

Terry Smith

# Marking Places, Cross-Hatching Worlds: The Yirrkala Panels

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“*Maḍayin*” is the term used by the Yolŋu people of the Northern Territory of Australia for that which is both sacred and beautiful. It is also the name they have chosen for an extraordinary exhibition of over one hundred of their paintings that will tour the United States during the next few years. While the acrylic-on-canvas works, made since the 1970s by indigenous artists from the Central and Western Deserts, are widely acknowledged as constituting a major movement within contemporary art, few are aware of the parallel, and arguably equally significant, achievement of Aboriginal artists from regions across the northern coasts of the country who paint onto eucalyptus bark using natural ochres.<sup>1</sup> The sacred content in the exhibition “*Maḍayin: Eight Decades of Aboriginal Bark Painting from Yirrkala, Australia*” is its revelation of the original world-making actions by the most ancient ancestors of the Yolŋu during what is known as “the Dreaming,” the time when indigenous peoples across the continent believe that the universe was created by Originary Beings from whom they are descended. The Yolŋu word for this time and its ongoing recurrence is “*Wangarr*.” The beauty emerges in that world-making and in how it has been depicted by Yolŋu artists, painting onto bark, from the mid-1930s until now.<sup>2</sup> The Yolŋu elders see this exhibition as an opportunity to share their sacred knowledge and the beauty they have created with the wider world beyond Australia.

The exhibition will include early paintings on bark made to share aspects of the Dreaming stories with missionaries, anthropologists, and visiting museum curators, but its main focus is on recent works by indigenous artists fully committed to the practice of painting. Among them is Manydjarri Ganambarr, whose Dreamtime ancestor was Bulmanydiji, also known as *Māḥa*, who took the form of a shark active across several Yolŋu lands (that of the Djambarrpuyŋu, Dātiwuy, Djapu, Dhudi Djapu, and Dhāpuyŋu clans). The stories of the shark’s world-making actions are shared by the two Yolŋu moieties, or ritual groups, the Dhuwa and Yirritja. Among the paintings in “*Maḍayin*” is Ganambarr’s *Djambarrpuyŋu Māḥa* (1996), which shows two key moments early in the shark’s journeys at Gurala. In the lower register, it is speared by the ghostly ancestor Murayana (who is not depicted). In the upper region of the image, the spirit of the now dead shark crosses the coast, shaping rivers and landforms as it goes, creating the homelands of its Yolŋu descendants, everywhere marked by its continuing presence. Such vivid depiction of transformation across multiple registers in space and time is typical of Yolŋu art.<sup>3</sup>



Manydjarri Ganambarr, *Djambarrpuyŋu Maŋa*, 1996. Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 192.7 x 57.8 cm. Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997. 1996.0035.017

### Yirrkala, Northern Territory, 1962–63

In the later months of 1962 and the early months of 1963, elders of Yolŋu clans from the area known by the *balanda* (“white people”) as the Gove Peninsula in North East Arnhem Land came together to paint what became known as the *Yirrkala Church Panels*. Today, the panels and the stories that they show are revered more than ever. As a collective statement, they continue to resonate on multiple levels, from the local community outwards through several registers to, I suggest, a worldly scale. The entirely collective process through which they were produced – and which I will explore in depth in this article – models a collaborative form of indigenous and non-indigenous participation in the processes of reparation and reconciliation so essential to Australia’s national polity. Historical accuracy, moral accountability, restorative justice, and social unity were at stake, as they remain. For both their artistic merit and their social resonance, the panels deserve greater recognition in the history of Australian art. They are, at the same time, a founding document in the Australian postcolonial national imaginary. Finally, on the largest, planetary scale, they inform, and should inspire, the quest for postnational, coeval coexistence that is so

urgently needed as geopolitical disunity increasingly fails to deal with the dangers of global warming.

### This Is Their Dreaming

The *Yirrkala Church Panels* were painted using natural ochres on two Masonite panels, each twelve feet high and four feet wide, in the later months of 1962 and early 1963, when large-scale mining of bauxite on the peninsula was about to begin. Yirrkala, where they were painted, was a mission established in 1935 at the site of a Yolŋu ceremonial ground and near a former Makassan station where Makassan people processed trepang with the help of Yolŋu people. Thirty years earlier, in 1905, the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia had asserted its sovereign claims on Yirrkala by closing this important Yolŋu trading center. Resistance to a similar takeover, this time on an existence-threatening scale due to mining initiatives, seems to have been on the minds of the clan leaders as they and Reverend Edgar Wells, the Methodist minister and superintendent of Yirrkala at the time, worked together to establish a viable, difficult-to-move community – including a bulk store, a technical school, and a mission church at the site. Wells recalls that

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The Living Knowledge Project,  
*Yolŋu Geography of North East  
Arnhem Land*, 2008. See <http://1.1.1.1>  
<http://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/learningsites/seaco>



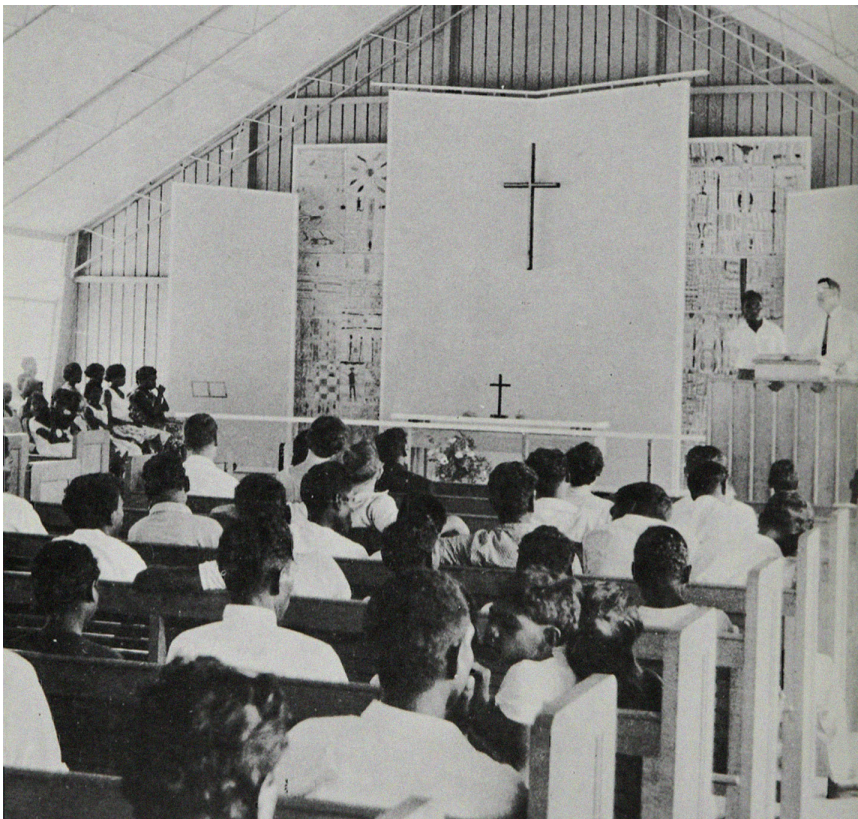
Narritjin Maymuru, a clan elder, proposed “a painting or something,” while his wife, Ann Wells, recalls him inviting the local elders to paint for the church “something of their own choosing.”<sup>4</sup> Wells’s motives are easily discerned. Based on his experience during the 1950s at the Yolŋu Methodist mission to the west at Milingimbi – where he had developed a deep interest in Yolŋu art and a close alliance with clan leaders – Wells understood that this was a way to give the clans a feeling of belonging within the church. A photograph from the period of a service in session suggests as much.<sup>5</sup> As well, he was outraged that both government and church officials were deceiving the locals about the nature and extent of the mining on their land.<sup>6</sup>

