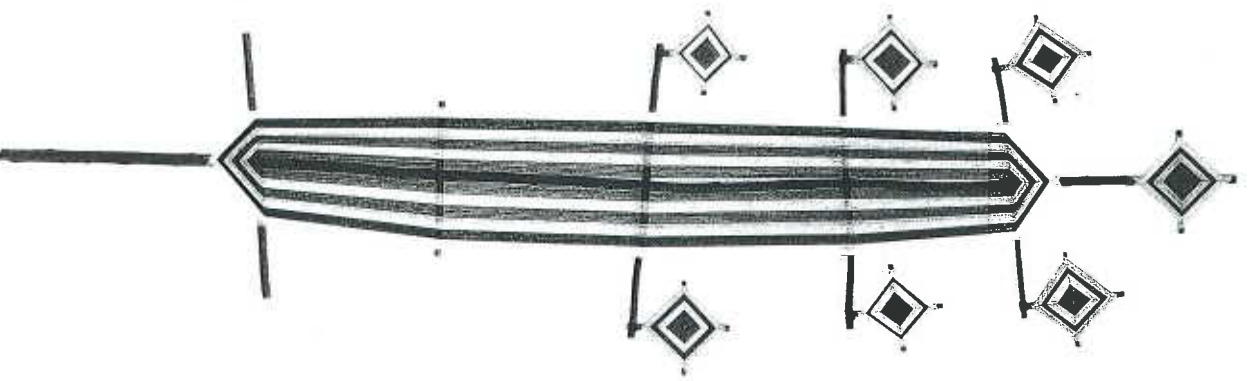


Brought to Light II:
 Contemporary Australian
 pp 404-409
 AQ

1966-2006
 Queensland Art
 Gallery
 Gallery

The balmorra of Alar
 Balibali balga
 Dominic ve Sweeney



Alan Griffiths
 Australian artist, Aboriginal heritage
 Dictionary, Simon, Sydney 2012
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The framework of the canvas is the base, middle, of
 while the wool is the flesh of the antelope - dancer's skin

Corroborees are at the heart of public cultural life in a
 renowned east Kimberley painting style made famous
 the term 'corroboree' is used to distinguish individual
 practice. Balga is a genre of corroboree and the balga
 performed as part of the Kimberley culture section of
 was originally created through a sequence of dreams
 gone than the story, choreography, music, and design
 collection were designed and constructed by Alan G
 Balbura are one form of the throat-cross performed
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Alan Griffiths is a creator of corroborees, banyan &
 30 grandchildren. He and his wife Peggy live close
 which maintain relationships with country and are
 Stanner (first called 'everywhere') - Alan Griffiths the
 of the fourth-year, use 'corroboree' to describe the
 culture: balga, junda, murgamurra, birga and wan

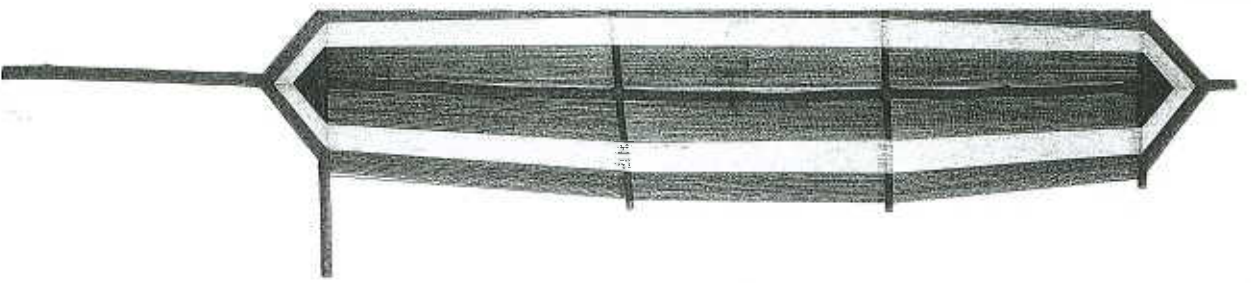
The balmarra of Alan Griffiths's BalBali balga

