

COLOUR COUNTRY: art from Roper River

UNA REY

COLOUR COUNTRY'S FINAL POST WAS CELEBRATED ON A SULTRY MAY EVENING, atypical of early dry season weather. Last on the tour, the Museum and Art Galleries of The Northern Territory (MAGNT) was the only venue where participating artists Amy Johnson, Faith Thompson Nelson, Maureen Thompson, Angelina George and Alan Joshua Junior attended. It is also where Ngukurr paintings made their dramatic public debut in the 1987 National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA), so a poignant 'homecoming' after the exhibition's tour of Wagga Wagga, Adelaide and Canberra.

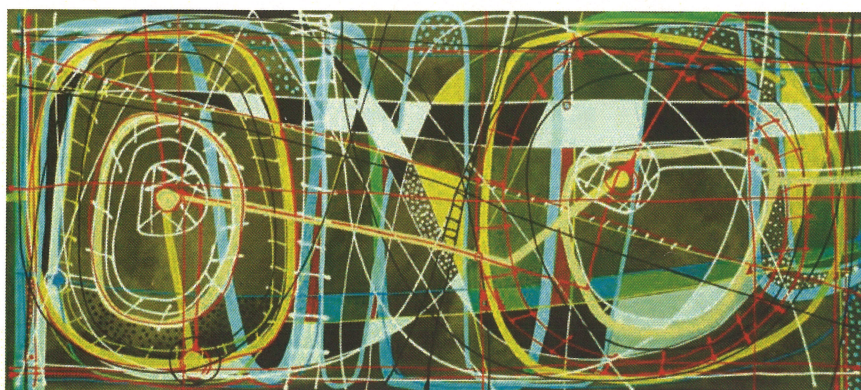
On the waterfront at Bullocky Point, hedged by pandanus and backlit by a blinding sunset, Crossing Roper Bar (the ongoing musical collaboration between the Australian Art Orchestra and the Young Wagilag Group) either delighted or exasperated visitors, some of whom were eager to see the paintings over an esoteric jazz fusion with lyrics in 'language'. One Ngukurr band member later suggested an abridged translation might be helpful, as indeed the songs about the 'wild-man' that acted as a prelude to the exhibition are central to many of the narratives of the late Djambu Barra Barra, to whom the exhibition is dedicated. The artists were visibly moved by the music. And finally, the crowd got to meet with the work.

Colour Country was a sensual feast for the viewer; it's tempting to lapse into a painter's reverie of ultramarine, scarlet, acid pinks and green. But as Cath Bowdler, the exhibition's curator and director at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, expresses in her introductory catalogue essay, country is also 'active, alive and intrinsically powerful'.¹ There are several reasons why these artists have previously been sidelined (with the exception of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, whose 1997 retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria remains a touchstone). A lack of ready classification or an inability to 'put a finger' on overriding themes are foremost.

Judith Ryan has described Ngukurr art by elimination, reiterating Riley's 'different from other mob' statement. It is unlike the ritualistic bark paintings of



Arnhem Land, or the restrained, encoded maps of Western Desert dot painting; not aligned with minimalism or abstraction, nor does it aspire to the overt politicism of 'urban' Aboriginal artists.² On the contrary, with fugitive perspective, multiple figuration, overt patterning and collaboration, the artists draw on all these qualities. As Bowdler explains, it was this perceived 'hybridity' that compelled her to research Ngukurr art, initially using a postcolonial approach to explain the artwork's diversity (including the motif of *kriol*).³ 'Of course, that whole construction fell away when I got closer and realised it was the actual lives of the artists that were responsible for the diversity, and the fact that there was no art centre editing out works and creating a "house style".'⁴ Roper River cuts



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P24: 1/ Gerlie Huddleston, *Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 143 x 134cm. Collection: Museum and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory; Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund. Image courtesy the artist.

2/ Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, *Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 185 x 250cm. Courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, and the Art Gallery of South Australia.

P5 1/ The Young Wagilak Songmen perform *Crossing Roper Bar* with the Australian Art Orchestra at the opening of *Colour Country: art from Roper River* at MAGNT, Darwin.

2/ Djambu Barra Barra, *Medicine Man*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 120cm. Collection: Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne.



across the bottom edge of Arnhem Land, running west to east into the delta swamp of Limmen Bight and the Gulf of Carpentaria. Alawa and Mara country lies south of the river, and rugged rock formations, plateaus and scrub scoured by an extreme climate mark this tropical landscape. This platform becomes the organising structure for the artists in *Colour Country*, and its recent history must be acknowledged even as the slow process of reconciling continues. From the 1870s pastoralists arrived along the Roper, intent on making the land in their own entirely different image. Contemporary lives prove that violent attempts to erase the pre-existing culture were ultimately unsuccessful, but unimaginable changes were thrust upon Indigenous populations in tragically familiar frontier wars. Missionaries, offering relatively benign protection(ism), established a post at Ngukurr early in the 20th century, adding further complexities and challenges to the local Diaspora.⁵ Over this jagged narrative, the development of an art centre from the mid-1980s looks trifling but is central to *Colour Country* and to reclaiming power and autonomy.