The clan elders at Yirrkala had parallel motives. They knew that the mission stations that had been established throughout central and northern Australia had only partially succeeded in diminishing indigenous belief systems. Their totemic song-cycle (*maḏayin*) remained alive and well across the region, existing alongside and with Christianity, which they did not see as a terminal threat. Instead, it was a recent story that could be incorporated as a subplot into their own vastly older and more replete narratives, and at the same time provide

a bridge across which to communicate their law to this formidable new power called the Australian government.

During the 1930s, the anthropologist Donald Thomson encouraged Yolŋu clan leaders to paint their Dreaming stories on barks – a practice that he took from Baldwin Spencer, the first major anthropologist to work in the Australian colonies. A few missionaries saw its value as a means to open communication with the clans. Selling bark paintings and other artifacts also provided a way for under-resourced missions to raise funds from believers and tourists. The bark paintings draw on parts or wholes of complex song-cycles, “episodic narratives” that trace the arrival of ancestral beings, their acts of creation, and their journeys across Yolŋu lands.<sup>7</sup> To missionaries, the paintings paralleled illustrations of episodes in the Old Testament, while to anthropologists they were archival records of body paintings that were part of initiation ceremonies. To tourists, they were portable versions of the images that were painted onto the surfaces of rocks in “galleries” throughout the region, especially in Western Arnhem Land. A widespread art practice of bark painting for a *balanda* market continues to this day.

In the Yirrkala church, which opened in



Edgar James Wells, *Panels in Place in Yirrkala Church*, 1963. Photograph. From Anne E. Wells, *This is Their Dreaming: Legends of the Panels of Aboriginal Art in the Yirrkala Church* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1971), x.

March 1963, the panels were shown up front, behind the altar table and rail, slightly set back on either side of the large central panels that were unadorned except for a simple wooden cross. In the Methodist manner, the church had little other adornment. Its side walls were open windows, as befits the climate. Howard Morphy, the leading living anthropologist of the Yolŋu, emphasizes that the artists “decided how they would use their art in communicating with outsiders and how their sacred law could be presented in public contexts.” They wanted to

show that Yolŋu had their own sacred heritage and to emphasize its connection to land and land ownership ... Visitors to the church would be able to see the ways in which the paintings mapped their rights in land and also apprehend the sense in which land was a sacred endowment.”<sup>8</sup>

It would be misleading, however, to imagine the encounter between the Yolŋu and Christians as occurring between two peoples who saw themselves as structurally parallel or similarly constituted either politically or socially. In his pathfinding study *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, Morphy

notes that the Yolŋu clans, while acknowledging that outsiders often referred to them as “Yolŋu,” usually used more specific clan, family, or language-group names among themselves. “Yolŋu refers to a group of intermarrying clans whose members speak a dialect of one of a group of closely related languages.”<sup>9</sup> The name “Yolŋu” was first adopted in the late 1950s by Western linguists, and the Yolŋu readily accepted it as useful. (“Yolŋu” is the recent orthography, preferred by them. I will use it, except when citing earlier usages.) Before then, anthropologists used a variety of names depending on the clans they mainly worked with. The adoption of this name by the Yolŋu, by the anthropologists, and then by government officials and wider publics parallels a function of the panel paintings. Both the terminology and the images create a new pan-clan category, one that asserts the clans’ collective sovereignty as a people, the kind recognizable to modern nation states, such as the Commonwealth of Australia, which was constantly attempting to impose its sovereignty.<sup>10</sup>

### Dualism, Convergence

First and foremost, the *Yirrkala Church Panels* reflected a basic division within Yolŋu society



Yirrkala Methodist Church, interior, 1963. Photo: Ron Croxford.



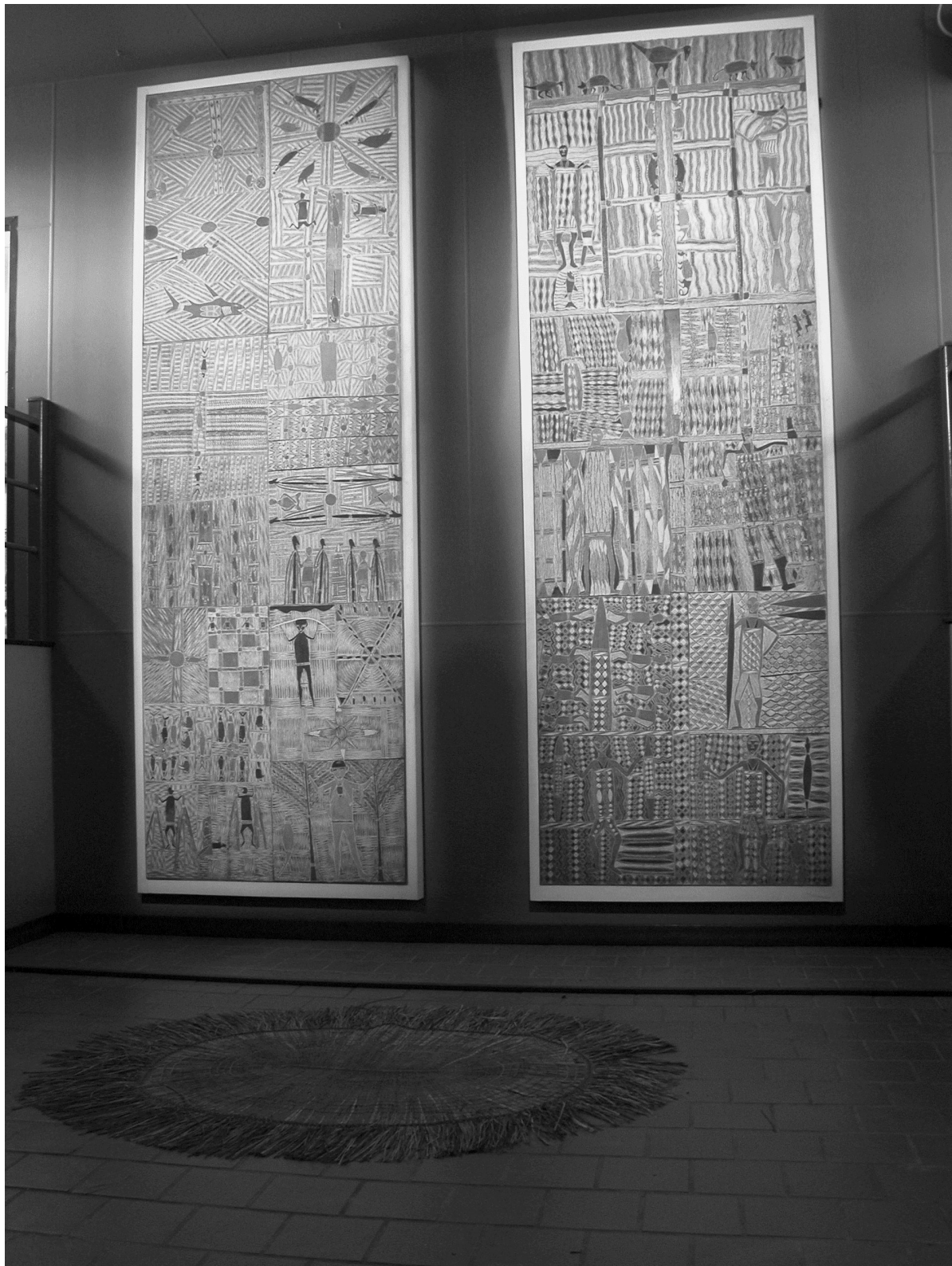
into two distinct but complementary moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja, each represented on one of the paired panels. This moiety system is an underlying cosmological dualism that unites the clans with each other and the cosmos.<sup>11</sup> The key stories of most of the nine Dhuwa and seven Yirritja clan subgroups appear in a defined section of each panel. The closely matching connections but also feared prohibitions within and between these clan groups evolved over centuries and continue to do so today. The changes to belief systems within the moieties during the period since contact with Malay and Indonesian peoples, and since the exploration and colonization of the continent by Europeans, suggest that they were not stabilized, and certainly not “timeless,” before the seventeenth century. Little more than that can be known with certainty, although much about it is inferred by some prehistorians and anthropologists.<sup>12</sup>

