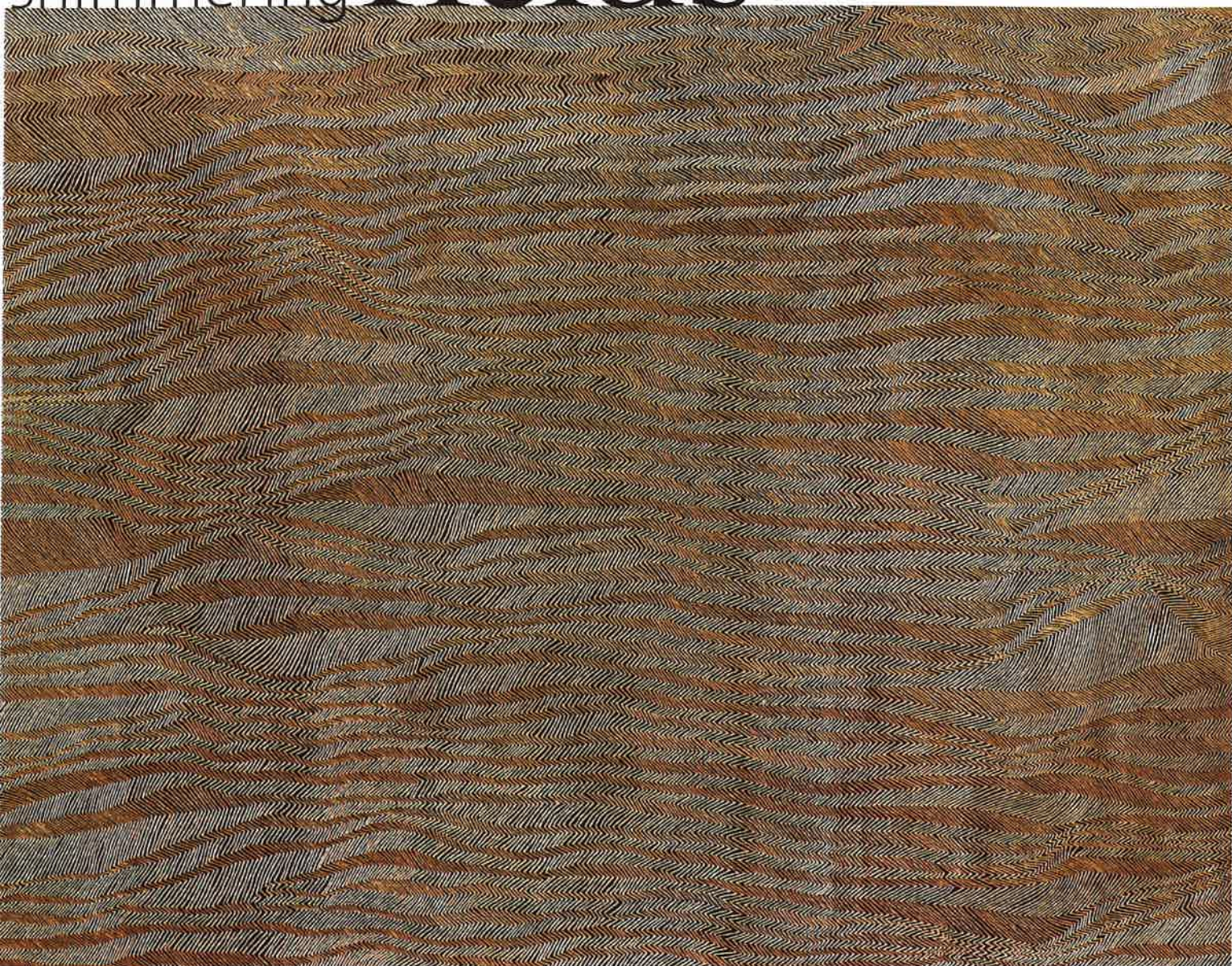


# shimmering fields



**cath bowdler**

in trying to understand an Aboriginal concept of beauty, I would argue that the environmental, cultural and spiritual contexts of Aboriginal art production should be taken into account

**Above:** Doreen Reid Nakamarra *Untitled* 2007, Papunya, Western Desert, Northern Territory, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 183 x 244cm. Purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, 2007.

**Right:** John Mawurndjul *Mardayin design at Dilebang* 2006, Maningrida, Western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, natural earth pigments on stringybark, 200 x 47cm. Purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, 2007. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008.