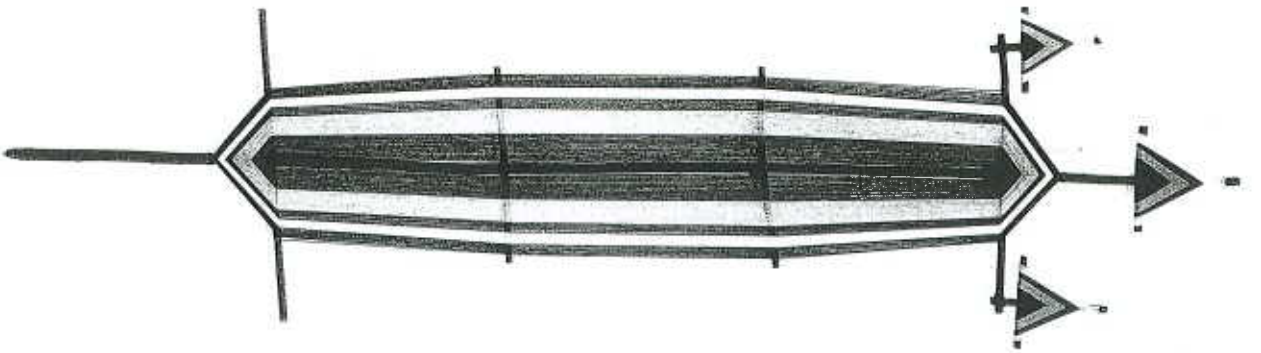
The juxtaposition of the crown at the base, instead of the necktie-clause, while the wood is the flesh of the animal, dancer's body.

Corroborees are at the heart of public cultural life in the Kimberley and the source of the renowned oral Kimberley quating style made famous by Rover Thomas. In north-west Australia the term 'corroboree' is used to distinguish individual artistic performance from group ceremonial practice. Balga is a genre of corroboree and the balmarra (divined creature) in this group were performed as part of the Kimberley culture section of the 2004 Perth Festival. Alan Griffiths's balga was originally created through a sequence of dreams that came to him in 1974, in which a spirit gave him the story, choreography, music and design. The balmarra in the Queensland Art Gallery collection were designed and constructed by Alan Griffiths for the BalBali spirit.

Balmarras are one form of the throat-cross performance *malidjari* documented throughout Australia in the 1960s by the anthropologist DS Davidson.¹ They were traditionally made from gumdjarri and coloured with ochre and white. Today, the spectacular array of rainbow wood colours is part of what makes these objects so striking in corroborees. The balmarra humanoid star constellation, places, people and spirits. In Alan Griffiths's balga they are specific and remain consistent, though this is not always the case. A large balmarra, carried by two men from Kalbarri, for instance, changes its meaning from being a boat to then being a bird, the rainbow snake.² The power these objects hold in performance is not inherent in the object itself. Rather, balmarras are theatrical devices in the control of the performers manipulating during a corroboree.

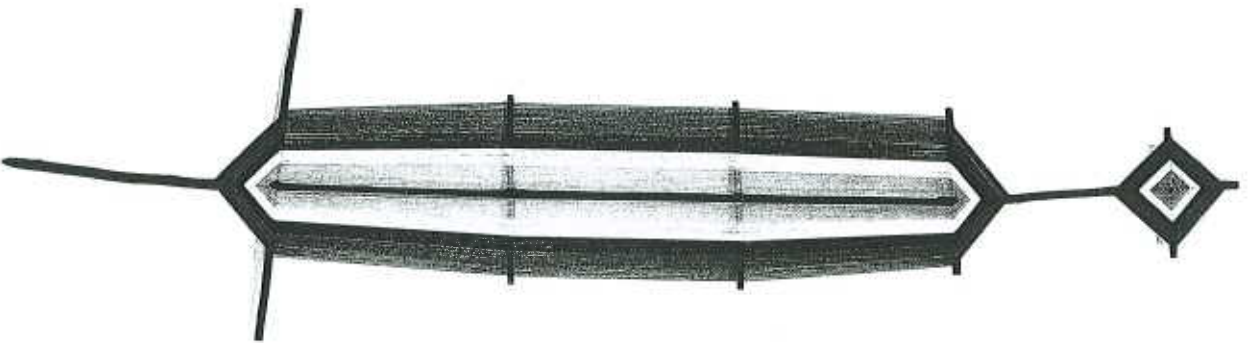
Alan Griffiths is a creator of corroborees, *lawitjari* and the head of a family with more than 20 grandchildren. He and his wife Peggy live close to their country, continuing cultural practices which maintain relationships with country and ancestors through what the anthropologist Bill Stanner first called 'everywhen'.³ Alan Griffiths lives in Kununurra and, like many traditional owners of the north west, uses 'corroboree' to describe the various public performance genres in his culture: *balga*, *jarja*, *malegamungh*, *birrpa* and *wangga*.⁴ Though we may look to the diverse