If we take, as we must, the two Yirrkala panels to be one work of art, they amount to a statement of the coming together of the clans as the basis of an equitable, respectful mutuality. Every Yolŋu inherits stories from both moieties, as their mothers and fathers are always from different moieties. Thus, each clan is composed of both moieties. Every wife in the clan is a

different moiety from her husband, in this case the elder who painted a section of one of the panels. The parallelism of the moieties is such that each person has a matching “manager” from the other moiety who is responsible for supporting that person’s spiritual life. Therefore, every ceremony and story, and thus every painting, is known to each moiety, in that a manager of the other moiety is a less authoritative but nevertheless necessary presence in their telling. Community runs through every aspect of Yolŋu life. Their clan identity devolves from the two moieties, as if two comes before one. So, an artist, for example, will usually have his uncle from his mother’s side (and thus of the other moiety to him) as an adviser. What is unusual in the panels is how forthrightly the power of the binary structure of the moiety system is shown, as if to assert that *it* is what holds the clans together. Usually, these designs are used in traditional body painting, ceremony, and language to distinguish the clans from each other. In the panels, the clan designs are orchestrated into a unifying ensemble. The moiety system declares its role as the transcendental underpinning of the clans from which they ultimately gain their sovereignty (clans may be formed, or die out, but the moiety



Edgar James Wells, *Painting the Panels*, 1963, photograph. From Wells, *This is Their Dreaming*, 43.



*The Yirrkala Church Panels, 1962-63. Natural ochres on hardboard, two panels, each 12 ft. x 4 ft. Left: Dhuwa panel. Right: Yirritja panel. Photo: Howard Morphy. Courtesy the artists and Buku-Larrngay Art Center, Yirrkala, Northern Territory.*

system is eternal).

The most historically notable aspect of the *Yirrkala Church Panels* is that this was the first time (at least as known to *balanda*) that the clans came together on such a scale to create a work of art with a single, focused, shared purpose.<sup>13</sup> The elders came to Yirrkala, to the church itself, and the mission house to plan the format and to execute the paintings. It is known that the senior members of two clans were unable to come, so they delegated others to paint their panels. Yolŋu clan members living at some distance from Yirrkala did not participate, for reasons unknown. Nation building is never a simple matter.

A photograph taken by Wells at this time shows several clan elders, Djarrkutjaraku Yunupingu, Mungarrawuy Yunupingu, and probably Nanyin Maymuru and Narritjin Maymuru, working on the Yirritja panel. Each person paints his ancestral story on a section of the appropriate panel.<sup>14</sup> Illuminating the kind of commitment felt by the artists, Wells recounts a moment early in the process when Narritjin, acting as an interpreter between the Yirritja elders and the Wells, asked his seniors whether they would offer more than (as Wells puts it) “the routine outline of a well-known legend” in their depictions. Their answer, translated by Narritjin: “This time I will give you the *yuwal* (true) *dhawu* (word).”<sup>15</sup> If we take them at their word, the panels might be said to mark the first historical appearance of most of the clans together as *Yolŋu*. Certainly, those who led this project also stood out in the subsequent fights for Yolŋu autonomy and were leaders in developing the bark painting movement that flourishes to this day.

### The Painting of the Panels

The Dhuwa panel (the lefthand panel) was painted under the direction of senior elder Mawalan Marika. Cross-hatching is its primary mode of mark-making. Each clan has its distinctive way of rendering the highly similar shapes, and each uses a particular sequencing of ochre colors. These generate signature styles, instantly recognizable to other Yolŋu. In the lower-right section, Mawalan’s son, Wandjuk Marika, painted the most revered Creator Being, Djan’kawu, appearing at Burralku, a mythical island from which he and his sisters came to the mainland, creating all geological formations, life-forms, and phenomena. These ancestors’ world-making activities, shown on the bottom four sections of the panel, parallel those of Banatja, Barama, and others for the Yirritja moiety. At the bottom left of this panel, Mawalan Marika paints the sisters calling into existence the creatures of the sea. In the section on the right above the

image of Djan’kawu, Mathaman Marika paints the sisters entering dry land, creating waterholes, and disseminating Dhuwa lore across the country. In the upper half of the Dhuwa panel, Djan’kawu and his sisters travel throughout the region, encountering much existent phenomena, which they react to or change.<sup>16</sup> Saltwater regions dominate the bottom and the top of the panel, while the sections at the center left, painted by Larrtjanja Ganambarr, show the small fish and grassland of the freshwater countries of his clan, the Naymil, and the closely associated Dätiwuy clan.

The Yirritja panel (the righthand panel) was overseen by Birrikiti Gumana, the acknowledged leader and custodian of their ritual legends. Each section evokes specific aspects of how their lands were created and what constituted that creation: in the second section from the bottom at left, the Ancestors convene to devise Yirritja law; in the central panels, freshwater regions cede to saltwater ones; while in the top third the landscapes of clans in which female Ancestors are most highly venerated are shown. The artists of these sections were, respectively, members of the Gumana, Wunummurra, Yunupingu, and Maymuru families. Narritjin was most likely the designer of its integrated format: ten large sections, in five pairs, on either side of a central band – what Wells insightfully calls a “tree of life” – that changes according to the creation stories in the sections around it, until it reaches almost to the top where, capped like the screen in a church, and topped by curious birds and animals, wavy lines designate “the ether – the heavens – back to the beginning to Burralku.”<sup>17</sup> The bottom-right section, painted by Gawirrin Gumana, shows Barama, today regarded as the most eminent of the four Creator Beings, emerging from the sacred waterhole at Gängan. Alongside him another of the Beings, Galparimun, is depicted, while above him a section shows a third, Lany’tjun.

