

A Narrative in Paint

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Any exhibition of paintings proposes several unique experiences to the viewer: the opportunity to encounter each work face to face; to recognise the similarities and differences between works, and how these function across time and space; and to engage with the consciousness of the individual artist, through the medium of the work and the touch of the artist's hand. The experience of an exhibition is an accumulation of all these things, and more, that in the body of an exhibition one learns to see each work differently by the inflections of context established between works, as each contributes to the framework by which others might be understood.

In the case of 'The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story 1937–1997' a number of things are occurring which are without precedent. We are all — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewers alike — seeing for the first time the pictorial accounts of a creation narrative as it has been related by four generations of Yolngu artists, since almost the time of the first white inhabitation of their land.

The theme of this exhibition is at the same time both narrow in its focus and for the Yolngu, extraordinarily broad in its implications. The core of the exhibition is based upon a concentration on the paintings which depict the full Narrative of the Wagilag Sisters and their encounter with Witiitj the Olive Python, in the *wangarr*, the ancestral past. For many groups and families in Central and Eastern Arnhem Land this provides a unifying set of principles which, in conjunction with each individual's other ancestral inheritance, simultaneously orders and makes sense of everyday life.

The scope of 'ownership' and custodial responsibility for the Narrative is reflected in the historical relationships between the various groups and families. As Albert Djiwada explains it, totems, places and songs are intricately inter-related:

We all have to sing, people from Mirarrmina, all the people, Lilipiyana mob, Durrurrnga mob, Mänyarrngu mob, we all have to sing, Mandhalpuy, Balawuy, one Witiitj, one song, *manikay*. And we are all Liyagalawumirr, but I'm Lilipiyana, Malangi's Mänyarrngu, Yambal's Durrurrnga, Minygululu's Balawuy.

That's why, as Durndiwuy [said], that's Liyagalawumirr country there at Gurka'wuy, but maybe we not all own it, maybe someone else, maybe a Gälpu mob, or maybe other Liyagalawumirr people, but we don't own him, right? We got Liyagalawumirr country, but maybe someone else is using it, that country, or ceremony. But it's Liyagalawumirr country, as Durndiwuy [said]. But we can say that there's a lot of Liyagalawumirr country, owned by Durrurrnga mob, Lilipiyana mob, Mänyarrngu mob, only all based on Witiitj, you know.¹

In this sense, the structure of relations between families and clans and the understanding of a Yolngu history are critically related to the actions and authority of a person's forebears. The historical aspect of any given thing or event is as much a matter for immediate concern and interest as the ideas and responses of the current generation. And this is just as relevant

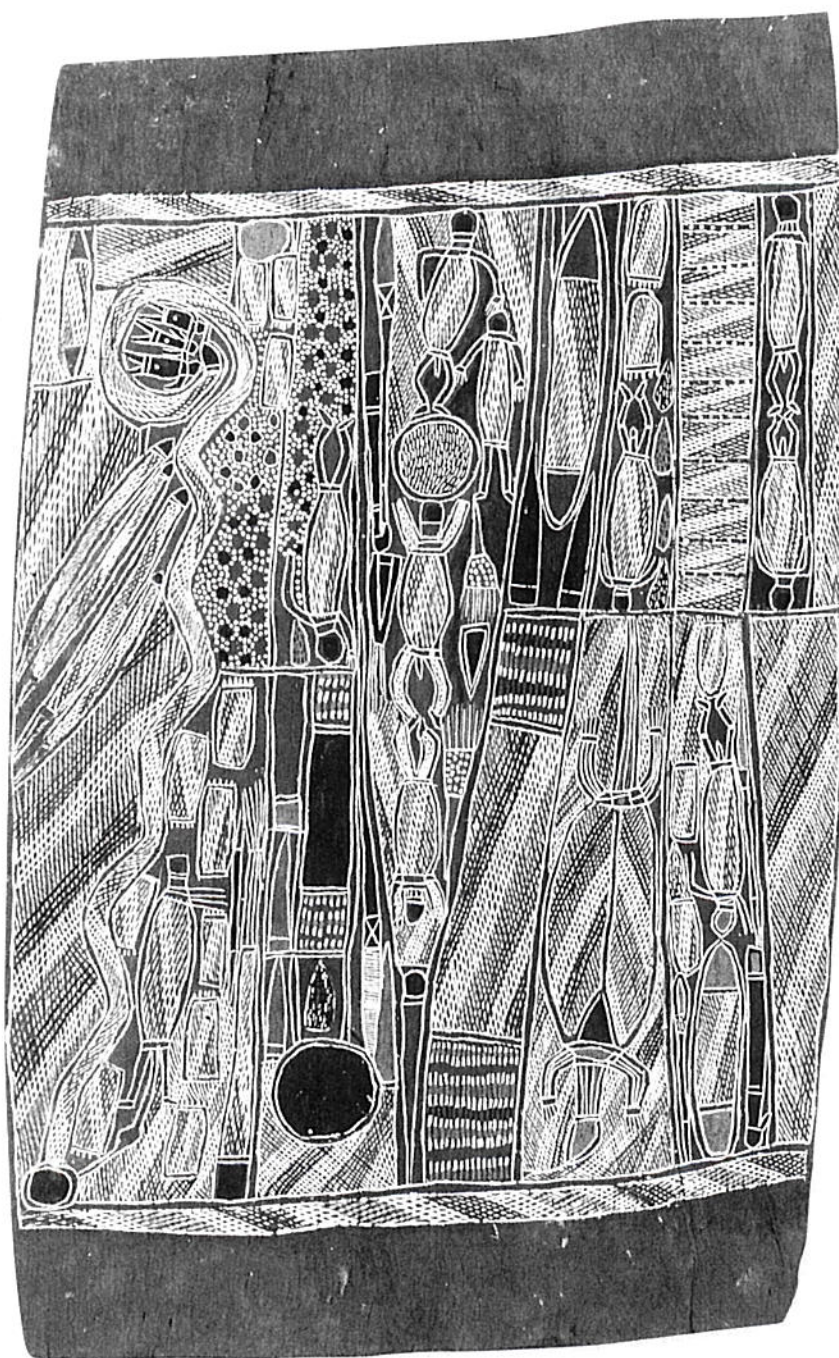


Plate 2. Yilkari Kitani Liyagalawumirr/Lilipiyana Wigiilag Dhaḡwa (Wigiilag Story) 1951

to the way in which painting is 'performed' as it is to any other aspect of ritual and social life. Painting, in this context, is crucially a performance of knowledge, inheritance, and the assertion of authority.