Djon Mundine's ironic comment – 'isn't someone in charge out there?' – in response to a radically shaped *Crocodile Story* (1987) by Djambu Barra Barra (think Lucian Freud's *After Cezanne*, 1999-2000) points to the reality that there were no regular art coordinators at Ngukurr. In 1986

an adult education program was established, printmaking and painting workshops followed, and over time the community developed an appreciation for the economic potential of acrylic on canvas. 'Beat Street', a disused building named after its graffiti facade, became a point of focus despite its physical shortcomings. Experimentation, eclecticism and a hands-off approach by early facilitators, along with the vision of senior painters and custodians, all helped drive the enterprise forward.⁶ Twelve years later, Ngukurr Artists was finally incorporated, but it still faces challenges, part of which may relate to the fact that (painters') ceremonial or religious authority does not necessarily equate with political power, which comes with land ownership and control.⁷

Revisiting *Colour Country* post-opening crowds, a group of young Indigenous men were posing for photographs in front of Sweetheart, the saltwater crocodile famous for hunting away anglers' outboard motors at a 'popular NT



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fishing spot'. The five-metre taxidermy *baru* (crocodile), who drowned as wildlife officers attempted his relocation, seemed a sentinel for the exhibition, guarding the entrance and reflecting the images beyond: Djambu Barra Barra's giant *Crocodile Men's Stories* (1996) with its gory man-eating story, and Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's sentient panoramas of Mara country, rich in creative power. Characteristic decorative canvas edges promote a heraldic quality in Riley's works, revealing a dramatic allegory across country and time, a stage for the metamorphic king brown snake Bandian, and Ngak Ngak, the sea eagle, looking on as witness ... over the complex dynamic of intercultural knowledge and description. Despite some weaker inclusions, Riley's best works appeared both secretive and flamboyant, emboldened by the language of paint.

The selection of Barra Barra's pieces prove his high artistic calibre, an oversight which *Colour Country* significantly redresses. A painter of tremendous scale, three key works hung together illustrated this beyond doubt. These may be secret mortality paintings, but the artist's descriptions are graphic, inducing a sense of fear and warning. In *Hollow Log Coffins* (1993), a galactic, dotted spaciousness recalls Galumbu Yunupingu's *Garak* (the universe) theme. Although her ochre embellished *larrakij* are speaking of a different colour country, Yolngu aesthetics and systems of representation were familiar to Barra Barra who travelled extensively from his birthplace at Nilipidgi in central eastern Arnhem Land, learning ceremonial and creation laws of the country he passed through.

In *Medicine Man* (1998), an image that seems to follow you out of the room, Barra Barra's 'devil-devil' is rendered in black with yellow scratches, and he walks through a storm of human bones. Pink and magenta *rarrk* – Barra Barra's palette was never formulaic – is accented by turquoise and lemon-yellow, baby colours in contrast to this malevolent being. The elbows, knees and head sport sharp spikes and blades, a link with Namarrkon, the lightning man/spirit from West Arnhem Land whose stone axe-heads bring spectacular electrical storms to the Top End. There are echoes of more contemporary digital villains too, such as Prince of Persia and The Terminator. The artist warns that one must be careful because 'if the devil-devil gets you by the ears, you can't know anything'. These wall texts, taken from Bowdler's interviews with the artist, have a sad potency on knowing that Barra Barra, the great cultural mediator, was struck dead by a random stone while trying to settle a petty skirmish.

Senior Alawa artist Willie Gudabi, often in collaboration with wife Moima Willie, also tells elaborate stories of a ceremonial nature using a unique visual code. The wild-man theme is manifest in the ancestral and real-life figure of Gudang, a 'grandfather' who achieved a kind of mythological stature as an outsider, remaining in the bush and performing and instructing Gudabi in initiation and circumcision rites. Abundant in detail, a microcosm of biological and botanical subjects are laid out in hieroglyphic sequence, reflecting Alawa cave painting traditions. Rigorous surface composition is richly overlaid with dots and scumbling, creating a mosaic-like schema.

