

# The Making of Indigenous Australian Contemporary Art



# The Making of Indigenous Australian Contemporary Art:

*Arnhem Land Bark Painting,  
1970-1990*

By

Marie Geissler

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Front Cover:

John Mawurndjul (Kuninjku people)

Born 1952, *Kubukkan near Marrkolidjban*, Arnhem Land,  
Northern Territory

Namanjwarre, saltwater crocodile 1988

Earth pigments on Stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*)

206.0 x 85.0 cm (irreg)

Collection Art Gallery of South Australia

Maude Vizard-Wholohan Art Prize Purchase Award 1988

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## PROLOGUE

### THEORIZING CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ART – POST 1990

The use of the term “Indigenous art” rather than “Aboriginal” is used to refer to art made by Aboriginal peoples in remote regions because it is the term widely used today to refer to this art in global art discourses. The term is also used today to refer to the art of “urban” artists.<sup>1</sup> The account that follows explores a trajectory referred to largely as ‘Indigenous art’ to give insight into the history of the philosophical, anthropological, social, cultural and political ideas and influences that informed the history of art produced in remote Australia.

In the late nineteenth century, bark painting was regarded as primitive art, a prehistoric fossil that was made by a people considered to be less than human. The subsequent journey of its recognition to that of contemporary art, late in the following century, has consequently been a highly contested one with art critics having to accept it firstly as fine art,<sup>2</sup> and then secondly, as an art of today or “contemporary.”

However, the term “contemporary art,” once a relatively neutral term meaning art made in the present, has undergone a change of meaning in the last twenty years. Art historian Terry Smith’s *What is Contemporary Art?*

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears. A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, (London, Reaktion, 2016), 9.

<sup>2</sup> While the notion of fine art has lost its gloss over the years – the distinction between high and low art has been the target of much art criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century – its meaning has been relatively stable. The critique of the distinction between high and low art has been one reason why Indigenous Australian art found it easier to be admitted into the fine art category, but the meaning of fine art – that which is exhibited in major art galleries and written about in art books and journals – is unchanged and easy to identify.

(2009),<sup>3</sup> and *Contemporary Art: world currents* (2011),<sup>4</sup> come closest to defining this new meaning. He argues that the term refers to the dominant art movement of the last twenty years, in which art across the world exists on a relatively level playing field and in which the differences in cultural traditions have shed their former hierarchies and exist together in their contemporaneity.

“Contemporary— perhaps for the first time in history – the art of the world. It comes from the whole world, and frequently tries to imagine the world as a *differentiated yet inevitably connected* whole;”<sup>5</sup> “if modern art was new and centred in Europe and the U.S., contemporary art is now and decentred or everywhere.”<sup>6</sup> This meaning of “contemporary art” did not come into play in institutional historical discourses until the 1990s when T. E. Smith’s chapter on recent Aboriginal art in Bernard Smith’s *Australian Painting 1788–1990*, proposed the first substantial theoretical framework for Aboriginal art to be understood as “contemporary art,” the point at which this history concludes.

Smith’s recent theorisations of “contemporary art” offered entry points for Indigenous Australian art, including bark painting, to engage with contemporary art historical discourse. An important vector in this discursive transformation was the entry of Indigenous Australian art into the artworld economy. It was, Smith argues, the developments in the second half of the twentieth century that prepared the ground for the emergence of contemporary art in the 1990s.

Initial opportunities for this came because Indigenous Australian art represented a “fully fledged contemporary art movement ... (with a network of) ... nearly one hundred art centres in remote communities all over the country.”<sup>7</sup> The creation of canonical works and “hero” artists whose sale prices matched those of non-Indigenous artists of similar stature<sup>8</sup> was further evidence for Aboriginal art’s contemporaneity. Smith’s analysis compares the outstanding aesthetic accomplishment in “abstraction” achieved by top Aboriginal artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye with that of such

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<sup>3</sup> T. E. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> T. E. Smith, *Contemporary art: world currents*, (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2011).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 339

<sup>7</sup> T. E. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

eminent European artists as Gerhard Richter and Sean Scully. His ultimate accolade states that over the past twenty years the top Aboriginal artists have produced symbolic abstraction “that is not matched by any other group of artists from any other country.”<sup>9</sup> This has made Aboriginal art Australia’s “most prominent and, in many ways, representative form of visual expression.”<sup>10</sup> This assertion has resonance with several earlier declarations, namely that of New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s curator of twentieth century art, Henry Gedzhaler who claimed “there is no doubt about it. It [Aboriginal art] is major world art. It ought to be sent abroad – to Paris, London, New York and perhaps Peking. It would create enormous interest.” Also, those of art critics John McDonald who stated in 1989 that Aboriginal art was “Australia’s most exciting, most imaginative and dynamic contribution to world culture,”<sup>11</sup> and Lisa Waller who concluded, also in 1989, that it was “one of the most exciting movements in art.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, there is the 1989 pronouncement of National Gallery of Australia’s director, James Mollison, that *Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition* was “the most important exhibition we have ever held.”<sup>13</sup>

Since the 1990s, contemporary art has begun to assume an ideological value that relates it to globalism and post nationalism. However, before 1990 – the end point of my review – the notion of contemporary art lacks this value. It is not the name of an art movement, and is usually used to describe art made in recent times that, and unlike that covered by the term “modernism,” does not easily fit into an existing movement, style or ideology, or describe recent art in the most general terms. Thus, Western Desert acrylic paintings were called contemporary because while they looked modernist they weren’t, and while they didn’t look Aboriginal, they were. It was a convenient term to describe a recent art practice that did not quite fit existing categories. As Ian McLean wrote, in the 1980s the category of “contemporary art” was:

[A] conveniently neutral term that allowed Aboriginal art to be considered an artworld player without having to invoke such theoretically loaded

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>10</sup> T. E. Smith, *Contemporary art: world currents*, 203.

