

2005

## **Kuninjku modernism: new perspectives on Western Arnhem Land art**

Ian McLean

*University of Wollongong*, [imclean@uow.edu.au](mailto:imclean@uow.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

McLean, Ian: Kuninjku modernism: new perspectives on Western Arnhem Land art 2005, 48-51.  
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/369>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)



# kuninjku modernism

new perspectives on western  
arnhem land art

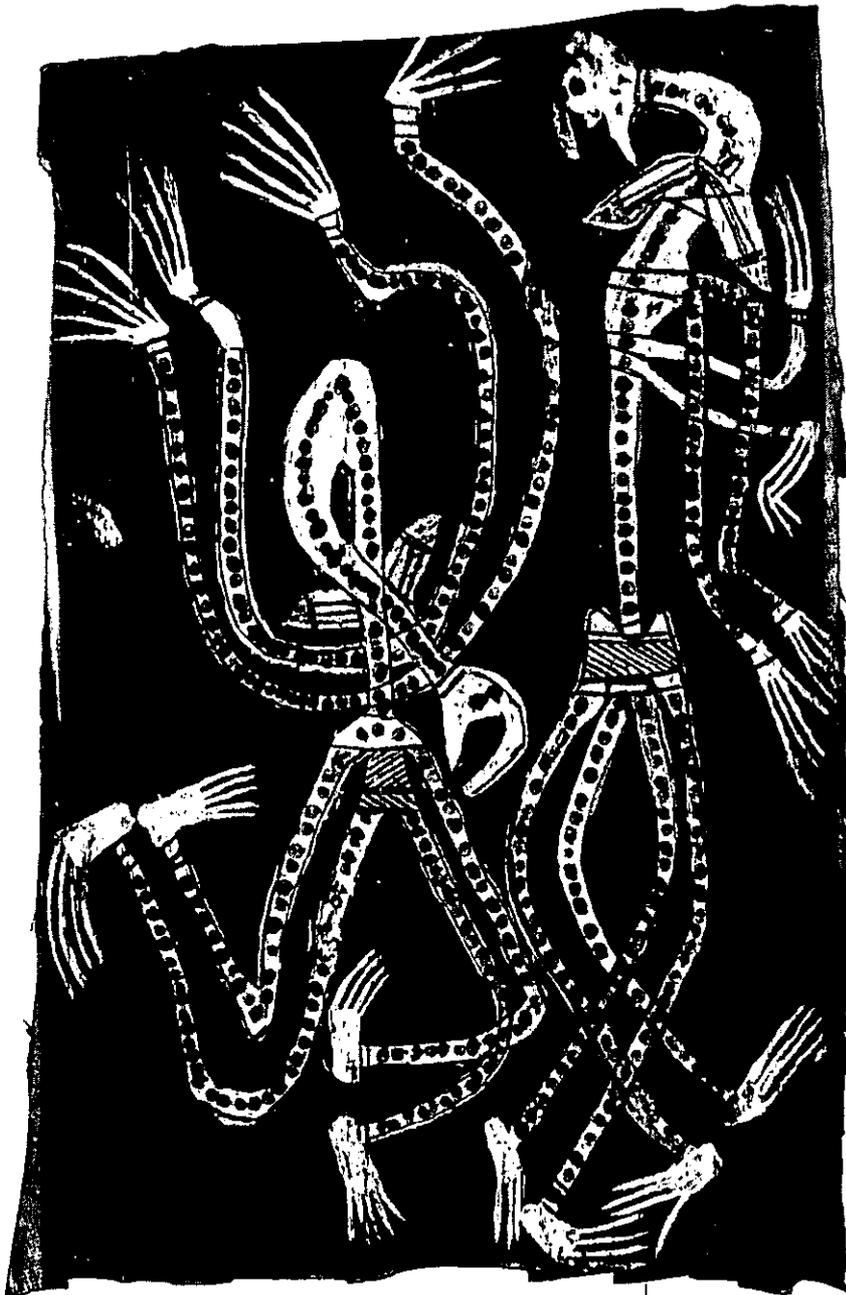
Many of Australia's most interesting artists are not based in the few large metropolitan centres in which other countries focus their cultural effort. The wellspring of the Indigenous art movement is the numerous small communities and outstations in remote Australia. Further, the tiny fraction of Australians who live in these settlements outperform other Australian artists, no matter what measure is used. In this respect Australia lives up to its Antipodean legend; here everything is back to front: the centre is the periphery and the periphery the centre. However there is another way of looking at it. Australia might be a single continent but it is several Countries or nations: a large 'civic' nation dominating the continent from its municipal hubs, and some thinly populated 'ethnic' Countries in the remote regions.