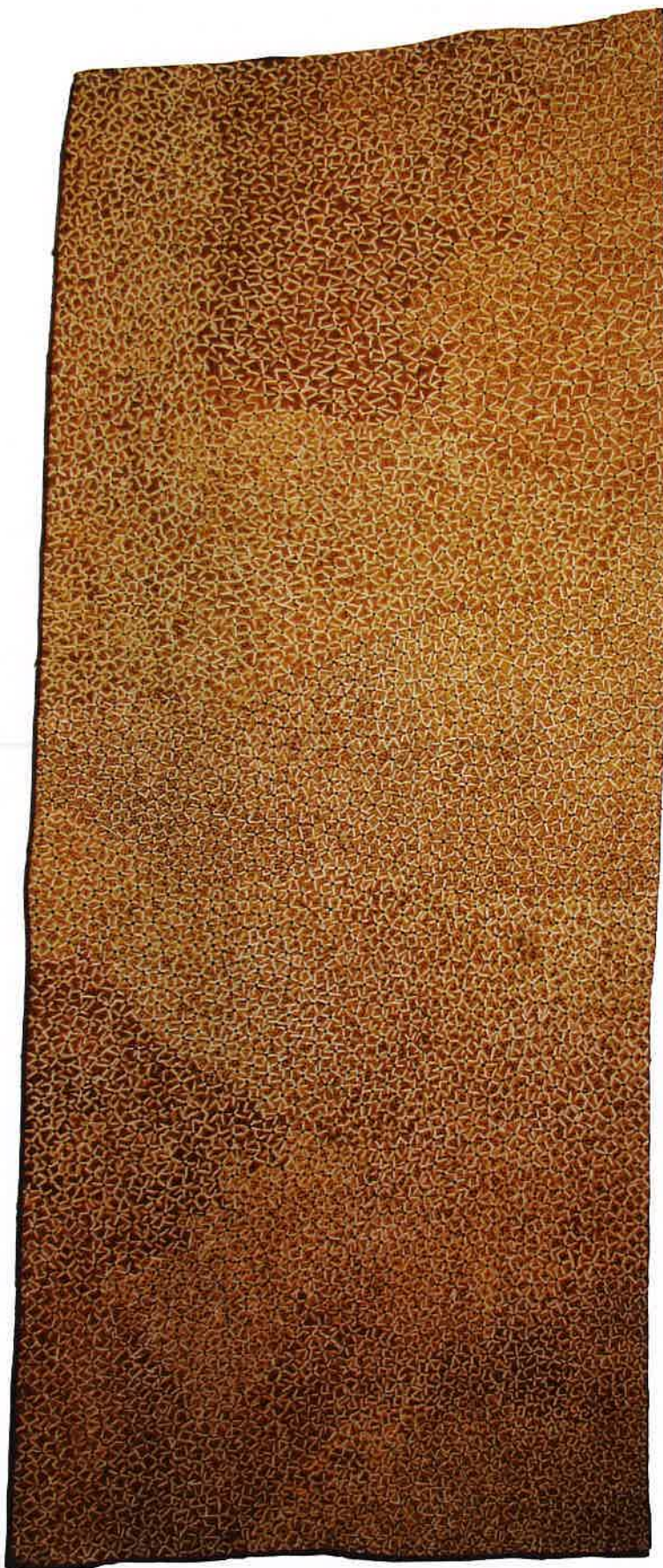


Aboriginal art is represented today in the collections of every major art gallery and museum in Australia. It is collected by art connoisseurs both here and abroad and has been lauded by the likes of Robert Hughes as the twentieth century's last great art movement. But it is easy to forget how recent this phenomenon actually is. It was not until the 1980s that Aboriginal art was hung in contemporary exhibitions or was collected by major institutions. Many observers, when they saw Aboriginal art in galleries in the 1980s, were struck by the sophisticated arrangements of form and colour, painted on a grand scale emerging fully formed from the depths of remote desert communities. The raw beauty, so palpably evident in those early works, led some in the art world to focus on the formal qualities of the work above all others. Consequently when Aboriginal art finally moved from the museum to the gallery, it was readily incorporated into the discourses of the 'art world'. In many cases it was measured by its superficial correlation with certain tropes of Modernism such as the idea of innovation, the notion of individual genius and the quest for the spiritual through formal abstraction. This approach has been used to validate artists and art works within the prerequisites of the fine art market, but has tended to extricate the art from its cultural roots.

