

Expressing identity

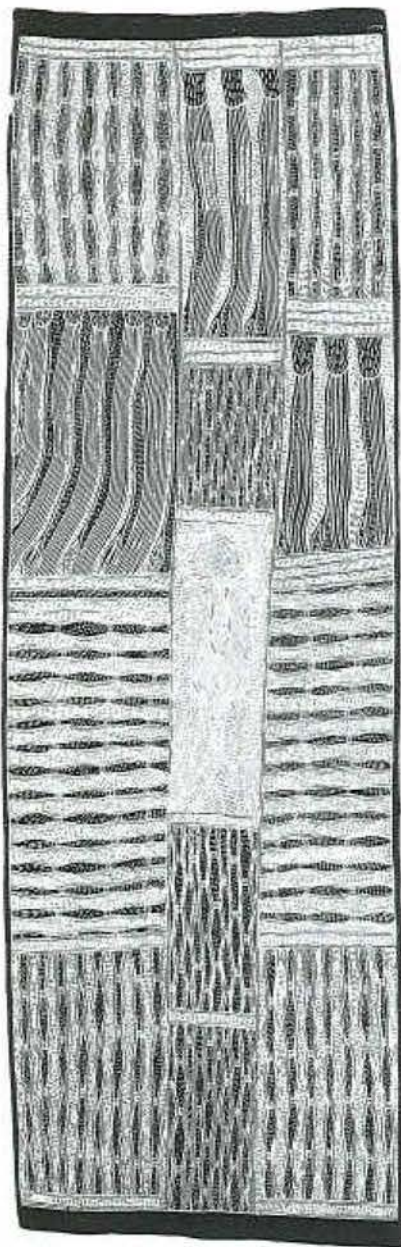
Creativity in Yolngu art

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 tide as it sweeps the beach clean. 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 commemorate 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.

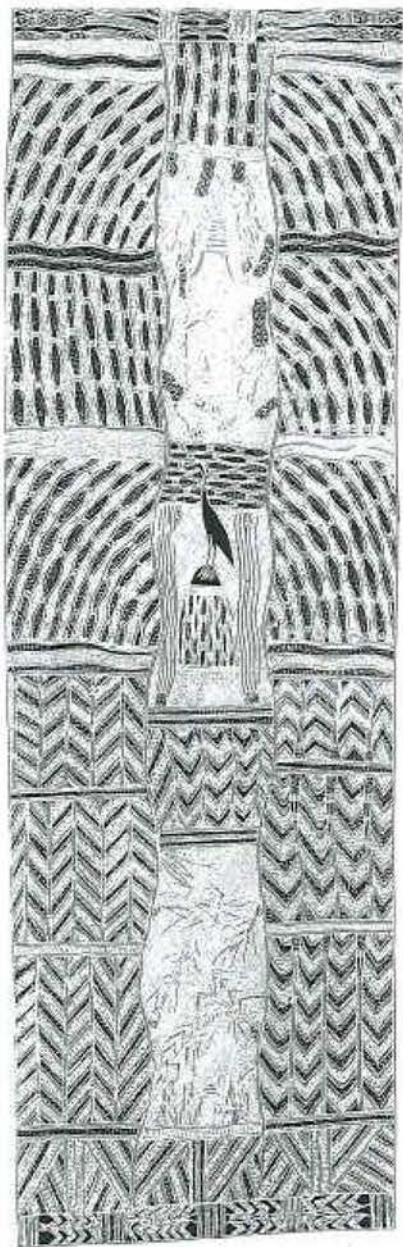
It can do all these things because of what it is — a form of art-making that makes the world in which people live, that communicates it to other people, that conveys individual perceptions and emotions as readily as it maps the structure of Yolngu society. Yolngu art has been taught and practised through generations by people of knowledge and skill. Over that 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 1935; their arrival created another audience for Yolngu art, another arena in which the artists could act.