Incredibly, despite the much bigger size and resources of the civic nation, its provincial, self-important culture pales beside the art of the few remote settlements and outstations in Australia's Indigenous Countries. This was demonstrated a few years ago in the stunning *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* exhibition curated by Hetti Perkins at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2000. Perkins has done it again with *Crossing Country - the alchemy of western Arnhem Land art*, an exhibition that traces ninety years of Kuninjku art. Perkins' aim is twofold: to highlight the vigour of contemporary Kuninjku art since the 1980s, when the artworld first accepted Indigenous art as contemporary art; and to show its genealogy in early mid-twentieth century developments that occurred beyond its borders in the west at Kunbarlanja (Oenpelli) and Minjilang (Croker Island) and on remote outstations on its southern edges (such as Malkawo).



The Kuninjku number over 1000 people, of which about 100 are practising artists. They speak a dialect of the Bininj Kunwok language spoken across western Arnhem Land. Kuninjku Country, as Perkins calls it, is between the Liverpool and Tomkinson Rivers, the closest art centre being at Maningrida, just across its north-eastern border. Less than 100 kms to the east are the legendary Yolngu and to the west are Kunwinjku lands that border on Kakadu.

**ABOVE:** Samuel Manggudja *Man with Leprosy* 1961, natural pigments on bark, 75 x 39.7 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.  
**FACING PAGE:** Paddy Compass Namatbara *Two Mimih spirits (female) dancing* c.1963, natural pigments on bark, 74 x 48.5 cm. Collection:



For most of us, the art from these places fuses into the familiar Arnhem Land style. If it does nothing else, this exhibition alerts us to the differences and subtleties of Arnhem Land art. But it does much more than this.

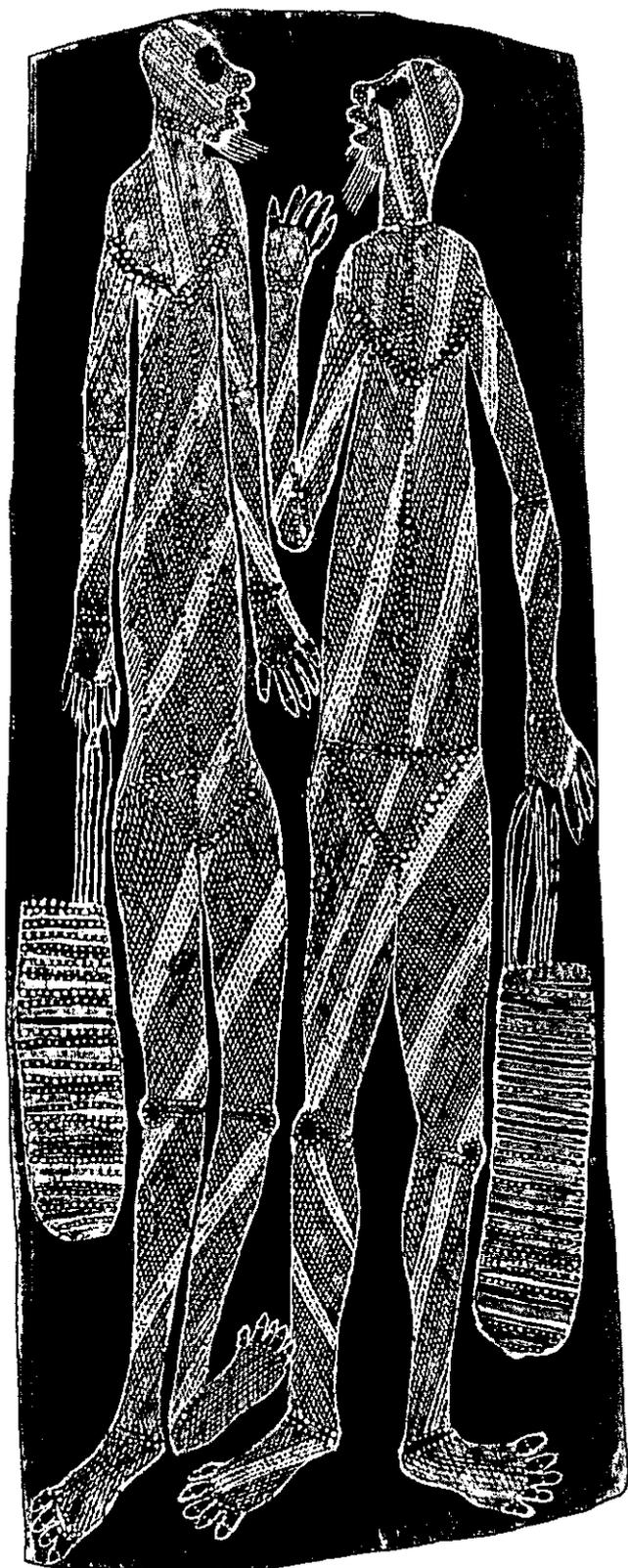
On entering the exhibition one immediately feels the richness of what is in store; and moving through the rooms, an art history nearly one hundred years in the making is revealed. It is a story of movements across and beyond the borders of Kunwinjku territories. During the middle of the twentieth century the art of the Western Arnhem Land region fused into one hybrid style, so much so that until quite recently Kuninjku artists were listed as Kunwinjku. This is the first exhibition to distinguish the Kuninjku from the Kunwinjku, and the first I have seen since *The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story 1937-1997* (NGA 1997) to consider bark paintings in such a pointedly historical fashion.