<sup>11</sup> John McDonald, “Our Unique Cultural Gift,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June, 1989, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Waller, “The Tradition Goes On,” *Canberra Times*, 6 June, 1989, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Waller, “The Tradition Goes On,” 12.

concepts as post-conceptualism, minimalism, modernism and postmodernism with which Aboriginal art has seemingly had no connection.<sup>14</sup>

In more recent Indigenous art theorisations on the contemporary by McLean in his publication *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (2011), he adds to Smith's contextualization's for the art. Important is his notice of the subaltern voices that had been occurring within the art discourses on Indigenous art, pointing out that these had been largely excluded from mainstream art historical texts up until the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> While interviews with remote Indigenous artists on their work had been conducted by anthropologists up until this time, these cross-cultural transcriptions of traditional cultural references, were not given authorship in the early years. This came later, when the individuality of artists was recognised and their work was not seen part of a regimented, unchanging collective view. Nonetheless these texts were revolutionary, seminal records of some gravitas about their culture. They underpinned the discovery of significant understandings for the people's sophistication and intelligence and were important not only for making way for progressing agendas for Indigenous self-determination, but for providing insights and eventually deep respect for the culture and art of Indigenous Australians. This fact has not been fully appreciated in art historical texts. Such informative texts that accompanied the documentation of early bark painting collections (e.g. those of Ronald and Catherine Berndt) present a field for further research in this context, as ways are determined for their inclusion in art discourse.

In McLean's most recent publication, *Rattling Spears. A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (2016), Indigenous art is contextualised within the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia's history of transculturation. He categorized the art as "neo-traditional" or "hybrid," a status applied to refer to its production as an adaptive response to an outside culture, which in its making maintained its tribal obligations to the authenticity of its traditional cultural inspiration.<sup>16</sup> In Australia, Indigenous artists produced paintings that adapted their traditional art in new ways in order to meet the needs of the market as well as those of their tribal compass. Drawing attention to the varying dynamics that applied within the relations

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<sup>14</sup> Ian McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld." In Ian McLean ed., *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art*, (Brisbane: Power Publications, Institute of Modern Art, 2011), 61, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 56–60.

<sup>16</sup> McLean, *Rattling Spears*, 70.

between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Australia, McLean, identified those that conveyed a ‘transcultural’ dynamic. Most interesting in his aesthetic and contemporaneity evaluations of Indigenous art and bark painting, are the discussions and interpretations of the process of abstraction. He linked Indigenous expression of abstraction to its spiritual underpinnings, and in this sense to abstraction in Western art discourse. The parallels inherent in this comparative evaluation, identified commonalities in both traditions and therein reasons for the potent agencies said to be embodied in bark painting.

Acknowledging the profound impact that the optically dazzling and shimmering surfaces of John Mawurndjul’s fine-line *rarrk* have had on artworld discourse, McLean investigated varying formats of this abstraction. He explained how such an aesthetic device for the concealment of Ancestral Presence, had functional affinities with the use of over-dotting by Papunya painters. Like the Yolngu, they developed abstraction using dots not fine line overlay, as a way of concealing traditional knowledge or Ancestral Presence within their painting. He concluded that such dazzling aesthetic manoeuvres proved to be the masterstroke-endpoint of Papunya’s expressive experimentations in the mid 1980s. In the dotted format of the Papunya tradition, a simulacrum expressively of the art’s Western minimalist and conceptual counterpart, the symbolic geometric figurations painted onto canvas, appealed to the tastes of the Western market, while at the same time endowing the work with spiritual agency.

McLean develops this ancestral thread in discussions of Yirrkala art, referring to the way the presence of the Ancestor or *Bir’yun*<sup>17</sup> is depicted using *rarrk* hatching. Commentaries note such works are designed to project a flash of light or shimmer on the painting surface to emulate the spiritual potency and ancestral foundations of the painting. In this context, McLean draws cross-cultural parallels with Indigenous art and the “flash” allegedly reported to be seen in the abstraction of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock or Barnett Newman. Their work he conjectures is informed by similar spiritual and existential questions as that for contemporary Indigenous stylistic adaptations and “derive from universal human concerns with the metaphysical and the poetic.”<sup>18</sup> Importantly in this context, he advocates that the aesthetic becomes a “lubricant of the transcultural.”<sup>19</sup> McLean goes on to propose that the flash, perhaps in its poetic interpretation evokes

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 258.