Yolngu artists begin to engage with the outside world almost from the beginning of the mission. Wilbur Chaseling, the founding missionary, encouraged the production of bark paintings to supplement mission income and to fund 'luxuries' such as tobacco and sugar. He sent collections to the Queensland Museum, the Australian Museum in Sydney and the Natural Museum of Victoria in Melbourne. However, Chaseling and the Yolngu artists were interested in more than generating income: they were engaged in processes of persuasion.

Chaseling 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



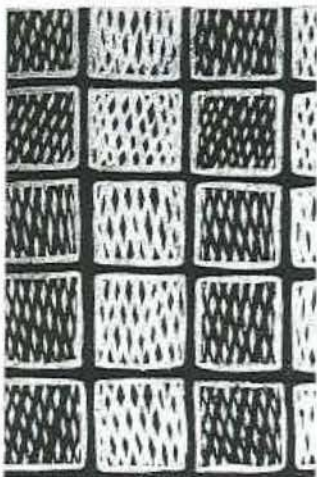
Galama Nigresaru
 Australia c. 1980 (Indonesian youth)
 Nympheas at Weyburn 2002
 Natural pigments on bark / 100 x 100 cm (orig.)
 Puschner 2002, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane



Galama Nigresaru
 Weyburn 2002
 Natural pigments on bark / 220 x 210 cm (orig.)
 Puschner 2002, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane



Djambawa Marawili speaking about his work at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2004
Photograph: Ray Potts



Yananyiwa Mawungurr
Anastasia 3 1992 / *Clan people*
Djang'kawu at Balana (detail) 1995
Mixed pigments on bark / 211 x 230 cm (83 x 91 in)
Purchased 1996, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

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 so too did the use of art for its persuasive powers. In 1962 Yolngu artists produced the church panels — two five-metre-high 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 petitions on bark, bordered with painted designs, to the House of Representatives.¹ And in 1998, in response to encroachments into sacred sites in coastal Blue Mud Bay, they produced the saltwater collection of bark paintings representing the clans' relationships to coastal waters.²

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 1930s, and may reflect continuities going back several thousand years.

Yananyiwa Mawungurr's painting *Djang'kawu at Balana* 1995 is one such example. The painting comprises a Djapu 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 fullest 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 individual 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 wangarr. Each pattern is associated with, indeed is a manifestation of, one or more of the ancestral beings connected to the clan's territory. The designs mark the presence of the wangarr 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.³

The square pattern of the Djapu clan is associated with the clouds that form during the wet season. The clouds are associated with different ancestral beings in different areas of Djapu land and sea. At Balana, they are connected to the Djang'kawu sisters, two women who paddled their canoes from Buraku, a distant island beyond the eastern horizon, to the Arrhem land coast. At Wangaway, they are linked to the ancestral shark who crashed his way inland, transforming his body into features of the landscape. From Trial Bay to Djambawal, the clouds evoke the Thunderman. The primary referent of the pattern is to the clouds themselves and the patchwork of colours they create in the sky: contrasting areas of dark and light as the scintillating rays of the sun break through, burning red at sunrise and sunset, reflections and shadows constantly shifting as they move across water, and masked and shaded as 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 repeated geometric pattern, the Djapu clan design is a condensation of ideas that can be connected: the seasonal cycle, the qualities of light, the identity of clans 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 colour — red, yellow, black and white — the process of painting seems to add colour and brilliance. Paintings are produced by building up layers of pigment. They begin with ground colour in red and yellow ochre as the basic pattern is marked out. The surface is then transformed through the technique of crosshatching with a long brush of human hair. The aim is to create a final image of shimmering brilliance in which the elements are both clear and vibrant. This is seen as a manifestation of the ancestral powers; it captures their spiritual essence. Its connotations depend on which wangarr are 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 luminance of eucalyptus in flower. The controlled use of



Fatigattary Wasungwura
Dhalakanga Iirrakity (Dhalakanga
clan heath pole) 2002

Wood (Eucalyptus cinerea) with natural
pigments. 224 x 18cm (diam) 2002
© Queensland Art Gallery / Brisbane

crosshatching has an extraordinary capacity to create subtle gradations of colour, as in the white-on-white areas of paintings by artists such as Galuma Maymuru in a work like *Wayanu* 2002.⁴

Djambawa Marawili's painting *Burrut'ji* 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 Yirritja moiety. The design draws on an intricate system of ancestral forces centring on the seasonal elements of fire and floodwaters, which in different places connect with wangarr such as birrkuda (wild honey), baru (crocodile) and burrut'ji (lightning snake).