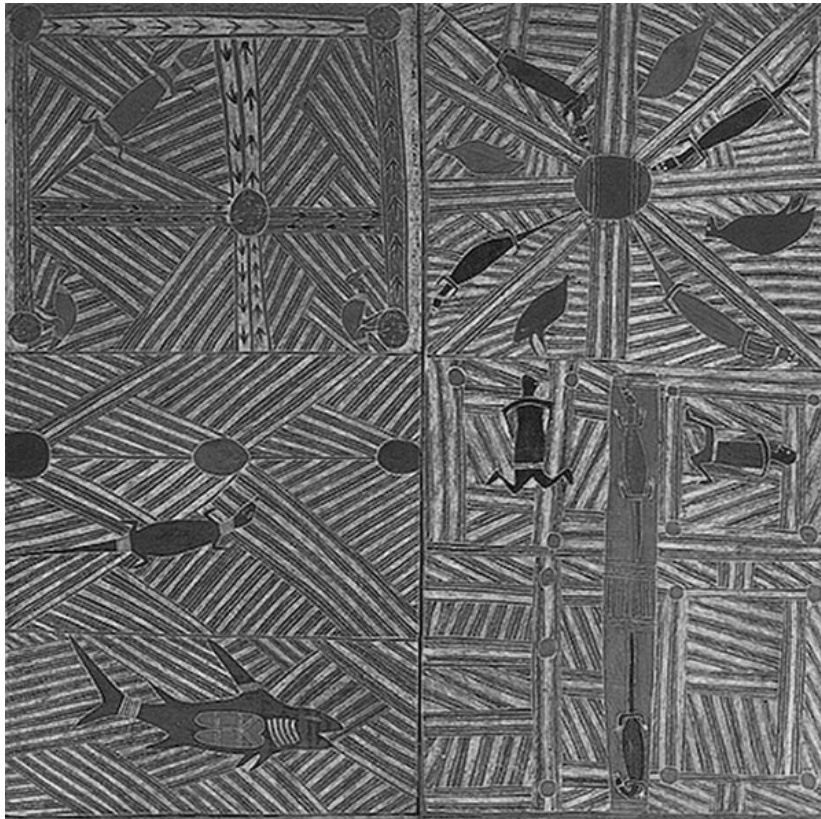
The diamond shapes always used in Yirritja representation originate from the first appearance of these Beings as crocodile-like creatures: foamy water runs off their backs as they emerge from the sea, and from their weed-covered bodies as they emerge from waterholes. Sunlight shining through these droplets, rendered in white paint, signals sacred presence, like a flash of lighting during a monsoonal storm. The diamonds, when slightly modified in shape, also represent honeycomb, fire, running water, or a mortuary sign, depending on when they occur within the narrative or which place or event they evoke.

What is most striking across both panels is that all of the sacred figures are shown at the moment they are doing the most important thing

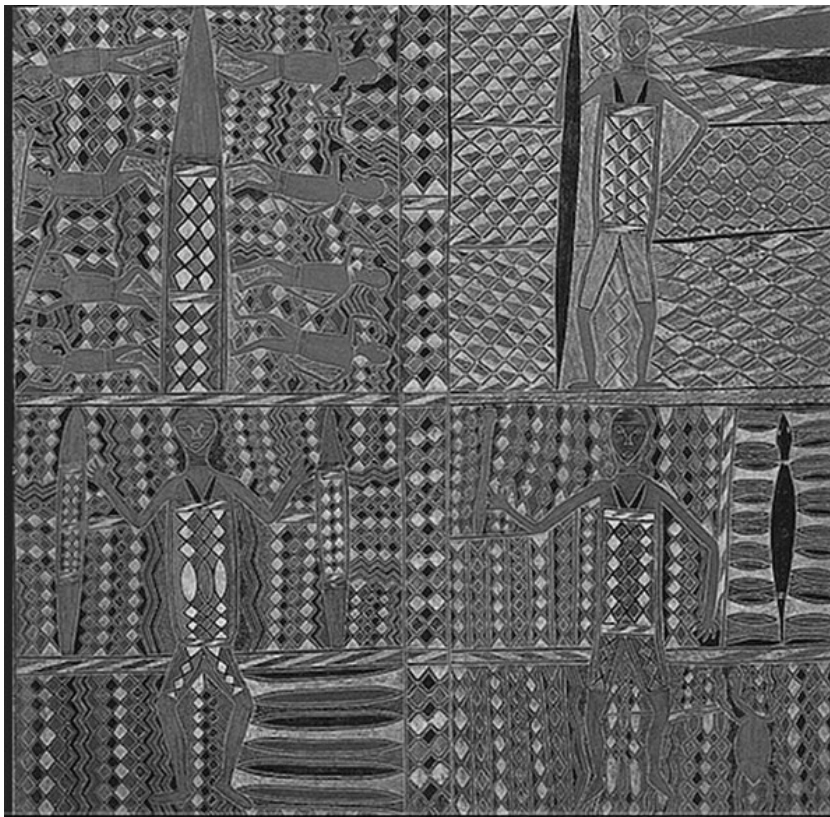
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Detail, upper right section of the Dhuwa panel showing pregnant Djan'kawu sisters.



Detail, lower right sections of the Yirritja panel showing major Creation Beings.

that was ever done, and would be done, that is, create *this* place, this world. The Creator Beings are being presented as they first appeared, when appearance became possible, when there was first something to see, something to be seen. The invitation to contemporary spectators, in 1963, and since, is to witness the creation of these places, this Dreaming, as it happened. How does this sense of the world's beginning square with the other most powerful idea in Australian indigenous cosmology: that of the Dreaming's eternal return?

### Time vis-à-vis Place

Describing the panels in terms of beginnings and ends gives a misleading sense of their temporality: it conjures parallels to the Book of Genesis, and implies that, for Yolŋu, time flows historically, in the manner it does for Europeans. Yolŋu recognize epochs, not least the changes engendered since the arrival of the colonists, but they also know, and do not see as mutually exclusive, the power of ancestral returning, the incessant recreating of places, the fact that these acts “abide” – as anthropologist Tony Swain (following his predecessor William Stanner’s idea of “everywhen”) puts it, using a somewhat Biblical word, but with an Aboriginal perspective.

The basic tenant of Abiding Events, as Nancy Munn has perceptively shown, is that something came out of, moved across, and went into, the earth ... In the boldest of terms, Aboriginal ontology rests on the maxim that a place-being emerged, moved, and established an abode. This, Munn correctly concludes, is the basis of Aboriginal “world theory.”<sup>18</sup>

The Yolŋu believe that these acts of creation and recreation are constantly occurring, constituting a world that is always in significant ways the same but also in perpetual transformation. Yolŋu representation is animated by this sense. Dhuwa cross-hatching and Yirritja diamond-shaping is rarely simply decorative or infill: mostly, its flow and gathering seems to generate the figures that appear, or are implied, in each section. We saw this in the shifts between registers in Ganambarr’s painting of the ancestral shark at Gurala, *Djambarrpuyŋu Maŋa*. The acts of the Orinary Beings founded places which they are believed to continue to occupy. This makes a place always alive. It also implicates the living beings who are ancestral incarnations responsible for them. For instance, Wukun Wanambi, who I met in 2019, is a current member of the Marrakulu clan, which has the duty of keeping a particular eucalyptus (*gaḏayka*;

*eucalyptus tetrodonta*) alive through ritual observance, which is used to make *larrakitj* (hollow log coffins), *yidaki* (didjeridu), and *nuwayak* (the bark used for bark paintings).

The panels are another way of keeping Wangarr alive, of declaring place and therefore sovereignty. The artists declared this, first of all, to the other Yolŋu clans. In doing so, they argued for an equivalence between the moieties in a world shared by both. The overall narrative in both panels is that of the creation of Yolŋu lands, those subsequently owned by the clans. They describe acts as causes, and picture their effects on other Beings, on environments, people, and animals. True, a certain temporality is suggested in the movements from one section to another, mainly from the bottom to the top, although a strict narrative sequence is not followed in either panel. The actions of the Creator Beings occurred in the Dreamtime – the equivalent, for Christians, to God’s eternal time, or the time of the gods in other mythologies. Perhaps the proximate sequencing of the stories in each panel was an adjustment oriented to just one set of intended viewers: the *balanda*, who are used to understanding things mostly via cause and effect, through accumulating, historical narration that plots movement from one place to another. The Yolŋu artists’ gesture in this direction, however, does not preclude their own conception of temporality, with its multiplicity of roughly parallel and simultaneous occurrences.

The panels show the *yuwalk dhäwu*, the true word, as the Yirritja elders promised, but not all of it. The so-called Dreaming Stories are traditionally shared in ceremonies of the initiated that, after lengthy preparation, unfold over days, or weeks, or sometimes months, as in the case of major foundational events of the kind treated in these panels. Shorter ceremonies are devoted to parts of these stories, or to lesser ones. Brief ceremonies that show unrestricted material have been developed for the uninitiated, and others for *balanda*. While the Yirrkala panels introduce, with elegant compression, the main outlines of the Dhuwa and Yirritja Creation Stories, some aspects seem underplayed. The travails of the Djan’kawu sisters, for example, are a conspicuous quality of their story, even as shared with uninitiated audiences. In the top-right sections of the Dhuwa panel, they are shown pregnant, and dancing awkwardly, but in a rather restrained manner.<sup>19</sup>

Over a short time, there have also been shifts in the aspects of the stories present on the panels that are worth emphasizing. In 1997, an exhibition, “Saltwater: Bark Paintings of Sea Country,” began an extensive national tour aimed at demonstrating that the Yolŋu exercised land



Djunmal, *The Djan'kawu Cross Back to the Mainland*, 1966. Natural ochres on bark, 138 x 53 cm, National Museum of Australia, Canberra.  
Copyright: estates of the artists, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd.  
Photo: National Museum of Australia.



rights over the seas of the region and not only the land. The catalog pages include images of the panels. Captions to them celebrate Barama, who is “said today to be the most eminent of the Yirritja Creation beings.”<sup>20</sup> Current discourse in the region similarly highlights Barama’s role. In the account given by Ann Wells, as told to her in the 1960s, however, the Yirritja peoples’ “creative legends were based on and woven through those of Banatja,” who is “an ancestor figure of ritual power, and leader or relation of three other spirit men.”<sup>21</sup>

The *Saltwater* catalog does not mention Banatja at all. It names the figure in the section above Barama as a depiction of another of the four ancestors, Lany’tjun. Wells, in contrast, devotes four pages of close description to this exact section, treating it primarily as a picture of Banatja, but also saying that, in this case, Birrititji painted both ancestors as one man “for that is the way they may be seen by those who are not initiated.”<sup>22</sup> Is it possible that negative, contradictory, or confusing information is being withheld? Banatja, who brought knowledge to people, became so strong, wise, and beloved by all that the other three spirit Beings – Barama, Galparimun, and Lany’tjun – grew jealous and killed him, an action that they immediately regretted, and have continued to regret ever since.<sup>23</sup> Is Banatja omitted because the story of

what happened to him conflicts with the affirmative message that all involved in the making of the panels in 1963 intended to convey? I think not, because each of the images is, like the front cover of a book, a placeholder, a gateway to the complex, contradictory, and often confusing behavior of the ancestors and, by inference, their descendants. Wells was told one side of a complex story; current discourse wishes to emphasize another. She was also given to understand that there was a deeper level of meaning, one on which both Beings were manifestations of the same originary spirit, itself complex and contradictory, like much of Wangarr. This is what *yuwalk dhäwu* actually amounts to, when taken seriously.

### Convergence and Difference

At the entrance to the exhibition “Old Masters, Australia’s Great Bark Artists,” at the Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 2013–14 (and touring Asia in 2019 and 2020), hung a painting, *The Djan’kawu Cross Back to the Mainland* (1966), by Dhuwa artist Djunmal. Djunmal used Dhuwa cross-hatching to show the freshwater waterholes created by the Djan’kawu sisters as they birthed the first peoples (on Dhuwa land), then switched to Yirritja diamond designs to show the return of the sisters to the saltwater mangroves (Yirritja country). In between, through

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Mawalan Marika, *Sydney from the air*, 1963. Natural ochres on bark, 43.3 x 91.3 cm. National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Copyright: estates of the artists licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd. Photo: National Museum of Australia.

the center of the image, fresh and saltwater meet in confluence: brackish, generative.<sup>24</sup> Another example of clan convergence is that of Mutitjpu Mununggurr, who did the freshwater section of the Dhuwa panel of the *Yirrkala Church Panels*. He was also entitled to paint some clan designs of his mother, who was Yirritja. In the “Old Masters” exhibition, he exhibited two paintings, one in the style of each moiety.<sup>25</sup> These instances bring out the interplay of convergence and divergence, of close proximity and respectful distance, which is the whole point of the moiety “system.”