mysterious readings, an embodiment not of anything intellectual, but of the experiential. He gives insight into this by explaining “excessiveness” or the feeling of exhilaration after physical excess, is akin to that experienced in the aftermath of the intense activities of ceremony or performance. This was, according to anthropologist W.E. Stanner a “type of art for art’s sake” where the geometric symbols used on the painted bodies of the dancers were valued for their “aesthetic impact” rather than their iconographic meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Further quoting Stanner, McLean implies that reason for the success and longevity in the use of the traditional geometric symbols in art was because of their “metaphysical underpinnings.” He reasons, the “deep psychic impact [of the geometric symbols] ... preserved something essential about Indigenous culture after its engagement with modernity” and that they are “held onto more dearly in the heat of radical change [such as the impacts of colonisation].”<sup>21</sup> McLean concludes, that such perspectives perhaps explain why the domain of the aesthetic has been so long serving the survival interests of Indigenous Australians, and has therefore provided the opening though which Indigenous art has, not only effectively transacted its agendas with modernity, but been the critical agency in the making of Indigenous contemporary art.<sup>22</sup>

One of the unexpected discoveries of my research was how often the word “contemporary” was used in relation to Aboriginal art, its meaning varying in different contexts. In the mid-twentieth century, collectors of tribal art shunned Aboriginal art because it was considered contemporary or not authentic. Most art collected had been made recently, and so was considered contaminated by modernity and its markets, rather than true to the old traditions. However, after WW2 some anthropologists – such as Ronald Berndt – increasingly valued the art for its engagements with the modern world while nonetheless holding true to the cultural protocols to protect the secrecy of their sacred material. Anthropologists brought into focus the contemporaneity of its agency, aesthetic qualities, individualistic expression, technical sophistication, dynamism and innovative practices. While “contemporary” was used to describe the art being painted in the chronological period of review, as distinct from that of much earlier times, its use in this context was influential in persuading audiences to think of Aboriginal art as “contemporary fine art.”

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Whatever “contemporary” meant, it signalled that the critic recognised the artwork was about the present day. This prepared the ground, I argue, for the acceptance of the art into a category that allowed it entry as an equal player or agent in contemporary Western art discourse from the 1980s.

## OVERVIEW

*The Making of Indigenous Australian Contemporary Art: The Western Reception of Arnhem Land Bark Painting 1970–1990* is based on the author's 2017 PhD thesis *Arnhem Land Bark Painting. The Western Reception 1850–1990*.<sup>23</sup> It investigates the way the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting from the period spanning 1970 to 1990 has influenced the making of Indigenous Australian contemporary art. This end date was selected as it refers to Terry Smith's chapter on recent Aboriginal art in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788–1990*, the first substantial theoretical framework in which Indigenous art is understood as “contemporary” art. Smith distinguished the contemporaneity of the art within the context of it staying true to its authentic cultural traditions while being an art of dazzling beauty, sophistication, dynamism, variability and visibility. He also pointed to its growing artworld acceptance and influence within Australian art.<sup>24</sup>

The brief history of the medium that leads up to 1970, which documented evolutionist views of Aboriginal art and judged it disparagingly to be “primitive” and the people as ‘savages’<sup>25</sup> underpins the current review, as

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<sup>23</sup> Marie Geissler, “Arnhem Land Bark Painting: The Western Reception (1850–1990)” (PhD Diss., University of Wollongong, 2017).

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/399/>

<sup>24</sup> T.E. Smith, “From the Desert: Aboriginal Painting 1970–90.” In Bernard Smith ed., *Australian Painting 1788–1990* (London, Oxford University Press, 1991), 553–4.

<sup>25</sup> “Savage (adj.).” *Online Etymology Dictionary website*. Accessed 1 May 2020. [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=savage&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0;](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=savage&allowed_in_frame=0;) Lorimer Fison, “Anthropology: Address by the President.” In *Report for the Fourth Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science* (Hobart: Acting Government Printer, 1893), 145–53; “Australia’s Black Men: A Strange Mortality if they Begin to Live in Houses. Natives as Trackers of Game and Criminals. Their Marvellous Sight. A Village and Mission. A Dying Race.” *New York Times*, 22 May, 1892.; “The coloured races in Australia,” *The New York Times*, 20 July, 1879, 2; Baldwin Spencer, “Presidential Address,” *Australian Association for the Advancement of Science*, 15, 1921, 39; Baldwin Spencer, *Native tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 33; Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, *The native tribes of central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1899), 7–9, 17–8; A. P. Elkin, “Anthropology in Australia: One Chapter,” *Mankind*, No. 6



does that of Robert Brough Smyth's first substantial anthropological survey,<sup>26</sup> and Ernst Grosse's art historical writings (1894).<sup>27</sup> The aforementioned scholarship situated Aboriginal art and bark painting within positive evaluative frames for the first time.<sup>28</sup>

Over this early period in the history, and later were press and review commentaries acknowledging Aboriginal agency,<sup>29</sup> aesthetic skill,<sup>30</sup> and