'Rich with history'²

For the Yolngu, the Western convention of seeing — that is, to see a painting from the past as if it effects some historical closure — has little meaning insofar as all art exists simultaneously in the present and in the past. Time and space collapse towards each other within the frame of reference of the painted image.³ The currency of past experience or the affirmation of knowledge and authority, and thereby access to the time and space of the ancestral beings, are all liable to be invoked in any number of circumstances. Thus the presence of a bark painting from the past is no more than a confirmation that things have always been so. In another deeper sense, the evidence of the paintings before us is an affirmation and clarification of the sense in which the actions of the ancestral figures remain with us in the present. This exhibition is also a tangible demonstration of how the reverence accorded to the authority of previous generations (whether from Djiwada to Dhathangu to Dawidi to Yilkari, or Gundimulk and Wolpa to Durndiwuy, or through Dhuwarrwarr and Banduk to Wandjuk to Mawalan), is here seen to be present, tangible, and a value embodied in the works themselves.

The preparation of this exhibition has provided the senior landowners and *djunggayi* (managers or custodians) with an opportunity to trace and reconstruct a different pathway along which a Yolngu sense of history may be experienced. This has happened as a consequence of the way these people have structured their engagement with outsiders — in this case, by painting their story in all its complexity, selling the paintings, and seeing them disappear to the outside world. In the absence of significant durable examples of material culture — by contrast to the rock art galleries of the escarpment country to the west — the Yolngu of the centre and east have few precedents for keeping a visual record of the lives and actions of their forebears. Apart from a reliance on oral history and visual memory, this is a context where most things are ephemeral, largely as a result of the harsh climate and the tradition of a semi-nomadic lifestyle. It was not until the 1930s with the production of bark paintings as commodities or items of trade with the outside world, that a record began, spontaneously, to be kept. Now, through the circumstances which have led to this exhibition and publication, the outside has brought these pictures back.

The changing circumstances of engagement with the world beyond the boundaries of Arnhem Land, the increasing numbers of visitors, the experience of travel, and the development of a market economy has had inevitable consequences for the place of art and the role of the artist. Over the past sixty years this has brought about a process of adjustment and modification to the imagery, but more crucially to the public interpretation of these works and the protection of knowledge. Here the status of a bark painting as a public manifestation of a sacred narrative is not in question.⁴

Outside the restricted setting of senior men with the relevant authority and knowledge, the ways in which a painting may be publicly interpreted now differ from the past. Restrictions are applied through a complex process of translation and accounting for the layered meanings of an image in response to the proliferating audience. These the artists now recognise are a consequence of the curiosity and admiration of the outside world.

This exhibition represents 'generations' ambiguously, for in one sense the sixty-year span of the tradition is but two generations: Albert Djiwada is Yilkari Kitani's son. In art historical terms, however, the show represents at least four generations of painters, with a number of sub-sets working simultaneously. In addition, within Yolngu society such categorisations are complicated by the moiety system. Everything has its place within either the Dhuwa or Yirritja moiety, and everything is linked by kinship to everything else. As they grow up, people learn their own complex relationship and responsibilities to other people and places, and thus to the totemic figures which give them life and order their behaviour in the world. As it applies to the successive senior painters celebrated by this exhibition, the term 'generation' dissolves into a matrix of interrelationships.

A key characteristic of this particular painting tradition is the process of the acquisition of knowledge through the role of the *djunggayi*, who carries managerial or custodial responsibility for a person's land and the related stories and ritual through that person's mother's clan. Thus although the Mirarrmina story is Dhuwa — and is owned by the Liyagalawumirr speaking people — it was the senior Yirritja ceremonial leader Dhawadanygulili who taught Dawidi, as he assumed the senior Dhuwa artistic role in Central Arnhem Land in the 1960s. The interval following the death of a leader often sees a number of senior men of the other moiety producing paintings 'on their mother's side', thereby maintaining the momentum of the tradition and reaffirming its vitality. In art historical terms, it is this cross-moiety influence at the moment of generational transition which appears to give this tradition its extraordinary dynamism. This mechanism also allows contemporary Yolngu to project backwards from the material evidence presented by the work in this exhibition towards its predecessors, as Albert Djiwada explains:

To you, old Yilkari, he painted this first. No, the system doesn't work like that, has to come out from *djunggayi*. I think they painted it first, because when you say to me that Yilkari, he painted the first one, uh uh, he had permission from his *djunggayi*. They learn it from their father, and they had to tell permission to my father, Yilkari ...⁵

Significantly, the person who assumes the role of the ceremonial leader, who may have previously been known more for their prowess as a singer, dancer, or a painter or maker of objects, now also acquires the added responsibility of painting the full account of the primary narratives to which their country refers. This creates the circumstances in which an artist's distinctive style, and the various factors which constitute their individual way of representing a narrative, contribute to each painter's performance of their authority.

In Lloyd Warner's fieldwork experience in the 1920s he recorded that bark paintings were used in the Ngulmark ceremony, and later Ronald and Catherine Berndt made similar references to this ceremonial function;⁶ and there are records from the 1920s of paintings on the inside of bark shelters in the Goyder River region.⁷ However the increasing number of requests from outsiders (starting with Warner, the Reverend Wilbur Chaseling and Donald Thomson in the 1920s and 1930s) has caused the production of paintings on bark as we now know them to become an increasingly important part of the material culture of the Yolngu.⁸ From their first contact with Europeans, who regarded bark paintings as objects of ethnographic interest (Thomson in particular recognised the value of using the paintings as a stimulus to Yolngu elucidation of their cosmology), it was but a short step for the Yolngu to recognise that the demand for these artefacts provided a potential avenue for establishing trading relations with the outside world. Gradually, through the interest of enlightened

mission staff (particularly Chaseling, the Reverend Edgar Wells, the Reverend Gordon Symons, lay missionary Douglas Tuffin and Alan C. Fidock), a significant market for bark paintings was established. From the mid-1950s collectors and dealers were making regular annual visits to Arnhem Land and increasing numbers of paintings began to be sent to southern and international outlets for sale or as the result of commissions. Important collections were formed through successive contacts with anthropologists and missionaries, often acting on behalf of collectors or through consignments to dealers, and later arts advisers, through which the developing characteristics of the works themselves can now be traced.