I was thinking about these issues when visiting the *Culture Warriors* exhibition, curated by Brenda Croft at the National Gallery of Australia recently. I was struck by the works of three contemporary artists in that exhibition, who live in remote outstations, whose art is formally beautiful, but who call on specific notions of Indigenous aesthetics to create their works. John Mawurndjul and Gulumbu Yunupingu, from Arnhem Land, and Doreen Reid Nakamarra from the Central Desert create paintings of startling refinement and beauty that reference the ineffable world beyond the material plane. Their works are site-specific, alive with meaning and essentially metaphysical and religious in conception. For these artists beauty equals power, the power of the creation stories that underpin their art. In trying to understand an Aboriginal concept of beauty, I would argue that the environmental, cultural and spiritual contexts of Aboriginal art production should be taken into account and I would caution against any form of cultural relativism by which objects are classified and valorised without any reference to Indigenous values.







John Mawurndjul, who lives at Milkmilngkan outstation in Central Arnhem Land, is perhaps the most renowned Indigenous artist working today. He has been feted as a 'maestro' by French President, Jacques Chirac after his contribution to the Musée Quai Branly and has had a retrospective solo exhibition in Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> I first encountered his exquisite *mardayin* barks in *Crossing Country: the alchemy of Western Arnhem Land art* at the AGNSW in 2004 and was overwhelmed by their beauty and power. Mawurndjul has talked at length about how he invented this style and made it his own. These works are a refined synthesis of ancestral power and ceremony in reference to specific places. They signify a move from the figurative to the abstract, where figures merge into landscape and what is represented is the energy of country created through the generative acts of ancestors. Ancestors' actions exist in different spatio-temporal contexts and artists depict aspects of these stories within a set of rules. John Mawurndjul's *mardayin* works in ochre and bark appear to be entirely abstract, but they reference a series of sacred waterholes where fire burns, the home of Ngalyod, the rainbow serpent. *Mardayin design at Dilebang* (2006) in *Culture Warriors*, comprises undulating fields of the finest *rarrk* that swoop across the bark, delineated by irregular sectioning. The painting represents a sophisticated synthesis of organic materials, accentuated by the shine of the surface and the complex interplay of sections of high key oranges with irregular bands of black and white ochres. An extraordinary visual dynamism is created by these elements.

For Mawurndjul this sense of brightness and vitality is integrally important. For many Aboriginal artists the representations of ancestral stories are seen as emanating directly from the ancestral past and successful paintings hold this power within them. Howard Morphy (1989) has written about how artists in Arnhem Land invest their paintings with power by the use of detailed cross-hatching, turning works into brilliant fields of shimmering energy. Morphy described the creation of a painting from the rough outline or dull stage through to the application of detailed and fine cross-hatching, which gives the painting *bir'yun*, its brilliance. The concept of *bir'yun* is associated with a flash of light, a shimmering sensation or a vibration. He explained, 'It is the quality of brilliance that is associated in Yolngu art with ancestral power and with beauty'.<sup>2</sup> Mawurndjul is Kuninjku not Yolngu, however, these attributes that animate and give power to paintings are equally important to him. His desire to constantly refine his application of *rarrk* can be attributed to the wish of an artist to master his craft, but also to create the effect of *kabimbedme* (shining paint, the Kuninjku equivalent of *bir'yun*) and animate the painting with the power of the ancestral past. Also the materials themselves are potent and the artists believe they hold power that will be visible. For Kuninjku artists materials such as *dalek*, the white ochre, are seen literally as the 'shit of the Rainbow Serpent' and therefore an embodiment of its spirit.

Gulumbu Yunupingu *Garak the Universe* 2007, Yirrkala, North-east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, natural earth pigments on stringybark, 227 x 91 cm. Purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, 2007.

## it is the quality of brilliance that is associated in Yolngu art with ancestral power and with beauty

Gulumbu Yunupingu is a Yolngu artist based in Yirrkala. She is part of one of the most culturally powerful families in the region and, like John Mawurndjul, has had a stellar rise in the art world. Yunupingu's work also transfixed me the first time I saw it: shimmering stars swarming across the surface of a bark, creating a mesmerising, pulsing field of energy. Gulumbu Yunupingu's major subject is *Garak (the Universe)* and more particularly aspects of the Seven Sisters Dreaming. She paints secular aspects of this story and has developed her own unique visual syntax to do this. She paints the constellations and the massive fields of stars in the night sky in ochre on barks and on *Larrakitji* (hollow logs). *Garak (the Universe)* (2007), a large bark in the *Culture Warriors* exhibition, exemplifies Yunupingu's recent work. She captures the endlessness and mystery of the solar system creating cloud-like miasmas of stars that echo the organic undulations of the bark with beautifully modulated shifts of density and colour. The work is akin to a piece of cloth that has been unfurled, hovering in the ether, pulsing with the rhythm of the constellations, revealing the same sense of energy and vitality as Mawurndjul's works. Yunupingu tackles a subject of great metaphysical reach and has developed a style which conveys the magnitude of her story, but within the bounds of convention and individual creativity.

