Expressing identity
Creativity in Yolngu art

For countless generations, Yolngu people from eastern Arnhem Land have used art as a way of relating to and acting in the world. Yolngu art is a way of knowing the world. Yolngu art expresses the forces of nature — the seasonal cycle, the wet season flood waters, the movement of the clouds, the action of the tides as it swamps the beach creeks. Yolngu art encodes features of the landscape; it can map the relationships between things — between people, places and ancestral beings. It can be used to demonstrate rights; to assert authority, to compare people and events, to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next, to renew a person’s spirit or transport the souls of the dead.

It can do all these things because of what it is — a form of art-making that makes the world in which people live, that communicates it to other people, that conveys individual perceptions and emotions as readily as it maps the structure of Yolngu society. Yolngu art has been taught and practiced through generations by people of knowledge and skill. Over time the world has changed in large and small ways. Yolngu have used the properties of their art — the techniques of representation, its aesthetic power, its inner logic — to ensure its relevance in new contexts. The last great change was the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of the mission station of Yirrkala in 1958, that arrival created another audience for Yolngu art, another arena in which the artists could act.

Yolngu artists began to engage with the outside world almost from the beginning of the mission. Walter Chasseling, the founding missionary, encouraged the production of bark paintings to supplement mission income and to fund ‘natives’ such as tobacco and sugar. He sent collections to the Queensland Museum, the Australian Museum in Sydney and the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne. However, Chasseling and the Yolngu artists were interested in more than generating income; they were engaged in processes of persuasion.

Chasseling valued Aboriginal culture and industry and wanted to demonstrate their worth to the congregations in the south. Yolngu saw art as a means of engaging with the missionaries and
This long period of engagement with the outside world is of life, and is reflected in their paintings and sculptures. Yolngu works are recognisable Yolngu, and some paintings prove from those produced in the 1980s, and may reflect change.

Yunumyndi Mununggurr’s painting Djangnowau at Innna comprises a Djugun clan design, similar paintings were art designs like this lie at the very heart of innovation in Yolngu to the past. While the painting itself is a powerful and the fullest sense in relation to the system of clan designs — particular clan. Elements of a painting gain their meaning or image-making. Clan designs are part of an underlying the geometric patterns as foundational. Each clan is in the ancestral dimension, the waru-arg. Each pattern is, one or more of the ancestral beings connected to the presence of the waru-arg a particular place or a particular ancestral beings travelled great distances, singly or in groups of these beings across the country, at the same time the

The square pattern of the Djugun clan is associated with seasons. The clouds are associated with different ancient and sea. At Dalna, they are connected to the Jinga paintings from Burdallu, a distant island beyond the eastern At Wayllawu, they are linked to the ancestral mark of body into features of the landscape. From Teld Bay to 1000 Thundermen. The primary reference of the pattern in 10 of colour they create in the sky contrasting areas of sun break through, burning red at sunrise and sunset, as they move across water, and marked and shaded as the designs that accompany the painting of the design in the participants. Rather than a simple repeated geometric configuration of ideas that can be connected with the song of clan and people, and so on. The individual design

The aesthetic force of the design is important in itself. Yolngu paintings comprise an apparently limited palette white — the process of painting seems to add colour's building up layers of pigment. They begin with ground pattern is marked out. The surface is then transformed with a long brush of human hair. The aim is to create st which the elements are both clear and vibrant. This is power, it captures their spiritual essence. Its icon in the sparkles of freshness or the luminance of curiosity
through them with wider Australian society, using it as a means of expressing core cultural values and demonstrating their relationships to land and sea. The process was a cumulative one. Over time, Yolngu learnt more about the nature of European society and were forced to engage with its legal and political institutions in order to survive; and missionaries, anthropologists and some European-Australians began to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of Yolngu culture. The engagement with the market continued and developed, but at the same time the use of art for its own sake was promoted. In the 1962 Yolngu artists produced the church panels — two painted panels — of sacred paintings to be placed either side of the altar in the newly built Methodist Church, representing the lands and spiritual identities of the clans who congregated at Yirrkala. In 1963, when they learnt that their hold over the land was threatened by the discovery of large reserves of bauxite, they sent two petitioners on bark, bordered with painted designs, to the House of Representatives. And in 1969, in response to encroachments into sacred sites in coastal Bule Muli Bay, they produced the saltwater collection of bark paintings representing the clan relationships to coastal waters.  

