

Karrimarnbun Daluhdaluk (Women creating together) Essay by Freya Black

Here now, and together at Coconut Studios we have the immense privilege to view the art practices of 15 artists from Kakadu and the surrounding country in *Karrimarnbun daluhdaluk (Women creating together)*. What is apparent about this community of daluk (women) artists are their tendrillar connections to each other, kinship to family and homelands and a natural proclivity to develop their own unique interpretations of stories and art-making techniques that have been passed on to them. What is significant is that many of the artists have come to artmaking guided directly by female relatives. Daluk, particularly younger daluk, are actively acquiring the skills necessary for the intricate woven forms constructed from kunngobarn (*Pandanus spiralis*) and milirl (*Trophis scandens*) which have always been taught by female family members, and learning the techniques of painting ochre and acrylic onto bark - which were traditionally taught by senior men - for the purposes of art. These skills are taught directly through a community of practice from family members over a period of time and for many of these West Arnhem Land artists, their mothers, stepmothers, and senior female family members have become the knowledge base of a new generation of artists.

The youngest artist in this show, Ailena Cunningham, is 12 years of age and appears alongside her Grandmother Irene Henry and her Auntie Rhonda Henry, both of whom have been mentoring Ailena in the preparation of bark for painting and carving wooden forms. This tradition of passing along knowledge through art to younger generations ensures these stories and skills remain current and in use, and it also empowers younger artists with a strong sense of identity. Rhonda's work looks back at her mother's design which she describes as 'the old Tiwi design', defining her own work as 'the modern Tiwi way'. Her collection of works entitled *Daughter to Mother Jilamara* (design), is influenced by her mother's (Aileen Henry Kumarjino) geometric forms on bark that depict the traditional jilamara (Tiwi body paint design), which Rhonda interprets through her use of bold contemporary colours. Like Rhonda, Ailena and Irene's work both demonstrate the connection to the traditional Tiwi jilamara through the complex geometry they paint directly onto tunga (bags used for hunting and ceremony), which are placed on top of the elaborately carved tutuni poles for the Pukumani mourning ceremony that farewells the deceased¹

Many of the artists whose country lies east of Kakadu, paint the story of Djimarr, the ancestral crow who lives at the sacred site of Kurrurldul, a creek on the lands of the Kurulk clan. Djimarr exists today in the form of a rock that lies submerged at the bottom of the creek and according to members of the Kurulk clan, appears at night calling 'wak wak wak wak,' before returning to the form of the rock; his final embodiment.² Djimarr is represented through the intricate painting style unique to the region known as rarrk, a dense interplay of abstract cross-hatching which is characterised by distinct patterning that shimmers and undulates across the surface of the bark. Roberta (Yulyulmarra) Wurrkidj's *Wak Wak* is a superb example of this exquisite line work, a technique that has been passed along to Roberta through her stepfather, James Iyuna (dec.) and her mother, Melba Gunjarrwanga, whose intricately woven *Marebu* appears alongside those of her family's in this exhibition. Roberta's form is, however, entirely her own as is

evident in her painting *Mandjabu (Fish Trap)* and her Djang* as associated with the sacred waterhole site at Dilebang which is said to be the home of the Ngalyod (Rainbow Serpent)³. Roberta continues in her family's tradition of mentoring with her daughter Teninnah England who formulates her own interpretation of the Duwa (moiety) story of Djimarr with her painting *Wak Wak*. From another branch of this artistic family is Carissa Gurwalwal, the granddaughter of artist Susan Marrawarr and the niece of Rosina Gunjarrwanga. Carissa has only just begun to paint in the rarrk style with her distinct monochromatic *Wak Wak*, and *Lorrkkon* (hollow log coffin), which traditionally held the bones of a deceased clan member. Susan Marrawarr's daughter, Alison Guwanguwan, also paints the *Lorrkkon* story, the final mortuary ceremony celebrated by the people of West Arnhem Land. After a clan member passes away, the family will cut down a Stringybark tree and once the log has dried, the surface of the wood is decorated with clan designs and prepared to house the bones of the deceased. As the morning sun rises on the final day of the two-week ceremony, the lorrkkon stands upright in a hole dug by the female family members and those with a particular kinship relation to the deceased begin to dance in the final ritual. The designs that are painted onto lorrkkon can vary, but Alison's lorrkkon are distinctly black and white and repeat a bold, abstracted diamond-shaped rarrk that radiates within a black and white grid.

An arresting interpretation of the *Wak Wak* story has been woven with pandanus and bush cane by Johanna Morris, a Kuninjku artist who was taught to paint by her mother and stepmother respectively. Johanna's distinctive rarrk is characterised by bright yellow and orange hues which are also present in her woven forms, but which manifests itself sharply in her bark painting *Waterhole at Yikarrakkal* – a sacred site which lies to the east of the Mann River and deep with the Kuninjku homelands. From the same waterhole at Yikarrakkal comes the Djang of Jemma Yibbruruana and her family, notably her stepfather, Paul Nabulumo. Jemma's painting style intensifies the images using negative black backgrounds, a style characteristic of her family as she interprets the imagery associated with her homeland at Yikarrakkal. Comparisons between her work and that of Johanna Morris reveal a similarity of form, although they are two very different interpretations of the same location which is said to be inhabited by Yawk Yawk (freshwater mermaids), known to be the guardians of sacred waterholes. Jemma also paints Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent who is the protector of Yawk Yawk, and an important ancestral figure in West Arnhem Land.