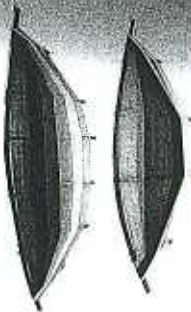
Balmorra, Bulla River 2002

Wood and metal 137.3 x 22.5 x 10.5 cm / Painted
2002. Sponsored by Oakley Foundation for Arts
and Culture, 2002. Lamented by Murray, 2004-10.

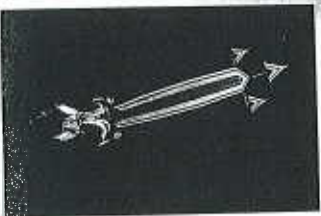


Balmorra, Morning Star 2002

Wood and metal 208 x 88.5 x 11.5 cm / Painted
2002. Sponsored by Oakley Foundation for Arts
and Culture, 2002. Lamented by Murray, 2004.



Balmorra, Small Boat 2002
Wood and metal 45 x 10.5 x 10.5 cm / Painted 2002
Sponsored by Oakley Foundation for Arts and Culture, 2002. Lamented by Murray, 2004-10.



Balbal balga performer Ned Johns, 2004
Wood and metal
Sponsored by Murray, 2004-10.

literature of early explorers, paratitlists, anthropologists and other these theatrical practices, they are at best secondary sources. 'Con as Alan Griffiths's Balbal balga grove the strongest point of depth the use of balmarra in performance.

Alan Griffiths travelled the country on foot to perform for different people exchanged corroborees through the warran — an exchange obligation. Only 50 years ago Alan Griffiths walked with bulmarra, hundreds of kilometers away, and brought new ones in operation today. The contemporary exchange of corroboree in arts multiple (DS) and Alan Griffiths (AG) discuss how corroborees were

AG: Alan, you look those corroborees around to all the scullies?
AG: Oh, yes. A long time ago, yes. In 1945, '47... We travelled all all around, Cobalah, Timber Creek, Bralshaw. We travelled all around. And that was for money, or for...
AG: For nothing.

AG: Just to show those other people, and the other people show it to us. To show those other people, and the other people show it to us. And if you were somewhere else, they looked after you?

AG: Oh, not really, but you got to hunt your own food. If you got in those days were you walking, or were you travelling in a car?
AG: Oh, we were walking. We never travelled in a car or by car walking. I got my swag on my shoulder and go.

AG: So were you carrying any beads or any balmarra or anything we were we carried, some of that.
AG: Oh, balmarra we carried, some of that.
AG: You carried them with you?
AG: Yes. Carry them down and leave them there.

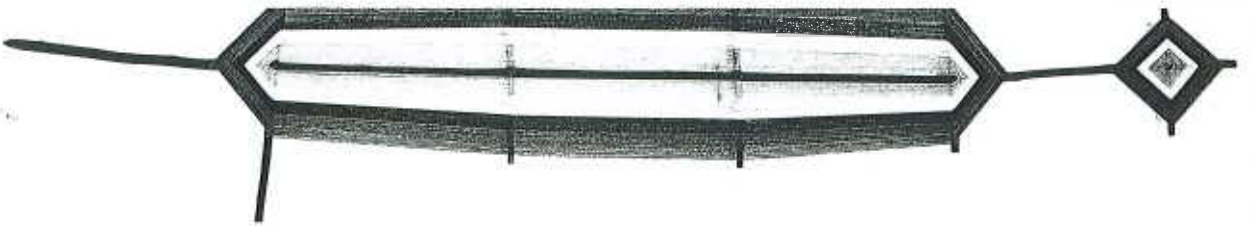
AG: Whose corroborees were you dancing?
AG: Oh, we were dancing jumbuk, balga, walgga, limga. That's it. And then would you bring back a new one from someone else?
AG: Walgga or limga or it might be different corroboree. We can avoid each time when you take someone else's corroboree, e corroboree that you're doing?