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1958, 227; Gardner, Helen (2009), "'By the facts we add to our store.' Lorimer Fison, Lewis Henry Morgan and the Spread of Kinship Studies in Australia," *Oceania*, 79: 3 (November), 2009: 280–92; Andrew Lang, "Savage Art," *Custom and Myth*, 1884: 176–7, *Library of Alexandria website*. Accessed 1 May 2020, [https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lang/andrew/custom\\_and\\_myth/complete.html](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lang/andrew/custom_and_myth/complete.html); Phillip Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A history." In Peter Sutton ed., *Dreamings. The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (Ringwood: Viking in association with The Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1988), 143–79; Susan Lowish, "Writing on 'Aboriginal Art' 1802–1929 [manuscript]: a critical and cultural analysis of the construction of a category," Monash University. Thesis, (Melbourne, 2004); Susan Lowish, "Legacies of primitivism. Writing/righting a history of Australian Aboriginal art," *ANU Press website* Accessed 1 May 2020. <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p14881/mobile/ch09s03.html>; Susan Lowish, "Evolutionists and Australian Aboriginal art: 1885–1915," *Journal of Art Historiography*, June, (12), (2015): 1–26; Ian McLean, "Aboriginalism: White Aborigines and Australian Nationalism," *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 10, May, 1998; Ian McLean, *White Aborigines. Identity Politics in Australian Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ian McLean, "Reinventing the Savage," *Third Text*, 26:5, (2012): 599–613; McLean, *Rattling Spears*.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria with Relating to the Habits of the Natives of Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania* (Volumes 1 and 2; Melbourne: John Ferres Government Printer and Trübner and Co., 1878).

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1897).

<sup>28</sup> Geissler, "Arnhem Land Bark Painting."

<sup>29</sup> One of a Down-trodden Race, "A Native's Views ... On the Nigger Question," *Sunday Times*, 23 September, 1905, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Preston, "Indigenous Art of Australia," *Art in Australia*, 11 (March, 1925, n.p.; Margaret Preston, "The Application of Aboriginal Designs," *Art in Australia*, 3 (March, 1930: n.p.; Margaret Preston, "Aboriginal art of Australia," *Art in Australia*, 4 (June–August), (1941), 87; Margaret Preston, "Aboriginal art of Australia." In Ure Smith ed., *Art of Australia 1788–1941*. An exhibition of Australian art held in the United States of America and the dominion of Canada, Carnegie Corp. by the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Ure Smith, ed., *Art of Australia 1788–1941*. An exhibition of Australian art held in the United States of America and the dominion of Canada under the auspices of the Carnegie Corporation and the Museum of Modern Art, New York / compiled and edited by Sydney Ure Smith, (New York: Carnegie Corporation and the Museum of Modern Art, 1941, 16–7; H.

intelligence which argued constructively for an evaluation of their art.<sup>31</sup> Cumulatively, their impact opened the doors for the entry of Aboriginal artists into an emergent contemporary art market for their work. It succeeded in establishing within the minds of the wider public, the equivalence of Aboriginal art with mainstream art.

The Introduction of Chapter 1 gives summary review to the history of first encounter, including subaltern voices reflecting on their understandings of their *Tjukurrpa*, or ‘Creation Time’ philosophy or *Dreaming*<sup>32</sup> from the present, and the beginnings of the cross-cultural history of Indigenous Australians with the non-Indigenous world. It observes the cultural collisions and first examples of neo-traditional or hybrid art produced in response to the demands of the invaders.<sup>33</sup> It acknowledged the role of missionaries in establishing the art business, the part played by anthropologists and their

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E. Payne, “Decay of Aboriginal art,” *The Mercury*, Tasmania, 18 September, 1871, 3; H. Stockdale, “Australian Aboriginal Art,” *Lone Hand*, 3, 18 October, (1908): 666–7; William Moore, “Art and Artists,” *Brisbane Courier*, 28 December, 1929, 17; A. S. Kenyon, “The Art of the Australian Aboriginal.” In Charles L. Barrett and A. S. Kenyon eds., *Australian Aboriginal Art* (Melbourne: Public Library, Museum and National Gallery of Victoria, 1947), 15–39; Alison French, *Seeing the Centre. The Art of Albert Namatjira 1902–1959*, (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Herbert Basedow, “The Australian Aboriginal,” *Adelaide Advertiser*, 8 March, 1914.

<sup>32</sup> W.E.H. Stanner comments on this in his famous essay on the Dreaming written in 1933.

The Dreaming is that of a sacred heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are, but neither “time” nor “history” as we understand them is involved in this meaning. [...] time is also, in a sense part of the present. One cannot “fix” the Dreaming to time: it was, and is, everywhere. [...] it was an age when the ancestors did marvellous things that men can no longer do. [...] The Dreaming is [...] a kind of charter of things that still happen: and a kind of logos or principle of order that transcends everything significant for Aboriginal man.

W.E. H. Stanner in W. Edwards (ed.) *Traditional Aboriginal Society*, (South Melbourne: McMillan Company), 1990, 225–36. Margo Neale, Head of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Executive Indigenous Advisor to the Director at the National Museum of Australia writes that the *Tjukurrpa* is a term used by traditional custodians and can never be accurately translatable and will always contain ambiguities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the continent have taken ownership of the cross-cultural terms such as ‘Songlines’ and the ‘Dreaming’ and are used interchangeably with *Tjukurrpa*. Email to the author 14 July 2020.

<sup>33</sup> McLean, *Rattling Spears*, 70.

interventions which facilitated the production of early examples of intercultural art.<sup>34</sup> It concludes with an overview of the Tony Tuckson exhibition in the early 1960s when aesthetic valuations for the art were highlighted and the art was received as primitive fine art.