The painting is centred on the river mouth at Baraltja in Jalma 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, mixing together in different places at different times of the year. In the dry season the salt taste of the water moves far inland as the creek beds dry out. In the wet season the cycle is reversed. The inland becomes inundated, and the coastal plains flood. The rivers become raging torrents bursting through river mouths and sending great plumes of freshwater far out into the bay. Burrut'ji the lightning snake moves 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 mouths. The snake tastes the fresh water. 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 talking to ancestral snakes from other places and times.

Djambawa's painting *Burrut'ji* is about the coming together of the floodwaters of three Yirritja moiety clans. The bar across the centre of the painting is the coastline at the head of Jalma Bay. The linear pattern inside it, belonging to the saltwater Madjarra people, symbolises the stakes of an ancestral fish trap. The diamond pattern in the left-hand segment represents the flooded waters of the Baykarrji River to the west, in the country of the freshwater Madjarra clan. The bars that cut across each intersection distinguish the patterns. In the panel to the right are the Dhalwangu clan waters — chains of diamonds containing elongated ovals. The swollen figure dividing them is floodwater from further 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 Burrut'ji as he travels between the inland 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 swirling saltwaters of Munguru.⁵

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 beehive; its colours can be flames or burnt wood, smoke and sparks, honey or foaming 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 Djambawa's painting we can see the geometric motifs come to life: the flooding of the country inland, the intense force of the floodwaters coming together in the river mouth, and these mixed waters thrusting out into the bay, pushing aside the saltwater. But we can also see in *Burrut'ji* 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 Djambawa, are the relationships between the groups themselves — the freshwater Madjarra, the saltwater Madjarra and the saltwater and freshwater Dhalwangu. 'We always come together for burial ceremonies' — and in those ceremonies the floodwaters are danced and sung, fire is braved.⁶ Baraltja, Burrut'ji and the floodwaters are created through ceremonial performance, just as their spiritual identity is manifest in the painting.

Yanggarrji Warungmuru's hollow log coffin, *Dhalwangu Iarrakji* 2002 overlaps with *Burrut'ji* 2002 but focuses specifically on Dhalwangu country. It represents Gangan — the inland stretches 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 tortoises and currawongs, as well as the clan design representing the flowing river water. The zigzag pattern outlining some of the strings of diamonds are streamers of weed that the tortoises often drag behind them in the water, though at a deeper level they can be string pendants attached to ceremonial armbands and connect the wearer to the ancestral dimension. The figure at the



Gaywanja River near Dhurupitji

Image courtesy: Wili Stubbs, *From Country to Media*
 Denver, Colorado

bottom of the hollow log is Barana, an ancestral being who initiated much Yolngu ceremonial law, and implicit here is the connection to the Magarrpa country of Baraltja, where the wet season floodwaters flow downstream.

Expression in Yolngu painting is motivated by meaning — by a conception of place combining the spiritual with the environmental and the social. To Yolngu, the paintings are highly productive; in a sense, meaning is emergent — it comes out of the painting as the mind lights on it and the eye perceives it. This is reflected in the complex interplay between geometric and figurative form in Yolngu art. We can see this clearly in Galuma Maymuru's paintings *Wayawu* 2002 and *Nguykal at Wayawu* 2002. Wayawu is a river system that flows into Grindal Bay, next to Jaina Bay. Galuma's focus is on the river itself. In *Wayawu*, the top half of the painting represents the river flowing through Galuma's own Manggalili clan country — Manggalili country ends just below a large rock that cuts across the river on which a heron can be seen standing looking for fish in the water. The river then flows through the country of the Dhugji Djapu clan, the clan of Galuma's husband Dhukal Wirrpanda. The change is signified by the different clan designs. The design in the top half of the painting — the linear pattern of opposed wavy lines — belongs to the Manggalili clan. Its core meanings associate it with a water plant, yoku. The design represents the corn of the plant, the long stems that trail through the water with the leaves visible on the surface.