Gudabi inspired the work of the devout Gertie Huddleston, whose personalised, layered bush gardens give vivid expression to syncretic belief systems. Christianity and the concept of Eden sit comfortably with a pre-contact flowering and its attendant animism, and her paintings were hung in a generous share of the limited space. Slightly more variation in scale may have worked. The inclusion of less dynamic works by Faith Thompson Nelson and Maureen Thompson read as slightly tokenistic, but there was a narrative at work. Works by Angelina George and Amy Johnson, who regularly collaborated with husband Djambu Barra Barra, appeared awkward against stronger works in the show. Nicolas Rothwell makes a sustained argument for Angelina George's vision in his catalogue essay, and having met her at the opening I can imagine watching her work would create a kind of spell, a stillness. I also recall ambitious and beautiful Maureen Thompson works from the early 1990s. This is where cross-cultural dialogue meets a conundrum: do we hedge towards a lean, tight selection of work to best represent Western aesthetics and curatorial signatures? Or a broader scope, telling a more complete story of place and community, mindful of current dynamics and social obligations? As Howard Morphy calls for in *Becoming Art*, both frames need to be encompassed within the rubric of cross-cultural art history⁸, and that is what *Colour Country* becomes.

Riley's major work, *Ngak-Ngak in Limmen Bight Country* (1994) was loaned by the Art Gallery of South Australia, but few public institutions contributed to *Colour Country*, which was mounted within the budgetary constraints typical of a smaller regional gallery. Neither the Art Gallery of NSW nor the NGV were loaning when the exhibition was being collated. Artbank's collection was largely unavailable due to an overseas tour. Support from Beverly Knight of Alcaston Gallery and Karen Brown (of Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin), both long-term commercial dealers of

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Image: Arlo Mountford, *The Triumph 2010* is digital animation still. Courtesy of the artist and GRANTPIRIE, Sydney.

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Public Lounge
14 August–26 September

Lynda Draper: Home Altared
21 August–23 September

Animal Island
21 August–3 October

Sam Jinks
21 August–7 November

The Drawing Wall #2:
Anna Kristensen
1 August–31 October



Ngukurr artists, effectively made the exhibition viable. Although a potential conflict of interest, many works were located through Knight's archive, (an important source for Bowdler's doctoral thesis, which in turn informs the rigorous, informative catalogue). And, it has to be said, the process of securing public loans can be substantial and costly.

Ngundungunya: Art for Everyone was the only Ngukurr exhibition held in a public gallery (at the National Gallery of Victoria, 1997) prior to *Colour Country*, which is in effect a survey of six artists rather than a fully comprehensive exhibition. MAGNT has not received a major upgrade in decades, despite its important collection of Indigenous art and Darwin's high-rise expansion: shamefully, the economic boom hasn't flowed this way. The exhibition suffered from this poverty as large, bold works struggled for space. Some minor curatorial deviations occurred between tour venues, with Flinders University unable to house Barra Barra's 2.9 metre *The Dead Ones*, while Gudabi's excellent *Singing Ready for Ceremony* (1992 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award winner) was a coup for the Darwin hang.

During the artist's floor talks, Alan Joshua Junior, chairman of Ngukurr Artists, explained humorously that his wish to negotiate painting rights entailed 'a lot of red tape'. Recently winning the Barunga Festival Art Prize for a figurative painting quite different to his previous sculptures, now may be the time to realise a new role, along with his peers, in filling a vacuum left by the senior icons of Roper River. *Colour Country* may prove to be yet another catalyst in the erratic but colourful story of Ngukurr artists. ☼

1. Cath Bowdler, *Colour Country: art from Roper River*, exhibition catalogue, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2009, p. 9.

2. Judith Ryan, 'Different from other mob: art from Ngukurr and beyond', *One Sun One Moon: Art in Aboriginal Australia*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 2007 p. 139.

3. Kriol is the *lingua franca* of the region, which is populated by nine different language groups.

4. Email between the author and Cath Bowdler, June 2010.

5. Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Manggarai, Ngandi, Ngalakan, Nunggubuyu, Rembarrnga, Ritharrngu and Yanuwa people's sovereignty over the region was dramatically impacted upon by the encroachment of pastoralists and miscellaneous 'overlanders'.

6. Brian Burkett and Gale Duell, as well as artists Edie Kurzer and John Nelson all supported the early painting enterprises in different ways.

7. Bowdler, 2009, p. 11.

8. Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross Cultural Categories*, University of NSW, Sydney, 2008, p. 144.

Colour Country: art from Roper River, curated by Cath Bowdler, opened at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, in 2009, and ended its national tour at the Museum and Art Galleries NT, Darwin, 22 May to 12 July 2010.

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Image courtesy of the artist

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