The single greatest achievement of this exhibition is its historical focus. Like the *Papunya Tula* exhibition, it shows that Indigenous art is not just the product of discrete individuals living on various settlements in remote Australia, but that it also comprises autonomous traditions or identities (Countries) with their own particular histories. This is something art history is good at doing. Since their inception in the nineteenth century, art histories were a means of legitimising the legends and landscapes that comprise the myths of nationhood. Hence exhibitions like *Crossing Country* and *Papunya Tula* establish, in the dominant culture's terms, the credentials of these small Countries as autonomous cultures. Only from that point is it possible to write a history of Australian art that does justice to its diversity, colonial history and cultural richness.

Perkins also undermines a persistent myth about the Aboriginal art movement; namely its apparent miraculous resurrection at the close of the twentieth century. You don't need a forensic mind to see in *Crossing Country* evidence of a well-planned strategy laid down decades earlier. Central to its success were two achievements by mid-twentieth century anthropology: the demonstration of the central role that art played in the maintenance and evolution of Indigenous cultures; and convincing the artworld that Indigenous art was fine art and should be exhibited as such. This gave Indigenous Elders the prestige they needed to engage with the Balanda (white people) from

a position of strength. It also laid the ground for the strategic alliance entered into some forty to fifty years ago by Elders and anthropologists to counter the deleterious effect of colonialism through developing a fine art market for Indigenous art.

To Indigenous artists and Elders, the role of art in strengthening the social, political and spiritual life of their Countries, as well as their own prestige and influence, was self-evident. Art is universally a tool for cross-cultural (or cross-clan) brokerage and political power. Certainly this was reinforced by the Kuninjku's early experiences with the Balanda. The Kuninjku had been relatively insulated from the terrible events that occurred in the south of Arnhem Land and around the coast during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The starting point of this exhibition is the moment of first sustained contact with Balanda, when Paddy Cahill, who had been buffalo hunting



ABOVE: Wally Mandarrk Wayarra  
spirits with dilly bags 1979, natural  
pigments on bark, 97.4 x 38.9 cm.

in the Kakadu region since the early 1880s, set up permanent residence in Kunbarlanja in 1906. He stayed for more than fourteen years, and quickly developed a close liaison with the Kunwinkju based on mutual respect and exchange.

Cahill's excellent relations with his Indigenous hosts made his station an ideal staging post for anthropological research. For eight years from 1912, he assisted the anthropologist and Chief Protector of Aborigines, Baldwin Spencer, in commissioning local artists to copy, on bark, examples of their rock art. The result was a new type of art (though it did in many ways mimic the traditional 'outsider' art (*kun-yarlang*) made to assist the education of children and youth). If Walter Benjamin is right, these bark paintings were also a type of modernism, 'copies' in which the 'aura' of the iconic originals was lost or reworked for other purposes. Certainly they have all the characteristics of modernist Indigenous art, namely a direct expressive design primarily intended to educate the Balanda. While probably not by Kuninjku artists, Perkins posits them as the dawn of modern Kuninjku bark painting. She is right to do so. Unlike 'insider' or sacred ceremonial art (*mandjamun*), the 'outsider' bark painting movement was made for the Balanda art market, and so has a direct lineage to Spencer's collecting at Kunbarlanja. Further, as *Crossing Country* demonstrates, Kuninjku bark painting was a movement formed in and still sustained by cross-border liaisons.

To my mind *Crossing Country* elucidates the development of an Indigenous modernism. Like the broad pattern of Balanda modernism, the history of twentieth-century Kuninjku bark painting exhibits a marked trend from figuration towards abstraction, and is characterised by relatively rapid shifts in style, innovation and highly individualistic ways of painting. My sense that these bark paintings are a modernism also stems from the social conditions in which they were produced. After the buffalo hunter and the anthropologist came the missionaries. While hardly metropolitan centres, the effect of the missions was similar: they were 'melting pots', attracting people from different clans and Countries and throwing them together in unprecedented ways. The Methodist mission at Minjilang was the centre of these developments in the years after World War Two.