This long period of engagement with the outside world has brought many changes to their way of life, and is reflected in their paintings and sculptures. Yet the continuities are profound — the works are recognisably Yolngu, and some paintings produced today are virtually indistinguishable from those produced in the 1960s, and may reflect continuities going back several thousand years.

Yanulpool Mangaurum’s painting, Ngurrurrngurr at Balamara 1966 is one such example. The painting comprises a Yupa clan design, similar paintings were among the first collected by Europeans. Yet designs like this lie at the very heart of innovation in Yolngu art, just as they are signs of connection to the past. While the painting itself is a powerful aesthetic object, the design has meaning in the holiest sense in relation to the system of clan designs — geometric patterns that are owned by particular clans. Elements of a painting gain their meaning from their place in a system of design or image-making. Clan designs are part of an underlying generative system that gives meaning to visualised works and has the power to produce an infinite number of new paintings. Yolngu artists see the geometric patterns as foundational. Each clan has a number of unique patterns with origins in the ancestral dimension, the wanggar. Each pattern is associated with, indeed is a manifestation of, one or more of the ancestral beings connected to the clan’s territory. The design marks the presence of the wanggar in a particular place or a particular stretch of land or sea. Many of the ancestral beings travelled great distances, singly or in groups, and the patterns mark the journeys of these beings across the country; at the same time the details vary from place to place.

The square patterns of the Yupa clan are associated with the rituals that form during the wet season. The clans are associated with different ancestral beings in different areas of Yupa land and sea. In Arnhemland, they are connected to the Dhagwara waters, two women who paddled their canoes from Burdapa, a distant island beyond the eastern horizon, to the Arnhem Land coast. At Wagagai, they are linked to the ancestral shark who created his way inland, transforming his body into features of the landscape. From Thiel Bay to Djirritjuwurd, the clouds evoke the Thunderclan. The primary referent of the pattern is to the clouds themselves and the patchwork of colors they create in the sky: contrasting areas of dark and light as the scattering rays of the sun break through, Giving red to sunrise and sunset, reflections and shadows constantly shifting as they move across water, and masked and masked in rain falls. All these images are taken up in the songs that accompany the painting of the designs in ceremony and extend their meaning to the participants. Rather than a simple representational pattern, the Yupa clan design is a combination of ideas that can be connected: the seasonal cycle, the qualities of light, the identity of clan and people, and so on. The individual designs have a mind behind them.

The aesthetic force of the design is important in itself and is a component of its meaning. Although Yolngu paintings comprise an apparently limited palette of natural colours — red, yellow, black and white — the process of painting seems to add colour and brilliance. Paintings are produced by holding up leaves of paperbark. They begin with ground colour to red and yellow ochres as the basic pattern is marked out. The surface is then transformed through the technique of exsiccation with a long brush of human hair. The aim is to create a final image of shimmering brilliance in which the elements are both clearer and vibrantly. This is seen as a manifestation of the ancestral powers, it captures their spiritual essence. Its connotations depend on which wanggar is associated with the place — it may be the rays of the sun, the flash of anger in the eyes of a shark, the sparkle of freshwater or the luminescence of eucalyptus in flower. The controlled use of
Djambawa Marawul's painting Burrurrangi 2002 demonstrates the potential of this system of knowledge and complex narrative. The painting consists of a series of images that illustrate the story of the Kurrajg people. The design draws on an intricate pattern of traditional elements of fire and floodwaters, which in different forms represent natural elements such as rain, wind, and water.

The painting is centered on the river mouth at Barakula in the Far North Queensland region. The region is dominated by a seasonal cycle in which fresh floodwaters converge from different places at different times to create a unique landscape. The adabu (water spirits) are believed to live in the floodwaters, and their movements determine the flow of water in the region.

The painting is a visual representation of the adabu's movements and their interactions with the surrounding environment. The adabu are depicted as powerful entities that control the flow of water and are responsible for the region's natural cycles. The painting captures the adabu's movements and their interactions with the surrounding environment, illustrating the importance of the adabu in the region's cultural and spiritual practices.

The painting is a powerful visual representation of the adabu's movements and their interactions with the surrounding environment. It serves as a reminder of the importance of the adabu in the region's cultural and spiritual practices and as a testament to the power and majesty of nature.
Djamalou Warwell’s painting Burntup 2002 demonstrates the way in which a Yolngu artist exploits the potential of this system of knowledge and expression to create images of great power and complexity. The dominant pattern of the painting is a diamond design associated with clans of the Waakura moiety. The design draws on an intricate system of ancestral forces centred on the seasonal elements of fire and floodwaters, which in different places connect with warraguy such as binkuda (swamp honey), burrt (crocodile) and burntup (lightning snake).