AG: Yes.
AG: So it's always clear.
AG: It's still your name, of that bloke, whoever found it. Doesn't or corroboree, or anything.

AG: Did people used to share more in those days, all that stuff?
AG: Oh, yes. They shared them out, yes.

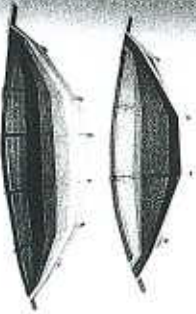
AG: Because there was more to share? There was everybody did it. Yes. Everybody doing something. Even on ceremony time, I finish the ceremony and then we'd put the corroboree in, I

The people of the Kurnurra area use the word 'Ngurungurra' with the ancestral domain, Alan Griffiths is from the Timber Creek Territory and it is the Ngurungurra word 'Ngurungurra' that describes that provides a direct link between people and the mythological uses balmarra in his corroborees is to manifest ever-present and just frames on which world is strong but frames of reference in manifest country, constellations, spirit and ancestors. Masks, it difficult to separate the balmarra, masks, or the way the curtain merge into the body design of the dancer as individual theatrical Myers and Nancy Myers speak of the way part of the material of people's bodies are identified with particular kin groups and too, who are felt as integral parts of people's bodies. For extra mother is mainly through a twitching in their buttocks. With Redmond elaborates:



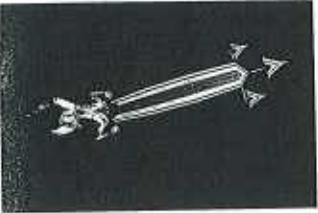
literature of early explorers, geographers, anthropologists and others to understand more about these theatrical practices. They are at best secondary sources - contemporary corroborees such as Alan Griffiths' Balibali balsa provide the strongest point of departure from which to appreciate the use of balmarra in performance.

Alan Griffiths travelled the country on foot to perform for different cattle station communities. The people exchanged corroborees through the woman - an exchange network of objects, culture and obligation. Only 50 years ago Alan Griffiths walked with balmarra on his shoulders to corroborees, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, and brought new ones home. Though the woman still operates today, the contemporary exchange of corroborees is rare. In the following interview the author (DS) and Alan Griffiths (AG) discuss how corroborees were performed in the past.



Balmorra, small boat 2002
Wood and wool / 40 x 126 x 54cm / Purchased 2006
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / © Alan Griffiths, 2002. Licensed by Visuals Sydney, 2006

Balmorra, large boat 2002
Wood and wool / 51 x 182 x 5.5cm / Purchased 2006
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / © Alan Griffiths, 2002. Licensed by Visuals Sydney, 2006



Balibali balsa performer Ned Johns, 2004
Magical! Patti Carling-Graham, Brisbane
Magical! 2004

- DS: Alan, you look these corroborees around to all the stations?
- AG: Oh, yes. A long time ago, yes. In 1946, '47... We travelled all around Wave Hill, Mt Saddle all around, Coolahah, Timber Creek, Bralshaw. We travelled everywhere with that corroboree.
- DS: And that was for money, or for...?
- AG: For nothing.
- DS: Just to show those other people...?
- AG: To show those other people, and the other people show it back again, same.
- DS: And if you went somewhere else, they looked after you?
- AG: Oh, not really. But you got to have your own hold. If you got family there, yes, they'll feed you.
- DS: In those days were you walking, or were you travelling in a car?
- AG: Oh, we were walking. We never travelled in a car, or by camel or anything. We were just walking. I got my swag on my shoulder and all.
- DS: So were you carrying any boards or any balmarra or anything?
- AG: Oh, balmarra we carried, some of that.
- DS: You carried them with you?
- AG: Yes. Carry them down and leave them there.
- DS: Whose corroborees were you dancing?
- AG: Oh, we were dancing jamba, jamba, wangga, birga. That's it.
- DS: And then would you bring back a new one from someone else?
- AG: Wanggal or birga or it might be different corroboree. We could take them back.
- DS: And each time when you take someone else's corroboree, everyone knows it's that person's corroboree that you're doing?
- AG: Yes.
- DS: So it's always clear.
- AG: It's still your name, of that block, whoever found it. Doesn't matter what it is: birga or wangga or corroboree, or anything.
- DS: Did people used to share more in those days, all that stuff?
- AG: Oh, yes. They shared them out, yes.
- DS: Because there was more to share? There was everybody doing it.
- AG: Yes. Everybody doing something. Even on ceremony time, we were taking the kids down, finish the ceremony and then we'd put the corroboree in, just like that.