While none of the paintings collected by Warner in the 1920s can definitively be identified as relating to the Wagilag Sisters Narrative, this exhibition draws on these early holdings to span almost the entire history of the collection of bark paintings from Central and Eastern Arnhem Land. The selection of paintings therefore widens the sense of the evolution of painting on bark as a significant medium, relevant both within Yolngu communities — its growing didactic role — as well as in its recognition by the artists as a form of communication with the outside world. Thus within the historical span of this exhibition we find the beginnings of a new role for painting to address multiple audiences, both Yolngu and Balanda, near and far.

To understand the significance of this medium — the 'bark painting' — it is necessary to recognise its references to other forms of imagery within Yolngu culture. For outsiders, bark painting has emerged as the most visible manifestation of Yolngu imagery and, possibly, in recent decades it has become the most prolific form of painting altogether. Within Yolngu culture however, the practice of painting on bark is grounded on other modes of image-making: on body painting, but also on paintings on hollow logs, on other sculptural or functional objects used in ritual, as well as the *molk*, the designs made on the surface of the ceremony ground. The specific ceremonial and ritual significance of these latter forms provides the source for the public manifestations of the many narrative representations which now make up the rich range of Yolngu visual arts.

In all of these manifestations, the key reference point is the way imagery is articulated in relation to and by the body. In this we find the basis of the crucial conceptual distinction to be made between the representation of the human form as the predominant theme of Western visual conventions, and the Yolngu conception of the body as the actual substrate of painting.⁹ For boys, from the moment of their *dhapi* (circumcision ceremony) — for which the child is elaborately painted — each individual experiences the idea of painting as being intimately connected with the space, the physical reality, of his own identity. Thus the equivalents of Western concepts of space, location, perspective and world-view are all centred on the individual's situation within his or her specific place in a constellation of social and totemic relationships.

'Painted literature'¹⁰

In the paintings in this exhibition one finds not only the explicit elements of the story of the encounter between the Sisters and Witiŋj the Olive Python, but also an allegorical potential for deeper interpretation. At this level, the paintings refer to reciprocal tests of powers — on the one hand, of the women, who (through their irregular behaviour) precipitated the laws relating to marriage and social structures, and invented ceremonies in response to the threats of the *bāpi* (the great Snake) — and on the other, the power of the



Plate 3. Dawidi Tiyagalawumirr/Walkurwalkur (with Dhawadanygulili) Wajiglag Creation Story 1960

bäpi, who, when the equilibrium of its existence was disturbed, summoned the first monsoon (and in the process created the seasons), and established (again by transgression) the proper relationship between the moieties. This allegorical dimension of the Narrative is revealed in other ways through ceremonial enactment of the events of each episode.

The interpretation of pictorial space provides a common access point for an understanding of the place of paintings within a Yolngu cosmology. One might start with the question of the orientation of a bark painting: how should we look at it? Bark paintings and body paintings share a common process in that both are painted on a horizontal plane, and then viewed on the vertical (as when a person stands up), even though many of the elements may also refer to the topographical figures of ground designs or a planar perspective of objects seen from above.

In the remainder of this essay I want to focus on what is at stake when the dynamic characteristics of this painting tradition are considered. While the artists and the Yolngu interpreters are always at pains to establish the ground rules for such a discussion — to establish continuity and stability, the characteristics of what we call a 'tradition' — at the same time the evidence of the eye confirms the existence of dynamic factors within their mode of representation.¹¹ They provide a multitude of formal possibilities within the determining sense of order and stability that Yolngu ideology demands. Thus while paintings from the past may demonstrate formal differences, for the Yolngu they demonstrate with equal force that things are as they have always been: the authority of their forebears is confirmed by the painting as a record of the performance of that authority. The Yolngu concept of tradition admits the actuality of individual variation and innovation as a proof of its continuing vitality and authenticity, passed from leader to leader through the successive generations.

Six key works by the artists who have successively held the primary responsibility for representing the Mirarrmina story — artists of the Liyagalawumirr language group and their *djunggayi* — will serve here to indicate how the potentiality of individual modes of representation of the Narrative evolves, and the characteristics of each generation's particular 'style'.

From the first known example of the narrative form of the imagery by Yilkari (plate 8), collected by Donald Thomson in 1937, one finds a number of elements which are common to all subsequent paintings on the same theme. While other images may refer to the Narrative in part or indirectly, those which can be described as the 'core' narratives always show the great Snake, Witiŋ, emerging from Mirarrmina, and encircling the Sisters and their children. Other elements refer to the sequence of the other events encompassed by the full account of the story.

Footprints tracking around the image of Witiŋ represent the dances performed by the Sisters in their attempts to repel the great Snake's advances. The triangular ceremonial ground represents the imprint of the great Snake when he fell from the sky. This element, which shows internal circular forms representing the Snake's heart and cloaca, is repeated as a ground sculpture in funeral ceremonies, in which case the circular forms acquire different functions and meanings. The lines of *dhapalany*, the itchy caterpillars, are ubiquitous in this and other images and objects, and their relationship to each element provides different keys to their specific part in this particular narrative.

In the paintings of the 1950s and 1960s different aspects of the Narrative are shown in distinctive ways by each artist: separate episodes are depicted within the image, and the sequential aspects of the key elements (for example, the multiple representations of the Sisters and the great Snake, as well as the latter's alternate embodiment in male and female guise) emphasise the narrative function of the painting in more literal ways.