The painting is centred on the river mouth at Barallja in Jakuwa Bay, at the height of the wet season. The region is dominated by a seasonal cycle in which freshwater and saltwater flow across the coastline, meeting together in different places at different times of the year. In the dry season there is a salt taste of the water moved far inland as the creek beds dry out. In the wet season the cycle is reversed. The inland becomes inundated, and the coastal floodplains flood. The rivers become rising torrential running through river mouths and sending great plumes of freshwater far out into the bay. Burntup is the lightning snake mosaic with this cycle of the seasons. In the dry season it occupies the floodplains hunting small macropods, in the wet season it is associated with the river mouth. The snake tastes the freshwater. It stands up high and spits it into the sky, its tongue the flickering of lightning and its voice the roar of thunder. It is taking to ancestor snakes from other places and times.

Djamalou’s painting Burntup is about the coming together of the floodwaters of three Waakura moiety clans. The bar across the centre of the painting is the coastline at the head of Jakuwa Bay. The linear pattern inside it, belonging to the saltwater Madjarrapu people, symbolises the states of an ancestral fish trap. The diamond pattern in the left-hand segment represents the flooded waters of the Waakura River in the west, in the country of the freshwater Madjarrapu clan. The bars that cut across each intersection distinguish the pattern. In the panel to the right are the Djuwarma clan waters — chains of diamonds containing elongated oval. The swollen figure dividing them is floodwater from farther inland believed to have surged through an underground tunnel before merging with the surface waters as they rush through the river mouth. The tunnel is the home of Burntup as he travels between the island and the sea. The snake’s head is seen emerging in the waters at the river mouth. The waters come together and move out into the bay, pushing aside the wetland salwatu of Yaimarut.1

The painting illustrates the ways in which the geometric component of Yolngu art acts as an expression of meaning. The clan designs are multi-referential. The diamond design can stand for the turbulent floodwaters, ancestral fire, the marks on a crocodile’s back, the cells of a bee, or the colours can be flames or burn wood, smoke and sparks, honey or glowing water, and the distinctive variants of the design belonging to different social groups mark their country and are part of the clan’s identity. There is a thin line between representation and expression in Yolngu art, and in Djamalou’s painting we can see the geometric forms come to life: the flooding of the country island, the intense force of the floodwaters coming together in the river mouth, and these mixed waters surging out into the bay, pushing aside the saltwater. But we can also see in Burntup the lightning snake gaining power from the floodwaters, his flickering tongue joining with the diamond pattern of the painting and creating the explosive force of lightning. And behind the imagery, and of crucial importance to Djamalou, are the relationships between the groups themselves — the freshwater Madjarrapu, the saltwater Madjarrapu, and the freshwater Dhuwarlangu.2

We always come together for burial ceremonies — and in those ceremonies the floodwaters are danced and sung, fire is thrown! Barallja, Burntup and the floodwaters are created through ceremonial performance, just as their spiritual identity is manifest in the painting.

Yagurturtor Yawunguwurrawurr’s fellow long coffin, Djuwarma Burntup 2002 overlaps with Burntup 2002 but focuses specifically on Dhuwarlangu country. It represents Gaaguy, the inland sketch of river where the taste of saltwater reaches at the height of the dry season. The painting illustrates some of the species associated with the lake: long-necked freshwater turtles and eels, as well as the clan design representing the flowing river water. The signal patterns marking some of the streams of diamonds are streams of wood that the serpents often drag behind them in the water, though at a deeper level they can be strong predators attached to ceremonial armbands and connect the wearer to the ancestral dimension. The figure at the
A river flows through Galum's country across the land, and the water forms the ancestral pattern that determines the pattern of the present day.

The river in Wuyawuru 2002 is represented by a larger version of the river that can be connected to the yolk plant since in the wet season the river debuts that course down the flooded river out into the bay. However, the Manggali clan, its ngatu or bone, is water connected to ngatu of the sea whose spirit country is in the islanding island. At Wuyawuru, the river transforms into a hallow coffin, which in the past, the bones of these rivers would be finally laid to rest. In Yuykuw in Wuyawuru 2002, we can effect mark the form of a hallow coffin, with the sacred Manggali body and the body of the ancestral longhali inscribed in it.

