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Sally Gabori, who died in early 2015 aged about 90, lived most of her life on the mission at Mornington Island in the bottom end of the Gulf of Carpentaria, where she was given the forename Sally. Her surname, another modern Western convention, was taken, in a corrupted form, from her husband’s place name.

When she became a famous artist it seemed fitting to restore her more dignified sounding place name – Mirdidingkingathi (born at Mirdidingki) – and ancestral name – Juwarnda (ancestral black dolphin). So she became Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori.

Dibirdibi Country – Topway was painted horizontally on a table but is shown vertically on a wall. Despite its title it hangs upright, in portrait rather than landscape format. About the size of the artist, it stands looking at us as if the painting is Gabori, the black dolphin.
A pink head-like oval shape is in the top middle of the painting where we would expect a head to be. It is nicely placed just to the left rather than dead centre, but any resemblance to a figure ends there. Floating on a dark magenta ground, the oval is roughly outlined, first in violet and again by a lemon yellow line made with a wide brush quickly run round.

There is no doubting the painting’s style: it ticks all the boxes of abstract expressionism. On either side of the oval, as if holding it up or wedging it in, are large triangular white shapes painted in broad sweeps spilling across the magenta ground.

A rectangular slab of violet dominates the bottom half of the painting, its curved right side edged in lemon yellow with a squared left top corner edged in red. More lemon yellow lines – some mixed in with the violet – give this shape form and weight but one could only guess at what it might represent. A swathe of orange swooping along the bottom edge and up the right completes the picture. While this description suggests a formal complexity, the main impression is of the artist’s sheer verve, not of a judiciously arranged composition. It is difficult to believe she was in her 80s when she painted this. More believable is the philistine’s cry, “my child could have done that”.

The painting has the naïve energetic expression of a three year old launching without restraint onto the paper with kinesthetic abandon. We can be more specific: Dibirdibi Country – Topway corresponds to the pre-schematic stage when children begin to make more orderly scribbles,
such as circles and other forms, and their tongues first grasp the rudiments of verbal language.

The first shape to appear in the pre-schematic stage is invariably circular, which the child will tell you is mummy (in fact mummy’s head), followed by some lines or another shape at the bottom signifying her body. Like these early children’s drawings, Gabori’s art is virtually impossible to decipher. She was keen to tell you its story – except there were only a handful of Kaiadilt speakers who could understand her.

Gabori had only started painting a year earlier in 2005, so this indeed is one of her first paintings. Traditional Kaiadilt culture is the only one (I know of) that lacks a painting tradition. She is their first painter. There is a story there: the last to speak the language, the first to paint the culture.

Kaiadilt was a culture that sang and danced itself into existence. This is the clue to appreciating Gabori’s paintings: they aren’t paintings at all. Or at least they are not about painting (which is how Clement Greenberg, that great champion of abstract expressionism, defined it) but music and dance, the most abstract of the arts where the materials of production completely fuse with the form. Gabori had discovered in painting a way to sing and dance with the verve and enthusiasm that her younger body once did.

Western modernists emulated children’s drawings because of their perceived truth-value and authenticity, but there is no sense that Gabori is emulating children’s drawings. The circle at the top of Dibirdibi Country – Topway is not a head, the large violet shape at the bottom is not a body, and the vertical yellow line down the left edge is not an arm. Nevertheless, her song and dance did have a subject.

These songs might reference mangroves and shorelines, white foam and breaking water, rolling clouds and piercing light and the sand bars and rock fish traps – but these are just elements in narratives of dancing, fishing, love making, tidal surges and flooding cyclones, starvation, murder, rape, wrong skin and ancestral beings.

Dibirdibi, which is Gabori’s main subject, is her husband’s story about the Rock Cod Ancestor. In his suffering and thrashing and throwing the foaming white water about him, Dibirdibi
carved out the channels between the islands. Eventually killed, his liver was discarded at the bottom of a cliff across the bay from where Gabori and her husband were born.

Here the liver transformed into one of the few fresh water springs on the islands. Perhaps the oval at the top of the painting is this spring and the large violet shape the hill – the topway – but this would be to reduce a song to its words.

More important are the rhythms and movement as Gabori sings and dances the story of Dibirdibi. Unlike children’s art, over the years Gabori’s paintings got less and less schematic.

In the few years she had left they veered back from the pre-schematic stage towards the child’s first scribbles that index the pure joy of kinesthetic activity, as if the words of the song were left behind and Juwarnda was inside the dance and the dance in her.

The retrospective Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori Dulka Warngiid – Land of All is showing at the Queensland Art Gallery from 21 May 2016 - 28 August 2016. The works will be on show at the National Gallery of Victoria from 23 September 2016 - 29 January 2017.

Sally Gabori: Painted Island Home, featuring never previously exhibited artwork, is on display at the Alcaston Gallery until 6 August 2016.