Following the death of Yilkari in 1956, Dawidi assumed the rights to paint the full Narrative. Dawidi's versions of the Narrative of the early 1960s involve a greater precision and the simplification of forms, along with an increased density and the complication of the pictorial space. In addition, one sees a more literal depiction of the sequence of events and inclusion of other elements of the Narrative, for instance the inclusion of *wurrdjarra*, the Sand Palm which is associated with Mirarrmina. These pictures also include the new forms of the rain cloud, occasionally a second ceremonial ground, the stars and moon, the Sisters' dog, multiple representations of Wititj and the Sisters, and other innovations. As well, other elements in the 1937 image (the spearthrower, spears, other triangular forms representing stone spear heads, and clan patterns representing country) re-appear in these and later images by Dawidi, Dhathangu, and others.

The differences between the paintings of this tradition reveal how the process of change occurs. The complex narrative images also exist in relation to other imagery which focuses on individual symbolic/totemic elements or combinations of elements of the Narrative. These, due to the multivalent nature of the meaning of each element in different conjunctions, connote different nuances of meaning. The understanding of these meanings is, of course, dependent on the ritual knowledge of the narrator or viewer, and the audience to whom these are addressed. In isolation they may assume a different order of representation.

'Same, but different...'¹²

In the Narrative paintings by Yilkari, who represents the first generation of painters encountered by European visitors to Arnhem Land, the elements are compacted into a distinctive pictographic field, constructed with a cellular division of space (plates 2 and 8). The mosaic of elements and emblems packed into the overall pictorial schema is much like a cross-section of a living organism.

A pictorial structure such as this addresses the viewer through multiple viewpoints, and establishes the precedent for the later representations which combine both a planar viewpoint (or rather a number of planar viewpoints at different scales) with pictorial and other visual conventions. The painting by Yilkari however derives its aerial perspective through its references to *molk*, or ground designs (the way these forms are depicted in ceremonial sand sculptures) and to body painting and objects used in ceremony, and creates a virtual inventory of forms and emblems which are related to the performance of the story.

Throughout the 1960s Dawidi, although a relatively young ceremonial leader of the Liyagalawumirr, produced an extraordinarily comprehensive body of work involving distinctive modes of depicting the complex narrative. These can be traced to the influence of his ceremonial mentor and *djunggayi* for the Mirarrmina story, Dhawadanygulili, in the years following Yilkari's death. In these paintings Dawidi employed an ambiguous spatial organisation, combining planar and atmospheric representations in a field aligned towards the viewer through the semicircular form of the waterhole. With a range of subtle

devices, Dawidi establishes a foreground and background and a clear sense of up and down within the picture, thus creating an internal structure which orders the viewer's access to the details of the story. The effect is a sense of progressive movement between the two conventions: both drawing in the viewer, almost within reach of the forms and figures represented, as well as emphasising the authoritative location of the painter/narrator. Through this compelling curvature of the space of the painting, (planar in the foreground, vertical in the background), the viewer is therefore drawn closer to the ancestral figures to which the Narrative refers.

The most complex and challenging invention in such paintings is the sense of space which incorporates the viewer. In Dawidi's painting it is the semicircular space of the waterhole at the bottom of the image — the site from which the Narrative radiates.¹³ The incomplete circular form imaginatively crosses the lower edge of the painting and thereby positions the artist (and the viewer) *within* the ambiguous space to which that form refers — with all the implications that position suggests to the knowledgeable viewer. Dawidi's adoption of this device can be traced stylistically to the influence of the ceremonial leader Dhawadanygulili.¹⁴ In their joint painting of 1960, *Wagilag Creation Story*, can be found the first known example of this distinctive new way of depicting the story from which Dawidi developed his particular style (plate 3 and fig. 9).

For the Liyagalawumirr artist, this particular symbolic space is the equivalent to the centre of the universe, from which perspective maximum authority may be exercised. Therefore, the optimum vantage point to enter the scene of the Narrative is to straddle the frame at the point of access to the space of ancestral time — the waterhole. These paintings seek to do more than simply depict an event. For different reasons, the artist invents pictorial devices which draw the viewer into the scene and into the different realities it represents.

Fig. 9
'Artists' workshop' in Milingimbi, southern camp, 1960. Dawidi, second from left, and Dhawadanygulili are shown painting *Wagilag Creation Story* (plate 3)
Photo: Karel Kupka



This sense of enveloping space suggested by such devices within Dawidi's paintings is also consistent with the way in which the Yolngu subject experiences other forms of painting. In body painting, from the time of a subject's *dhapi*, for example, the body is literally

the substrate of the painting of the complex clan designs. Thus in bark painting, by an extraordinary conceptual transposition, the knowledgeable subject may both enter the space of the painting from the outside or, drawing on restricted knowledge and experience of body painting, the subject may experience it from within.

Some years after Dawidi's death in 1970, the rights to paint the Narrative in his manner were inherited by his daughter Daisy Manybunharrawuy and her husband Joe Djembangu who, being Yirritja, assumes the rights from his mother's side.

The first accounts of women painters possessing the authority to paint such stories

dates from the late 1950s: the three daughters of the Rirratjingu clan elder Mawalan (Banygul, Dhuwarrwarr and Banduk Marika) are recorded as learning through assisting their father. As Dawidi's first-born child, Manybunharrawuy acquired the rights to paint the Narrative of the Wagilag Sisters in her father's style through a similar process.

In her paintings, often produced in collaboration with her husband Djembangu, we see a clarification and elaboration of Dawidi's style. Djembangu is also the senior *djunggayi* and thus has the right to paint the story independently. A comparison of their two paintings (plates 4 and 5) reveals the literal intention of the planar viewpoint of the central section of the painting: within their hut, lying down asleep (about to be eaten) the orientation of the figures of the Sisters and their children can be either up or down — they are, after all, lying on the ground. In the paintings of the full Narrative by Manybunharrawuy one finds the continuity of her father's 'classical' representation of the Narrative modified by the characteristics of her individual style.

In contrast, the other significant Liyagalawumirr artist who began to paint the story of the Wagilag Sisters in the 1960s, Paddy Dhathangu, depicted the Narrative through constant variations on the theme. With his *märi* Dawidi,¹⁵ Dhathangu shared the Dhuwa ritual and ceremonial authority throughout the sixties, and with this authority came also the rights to paint the full Narrative, although the specific source of his style is not so clear. Examples from the late sixties show the development of a different mode of representation from that of Dawidi, in which Dhathangu's approach to the depiction of figures and forms in space is through an emphasis on their bodily presence.