A familiar occurrence in billabongs across the Top End is the mandem (waterlily), which is a common manme (food) for Bininj (people) around Kakadu and West Arnhem Land. Vienna Buramura represents the mandem several times in acrylic paint on Arches paper, as well as works that are a design unique to Vienna. Another common manme is wirlarrk (egg), which Joy Nabegeyo paints in acrylic (on Arches paper) as being carried in dillybags. Joy was taught to weave when she was a teenager by her mother and sister. Her painting *Wirlarrk (Egg)* is particularly striking with its distinct red background and fine linework. Vicky Wood is another fibre artist who makes finely woven dillybags but also coil weave baskets, a technique which came to West Arnhem Land via a circuitous route from Ngarrindjeri Women in the Coorong region of South Australia in the 1920s.⁴

When the red moon appears so may appear the Namarnde daluk (female devil spirits), malevolent female spirits who are unique to the stone country surrounding Kakadu and West Arnhem Land. Sylvia Champion's *Namarnde Daluk*, are lean like rails with sinister smiles, warning the viewer *not to get too close!* Kristelle Murdilnga's *Mimih Spirits* also appear after dusk, but only when there is no wind as they are so thin and slender, they risk being blown away. Mimih are mischievous, which is evident from their smiles, but again one must approach them the right way to avoid danger as they are said to be volatile as well as cheeky.

There is a richness to this group exhibition that is fulfilled by the culturally significant nature of the narratives that drive each of these works. However, it is also rich because it is a coming together of Women, of Women working and creating together, and generously sharing their histories and stories which are such an important cultural basis in the Kakadu and West Arnhem region, and for the individual artists themselves. In this coming together we can witness the journey of artists who have been practising for many years whilst also meeting the generation who are emerging and beginning to find their way. This is a dynamic cycle of learning, practising and creating - both communally and individually – as Women create together, and in the words of these 15 artists:

*“Ngurrimray ngurrinan njalehnjale nawu ngarrimarnbom.
(You mob come and see the various things we're making).”*

- Reference list:
1. McLean, Ian. “Future Perfect: The Pukumani Poles,” Curator: The Museum Journal 62, 1, (2019): 81-85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12290>.
 2. Culpitt, Michelle. Primavera 2019: Young Australian Artists. Edited by Karen Riederer. Museum of Modern Art, with Mitch Cairns, 2019. Exhibition catalogue.
 3. Mawurndjul, John. “Djang,” 2022. <https://www.johnmawurndjul.com/resources/video3/>
 4. West, Margie. “String Lines: Continuing Developments in Aboriginal Fibre Art,” Artlink, Vol 25 (June 2005), 56.

All artist biographies and artwork information have been sourced through SAM (Stories, Art, Money) courtesy of the artists and Marrawuddi Arts & Culture.

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1. Ian McLean, “Future Perfect: The Pukumani Poles,” Curator: The Museum Journal 62, 1, (2019): 81-85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12290>
2. Michelle Culpitt, Primavera 2019: Young Australian Artists, Edited by Karen Riederer (Sydney: Museum of Modern Art, Mitch Cairns, 2019), Exhibition catalogue.

3. The Kuninjku word Djang* has no direct English translation. Djang can be physical places that are the focus of ancestral creator beings. It can be represented by natural species, weather phenomena, human emotions and physical states - such as jealousy or sickness - as well as by other types of non-human persons such as spirit beings.<https://www.johnmawurndjul.com/resources/video3/>
4. Margie West, “String Lines: Continuing Developments in Aboriginal Fibre Art,” Artlink, Vol 25 (June 2005), 56.

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Karrimarnbun Daluhdaluk (Women creating together)

2–31 July, 2022

Ailena Cunningham
Alison Guwanguwan
Carissa Gurwalwal
Irene Henry
Jemma Yibbruruana
Johanna Morris
Joy Nabegeyo
Kristelle Murdilnga
Melba Gunjarrwanga
Rhonda Henry
Roberta (Yulyulmarra) Wurrkidj
Sylvia Champion
Teninnah England
Vicky Wood
Vienna Buramura



(01) Ailena Cunningham (born 2010)
Tunga
Acrylic on bark
35 x 22cm

(02) Melba Gunjarrwanga (born 1959)
Marebu (Woven Jungle Vine Mat)
Jungle vine (*Malaisia scandens*)
65 x 65cm

(03) Roberta (Yulyulmarra) Wurrkidj (born 1978)
Wak Wak (Crow)
Ochre on bark
83 x 25cm

Curated by
Marrawuddi Arts & Culture,
Stephanie Martin and Freya Black