

Artist Spotlight: Janet Dreamer

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Janet Dreamer painting at the Yarliyil Studio © AGWA 2015

'My country stays in my dreams, I dream about my home and I don't forget about my country.'

On our previous visit to Yarliyil Art Centre in Halls Creek we'd noticed two acrylic works in a style so distinctive we knew we had to meet the artist; luckily for us she was painting at the art centre studio this trip.

Janet Dreamer was born at Old Flora Station in 1959 in the heart of Jaru country to the east of Halls Creek. She and her four brothers and younger sister grew up on the station and as children they loved going hunting and fishing with the old people. Despite having to fit in with the routine of a pastoral property they were still able to acquire a deep understanding of their country and the mores of traditional life. Janet learnt station work alongside her mother and grandmother, traveling to stock camps and working in homestead kitchens. Her eyes light up when she recalls going away for ceremony during 'holiday time', the summer wet season when pastoral work stops. In adulthood Janet lived and worked on other nearby stations including Billiluna and Kirkimbie, where she married her Jaru husband and two of her children were born. When Aboriginal involvement in the Kimberley pastoral industry was brought to a rapid and traumatic end, partly as a result of the legislated introduction of equal pay for Indigenous workers, Janet and her family were included in the mass enforced exodus off country to east Kimberley towns – in their case to Kununurra.

Janet first picked up a brush when she was around 16 years old, after watching her father paint. Later on she painted in Kununurra, using the ochre pigments generally used by artists there. She says her ochre work was in a different style which she also likes. As a result of an accident she is less mobile than she once was, and started painting again in Halls Creek for something to do. She credits getting her ideas from the time she was in the bush, and thinks about that time while she's painting. She says her subject matter includes stories, country and aspects of culture she learnt from her old people. Janet's biography follows a life trajectory common to many east Kimberley artists, but her work is diverging quite markedly from the now familiar east Kimberley contemporary art styles developed over the last three decades.



Janet Dreamer, *Freshwater Crocodile* 2015 Courtesy of Yarliyil Art Centre

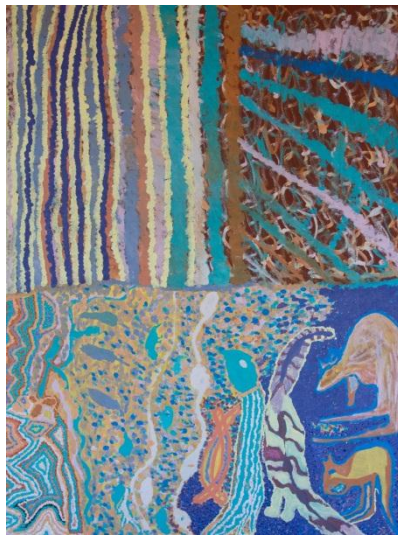
We watched as Janet took a painting from blank canvas to finished work over the course of a day. Her acrylics are wildly exuberant, in pattern, brush-stroke and use of colour. At an art centre which already shows considerable stylistic divergence amongst its painters, Janet stands alone. No neat borders framing her subjects, no adherence to classical motifs or restricted palette; her paintings progress according to a highly individual internalised logic and the results are unsettling and mesmerising in equal measure.



Janet Dreamer, *The Mother and Child Story* 2015 Courtesy of Yarliyil Art Centre

This day as she worked, Janet was thinking about Donkey Crossing, a place on old Flora Valley Station with which she is deeply familiar. She explained that you can see a lot of kangaroos here, as well as kurukuru (maggies) and kutkali (brolga). They are depicted on her canvas, along with the numerous other bush foods which make this place special – kulibi (bush banana), bush apple, bubugara (witchetty grub), junda (bush onion), yawu (fish, bony bream), and jibulutj (wild duck). Initially they are illustrated as an underpainting, at which point they are easy to see in their joyful asymmetry, if not identify. Slowly Janet overlays patterns, dots and slashes to bring them to life. 'Making them come out, stand out', as she describes this process, is an aesthetic impulse common to many remote artists who utilise a variety of techniques to achieve it, of which dotting is but one. In certain contexts this intention to make things 'brilliant' also has a spiritual significance or purpose, contributing the power of its immanence to painted objects and bodies.

As she completed the painting Janet started to talk about how the people who died at Donkey Crossing call out for the birds. She agrees that her paintings are an amalgam of Dreaming stories and personal experience. It is difficult for a viewer to see the difference without a clear explanation from Janet, who might not want, or be authorised, to give one. What might at first glance look like a complex depiction of flora and fauna might symbolically represent a Dreaming story, or be an oblique way to tell of less palatable historical events. Similarly another artist at the table, Maggie Long, was working on a more restrained piece. Over the course of an afternoon she shifted from pointing out the trees and rocks and watercourses she had painted, to finally describing an early contact-era massacre which had taken place there.



Janet Dreamer, *Bilgin Bilgin* 2016 Courtesy of Yarliyil Art Centre

Janet and other Yarliyil artists had recently participated in a workshop on history paintings. Perhaps this had impacted on participants in unexpected ways, and they were recalling historical events for places they commonly painted. Or perhaps this layering of meaning has always been present, just not generally articulated. Women's artwork in the Halls Creek area has often focused on figurative depictions of plants and animals, but it can't always be dismissed as simply 'bush tucker' painting. The more complex of these paintings are likely to be grounded in a gender-specific cultural authority and symbolism enabling a layered reading of their significance. It is entirely plausible that post-contact historical events have at times also been 'pictured' in these works.