Characteristically, he turns the bark rectangle sideways and arranges the participants in the story, the elements of the landscape and the ceremonial emblems, to fit within the boundary of the new format (plate 6). This mode of depiction creates a distinctive vantage point which gives emphasis to the corporeal and enveloping form of the coiled Witiŋ. While his depiction of the Snake is often more energetic than his predecessors, certain motifs (for instance, the palm tree and the dilly bags full of bush tucker) are painted with a characteristic rhythmic structural patterning that distinguishes Dhathangu's work.

The 'embodied' space of these paintings, their corporeal quality, arises partly from the artist's pragmatic necessity to arrange the bodies of the figures and animals and other forms within the available space. On one level the space of these paintings is articulated as a function of the need to adjust the bodies and objects within the boundary of the bark: as a consequence this presents the images and forms close up, on the same scale as painted on the human body.¹⁶

Following Dhathangu's death in 1993, Albert Djiwada assumed the ritual authority for the Mirarrmina story as the senior songman for the Liyagalawumirr and the oldest living son of Yilkari. He resumed painting in 1994, reviving his early 1980s style of representing the story. In Djiwada's style we find a multiplicity of icons presented in profile, dispersed across a distinctive regular pictorial background of *rärrk* (cross-hatching). In these works the forms of the minor elements do not align necessarily with the major forms of the Snake and the figures, nor with a sense of foreground and background, but are shown floating against the *rärrk* and across the painting's boundaries. The poly-iconic structure of his paintings allows an inclusive and flexible approach to representations of the details of the story and makes references to other visual forms derived from the ground designs of related



Fig. 10
Dawidi explaining the Wagilag Story to
Malcolm Douglas, Milngimbi, 1967
Photo: David Oldmeadow