Doreen Reid Nakamarra is one of the second generation of Papunya Tula artists who currently resides at Kiwirrkura in the Western Desert. Doreen, like Gulumbu also uses subtle variations and a muted palette. Her *Untitled* painting from 2007 was presented on the ground in the *Culture Warriors* exhibition. This apt installation reinforced the intent of the artist and rendered her subject palpably clear. The work is a mesmerising series of finely rendered zigzags, which create a strong sense of pulsating optical illusion and movement. The organic shifting lines suggest a series of ridges and sandhills near where she lives but also where ancestral women camped on their travels through the country. The notion of 'design', composition and repetition of forms, as well as colour, create these vibrating optical effects, and the sense of emanation of ancestral power, which the artist sees and experiences in her country. A number of senior Papunya Tula men including Doreen's husband, George 'Tjampu' Tjapaltjarri, pioneered this optical style. In an adjacent work hung on the wall there are no zigzags but rather a series of wavering lines that also suggest the sandhills but from a greater distance. They express fragility and hint at the subtle lines of a fingerprint, tentative and yet authoritative, intimate yet potent and undeniably beautiful.

Some art historians have explicitly stated their desire to extricate Aboriginal art from the sources of its production, 'to take it as far away from itself as possible, [and] to subject it to the most sophisticated finesses of Western philosophy and critical theory' (Butler 2002: 127). In 2002 Rex Butler called for an artistic appreciation where judgements could be made using notions of universal aesthetic traits across cultures, unmediated and unsullied by cultural knowledge. There was a sense in some art historical discourses that Aboriginal paintings could not operate effectively in the international fine art market without this kind of philosophical and textual authority. They needed to be removed from any taint of the 'ethnographic'.

However there are some major deficiencies in this kind of approach: its essentialist assumptions, its denial of the local context in favour of the global and its marginalisation of the voices and motivations of Indigenous artists. Anthropologist Ronald Berndt had understood this much earlier. He wrote:

... although it is possible to appreciate works purely on the basis of form, this appreciation is only partial, and is biased towards the values of the viewing culture... the failure to provide the background knowledge necessary to interpret the object in relation to the producer's culture can then be challenged both on moral grounds and on the grounds that it impoverishes the interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

He is arguing that, although it is possible to appreciate the formal characteristics of works alone, this appreciation is impoverished. The most unfortunate and serious consequence of this overarching approach was the undervaluing of the perceptions and motivations of Aboriginal artists. Many now agree that an understanding of the context of art production is essential in order to understand the true accomplishments of Aboriginal artists. The inclusion of Aboriginal subjectivity and acknowledging the local is of paramount importance to community-based Aboriginal artists, who see their paintings as embodying their worldview. This can be ignored in discourses that focus only on style and the formal qualities of Aboriginal art.

Each of these artists in the *Culture Warriors* exhibition has developed a unique style which he or she owns, and yet those 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. To fully account for the power of these works and the achievement of these artists it is necessary to take into account the dance between the power of knowledge and creative interpretation, between what is allowed and what is not, between restraint and revelation and between the personal and the political. That is where the beauty lies. ☞

1 The exhibition *Rarrk: Journey Through Time in Northern Australia* by John Mawurndjul was held at the Museum Tinguely in Basel in Switzerland in 2005.

2 Howard Morphy, 'From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power Among the Yolngu', *Man New Series* 24(1): 21-40 2008.

3 Cited in Howard Morphy, H. (2001). 'Seeing Aboriginal Art in the Gallery', *Humanities Research* VIII(1): 37-50 2001 p41.

4 Rex Butler, *A Secret History of Australian Art* Craftsman House 2002.

After 15 years in the Northern Territory, as an artist, writer and curator, and three years completing a PhD in Indigenous visual art at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the ANU, Cath Bowdler has recently taken the position of Director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery.