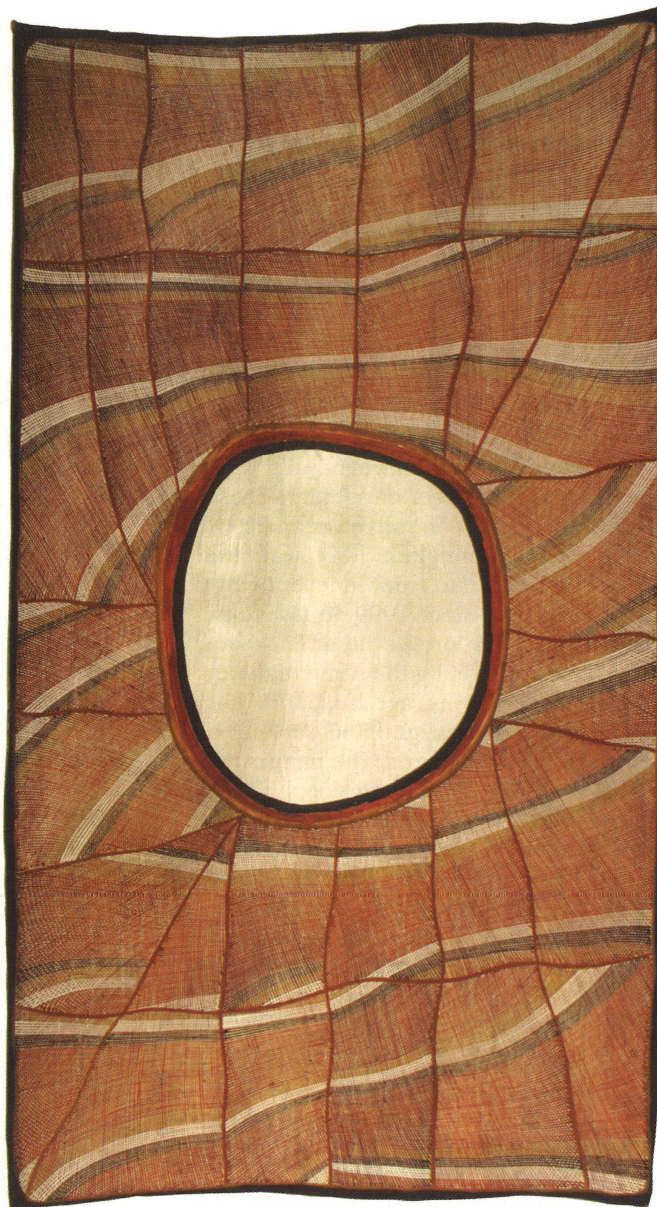
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John Mawurndjul, *Mardayin design at Kakodbebuldi*, 2002, natural ochres and pigments on bark. Laverty Collection, Sydney.

of the finest *rarrk* swoop across the bark, delineated by irregular sectioning. A series of sacred waterholes where fire burns punctuate the centre of the painting. This, like many of John Mawurndjul's later barks, which feature quite high key orange ochres, is a work of great power and aesthetic beauty.



Kay Lindjuwanga, *Billabong at Dilebang*, 2004, natural ochres and pigments on bark. Private collection, Maningrida.

The charting of the development of painting styles of Njiminjuma, Mawurndjul and Iyuna over a thirty-year period is one facet of *Mumeka to Milmilngkan* which, like the intertwining body of the *Ngaylod*, weaves a complex and multi-layered path between different places, family relations and gender roles in Kuninjku society and shows in fascinating detail how these interplays have become fluid and mutable in response to living in different places and having a keen understanding of the art market. In some ways it is the self-conscious understanding of the demands of the market that has set these artists apart.

One of the most important revelations of this exhibition, and a driving force for art advisor Apolline Kohen, has been the development and encouragement of a new generation of artists, particularly women artists. Kohen notes in her catalogue essay that 'traditionally Kuninjku women were not independent painters and actually rarely painted', but since the year 2000 there has been a shift in gender relations in Kuninjku society that has embraced women artists.³ The layout of the Drill Hall Gallery with its large central space and two discrete side rooms, lends itself to the ambition of this exhibition, and

each of the smaller spaces is devoted to art from a specific outstation made by relatives of one of the three brothers, many of them women.

I started to paint at Mumeka and then kept going when we moved to Milmilngkan. *Balang* [John Mawurndjul] was teaching me for a long time but not anymore. I paint on my own now.

Kay Lindjuwanga.⁴

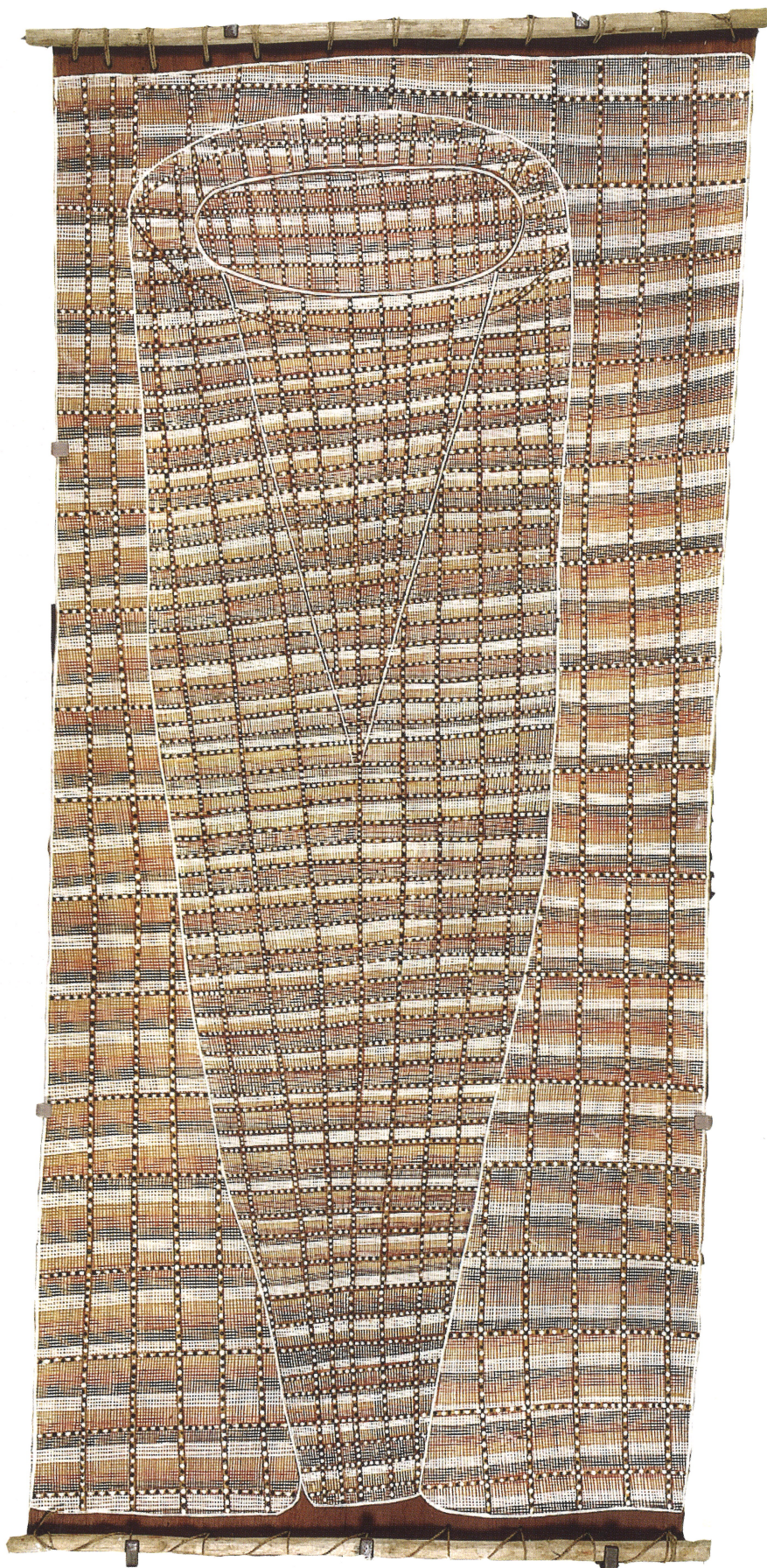
One of the side galleries is dominated by the work of Kay Lindjuwanga, John Mawurndjul's wife, and their two younger daughters. These paintings relate to sites near their outstation Milmilngkan. Kay was the first of the women to paint independently and has done so since 1999. In *Mardayin design* 2004 she proves herself to be a superb painter. Using the same high key orange tonalities as her husband, she creates waves of slightly looser *rarrk*, which traverse the bark. The painting is punctuated by a dramatic loop, which appears to contain a body of water and creates a strong graphic element that distinguishes the painting. Most of the work in this gallery is similar to John Mawurndjul's later, more abstract works, and it is interesting that these days even young women are enabled to paint 'Mardayin-style' paintings.

My father first taught me how to paint. I was watching him... Now it's my turn to teach others. I have been teaching my husband and I am now teaching my brother Seymour, sister Aileena and Badligo [youngest brother]...

Irenie Ngalinba⁵

The other side gallery is largely devoted to the work of Jimmy Njiminjuma's descendents who paint at Kurrurldul outstation. One of the standout artists in this room is the twenty-seven year-old Irenie Ngalinba. Her *Ngaylod, Rainbow Serpent* 2004 is an ambitious almost three-metre high bark depicting the totemic ancestor so often painted by her father. Her distinctive interpretation is bold and imposing and features straight bands of *rarrk* that cut across the form of the snake. She also paints the *Wakwak* or Crow Dreaming associated with her country. Melba Gunjarrwanga's *Mandjabu, fish trap* 2006 is another great work in this room, and echoes her husband, James Iyuna's 1999 painting of the same name, one of the most beautiful paintings in this exhibition.

The smaller rooms highlight two important aspects of *Mumeka to Milmilngkan*: the strength of the next



Melba Gunjarrwanga *Mandjabu, fish trap*, 2006, natural ochres and pigments on bark. Australian National University Art Collection, Canberra.



James Iyuna, *Mandjabu fish trap*, 1999, natural ochres and pigments on bark. Private collection, Maningrida.

generation of artists who have sought inspiration and training from their fathers, husbands, mothers and one another, and the importance of outstations, where the social dimension of Kuninjku painting has resulted in the development of 'schools' of painting on the artist's own country away from the humbug of Maningrida. It is unfortunate that the Federal Government has decreed outstations such as these, which are at the heart of this cultural regeneration, to be non-viable. As Jeremy Eccles stated in a *Canberra Times* preview, 'perhaps [the outstations]' best case lies in this exhibition'.⁶ I firmly agree, as the hope and optimism for the next generation of Kurulk artists that is evident in this exhibition is worth its weight in gold.

In some ways the presentation of *Mumeka to Milmilngkan* might be seen as overly ethnographic in approach, with its emphasis on family lineage and place, discussed in detail in the catalogue, which also includes contextual information about specific practices and modes of production of the art. Yet I believe it is not possible to understand these artists' achievements without an understanding of their conditions of production. It is in the way that artists tread the fine line between the constraints of subject matter and individual style, and negotiate the culturally specific forms of their art, that their true accomplishments lie. This exhibition conveys this complexity with clarity and with rigour.

Notes

- 1 John Mawurndjul, interviewed by Apolline Kohen, in Kohen 'From the artists' in Jon Altman (ed.) *Mumeka to Milmilngkan: Innovation in Kurulk Art* (exhibition catalogue), ANU, p 13
- 2 Luke Taylor, 'Negotiating form among Kuninjku Bark Painters', in Jon Altman (ed.) *ibid* p 43.
- 3 Apolline Kohen, 'A new generation of artists and the freedom to paint', in Jon Altman (ed.) *ibid* p 52.
- 4 Kay Lindjuwanga, interviewed by Apolline Kohen, in Kohen 'From the artists', *op cit* p 13.
- 5 Irenie Ngalinba interviewed by Apolline Kohen, in Kohen *ibid* p 14
- 6 Jeremy Eccles, in the *Canberra Times*, Times 2, 1 November 2006, p6

Mumeka to Milmilngkan: Innovation in Kurulk art opened at the Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, Canberra on 2 November 2006, and is on display until 17 December.

Cath Bowdler is an artist, writer and curator based between Darwin and Canberra. She is currently completing doctoral studies at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University, Canberra.

*Roger Benjamin's review of *Crossing country: The alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* was published in AMA #176, December 2004-February 2005, pp 12-15; Melinda Hinkson's review of *Rarrk - John Mawurndjul: A journey through time in northern Australia* was in AMA #185, November 2005, pp 14-19.

**See AMA # 195, November 2006, Artnotes ACT for an image of Jimmy Njiminjuma, *Ngalyod*, 1981.

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Image: Jimmy Njiminjuma, *Wayarra*, 2002, pigment on bark. 94 x 53 cm.
Private collection. Image courtesy Maningrida Arts and Culture.