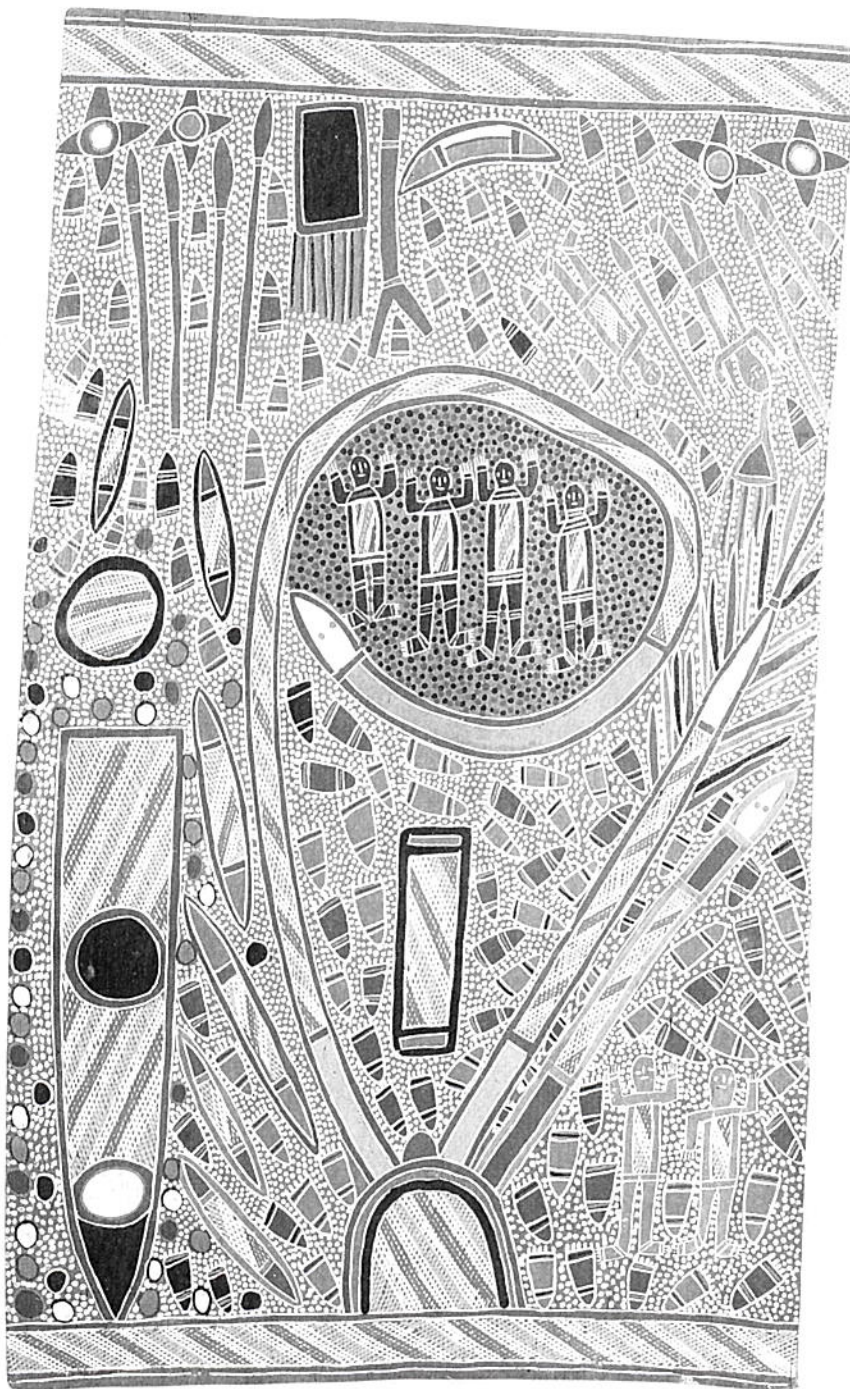


Plate 4. Joe Djembangu Gupapuyngu *Wagilag Creation Story* c.1980

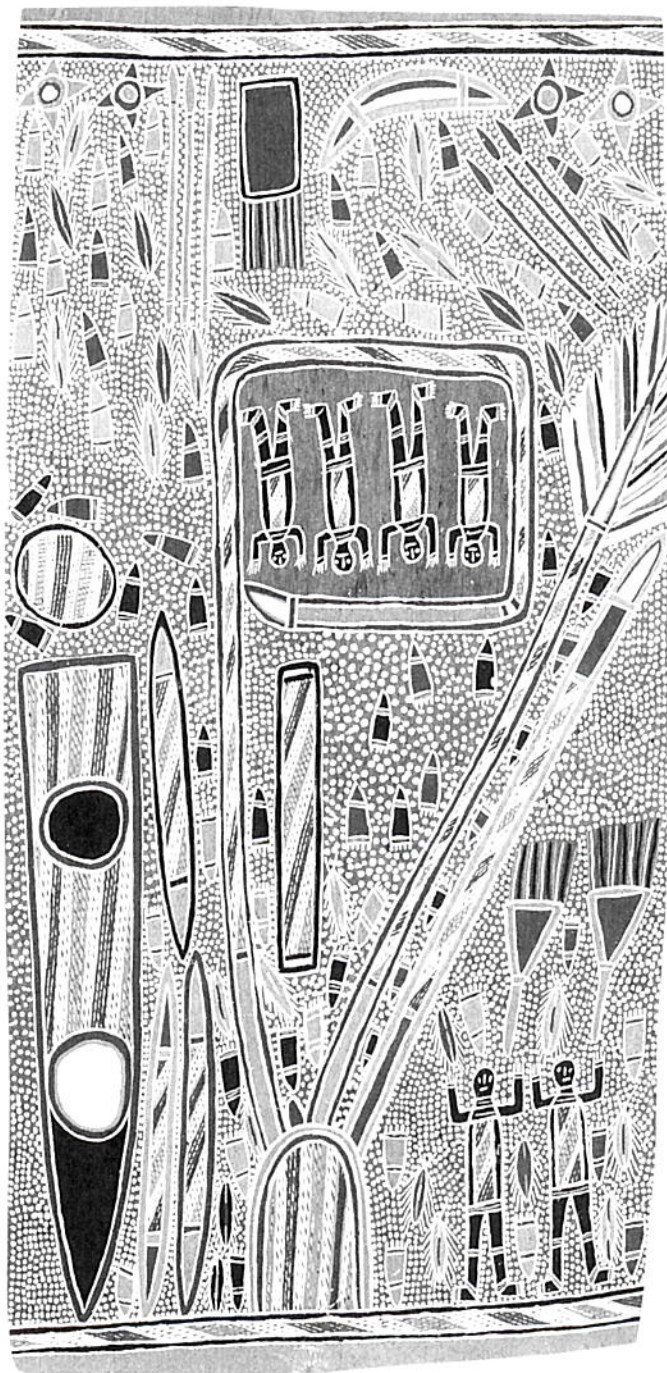


Plate 5. Daisy Manybunharrawuy Liyagalawumirr / Walkurwalkur *Wagilag Creation Story* 1990

ceremonies. Thus we find the inclusion of the constructed *wānga* (bark hut) and *dindin* (paperbark water carrier) (plate 7), elements not previously seen in the paintings which precede Djiwada's own representations of the Narrative.

Through examples like these we recognise an historical process in the development of the Narrative paintings, building up to a complex spatial repertoire both through the capacity for invention, which is evident in the way the tradition has evolved, as well as the influences of external pictorial conventions. One example is the formal complexity of the multiple viewpoints in such paintings. This apparent paradox is entirely consistent with the sense in which a multiplicity of ways of reading or explaining natural and social phenomena is fundamental to the Yolngu system of knowledge. This system is inherently multivalent and variable, dependent on who is interpreting what, and for whom, and the degree to which 'meaning' may or may not be enunciated. The polysemic nature of these paintings thus enables the protection of meanings without necessarily restricting either their exposure to the gaze of outsiders or their content to the communication of 'outside' meanings.

Some forms of pictorial innovation, which may be said to animate the Narrative in a quite individualistic manner, pose a different set of questions. This draws attention to the potential for such visual innovations to have primarily an aesthetic intention; to intensify the reading of the more conventional symbolism; or to articulate the artist's authority in the expanded frame of reference of the new social arenas now addressed by the work.¹⁷

The development of new conventions of pictorial space (for example in the ambiguous curvature of space as seen in Dawidi's paintings, or the floating effects of those by Djiwada) provides a clue to the new communicative functions of painting within the historical span of this exhibition. This occurs both internally, in relation to the changing role of bark paintings as a didactic medium, and externally, in response to the interrogation of visiting Balanda, and their explicit search for 'epic' stories (from the time of Karel Kupka, Stuart Scougall and Tony Tuckson). It is also possible to interpret these new spatial conventions as both a way of structuring the relationship of the viewer (and by implication, the artist) to the subject matter, and of enhancing that experience through innovative activation of the forms of the image.

Such instances of formal change may also be interpreted as a manifestation of the enhanced social status acquired through the developing role of the painter within Yolngu society.¹⁸ The development of a recognisable personal style occurs, not only through the demonstration of a particular array of forms and symbols each painter may own, but also through the development of a signature style in terms of technique and articulation of the material qualities of a painting to depict forms and space.

The formal language of this art reveals how certain conventions have been established through which the tradition has been passed from generation to generation. An iconographic approach to the modes of figuration and abstraction, in which are combined the various representations of the different episodes of the stories, suggests how these more complex narrative pictorial accounts establish unique ways of representing the world and the artist's relationship to it.



Plate 6. Paddy Dhathangu. Liyagalawumiri/Malimali. *Wagilag Dhatuwa (Wagilag Story)*. c.1980

'Plenty of stories under the ground'¹⁹

Other paintings in this exhibition describe specific episodes in the Narrative. They appear to have an added significance beyond amplifying a particular aspect of the Narrative, in that they also have the capacity to provide linkages to other ceremonies and stories. In such paintings the Narrative is implicit rather than explicit. The explanatory power of such imagery increases with the potential of each element to carry multiple meanings or a higher order of knowledge and a greater degree of abstraction.