In *Nguykal at Wayawu* and *Wayawu*, Galuma has made this connection explicit in some of the panels by representing the corms, leaves and trailing stems figuratively. As the river enters the Dhugji Djapu country of Dhurupitji, the clan design changes to one representing a different water plant, the dharrangi, that grows in clumps and provides dense shade where fish can hide. The design itself contains these meanings, but in her painting Galuma has included a palimpsest that makes this explicit. And hidden in the dense jungle beneath the waters we can see the barely visible form of a fish. This technique of painting, in which the figurative form disappears into or barely emerges from the background, was termed 'buwayak' by the Riratjingu artist Wanyubi Marika, in conversation with Wili Stubbs. Buwayak signifies invisibility or faintness. While the

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.⁷

The combination of design elements from Galuma Maymuru's clan and her husband's clan in the same painting is significant. To Yolngu, marriage relations stem from ancestral design. The Manggali and Dhugi Djapu clans are in a relationship of *yothu-yindi*, or child to mother. For generations Manggali women have married Dhugi 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 Manggali waters from Wayawu join with the Dhugi Djapu waters at Dhuruputjpl. It is this ancestral pattern linked to the logic of the relationship between countries and waters that determines the pattern of the present day.



Dhuruputj community showing the Dhuruputj River flowing into the Yalata floodplains

Image courtesy: Phil Skelton, Duke University, USA
Caption: Yalata

The river in *Wayawu 2002* is represented by a larger version of the Manggali clan design. This too can be connected to the *yoku* plant since in the wet season the leaves of the *yoku* are among the debris that course down the flooded river out into the bay. However, the design also represents the Manggali clan, its *ngaraka* or bone. Wayawu is connected to *ngaykal*, the ancestral kingfish, a fish of the sea whose spirit country is in the billabongs inland. 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 finally laid to rest. In *Ngaykal* at Wayawu 2002, we can see the river straightened in effect to mark the form of a hollow log coffin, with the sacred Manggali clan designs painted on its body and the body of the ancestral kingfish inscribed faintly 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 meaning 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 action — in the continuing relationships between people, in the fertility of the land, and in the renewing and clearing power of the wet season. But it is also demonstrated in the paintings which express the unity of the clans that come together at ceremonies or in marriage, as readily as they can allude to the presence of the fish hidden in ancestral waters, and the agency of the ancestral *ngaykal* in creating the Manggali hollow log coffin. Events that happened in the *wangarr* 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.

Professor Howard Murphy is Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University in Canberra. He is an anthropologist and curator whose books include *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal Knowledge* (1991), *Aboriginal Art* (1998) and, with Marcus Banks, *Ethnographic Visual Anthropology* (1997).

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PUBLICATION TEAM

Doug Hall, AM, Director
Lynne Seear, Assistant Director
(Curatorial and Collection Development)
Julie Ewington, Head of Australian Art
Judy Gunning, Head of Information and Publishing Services
Rebecca Dezuanni, Assistant Editor
Sarah Stutchbury, Senior Managerial Researcher
Kylie Timmins, Publications Assistant
Elliott Murray, Head of Design
Chris Starr, Senior Designer
Madeline Hoy, Designer

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Title (detail)
A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/
someone looks at something

LOGOS / HA HA

Medium A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/
someone looks at something ...
CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION

Date - 1989 -

Artist Peter Tyndall

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Rosalie Gascoigne

ARTIST (197-99)

Lamp lit (detail) 1989

Repro: reflective metal frame artwork on 1.81 x 1.81cm
Purchased 1990, Mrs JR Lucas Estate in memory of her father
John Robertson Black

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Scott Redford

ARTIST (1992-)

Proposal for a Surfers Paradise public sculpture/Paradise
now (back view) 2006

Painted, laser-cut acrylic / 91.5 x 108 x 50cm / The James C Stewart
Collection. Purchased 2006 with funds from James C Stewart through
the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation.

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