Chapter 2 which focuses on the seventies, investigates how Indigenous voices began to enter art history. It critiques the Ulli Beier Report of 1969 which proved highly influential to the settings of Indigenous cultural policies for the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB).<sup>35</sup> The activities of the AAB and the impact of their major overseas exhibition program is evaluated for its impact on the reception of the art, as are the flow on effects of the impact of Australian exhibitions of the art on the media. It incorporates interview accounts of this period by Jennifer Isaacs, Leon Paroissien and Robert Edwards. Landmark exhibition milestones in this decade are reviewed. *Landscape and Image* in 1978 showcased for the first time, one Arnhem Land bark and one Papunya painting in an international context, within the frames of the Australian landscape tradition and contemporary fine art. Curator Bernice Murphy's commentary was revelatory of her scholarship and nuanced thinking about artworld concerns. In *European Dialogue* 1979, curator Nick Waterlow exhibited bark paintings in an international fine art contemporary context. The delivery of the curatorial rationale globalized the art in non-hierarchical display, an ambition which was to again be tested in Jean-Hubert's *Magiciens* in 1989. The Arnhem Land bark paintings were exhibited in the adaptive cross-cultural format of being larger than usual the barks and for having ceremonial content that had been modified for public display, in ways which meet the restrictions imposed by culturally sensitive protocols.

The eighties emphasis for Chapter 3 tracks the impact on the artworld made by Papunya painting. It singles out the Boyer Lecture in the opening paragraph as a watershed moment in the history at this time, for insisting that priority be given, in national building narratives, to acknowledging the traditional underpinnings of Indigenous culture and art. The account that follows notes that bark painting established the commercial market for Indigenous art, but that Papunya grew it significantly. The greater success of acrylic work is acknowledged as happening because of the more Western

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<sup>34</sup> McLean, *Rattling Spears*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Marie Geissler, "Ulli Beier, The Aboriginal Arts Board and Aboriginal Self-Determination." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, December, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2020.1837380>

appeal of its aesthetic. Discussions give insight into the impact of Papunya painting on growing Indigenous art reception, drawing attention to the early collector and commercial gallery support for Indigenous art. It highlights the revolutionary impact of *Australian Perspecta 1981*. At this time Papunya works shocked the artworld when they were first profiled in a contemporary fine art gallery display. Also, in mix for crossing the line of artworld expectations, was the *1982 Biennale* display, when the ground painting of Warlpiri artists was commissioned for the event. It found favour with the future curator of *Magiciens de la terre* (1989), not only for its impressive impact, but also most likely for its conceptual and performance underpinnings, which were then in favour with the artworld. The closing discussion of the chapter was the review of events around the opening of the National Gallery of Australia. In the interview account with director, James Mollison admitted to his life-long interest in bark painting and his Eureka moment for Aboriginal art. It arrived when he saw the spectacular escarpment rock art in the Northern Territory in the early 1980s. He reveals how he skilfully engineered to have Aboriginal art acquired within contemporary art budgets and how the commissioning process proved to be a masterstroke within the cross-cultural dynamic of Indigenous art history. Mollison agreed with some Indigenous artists that in return for having their bark paintings at the Gallery, it would act as their “Keeping Place, and in return, the artists could recall them at any time to their homeland, when required for ceremony or other reasons.

The commissioning process between Sandra Le Brun Holmes and Yirawala, was another example of a mutually beneficial cross-cultural dynamic in operation between artist and patron. Yirawala produced a series of works for his patron on a commercial basis. In return the subjects he painted, would be those of significant cultural value to him, and she would attempt to have them placed in a major public institution (Images 1, 2).

He wanted the series of paintings to act as public records in perpetuity which would advocate for the continuance of his sacred cultural narratives and speak to his tribal land entitlements in his homelands.



Image 1: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), born in 1897 in the Marugulidban region, south west of Maningrida in the Northern Territory, *Male and Female Kangaroos* c.1965, 44.5 x 77 cm, Natural earth pigments on Eucalyptus bark, photography Sotheby's Australia. © Yirawala/AAA 2020.



Image 2: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), born in 1897 in the Marugulidban region, south west of Maningrida in the Northern Territory, *Crocodile Maraiian Ceremony* 1976, 10 x 24 cm, Natural earth pigments on Eucalyptus bark, Collection National Gallery of Australia, NGA 113444 76. 153.79. © Yirawala/AAA 2020.

For Chapter 4, the interventions by Bernice Murphy and Djon Mundine in the commissioning process for the art works for both the AGNSW and the Power Institute exhibitions in 1983 and 1983 respectively, discussed further examples of the cross-cultural dynamic in operation between artist-creator, and external curator. Review commentaries acknowledged the contemporary qualities of the art works. Insightful reflection on Murphy's curation were detailed in her interview. The bargain Murphy struck with Mundine to be in complete control of the curatorial process, introduced a new episode in the black-white, intercultural dynamic, presenting Indigenous voice with an innovative platform from which to engage in art historical discourse. After this, the playing field was no longer hierarchical but flattened for Indigenous curation. There was no turning back. The possibility for Indigenous agendas and subaltern perspectives to be given increased traction and visibility, was now a concrete reality for Australia's artworld. The exhibition resulted in the introduction of fresh thematic concerns and agendas for Indigenous art discourse and its expression. Experimentation in media beyond traditional formats (e.g. photography and sound) were added. Indigenous bark painters entered an era, where wider expressive frames and the freedom to explore new media was at hand.<sup>36</sup> Reviews of other Indigenous exhibitions staged for this period were largely unaffected by such initiatives for curatorial Indigenous agency as exemplified by Murphy and Mundine. Most notably, however, bark painting was gaining in status. In the first bark painting exhibitions at the National Gallery of Australia, both its traditional context and that of its contemporary status was acknowledged in the catalogues for the exhibitions.