Such combinations of totemic forms represent both a different order of abstraction and an elaboration of the forms, objects and events referred to in the more literal Narrative paintings. In an important sense it is the artist's understanding that such further dimensions of the content of the Narrative are already contained within the more literal depictions, awaiting the right circumstances or an appropriate level of ceremonial knowledge to be triggered.

As if to illustrate Marshall Sahlins' paradoxical dictum that 'tradition is the distinctive way that change proceeds',²⁰ the thrust of this essay has been to explore the dynamic character of a particular painting tradition. For the Yolngu, however, the prime characteristic of what I have referred to as 'tradition' is the capacity of narratives such as the Mirarrmina story to invoke the constancy of the ancestral past, albeit through a dynamic and variable mode of representation, while at the same time affirming the authority of forebears and their ancestral antecedents.

Within the paintings in this exhibition, one particular icon consistently grounds the Narrative in the events that occurred at Mirarrmina in the ancestral time of the *wangarr*. The representation of the waterhole, the locus of the greatest concentration of spiritual power, offers a constant reminder of the way these paintings are expected to engage the viewer. While in earlier images the waterhole was conventionally shown as a black circular form, in the paintings of Dawidi, Manybunharrawuy and Djembangu it is a semicircle bridging the foreground edge of the painting. In Djiwada's paintings this particular form of the waterhole, the great Snake's *wānga*, or home, is ambiguously also the representation of the *gurndirr*, the termite mound, as well as the entrance to the bark shelter, the *wānga* which was first built by the Sisters to shelter from the rainstorm. In other representations, for instance Gimindjo's *Wititj and Bardipardi (Rock Wallaby) at Marwuyyu* (plate 66), the significance of the waterhole is intensified by showing it and its surroundings as a vortex, stressing its symbolism as the site of ancestral power, and a point of access to the world beneath the ground.

Throughout this exhibition, the multiplicity of associations invoked by the black circle is a constant reminder of the immense significance of Mirarrmina as the site of ancestral power for those associated with the Narrative of the Wagilag Sisters. As a form, the black circle has also an extraordinary metaphorical potential, for the surface of a waterhole is both a mirror, reflecting back the gaze of the outsider, and an interface, a symbolic point of access to the space of the *wangarr*, under the ground.

The surface of a painting may also be thought to represent an interface — a boundary between inside and outside meanings, or between the secular and sacred realms of human activity. In addition, the material qualities of the painted representation of the black circle

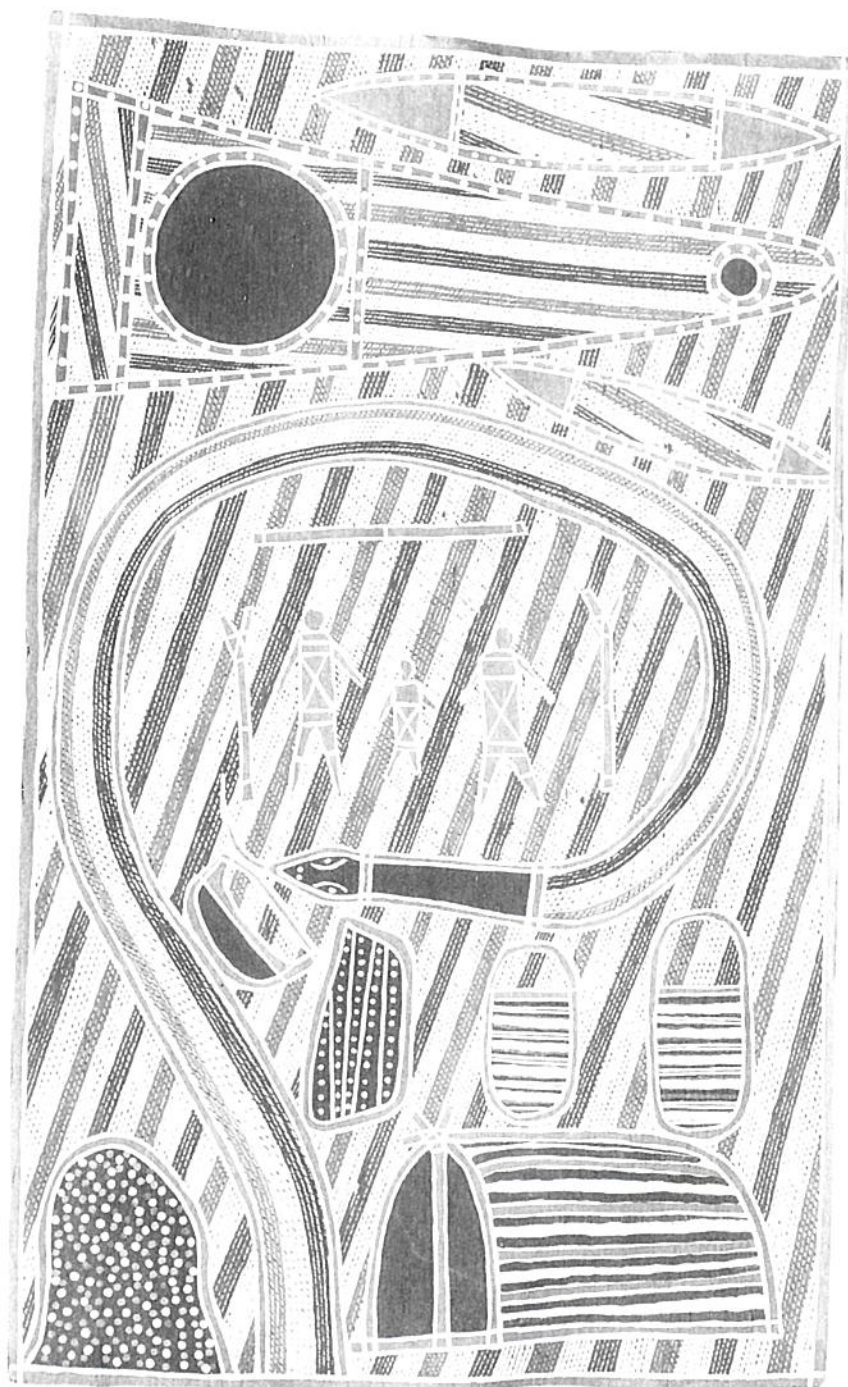


Plate 7. Albert Djiwada. Liyagalawumirr/Walkurwalkur. *Wigilag Dhanu* (Wigilag Story) 1995

have the potential to bring us close to its most striking analogy — the skin of the painted body, glistening, shining, anointed with pigment, the figurative ground itself.