The relationship between the visible and the invisible is a central issue that reflects the fact that paintings are tuned in a revelatory system of which people acquire deeper meaning as they pass through life. When we see the river, we are aware that we are looking at a symbolic image that is fundamental to Manggali identity. The river forms the ancestral pattern that determines the pattern of the present day. Water is essential to the living world, and its flow is the source of all life. Water is also a source of spiritual power and the river is a symbol of life and death.

Techniques of Yuykuw 2002 is a high level of development in coastal communities. From the Blue Mud Bay, it is present in many earlier Yuykuw works.

The combination of design elements from Galum's country are the same painting is significant. To Yuykuw, marriage relations stem from Manggali and Dhug Jupus clans are in a relationship of yohit-yubun, generations Manggali women have married Dhug Jupus men and in To Yuykuw, this comes from the relationship between the lands, and two waters as the Manggali waters from Wayawu join with the Dhug Jupus waters.

In the manggali clan, its ngatu or bone, Wuyawuru is the sea, and the river is the land. The Manggali clan, its ngatu or bone, is water connected to ngatu of the sea whose spirit country is in the islanding island. At Wuyawuru, the river transforms into a hallow coffin, which in the past, the bones of these rivers would be finally laid to rest. In Yuykuw in Wuyawuru 2002, we can effect mark the form of a hallow coffin, with the sacred Manggali body and the body of the ancestral longhali inscribed in it.

The relationship between the visible and the invisible is a central issue that reflects the fact that paintings are tuned in a revelatory system of which people acquire deeper meaning as they pass through life. When we see the river, we are aware that we are looking at a symbolic image that is fundamental to Manggali identity. The river forms the ancestral pattern that determines the pattern of the present day. Water is essential to the living world, and its flow is the source of all life. Water is also a source of spiritual power and the river is a symbol of life and death.

Techniques of Yuykuw 2002 is a high level of development in coastal communities. From the Blue Mud Bay, it is present in many earlier Yuykuw works.
technique of buwayak has reached a high level of development in contemporary works by artists from Blue Mud Bay, it is present in many earlier Yolngu works.

The combination of design elements from Galama Maymuru's clan and her husband's clan in the same painting is significant. To Yolngu, kinship relations stem from ancestral design. The Manggallli and Dhugl Djapu clans are in a relationship of patrilineal, or child to mother. For generations Manggallli women have married Dhugl Djapu men and raised children for that clan. To Yolngu, this comes from the relationship between the lands, and can be seen in the mixing of waters as the Manggallli waters from Wayawu join with the Dhugl Djapa waters at Dhuppaqgi. It is this ancestral pattern linked to the logic of the relationship between countries and waters that determines the pattern of the present day.

The river in Wayawu 2002 is represented by a larger version of the Manggallli clan design. This too can be connected to the yoka plant since in the wet season the leaves of the yoka are among the detritus that course down the flooded river out into the bay. However, the design also represents the Manggallli clan, its opelters, the leaves of the yoka. Wayawu is connected to ngayakik, the ancestral kingfish, a fish of the sea whose spirit country is in the bilabong island. At Wayawu the kingfish ancestor was transformed into a hollow coffin, where in the past the bones of people connected to the clan would be family laid to rest. In Ngayaki at Wayawu 2002, we can see the river straightened is to effect to mark the form of a hollow log coffin, with the sacred Manggallli clan designs painted on its body and the body of the ancestral kingfish inscribed familiar in white on white in the central panel.

The relationship between the visible and the invisible is a central trope of Yolngu art. In part this reflects the fact that paintings are based in a revelatory system of knowledge about the world in which people acquire deeper meanings as they pass through life. While some elements of meaning are secret, it is more the case that, as with any system of knowledge, people need to acquire information over time in order to develop a fuller understanding of their place in the world. In harmony with this is the belief that the surface forms of things derive from underlying structures and relationships. Yolngu art condenses and expresses extremely complex relationships between things—between social groups, the seasonal cycle, the relationships between freshwater and saltwater, fire and water, between life and death, male and female—and underlying all is the template of the ancestral past.