Chapter 5 investigates accounts of a series of blockbuster, or high-profile artworld events where Indigenous art, including Arnhem land bark painting was displayed. The review began with exhibitions staged over the period of the Australian Bicentenary and spanned the period up until 1990. Daniel Thomas' interview gave context to his understandings for the exhibition curatorial rationale for *The Great Australian Art Exhibition* (1988) and in so doing extended, the then current perspectives for understanding Indigenous art. It revealed Thomas' meticulously thought-through categorizations for bark painting and unpacked the complexities of role it had played within the Australian art historical record, including that within contemporary discourses. Thomas' famous quote likening the impact on Aboriginal art on Australian art to that of the Greeks reconquering the minds of the Romans reflected a growing cross-cultural dynamic that Aboriginal art had indeed

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<sup>36</sup> Most notable was the establishment a decade later of printmaking at the Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre at Yirrkala in 1996.

entered the Australian psyche. This must certainly have been uppermost in the minds of the curators commissioning the art for the new Federal Parliament House in Canberra. A stunning mosaic design by Papunya artist, Michael Nelson Jagamara was installed for the Bicentennial in its prominent forecourt entry. The installation made a powerful national statement about the potency of the emerging vision for black-white convergence. Arguably, the existence of the artwork, was the outcome of significant Indigenous agency from Indigenous artworld supporters.

Another cross-cultural art work with significant political agency that was evaluated, was Djon Mundine's *Aboriginal Memorial* (1988). Possibly the most significant artwork of the Bicentenary, critics argued it was created as a way to counter the artworld's attention on Papunya art. At that time, art aficionados were in a post-conceptual mood, and caught in the thrall of installation and performance art. These were the underpinnings of the *Memorial*, and may well have been the reason for its contemporary artworld appeal. The discussion of *Dreamings* (1988) in New York gave insight into the growing reception for Indigenous art within cross-cultural contemporary frames. Intercultural exchange occurred during the exhibition between artists and visitors within the seminar format of the display. Designed to showcase the work as contemporary Aboriginal art, it was critically acknowledged for its innovation, flexibility, beauty and dynamism. The works were the adaptive endgame of modifying existing traditional forms to produce those that were entirely new. So impressive, was the impact of the artists on New York audiences, one critic called them "masters of modernity."

In the discussion for the *Magiciens de la terre* (1989) exhibition in Paris, it was observed that the ambition of the art curators was to create a platform for globalization where no hierarchical or national orderings existed between exhibiting artists. Such intention for world art display, facilitated opportunities for post-national art discourse. Martin's selection criteria for Indigenous artworks was cross-cultural, selecting those that were innovative and that had adapted traditional formats for contemporary display. It was noted that because of the limited commentary from the curators on the context of the work, critics generally failed to see the contemporary agency of the work in regard to the highly contested contemporary debates in Australia.

The conclusion for the chapter were reviews of three crucial Indigenous exhibitions for the decade in Australia. Collectively they reflected the coming of age of the medium of bark painting in the eyes of key art



institutions of the nation. Large collections of works had been acquired, including some substantial commissioned paintings. Significant scholarship was present in the exhibition catalogues, and glossy reproductions of major works were published for the first time. As never before, the public was given access to much broader perspectives on the art and the culture. *Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition* (1989), was illustrated by a glossy publication, *Windows on the Dreaming: Aboriginal Paintings in the Australian National Gallery* 1989. It was cross-cultural in vision, including the subaltern voice of Indigenous perspective in essays by Indigenous artists, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and George Milpurrurru as well as Indigenous curator Djon Mundine. Alongside, were perspectives of white Australian anthropologists Luke Taylor and Howard Morphy who had significant expertise in the area. In his catalogue essay, the curator, Wally Caruana, elaborated on the complexity of the understandings that underpinned the art and gave insights into its contemporaneity.

Michael O'Ferrall's curation of *Keepers of the Secrets* (1990–1991) evaluated his perspectives for the contemporaneity of the work, its nuanced historical evolution, individuality, regional stylistic codes, innovation and its traditional underpinnings. It was the largest ever display of bark paintings with 100 impressive works on view.

Judith Ryan's catalogue for *Spirit in Land. Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land* (1990–1991) likewise revealed understandings of the contemporaneity of the bark painting.<sup>37</sup> It significantly extended the art historical discourses in her discussion on a range of issues. Most notably was her analysis of the evolution of the aesthetic form, particularly the expressive use of *rarrk* patterning. Inspired by the *Mardayin* ceremonial body painting of the region, Ryan discussed how *rarrk* had been innovatively adapted by master-painter, John Mawurndjul and others in Western Arnhem Land. She described the complex process of his visual abstraction which was elaborated by the author with reference to a number of his bark paintings. A tour-de-force in the catalogue are images of stunning works from the exhibition, drawn from their collection (a function of support for recent purchases by the new director James Mollison). Ryan also detailed a comprehensive overview of the history of the bark painting movement in Arnhem Land, uniquely noting the participation of women in the art practice.