A small painting by Mawalan Marika, modest in size relative to the church panels but painted at the same time, is comparable to them in its speculative ambition. As part of the travel involved in pressing the case against bauxite mining of their lands, in 1963 Marika was required to travel by air, for his first time, from Gove airport, at Nhulunbuy near Yirrkala, to Sydney. Known for some years by a description “Map of painter’s travell [sic] by plane from Yirrkala to Sydney,” the painting is now titled *Sydney from the Air*. Under the first title, it evokes an overview of thousands of square miles of mostly open country, the lands of many peoples. The distinctively jagged coastline along which the city clusters is shown at one side, while in between a plethora of unknown places, doubtless other peoples’ lands, are connected by lines. The title *Sydney from the Air*, however, suggests the artist’s arrival at a great modern city.<sup>26</sup> Morphy believed Marika was responding to the bright lights of “a shimmering city at night.” He remarks: “Aesthetic forms are not limited to a particular content and can be used as a means of conveying experience cross-culturally: the Arnhem Land idea of spiritual power to the Sydney audience, the energy and the electricity of the city to the Arnhem Land one.”<sup>27</sup> Morphy is, of course, not speaking literally. He is highlighting the work’s capacity as a metaphor, and projecting forward, metaphorically, its metaphorical resonance. He conjures some of its potential audiences, and suggests the kinds of reception that Mawalan might well have anticipated, given the growing interest in his work, and that of some of his fellow artists, by major museums, such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, through the collecting activities of its deputy director, the artist Tony Tuckson.<sup>28</sup>

Marika’s composition, at first glance, looks like that of the circles and lines in a Central Desert painting – the Tingari cycle, to take a famous case. But this is misleading. The composition follows directly on from the kind of mapping of clan lands found in some of the colored crayon sketches made onto large sheets

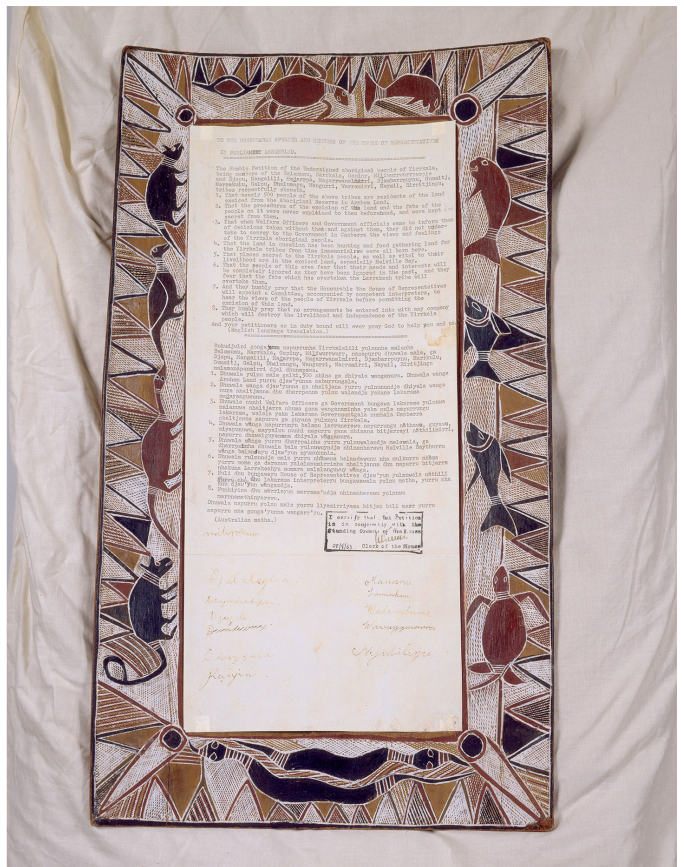
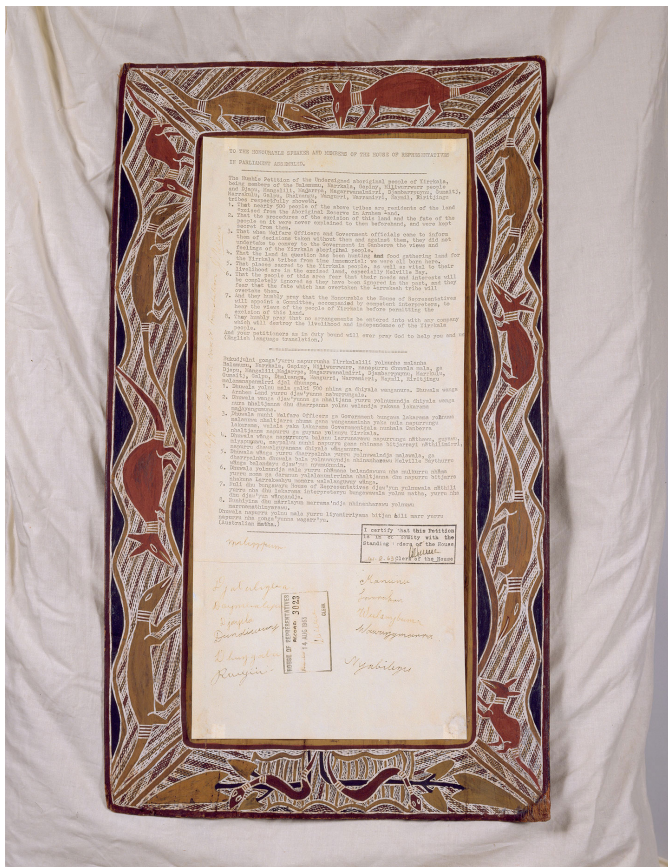
of butcher’s paper by Marika and other Yolŋu at the invitation of anthropologist Ronald Berndt in 1947. What may be pictured in *Sydney from the Air* are the clans that Marika imagines inhabit this region. He does not know or have the authority to represent their designs, thus they appear as unfilled rectangles or squares, and as dark or light brown in color. Dhuwa hatching, however, grounds the whole, but not as a unity. This is a restless, churning world, its clans unevenly dispersed, differing in size and power, its areas folded into dynamic tension. Unlike Yolŋu land, which is replete with ancestral energy, the movements of ancestor and earth here have not yet generated well-formed figures, at least not ones that Mawalan can see or show. This is, then, not only a rare glimpse into the *subjectile*, the underlying compositional format, upon which Yolŋu representation builds; it may be a rarer revelation of the schemata of the clans in their contestation, *before* moieties, or, even more radically and simply, without them. But they will come ... and the dark and light brown shapes, small paintings in themselves, will be ready to receive them.<sup>29</sup>

### “A new Yolngu politics”

In October 1963, the panels were on prominent display in the Yirrkala church during a visit of parliamentarians charged with making recommendations for or against mining. One of them, Kim Beazley Senior, a Labor Party politician from Western Australia, recommended that the Yolŋu incorporate the concept of the panels into a petition to Parliament opposing the mining. They decided to follow his suggestion, mounting the typed text of the petition on two small bark panels, one Dhuwa and the other Yirritja, each bordered with figures painted by Narritjin with permission from several of the same elders who did the church panels. While unsuccessful in stopping the government’s granting of the lease, the court acknowledged that a claim to sovereignty was being made, one impossible to grant under the principle of *terra nullius*, through which British settlers declared the land unoccupied.