Minjilang is well to the west of Kuninjku Country, but many Kuninjku migrated there, including Jimmy Midjawmidjaw, January Nangunyari-Namiridali, Spider Namirriki Nabunu and Yirawala, as well as other (non-Kuninjku) artists such as Paddy Compass Namatbara, Samuel Wagbar. These were clearly confident and fully formed artists who were inspired by their close proximity to each other. Collectively their work shows the remarkable diversity of individual approaches, and comprises an extraordinary burst of energy that has no parallel in Australian Balanda art (except perhaps Melbourne in the 1940s).

In 1957 the Australian government began developing Maningrida, a small trading post established eight years earlier, into a permanent Welfare department settlement. Unlike the missions at Minjilang and Kunbarlanja, Maningrida is situated close to Kuninjku Country. Developed to promulgate government assimilationist policies that pushed Indigenous people into 'useful' occupations (eg. forestry, horticulture, fisheries), the extraordinary synergy previously evident at Minjilang waned. Nevertheless, the local Methodist minister did act as an intermediary in the trading of art with collectors, and by the end of the sixties the tide had turned. Today Maningrida is an immensely rich centre of art. The home of nine different language groups of which the Kuninjku are just one, and a major clearing house for the art of the outstation movement, it is, for artists, the site for a constant interchange of ideas.

After the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972, the period of assimilation was replaced with self-determination, one result being that many artists left Maningrida and returned to their (nearby) homelands. Not only did the production of Kuninjku art rapidly expand, but it also re-engaged with tradition especially classical rock painting styles - what we might call a primitivist turn in Kuninjku modernism.

The outstation movement inaugurated a new period of Kuninjku modernism. Its most prominent artists were Yirawala (who at this time became a national celebrity) and Peter Marrawanga. Also important was the influence of non-Kuninjku artists Wally Mandarrk, Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Dick Nguleingulei Murrumurru, whose homelands were beyond the southern fringe of Kuninjku Country. They combined the figurative rock art style with expressive use of rarrk (cross-hatching infill) that, until then, had been primarily associated with Yolngu bark painting. However the Kuninjku painters use rarrk in a very different way. Rarrk is an important part of Kuninjku body painting in the Mardayin ceremony, and in the barks was used very expressively. Kuninjku artists had been using rarrk infill at least since the 1950s, but the outstation artists experimented with different colours and finer lines to create a vibrant space and light. By combining rock and body art traditions, they developed a new style that focused the divergent styles of the 1950s into a more intense and singular style.

The most recent phase of Kuninjku modernism is a product of both the success of the outstation movement and the new artworld climate resulting from the triumph of Papunya paintings. A period of significant expansion, it heralded an increasing abstraction that placed even more emphasis on rarrk patterning. Its most significant artists are Mick Kubarkku, Jimmy Njiminjuma and John Mawurndjul.

Mawurndjul (now in his fifties) is the acknowledged master of contemporary Kuninjku art. He made it his business to comprehensively study the traditional practices of his forbears. However, perhaps influenced by the success of Papunya art, he responded to the aestheticisation of Indigenous art that followed its acceptance as contemporary art in the 1980s. His stunning large abstract barks of the 1990s, evocative in their spiritual force, distilled the narratives of Kuninjku myth into a sensuous pattern of light created by the close rhythms of rarrk. They suggest the invisible presence of 'ancestral energies' that are felt rather than seen.

While Mawurndjul makes no concessions to the authenticity of his art, his simultaneous claims for contemporaneity are difficult to deny. In 2003 he won Australia's most prestigious prize for contemporary art, the National Gallery of Victoria's Clemenger Contemporary Art Prize.

The close focus on a specific tradition is the highlight of *Crossing Country*. It not only shows the origins and development of Kuninjku bark painting but, to me, also suggests interesting parallels with mainstream modernist art that cry out for further investigation. *Crossing Country* shows up the inadequacy of current Australian art histories that as a rule ignore bark painting. Likewise, rarely is bark painting exhibited with such an acute sense of its own history and place in the world (articulated so clearly in the excellent catalogue). We need more exhibitions of Indigenous art like this. ☺

Ian McLean lectures in art history at the University of Western Australia.



RIGHT: Jimmy Njiminjuma  
*Ngaylod, the rainbow serpent*  
 1985, natural pigments on  
 bark, 145 x 55 cm. Collection  
 Art Gallery of New South  
 Wales.