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<sup>37</sup> Judith Ryan, *Spirit in Land. Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land* (1990–1991) (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1991).

Chapter 6 evaluated the theoretical frameworks advanced by Terry Smith for Indigenous art to be understood as “contemporary art.” These were advanced in his chapter on Aboriginal art in Bernard Smith’s *Australian Painting 1788–1990*. Of significance, it illustrated how he retained an ambivalent position between the traditional and contemporary concerns of Aboriginal art, despite framing it within the concerns of contemporary art in the 1980s. These he referred to as it being adaptive, innovative, complex technically, aesthetically beautiful and having a growing commercial success and visibility, in its artworld acceptance and influence within Australian art. The text evaluated how Terry Smith’s discursive art historical frameworks for Aboriginal art’s contemporaneity, were reflected in curatorial discourses that soon followed. Such was the case in Caruana’s text for the 1993 Thames and Hudson publication *Aboriginal Art*.

The conclusion of Chapter 7 summarized the publication text pointing out its highlights then concluded with an overview of recent signature exhibitions since 1990 where Arnhem Land bark painting had been displayed. Commentary by Bernhard Lüthi discussed the far-reaching impact on international artworld discourses that followed from *ARATJARA* (1993). It was the Indigenous-curated exhibition of Indigenous Australian art that toured Europe in 1993–4. The chapter gave insight into the growing acclaim and respect of Arnhem Land bark painting within Australian institutional exhibition displays highlighting the very comprehensive and scholarly texts that were produced for such events. It acknowledged the Indigenous-directed curatorship and commentary by Djon Mundine and Margo Neale. The chapter concluded with a review of the ground-breaking exhibition and seminar of John Mawurndjul’s work in Europe. It noted its significance in establishing for Indigenous Australian contemporary art, an impressive international cross-cultural platform. Such achievements have been critical to the growing profile of Arnhem Land bark painting, and understanding its agency within the making of Indigenous Australian contemporary art.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **First encounter**

When the first bark paintings from the Arnhem Land region were collected in the late nineteenth century<sup>38</sup> there was no sense of the potency and influence they would have in shaping the culture psyche of future Australia. The impact of this ancient medium, one of the world's oldest forms of artistic expression, would be pivotal to the foundations of the Indigenous Australian contemporary art movement, Australian art and contemporary global artworld discourses. In the art business, over time the adaptive outpourings of the painters of Arnhem Land barks, particularly in the aesthetic domain, established a platform that secured for the people an economically viable art industry and a seat at the table of contemporary art.<sup>39</sup>

The aforementioned contemporary artworld relevance is realized in the very essence of the art from the beginning. Firstly, their Dreaming reality, sees the collapse of time and space with an equivalence found in the past, present and the future operating in the simultaneity of today and their ethical settings are determined by a paradigm for planetary ecological sustainability.<sup>40</sup> Critically, the art's contemporaneity finds resonance in the space-time frames of today's globally interconnected world and its urgent agendas for planetary survival.

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<sup>38</sup> The first collectors were government officials, explorers, pastoralists and entrepreneurs in the region.

<sup>39</sup> McLean, *Rattling Spears*.

<sup>40</sup> Colin Dean, *The Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime: Its History, Cosmogogenesis Cosmology and Ontology* (West Geelong: Gamahucer Press, 1996); W.E. Stanner, "The Dreaming." In *White Man Got no Dreaming* (Canberra, ANU Press, 1979), 23–40.

Subaltern voices from Arnhem Land bark painters that reflect on this are insightful. Western Arnhem Land, Kuninjku bark painter John Mawurndjul says:

We Biniŋ are painting things from long time ago, as we have been shown by our ancestors. I have put inside my head all of this knowledge and I hold onto it. I want to give Balanda people what is inside my head! The law of our old people... [For example] ... at Dilebang. When they [ancestors] died [from drought] the new moon placed itself at that place as a djang [Dreaming] ... the old people used to paint the story of those ancestors who all died – the new moon story. That image is the inspiration for the [moon] paintings.<sup>41</sup>

Fellow Kuninjku bark painter Mick Kubarkku (c.1922–2008) says:

We do our paintings and show them to Balanda [Europeans]. From one generation to another it passes on. We painted the djang [Creation Time] stories for all the country around here this way, that way. We don't paint anything else, just our own djang places. Aboriginal subjects and nothing else. We are always painting our sacred places.<sup>42</sup>

Also, from West Arnhem Land, Kuninjku painter Ivan Namirrki says:

Our ancestors, they lived here in this place, put here for them... Our spirits lie in water... We will all see this culture, which is ancient, going back in time. We didn't create this culture. It lies in the ground. It lies in the earth, but we

are bringing it out. We bring it out and paint it on bark ... I paint the spiritual essence of the place where I come from and I paint this place here where I live. This place is called Kudjaldordo. I create paintings to connect to this country and my spirit from the land where I grew up.<sup>43</sup>

Central Arnhem Land, Ganalbingu bark painter Charlie Djurrutjini explains:

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<sup>41</sup> John Mawurndjul, "I am a Chemist Man Myself." In Hetti Perkins and Theresa Willsteed eds., *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* (Sydney Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004), 134–9.