The people of the Kowanyarra area use the word 'Ngarrangarru' to describe their relationship with the ancestral domain. Alan Griffiths is from the Yunder Creek region in the Northern Territory and it is the Ngalyawu word 'karru' that describes inherited spiritual affiliations that provide a direct link between people and the mythological landscape.¹ The way Alan Griffiths uses balmarra in his corroborees is to manifest ever-present aspects of existence. Balmarra are not just frames on which wool is strung but frames of reference and, during the corroboree, they manifest country, constellations, spirit and ancestors. Masks, too, are part of this culture; it is difficult to separate the balmarra, masks, or the way the corroboree is performed from the people. Myers and Nancy Muan speak of the way parts of the material world provide fragments of people so that individuals come to identify places and ancestors as part of themselves.² Particular parts of people's bodies are identified with particular kin types and it is not just ancestors but the living, too, who are felt as integral parts of people's bodies.³ For example, a person may know that their brother is nearby through a twitching in their buttocks. Writing recently, the researcher⁴ Tony Redmond elaborates:

In the progression from buttocks to hip to thigh to knee to calf there is a progression from emotional closeness to emotional distance in which the greatest degree of transformation or inversion of affect takes place at the knee joint.¹⁸

An appreciation of how traditional owners raisee other people, the spirits around them and their environment; enhances an audience's experience of a corroboree. When traditional owners see their family and relations dancing, they also see the spirits of ancestors who, in everywhen, are the very country itself. This is what Alan Griffiths and others say makes them feel glad in their guts.¹⁹

In the following discussion between Alan Griffiths (AG), the author (DS) and anthropologist Kim Abernethy (KA), Griffiths describes how the Bailbal balga was created from a dream and then developed over a period of years.

DS: Story for the Bailbal ... that's from the dreamtime. I dreamed that. Old Mandi, he didn't die here, but he died in Dingo Springs, near a big boab tree. Months after that, I went out to Spillway, camping out there. Next time we went up again, and made a camp on the same place, and my wife seen a fire on top of the hill. Oh, that's only a bloody bushfire. What are you talking about? I took my beer, went to sleep. In the morning she lights the fire, puts the billy on. 'Where's the fire now? You reckoned it was a bushfire.' I had a look around that little knob, looked at the bloody grass: no burnt grass! That's Old Mandi, a spirit, you know. Next week we went back and I dreamed that corroboree, Bailbal ... Then a few years after that I went to Darwin, with that big mob Waingurrin. I dreamed that boab, Seven Sisters and Morning Star.

KA: In '97, when you had that dream, did you see Mandi or did you just get his voice?

AG: I just seen him standing up with a balmarra, in my head.

KA: But, it was Mandi, or anyone else?

AG: Yes, Old Mandi.

KA: And he was singing, or somebody else singing?

AG: Oh, both, I think, I put it all together, mixed songs, in Bailbal. — In Darwin, Bullo River.

I brought it back.

KA: How many people did you teach, first up, yourself?

AG: Here? Oh, quite a mob. I had seven dancers gone to Perth. — Seven women.

DS: Seven men, seven women?

AG: Yes.

DS: And then how many singers? Three, with you?