Publicity around the case raised public consciousness that Australian indigenous people believed that their relationship to their land was one of primary ownership. It took until 1992, however, in the case brought by Eddie Mabo of the Mer Island in the Torres Strait, for the High Court of Australia to rule that a native title existed. Such a title remains contested, but artworks continue to be recognized by the courts as the basis for the claiming of titles. In 1997 an extensive national tour of the exhibition “Saltwater: Bark Paintings of Sea Country” began, including works depicting many of the





*Yirrkala Bark Petitions*, August 14 and 28, 1963. Typed paper and natural ochres on bark, 46.9 x 21 cm. Parliament House Collection, Canberra. Courtesy Table Office, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra.



same places as on the panels, and many more from the wider region. The exhibition was material to the Blue Mud Bay Case brought by the Yolŋu in 2008 to the High Court of Australia, which recognized that the people's land rights extended into the sea to the extent of the low water mark. Today, the Yirrkala bark petitions are regarded as among the "founding documents" of the Commonwealth of Australia and are displayed in Parliament House, Canberra.<sup>30</sup>

Reverend Wells was dismissed from Yirrkala in 1964 for his role in the petition. A subsequent, more fundamentalist minister discarded the *Yirrkala Church Panels* and they were left to rot. They were recovered in the late 1970s as plans to establish a museum at Yirrkala arose. It opened in 1988. Interest in them has recently been revived by the thriving Buku-Larrnggay Art Center, arguably the most successful center of its kind in Australia, serving the now five-thousand-strong Yolŋu community, as well as by national and international interest in their art. Their association with the church a fading memory, the panels are now the centerpiece of a museum space adjacent to the art center. They are fully encased in glass and bolted onto metal sheets in a structure designed to protect them from earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis. As of 2020, the space remains unfinished, but it is planned to serve as an entrance as impactful as the experience of passing through the well-known *Aboriginal Memorial* when one enters the National Gallery of Australia in the nation's capital, Canberra. Until then, they may be seen by the general public only in the black-and-white images that accompany this article.

The panels were a deliberate showing of sacred material, first and foremost, by each clan to members of the other clans. The line between secret and public knowledge is not fixed but is constantly negotiated within and between clans, and always between representatives of the moieties which are cemented in the kin relations of the clan, according to the contexts and needs of the time. Yet to see some of the most sacred images, and to see all of them together, at once, side by side – what else is this if not *revelation*? The fact that all those who painted them are now dead means that the revelation has also become that of the immediate ancestors of living Yolŋu, who experience it as such. The revelation goes right back to the Orinary Beings, and returns to all, including non-indigenous peoples, who experience it now. This legacy demonstrates how the revelation of what is usually secret totemic knowledge may be used, if the contemporary situation becomes dire enough to demand it, for a political purpose. As Ian McLean puts it, the panels "embodied the origin of a new Yolŋu politics."<sup>31</sup>

It is true, as mentioned above, that the panels' creation might mark the appearance of the clans in an alliance as *Yolŋu*, the historical moment when they came together, for the first time, to declare their shared identity against that of the federal government. Yet "historical," here, perhaps comes too close to implying that only registration in the narrative of European world expansion, colonization, and universalization counts as history. But the Yolŋu, like Aboriginal peoples across the continent, have lived for millennia in their own temporalities, those of the Dreaming and its eternal recurrence in the present. They have also always lived in active relation to the times of those others with whom they interact. The potential productivity of such temporal doubling is what the panels demonstrated in 1963. They were an affirmation of Yolŋu spirituality in another sacred setting, the Methodist church – it is, after all, located in their place, on their land. In a broader legal context, that of the land rights case against mining, the panels declare a Yolŋu sovereignty, one that challenged the kind claimed by the government and its courts. More broadly, in their address to the earth, the panels manifest each unique clan's specificity and its moiety underpinnings as processes of world-making that keep on making place, despite the scarring and destruction of the lands by extraction. *Balanda* world-making will impede that of the Yolŋu but will not stop it. Similarly, in current circumstances, the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, with its request that a First Nations Voice be enshrined in the Constitution of Australia, continues the many processes of reparation and reconciliation that, despite the resistance of conservative politicians, will not cease the "Makarrata" – that is, the coming together after a struggle between all concerned.<sup>32</sup>

Coeval communality, we might infer, will definitely entail thinking together, feeling together, experiencing together, *after struggle*.<sup>33</sup> It will also entail talking and listening together, having meetings, writing documents, demonstrating, protesting, occupying, painting murals, presenting exhibitions, and the like. Doing these things, Yolŋu tell us, is also, and mainly, about making places, many of them, alongside each other, through processes of world weaving: coming from the earth, moving across it, returning to it. That is, through practices of cross-hatching and shape-making, in concurrence with each other, in what might become, in however fragile a way, our common place.

x

These reflections were triggered by the experience of attending the "Postnational Art Histories Workshop," hosted

by Wukun Wanambi at the Baku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala, June 10–15, 2019. I am indebted to Wukun and the coordinator of the Centre, Will Stubbs, and to the conveners of the workshop, Ian McLean and Charles Green of the University of Melbourne, my fellow workshop participants, and to the artists who work at and show through the Centre and who made us *balanda* welcome. I especially thank Ian McLean, Howard Morphy, Henry Skerritt, and Will Stubbs for their close and insightful reading of this essay and their many helpful suggestions.

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1  
For a discussion of the contemporaneities within Australian indigenous art, see “Country, Indigeneity, Sovereignty: Aboriginal Australian Art,” chap. 6 in my *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2019), 156–97. Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (Phaidon, 1998), and Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (Reaktion Books, 2016) are excellent introductions. See also Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Duke University Press, 2002).

2  
“Maḏayin: Eight Decades of Aboriginal Bark Painting from Yirrkala, Australia” is curated by Yolŋu artists from the Buku-Larrnggay Art Centre, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, and curators from the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia. It will also include a six-screen video installation by Ishmael Marika and the Mulka Project, which is based at Yirrkala. The exhibition will open at the Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, in September 2020, and complete its tour at the Fralin Museum, University of Virginia, in January 2025.

3  
In his exhibition “Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia,” at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, in 2016, Stephen Gilbert included a painting by Ganambarr, *Maḏa ga Dhukurruru* (1996), which depicts Wandawuy, a place where fresh river water and saltwater from the Arafura Sea converge into a turbulent but vital foam. This concurrence is a major symbolization of the unity-within-difference of the Yolŋu moieties. See *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Yale University Press, 2016). “Everywhen” is a term coined by anthropologist William Stanner in a 1953 essay “The Dreaming,” in Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973* (Australian National University Press Books, 1979), 24.

4  
Edgar Wells, *Reward and Punishment in Arnhem Land, 1962–1963* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1982), 58–59; Anne E. Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming: Legends of the Panels of Aboriginal Art in the Yirrkala Church* (University of Queensland Press, 1971), 41.

5  
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, x. Of course, exactly this was the self-evident purpose of the photograph. Wells was pursuing a policy of “contextualization,” of relating Christianity to Aboriginal cultural, social, and political contexts, that was

emerging within the Methodist mission to Arnhem Land. It was not, however, fully embraced by the church hierarchy. See John Kadiba, “The Methodist Mission and the Emerging Aboriginal Church in Arnhem Land 1916–1977” (PhD diss., Faculty of Education, Northern Territory University, 1998).

6  
See Jeremy Long, “Wells, Edgar Almond (1908–1995),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2019 <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wells-edgar-almond-27835/text35581>; Ann E. Wells, *Milingimbi: Ten Years in the Crocodile Islands of Arnhem Land* (Angus & Robertson, 1963); and Wells, *Reward and Punishment*. While at Milingimbi, Wells had arranged for Karel Kupka to design stained-glass windows featuring Yolŋu motifs gathering around a central cross. Aesthetically, a greater contrast to the achievement of the Yirrkala panels is difficult to imagine.

