

Artist Spotlight: Barry Ngiyari Nuggett

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Barry Nuggett 2016

Mangkaja art centre in Fitzroy Crossing this year welcomed another experienced artist to their midst; Walmajarri man Barry Nuggett. Since the arrival of studio coordinator and artist Wes Maselli in 2014, the men of Mangkaja have strengthened and extended their practice to an exciting degree, and several newcomers have swelled the ranks of those working daily in the hot hive of activity that is the art centre back verandah.

Barry grew up on Gogo Station just south of Fitzroy Crossing. At fourteen he moved to Fitzroy Crossing and then to Perth for one year for high school. His own art practice has been life-long, but didn't arise in a vacuum. Similar to many Mangkaja artists, he has close family ties with senior artists and cultural leaders who were instrumental not only in establishing the success of this particular art centre, but maintaining the cultural strength of the various groups who came to live in Fitzroy Crossing in diaspora from desert country and elsewhere. His mother is senior artist Amy Nuggett. She is one of a core group of older women who have painted with Mangkaja art centre for many years – as did her mother Walka Molly Rogers, uncle Pijaju Peter Skipper and Kurntika Jimmy Pike, all of whom were born to a traditional life in the Great Sandy Desert before moving to station country in the mid-1950s.

Barry now lives at Bayulu, a community of around three hundred people just fifteen kilometres from Fitzroy Crossing. He has been engaged in art-making since his school days. As a child he loved comics, particularly those featuring superheroes and cowboys and Indians, and says he learnt how to sketch the human figure by studying these closely. During high school he discovered the central Australian painters of the Hermannsburg School and was greatly inspired by their work, particularly their use of colour. He too began exploring watercolour and landscapes around this time.

As an adult Barry worked as a stockman on central and east Kimberley cattle stations. The demands of this working life didn't entirely eliminate opportunities for creative visual expression. He describes covering his canvas swag in drawings using pen, pencil, texta or whatever was available. Mostly these were depictions of

country, horses and cattle. He says a lot of the stockmen used to do this - they would also draw on their hats, station water tanks, 'anything and everything!'

Most days Barry does his artwork at home. He says he gets up at around 5am to paint - naturalistic landscapes and sometimes acrylics in the now familiar colourful desert idiom of his Walmajarri forebears. He says he paints *jilji* (sand hill) and *jila* (waterhole) country only, ('not the hills of other people's country'), sometimes including the *dinjil* tree. This iconic white-trunked species grows in sand hill country and is good for firewood, medicine and many other purposes.



B. Nuggett, Untitled, 2016

He likes experimenting with different materials and techniques – *Puluwala* (above), representing a recent shift in style, had salt added to it for texture for example, and he has taught himself lino-printing. After watching televised Anh Do's portraiture series, he also completed a self-portrait. He enjoys exposure to other artists' work, but given the lack of ready access to this from the centre of the Kimberley he relies on art and photography magazines when seeking inspiration beyond his immediate environment and own cultural milieu.

Afternoons are set aside for working with wood, carving boab nuts and making objects such as boomerangs in the 'proper' (traditional) way. In his youth he would watch his father Janjiny paint boomerangs, shields and other tools and ceremonial pieces, and when making these objects himself now he draws partly on skills he acquired through observing the older men.



B. Nuggett, River, 2016, 60 x 60cm, etching on metal. Photo courtesy Mangkaja Art Centre.

Barry started going to Mangkaja this year for the first time. He says he really enjoys sitting and working with the other men out the back of the studio/gallery space. As he says, he's 'family for everybody there', or at least those from the desert side¹. An engaging conversationalist, he's also happy to talk to visitors to the art centre. He says he's accustomed to lots of people around at home and can stay focused on his work easily.

Whilst he has started experimenting with abstract acrylic paintings most of the small body of work Barry has produced thus far at the art centre is comprised, not surprisingly, of incised painted metal panels. This is a technique developed recently by the men at the art centre as a deliberate strategy to extend their traditional carving skills into a more contemporary medium. He immediately produced figurative work clearly evidencing his skills in this area; finely etched depictions of *parlka* (barramundi), other freshwater fish, boab nuts and plants, distillations of the visual character of each form.

Barry's love of the natural environment is evident not only in his artwork but also his conversation. His eyes light up as he tells of catching barramundi and the fight they put up when caught – but also of the pleasure in giving the fish away to others during Sorry Time, the mourning period when desert people follow the traditional restrictions on meat-eating and must eat fish instead.



B. Nuggett, *Parlka*, 2016, 80 x 40cm etching on metal. Photo courtesy Mangkaja Art Centre.

Art-making in remote communities is not by any means linked solely to economic activity. There are recognised social, health and educational benefits which often result from artists' own initiatives. Similar to many others Barry has found ways his artwork can be used for community benefit. He recently illustrated a Healthy Eating cookbook and has worked with Bayulu children on art projects such as mural painting for NAIDOC week. He also volunteers with the Ngurrara Rangers ('for Walmajarri side'). Aside from getting out on country this also enable him to get photos of the landscape, plants and animals as reference for his artwork.

Unusually, Barry maintains a collection of his work at home, both folders of paintings and carved pieces, which he takes with him when he gives talks at schools. He sells his work through the art centre now though; as he says, 'I got older and wiser and decided I'd rather sell it for the right price and with the right respect'.

Written in conversation with Barry Nuggett at Mangkaja Art Centre.

ⁱ Mangkaja art centre membership is principally members from the four major language which now comprise the township of Fitzroy Crossing: the people of the river country – Gooniyandi and Bunuba, and the sand hill people of the great Sandy Desert – Walmajarri and Wangkajungka.