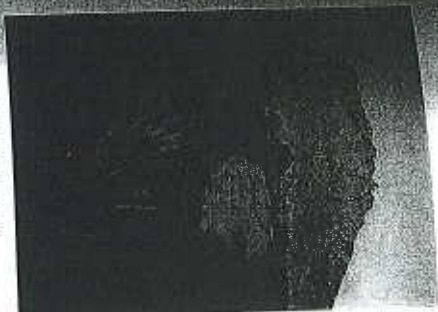
AG: Yes. We can sing it if we got three, or sing it if we got two.²⁰

In December 2003 Alan Griffiths performed his corroboree in preparation for the 2004 Perth Festival. The corroboree took place in Kunurrarra next to Griffiths's house, under the stars, with a fire and one hoodlight to illuminate the performance area. From behind the bough screen came the ghost. The bough screen separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. Like the devil character in European medieval morality plays, the juari of the balga promises laughter in the audience — he taunts them. He provides continuity through the various songs that do not follow a linear narrative. Those who know recognise him as the deceased relative who visited the corroboree creator, Alan Griffiths, to impart the balga.

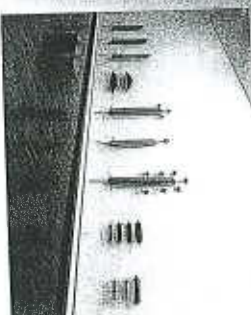
The ghost came — a large white mask on a painted body — and brandished his spear at the sorngman and audience. Thus juari, the spirit of Mandi, came to Griffiths to impart the balga but in the performance he taunts the sorngman. In the song the Bailbal juari calls himself 'stranger', but it is Griffiths who is the stranger to Mirning country. There is a lot of play in this interaction, which may well reflect the close relationship they shared in life together. The head of the juari moved sharply from one side then to the other, looking for his prey, the little girl. The mask held still. The upper half of his body remained still. The performer's legs, in large dramatic steps and in opposition to his top half, firmed sideways from the knees; his neck twisted to one side, then to the other. The mask held still. A child cried. The size of this mask demands stylised movement of this amplitude and the older audience laughed at these provocative antics. The ghost made his way back to the bough screen and disappeared into darkness. The men, with supports down their backs, wore the balmarra held vertically, lowering above their heads. The dancers entered with the balmarra facing away from the audience. Three balmarra represented the Bailbal spirit.



Alan Griffiths with a dancer, 2004. Photograph: Peter Day / Image courtesy: Waingurrin Mirning Arts.



A view of Mirning country. Photograph: Alan Griffiths. Photo by Alan Griffiths. Photo by Peter Day / Image courtesy: Waingurrin Mirning Arts.



A landscape view of Mirning country. Photograph: Alan Griffiths. Photo by Alan Griffiths. Photo by Peter Day / Image courtesy: Waingurrin Mirning Arts.

Even though the objects are clearly seen an entry, it is the act of audience which brings their meaning forward. These extensions create the place and connection to country which welcome soul. The male, with all the performers and objects brought out again two balmarra loads, the Seven Sisters, the Morning Star and Bullo Magessean loads, the Sorngmen, use the small hand-held bough mask (juari) in a shuffling, jangling dance, making the balmarra in a whir of tales in a shuffling, jangling dance, making the balmarra in a whir of tales. In the final the men perform with the masks and large bough balmarra. The dancers have become the balmarra, artistic, small balmarra. The dancers have become the balmarra, artistic, small balmarra. The dancers have become the balmarra, artistic, small balmarra.

Each performance of the corroboree is a reworking of Alan Griffiths. Each performance also offers a form of news from the dead. The spirit re-emerges and also offers a form of news from the dead. The spirit re-emerges and also offers a form of news from the dead. The spirit re-emerges and also offers a form of news from the dead.

The Bailbal balga came to Alan Griffiths in Marrali languages — his local languages to the Kunurrarra district. The meaning of it are rather because they travel to places far from their region, or, in the language of the over/under/over. Meaning is passed just through the dance steps and through the objects and designs. It is not superficially evident. When asked the question, 'what is Griffiths's response is that thing now.' In another discussion, Griffiths's response is that thing now. In another discussion, Griffiths's response is that thing now. In another discussion, Griffiths's response is that thing now.

Through his corroboree Alan Griffiths publicly shares his sense of importance of traditional law and culture. An understanding of importance of traditional law and culture. An understanding of importance of traditional law and culture. An understanding of importance of traditional law and culture.

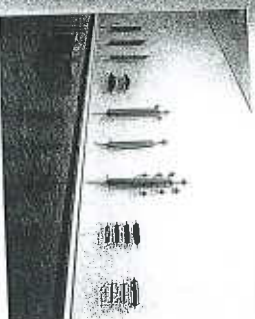
Donnaueque Sweetney is a PhD student at the Centre for Cross Australian National University.