The micro-structure of paintings such as these is also loaded with meaning: the pigment has specific associations with the land and specific identities, qualities, and significance — both separately and together with other elements and qualities. Thus the material itself has a heritage of meanings, dependent on the particular constellation of references released in the performance of the artist's unique capacity to produce a particular image. Matter is transformed by the touch of the artist, which is reciprocated in the actions of the viewer.

With bark paintings, interpretations of the potential significance of different conventions of form and space need always to be grounded on the compelling material qualities of the medium itself, which leads to a distinctly different mode of perception. The importance of non-pictorial ways of seeing may be reinforced through the association between the material, the bark, which is peeled from the trunk of the tree, and the form of the painted hollow-log coffin, with all the spiritual associations this engenders. Such an appreciation of the material qualities of the form of a bark painting, along with the performative and bodily associations with other forms of Yolngu visual imagery, is a necessary balance to the tendency of Balanda to limit visual analysis to comparisons with outside conventions of perspective-based pictorialism.

Within the culture of the Yolngu the role of painting is established through a reiteration of origins, of place, of ownership, authority, and identity through the rendition of a particular narrative. Painting therefore fulfils a function in the description of belief systems, as a way of interpreting the natural and social worlds. Inasmuch as these are inseparable concepts for the Yolngu, painting also serves to activate sacred and secular accounts of nature and culture. In the recognition by the Yolngu of the painter's 'ownership' of a repertoire of images, and the identification of individual signature styles, painting also serves to confirm the structures of social life, and as a consequence the social status of the painter, far beyond the mere capacity to produce artefacts for a market.

- 1 Author's interview with Albert Djiwada, David Malangi and Joe Djembangu, 12 November 1994.
- 2 'Galpu are like rich people ... Rich, with history', Djalal Gurruwiwi and Manany, from the video 'Galpu people sing Witiij manikay for Liyagalawumirr people', April 1997.
- 3 See Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1991, p. 134. Here Bardon's comments on the multivalent character of Western Desert art are relevant: 'In the Western Desert paintings, the images do not provide a mere graphic equivalent of spoken words, thereby attaching themselves to the temporality implicit in the ordinary syntax of a sentence. Quite to the contrary, and importantly: time has become space.'
- 4 From all the many bark paintings considered by the Yolngu owners and their consultants for this exhibition, only one was withheld from public view. As Yambal Durrurrnga once commented when a curator asked whether a particular painting should be restricted: 'No, this was painted for people to look at'. [Dick] Yambal Durrurrnga, personal communication, 1994.
- 5 Albert Djiwada, 1996.
- 6 See Ronald M. Berndt & Catherine H. Berndt, *Arnhem Land: Its history and its people* (1954); and R. Berndt et al., *Australian Aboriginal Art* (1964).
- 7 Captain Sir (George) Hubert Wilkins, *Undiscovered Australia* (1929).
- 8 In its present form, bark painting appears to be a relatively recent development within Yolngu culture. The production in large numbers of small portable paintings on bark for a commodity market has effectively resulted in a new secular 'medium' of communication with the outside world. In the creation of this painting tradition, the distinctive form of this medium, a pictorial field created in ochres, natural pigments and binders on the smooth inner surface of a rectangular piece of the stringybark tree (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*), refers to the many prior modes of painting which predate this development, including paintings on the inside of bark huts, bark paintings used in ceremony and body painting.

- 9 See author's essay 'The Meaning of Innovation: David Malangi and the Bark Painting Tradition of Central Arnhem Land', in J. Kerr, D. Losche & N. Thomas (eds), *Reframing Aboriginal Art* (forthcoming).
- 10 Karel Kupka coined this term to describe these paintings in *Dawn of Art* (1965), p. 109.
- 11 For an account of the stability of Aboriginal notions of tradition, at odds with some of the suggestions of this essay, see P. Sutton (ed), in *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia* (1988), pp. 46–49.
- 12 'Same, but different' is the most common Yolngu translation of variation within a stable cosmology. See Luke Taylor (1987), 'The Same but Different': Social Reproduction and Innovation in the Art of the Kunwinjku of Western Arnhem Land, Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University.
- 13 See my later discussion of the way in which the contemporary painter Albert Djiwada refers to the semicircular form ambiguously as both the waterhole, the entrance to the bark hut (*uwanga*), and as the termite mound *gurnidirr*, which are all alternative references to the underground 'home' of the Witiitj.
- 14 The transition from Dawidi painting in the 'style' of Yilkari to the 'style' of Dhawadanygulili can be traced to the painting episode photographed by Kupka in 1960. See Kupka (1965), p. 38b.
- 15 In this context, *māri* is the subject's classificatory grandfather. In different circumstances one's *māri* can be either paternal grandfather or his sister, or maternal grandmother or her brother, all of which are the same moiety as the subject.
- 16 In his own words, it's a big story, and there's not enough room to fit everything in: 'There's no room for the house for these two women. There's nothing wrong with the painting, but there's no room to put the house in,' Dhathangu, 1992.
- 17 The precedent for this approach to the study of form is Howard Morphy's account of the function of *bir'yun* (brilliance) in the painting tradition of the Yirrkala region. See Morphy, 'From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu,' in *Man*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1989, p. 189.
- 18 See author's essay in J. Kerr, D. Losche & N. Thomas (eds), *Reframing Aboriginal Art* (forthcoming).
- 19 Robert Gural Lilipiyana (Yilkari-3), personal communication, 1995.
- 20 From his paper at the Australian National University/National Library of Australia conference, 'Reimagining the Pacific', 1996.

The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story 1937-1997

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Nigel Lendon
Editors

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(cover) Paddy Dhathangu Liyagalawumirr/Malimali Witiij (*Olive Python*) 1983 from the series *The Wagilag Sisters Story*