7  
See Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), chap. 3.

8  
Howard Morphy, “Acting in a Community: Art and Social cohesion in Indigenous Australia,” *Humanities Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (2009) <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p14881/html/frames.php>. See section “The Bite in the Bark.”

9  
Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 40.

10  
It is worth noting that the clans still maintain that they speak different languages (as it is a defining feature of clan difference), whereas the linguists insist they speak different dialects.

11  
These are the main Dhuwa clan groups of East Arnhem Land: Rirratjinu, Gälpu, Marrakulu, Dhuḏi-Djapu, Djapu, Ḍätiwuy, Daymil, Djarwark, and Golumala. The major Yirritja clan groups of the region are these: Gumatj, Wangurri, Munyuku, Manggalili, Maḏarra, Warramiri, and Dhalwaṇu.

12  
See Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (Penguin Books Australia, 1989), chap. 1, for some such inferences. For a skeptical view, see Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), Introduction, chap. 1.

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Marking Places, Cross-Hatching Worlds: The Yirrkala Panels

13  
Of course, ceremonial exchange had been occurring for millennia. Sociologically speaking, the missions had already concentrated the clans into one large area. There were also some art precedents. In 1942, Wonggu Munuggur and his children made bark paintings for anthropologist Donald Thomson that explained major Dreaming stories, such as that of the Djan’kawu, including a painting of one of the sisters in half-human form. See “Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic,” Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2009. Four years later, anthropologist Ronald M. Berndt encouraged Yolŋu to do crayon drawings of their Dreaming stories. The 365 resultant drawings, made in a five-month period by twenty-seven Yolŋu, are held in the Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia. Each of these precedents echo in the panels.

14  
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 43.

15  
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 41. Written for the general reader, in a story-telling style, this moment has some earmarks of apocrypha.

16  
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 7–37, offers a detailed account of each section, as she does for the Yirritja panel, 39–71.

17  
“Yirrkala Church Panels, 1962–63,” *Saltwater, Paintings of Sea Country, The Recognition of Indigenous Sea Rights*, 2nd ed. (Baku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, 2014), 25. Sometimes named “The Island of the Dead,” Burralku is the place from which the Creator Beings of both moieties came, and to which the spirits of the dead return. Swain speculates that, for the Yirritja in particular, this mythical domain is in some sense coterminous with parts of Indonesia. See Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, chap. 4.

18  
Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 32. The internal reference is to Nancy Munn, “The Spatial Representation of Cosmic Order in Walbiri Iconography,” in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Andrew Forge (Oxford University Press, 1973), 197. See also Nancy Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society* (Cornell University Press, 1973).

19  
See Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 37. In Central Arnhem Land, a parallel theme, the story of the Wagilag Sisters, is much elaborated in ceremony and in art, by Dawidi Birritjama and Paddy Dhatangu, for example. See *The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story, 1937–1997*, ed.

Wally Caruana and Nigel Lendon (National Gallery of Australia, 1997).

20  
*Saltwater, Paintings of Sea Country*, 25.

21  
Furthermore, having given the people language, lore, kinship behavior, and the designs for ceremony, “Banatja is a very special name for the Yirritja people. He is said to be the ancestor for the Yirritja as Djankawu is for the Dua, for the senior men say that Banatja and Djankawu are equal in all things.” Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, xi.

22  
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 48.

23  
In 1948, the Berndts heard a version of this story in which Lany’tun is the father of Banatja, who became in turn a great religious leader and teacher. In this version he is killed by his disciples. See R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, “Sacred Figures of Ancestral beings of Arnhem Land,” *Oceania*, vol. 18 (1948): 314. Cited in Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 199.

24  
See <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/old-masters/artists/djunmal>.

25  
See <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/old-masters/artists/muttijpuy-mununggurr>.

26  
“... as if done by the Dutchman Piet Mondrian.” Peter Nauman, “Old Masters: Australia’s Great Bark Artists,” *reCollections* 9, no. 2 (2013) [https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume\\_9\\_number\\_2/exhibition\\_reviews/old\\_masters](https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume_9_number_2/exhibition_reviews/old_masters).

27  
Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (Phaidon, 1998), 37 and 39.

28  
See Natalie Wilson, “(Works of) Paradise and Yet: Stanley Gordon Moriarty, Tony Tuckson and the Collection of Oceanic Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales,” in *Hunting the Collectors: Pacific Collections in Australian Museums, Galleries and Archives*, ed. Susan Cochrane and Max Quanchi (Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, 2014), 221–42.

29  
For a similar reading of this painting, see Henry Skeritt, “New Lines of Flight: Bark Painting as Contemporary Encounter,” *Art Guide Australia* (January–February, 2014): 61–66 [https://www.academia.edu/11829758/New\\_lines\\_of\\_flight\\_Bark\\_Painting\\_as\\_Contemporary\\_Encounter](https://www.academia.edu/11829758/New_lines_of_flight_Bark_Painting_as_Contemporary_Encounter). There are many



resonances across these cross-cultural spaces, the pursuit of which would take us too far off course. Four come to mind immediately, one each for the kinds of spatial and temporal projections we have been considering. A concurrent instance of cross-cultural convergence: Margaret Preston's later works, notably in this case her painting of 1942 *Flying Over the Shoalhaven* (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra). A subsequent Yolŋu collective enterprise, this time out of Ramingining: *The Aboriginal Memorial* 1988 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra). This was at least as ambitious as the church panels, was arguably more monumental, and has been, to date, more consequential. A later compilation of stories across a territory, a chronicle of dispossession, of mourning: *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby Country*, a scroll-like painting made in 2008 by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri for filming by Geoffrey Bardon (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). And a gesture of historical retrospect, in a spirit of coevality: Kunwinjku man Gabriel Maralngurra's series of paintings made in the 2000s, about the visits to Oenpelli made a century earlier by one of the founders of the discipline of anthropology, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer. On this last, see especially, Henry Skeritt, "Seeing Through Spencer: Gabriel Maralngurra's Paintings of Baldwin Spencer," *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association*, 14, no. 1–2 (2015): 106–19.

30

See <https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-104.html>. This does not mean that they were seen and understood by all who saw them. Liberal Party Treasurer Joe Hockey, currently Australia's ambassador to the United States, recently admitted to having never heard of them. See Will Stubbs, "A Short History of Yolŋu Activist Art," *Artlink*, June 1, 2016. The economic future of the Gove Peninsula within the global economy is destined to diminish considerably, as Rio Tinto closed the aluminum mine in 2014 and plans to cease extracting bauxite in 2030. See <https://www.riotinto.com/operations/australia/gove>.

31

Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (Reaktion Books, 2016), 110.

32

See [https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru\\_Statement\\_From\\_The\\_Heart\\_0.PDF](https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF) and [https://law.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/2791940/Uluru-Statement-from-the-Heart-Information-Booklet.pdf](https://law.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2791940/Uluru-Statement-from-the-Heart-Information-Booklet.pdf).

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33

On this expanded sense of "coevality," involving a shared possession of the same temporality based on an exchange between equals, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 2002).

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