Alan Griffiths with Dance 2004
Photograph: Peter Bow / Image courtesy: Warrungul Aboriginal Arts



Corroborees, a site in Murrumbidgee country
Photograph: Peter Bow / Image courtesy: Warrungul Aboriginal Arts



Indigenous view of landscape, early 19th century
Photograph: Alan Griffiths

Even though the objects are clearly seen on entry, it is the act of turning around to face the audience which brings their meaning forward. These extensions of body design during performance create the place and connection to country which welcome both the ancestors and the living. The finale, with all the performers and objects brought out again to dance together, includes the two Murrumbidgee women, the Seven Sisters, the Morning Star and Bullo River. In the meantime, the murgamurga (little magic women) use the small hand-held balmaina. The women express the change of tides in a shuffling, jumping dance, shaking the balmaina in a charming action in front of their waists. In the finale the men perform with the masks and large balmaina and the women with the small balmaina. The dancers have become the balmaina, artistic vehicles that extend the material body of the dancers during performance into the design that stood up in Alan Griffiths's head.

Each performance of the corroboree is a re-enactment of Alan Griffiths's dream. The balmaina holders entertain and also offers a form of news from the dead. The spirits pass on important information to relatives through this medium. In some cases the purpose of the information is to reach another relative who is not ready or able to receive this kind of dream (as with Rover Thomas's famous Gurr-Gurr balmaina).¹⁰ In other cases the information alerts everybody to a particular historical event, like the Fire Fire Burning Bright corroboree which tells of a massacre at Boy River where the spirits from the burning bodies of men look down upon the fire that engulfs them as they sing the event that took place last century.¹¹ This corroboree was performed at the Darwin, Perth and Melbourne Festivals.

The Balmaina holds came to Alan Griffiths in Murrumbidgee — both Murrumbidgee and Ega. They are local languages to the Kurnurra dialect. The meaning of the words in corroborees can be lost, either because they travel far from their origins or, as in this case, because they are not in the language of the contemporary composer. Meaning is passed just as importantly through the music, through the dance steps and through the objects and designs.¹² "These multiple layers of meaning are not superficially evident. When asked the question 'what does the morning star balmaina mean?' Griffiths's response is 'that thing now'. In another discussion, when questioned about whether balmaina are totemic, Griffiths said that whatever totems are, they are not that — they are balmaina. To some extent these responses are to circumvent explaining private knowledge which is not to be talked about publicly. For Alan Griffiths the story is not simply apparent — it is an interwoven part of Murrumbidgee. Because the traditional owners have grown up with their stories interconnecting with other stories, it seems strange to Alan Griffiths that anyone would ask the meaning of specific parts, words or designs, when it is the whole that is important. Griffiths partly inherited the Balmaina holds, partly received it and partly created it. Each time it is performed, what Alan is doing is attempting to reproduce what came to him, 'the way it stands up in my head'. He is forthright in saying that the process is artistic and creative, 'same as how you think for painting'.

Through his corroborees Alan Griffiths publicly shares his sensitivity to the country and the importance of traditional law and culture. An understanding of the theatrical practices used in corroborees enables an audience to see what is being attempted in the performance. When you see, you gain an understanding of people's relationships to spirit and country. Alan Griffiths's balmaina are manifestations of ever-present aspects of existence. The performers enable an experience of these manifestations through an artistic process. For those who appreciate their meaning, balmaina are sung and danced into the everyday of performance, into the living Murrumbidgee.

¹⁰ Dominique Slattery is a PhD student at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University.

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TOP 54

Cover detail
Title detail
A Person Looks At A Work Of Art
LOGOS / HA HA
someone looks at something
A Person Looks At A Work Of Art
Medium
someone looks at something
CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION
Date - 1989
Artist Peter Tyrnall
Page 3
Rosalie Gascoigne
Lamp II (detail) 1989
Reproduction: Two lights in hardwood / 83 x 183cm.
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Awards 1903
Proposal for a Surfers Paradise public sculptureParatidse
now (back view) 2006
Printed: limited edition / 31 x 108 x 108 / The Artist's Book
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