<sup>42</sup> Mick Kubarkku, "We Paint our Djang." In Hetti Perkins and Theresa Willsteed eds., *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004), 188.

<sup>43</sup> Ivan Namirrki, "Our Spirits Lie in the Water." In Hetti Perkins and Theresa Willsteed eds., *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004), 113–114.

These paintings are to show Balanda [white people] what my culture is. To show where my country and Dreaming is from, and where my culture comes from. I only paint about one place, Mutyka – that’s my country. These pictures come from my head – I think about my culture.<sup>44</sup>

East Arnhem Land bark Rirratjingu painter Wandjuk Marika explains his painting:

There is meaning, knowledge and power. This is the earthly painting for the creation and for the land story. The land is not empty; the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. Earth is our mother. The land is not empty – there is the story I am telling you – special, sacred important.<sup>45</sup>

Madarrpa bark painter Djambawa Marawili from eastern Arnhem Land elaborates on the Ancestor Bāru, one of his father’s mythological narratives:

Our clan is known as Madarrpa and our tribal identity is Gunmurrutjpi, Dhanala, Mukurala (deep power names of places key to the creation of Fire). For those of you who do not know our sacred identity it is Djambuyma, Malarra, Birratja, Worrpum, Ganangumirri, Dhathiyala, Wandada, Buryiwurri, Bathiya, Murrnginyangala (power names usually only called in ritual incantation, tracing the elements of Madarrpa Land and spirit). This is from the power flowing from Bāru, the Madarrpa clan crocodile lawman. Over these places he caused fire, danced with it and made himself strong, sanctifying these places with his song and actions at Gunmurrutjpi, Dhanala, Mukurala, Wangangurundja, Ditjpal Mandi’mandi, Manditjpi (power names correlating to the special sites and events in the Madarrpa landscape and cosmology). In these places, his voice thundered and sparkled, lighting the fire known as Ganambali Lirtji’lirtji (power names for Ancestral Fire) and when he saw these places transformed then he spoke, “Here are my nests Ngulwurr, Ngulumurmur, Bidin’bidin (power names for the creative force of fire, fertility and danger embodied in the crocodile’s nest). I am the source of the Fire.” This was Gunmurrutjpi (power name for the crocodile). The origin point of the knowledge and wisdom of Bāru is Madarrpa and only the Madarrpa are the source of Fire. This resides in the places of Gunmurrutjpi and Dhanala, Mukurala.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mundine, “The Native Born,” 44.

<sup>45</sup> Wandjuk Marika, “Most Important is the Line. Wandjuk Marika Speaks of Painting.” In *They are Meditating. Bark Paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection* (Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 13.

<sup>46</sup> Djambawa Marawili, “Two Stories from My Father.” In Marie Anne Brody ed. *Larrakitj. The Kerry Stokes Collection* (West Perth: Australian Capital Equity, 2011), 62.

Though part of an ephemeral tradition, barks were made for ritual and storytelling and not kept indefinitely, they shared with the scrolls of Egypt and China an ancient practice for documentation of sacred and traditional knowledge and political agendas. The symbols encoded within these mediums spoke of deep wisdom and spiritual knowledge. They were consequently vehicles through which the sophistication of their people was acknowledged. In Australia barks were used to facilitate legal interaction with the non-Indigenous world of their oppressors. They advocated for equality in the face of unprecedented black-white conflict in their lands, by asserting their entitlement to traditionally held lands.<sup>47</sup>

For Indigenous Australians, the era of modernism dawned with the arrival of the British in the late eighteenth century. It set in train a cultural change so radical from the one that the newcomers encountered, that the period that followed signalled the beginnings of their cross-cultural history with Indigenous Australians. Though many looking at Indigenous Australians from this period saw a culture locked in the past and doomed to destruction, the reality however, was quite the opposite. In the South, where the settlement by Governor Arthur Phillip took place in the founding of a new colony for Empire, a rapid dislocation of culture on many fronts occurred. It was a consequence of the widespread massacres, decimation and the destruction of clans, languages and ceremonies. In the North, by contrast, while the invasion occurred, it was far more gradual.<sup>48</sup> In 1931 Government legislation set aside large tracts of land as Aboriginal Reserve for Yolngu people and because of this, the conditions were set in train for the people to continue to occupy their lands, for them to maintain their tribal obligations with integrity, as well as their traditional cultural practices and identities. The knock-on effect was that Indigenous people were able to respond to the opportunities presented by modernism from a position of strength. It was a gradual evolution of change, rather than insensitive destruction as seen in the South, Indigenous people in Arnhem Land engaged with the new

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<sup>47</sup> Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art. Exploring Cross Cultural Categories* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2008): "Bark Petitions," *Magna Carta and Modern Australia website*. Accessed 1 May 2020.  
<https://magnacarta.moadoph.gov.au/story/bark-petitions/>." Accessed 1 May 2020. "Early Attempts at Settlement in the Northern Territory (1824–1870)," University of Queensland.  
[http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:212586/s00855804\\_1959\\_1960\\_6\\_2\\_324.pdf](http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:212586/s00855804_1959_1960_6_2_324.pdf).