Ancestral design is revealed in a new way in the continuing relationships between people, in the fertility of the land, and in the remaking and clearing power of the wet season. But it is also demonstrated in the paintings which express the unity of the clan that comes together at ceremonies or in marriage, as readily as they can allude to the power of the fish hidden in ancestral waters, and the agency of the ancestral ngayaki in creating the Manggallli hollow log coffin. Events that happened in the wargay are made part of the present, creating an ancestral presence in the world. Just as the powers that bring about the transformation of the landscape are both seen and unseen so, too, is much of the imagery of Yolngu art. The relationship between abstraction and representation provides the continuing dynamic of Yolngu art and gives it the power to continually explore new forms of expression.
NOTES ON THE PUBLICATION

Essays are presented in chronological order of the dates of the main works discussed.

Text for this publication has been supplied by the authors as attributed. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Unless otherwise stated, art works illustrated are from the Queensland Art Gallery Collection. Other works from the Collection may be illustrated where appropriate without being directly referred to in the text.

Dimensions of works are given in centimeters (cm), height preceding width followed by depth.

Captions generally appear as supplied by the lenders.

Where there are several variations of spellings for indigenous words, the most commonly used version has been included or, where supplied, the preferred spelling of individual artists or communities.

PHOTOGRAPHY

All Queensland Art Gallery Collection photography by Natasha North and Ray Fulcher, except where otherwise credited.
Centre Five revisited
Ken Scarlett

The Field
Art, context and the historical moment
Carolyn Barnes

Patterns of experience
Sydney abstraction
Linda van Nunen

Robert Klippel and the language of form
Samantha Little

The evocation of distance
Fred Williams and the Australian landscape
Sebastian Smee

'Otherwhereish creatures'
Sam Pollock's portrait of Ernestine Hill
John Murphy

Table dancing
George Baldessari's Small bouquet 1971-72
David Hansen

Tony Tuckson's hot licks
Pink lines (vertical) on red and purple 1970-73
Julie Ewingten

Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri
Summer and screen
John Kona

Imants Tillers and conceptual art
Moments of Anxiety: Still life 1973
Abigail Phippsboon

'It's OK if you weren't there'
Mike Parr and performance documentation as remediation
Edward Schoen

Australian mavericks
The provocative art of Richard Larter and Greiss Sanson
Deborah Clark

Col Levy's big subject
Peter Timms

DIY defiance
Political posters during the Bjelke-Petersen era (1965-87)
Lynette Finch

'Beautiful one day, perfect the next'
Documentary photography in Queensland in the 1980s
Clarke Gobbi

Reprise
Jean Davila's Miss Sundown 1981
Shaune Lakin

Articulating the unspeakable
The feminist photography of Annie Gepa and Anne Ferran
Jacqueline Milner

Klaus Moje
'Swimming above the water'
Margaret Osborne

Cast-offs and found objects
Tom Rosley's mark-making
Michael Hawsker

Thanakupi
Foul circles
Simon Wright

Clifford Possum
Tjapaltjarri
Beneath the clouds
Vincent Johnson

The symbolic space of Tim Johnson
Wayne Turnercliffe

Outstation art
Emily Kngwanawye and Utopia
Awelye Bath
Sally Butler

Gordon Bennett
Reading pictures
Susan Loutit

Judy Watson
Sacred ground beating heart
1989
Ruth McDougall

Rosalie Gascoigne's lyrical derailments
Mary Eagle

Dale Frank
' strings out in heaven's high'
Sarah Stutchbury

John Nixon
Revision and renewal
Nicholas Chambers

Howard Arkley and 'Popism'
Sara Gregory

Aleks Danko
What line is it?
David Hurnett

Robert Foster
The ghost in the machine
Paul McGillick

Michael Riley
Common sense
Heidi Perkins

A complicated edge
Bea Mulluduck's TERRA
SPIRITUS ... with a darker shade of pale 1985-88
Kate Ravenswood
There goes the neighbourhood
The works of Vernon Ah Kee and Richard Bell
Avril Quaili

Scott Redford
Paradise now
Jason Smith

Being in the world
Two responses to the art of Judith Wright
Ruth McDougall
Suhanya Lalla

Other side of the rainbow
The sad and bad art of Donald Dewar
Hannah Pink

Rosemary Laing
Pure Transit
Kelly Goleally

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott
Sarah Tiffin

Expressing identity
Creativity in Yirrga art
Howard Morphy

Arnhem Land fibre art
Levi Yirritjarra, sculptor
Regina Wilson, painter
Diane Moore

Weaving visions of country
Lily Kelly Napangardi and Mitjuk Naparrula
Christine Watson

The balmarra of Alan Griffith's BallBal balga
Dominique Sweeney

To dance in the theatre of absence
Some remarks about Arnhem carvings
John von Stuemen