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**Dear Friends,**

Here is the latest Kimberley art news from Broome - Enjoy!

Philippa & Geraldine



*Image credit: (L to R) Butcher Joe Nangan. Wilarmintj - Blue Mountain Parrot, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Butcher Joe Nangan in Mayarta headdress. Photo © Roger Garwood. Butcher Joe Nangan. Mayata - the Pelican, c1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra*

## **Butcher Joe Nangan: an introduction. By Philippa Jahn and Brigid Drummond**

*The conditions for an Aboriginal aesthetic are the conditions for living with the possibility for expansion and transformation, always moving slightly beyond recognition, allowing critics and traders the glimpse of a secret which is both profound and as candidly open as the country in which we walk.* [\[i\]](#)



*Early photograph of Nangan (right) wearing Mayarta headdress* [\[ii\]](#)

Much like his ethereal depictions of Dreaming narratives, Nyikina man Butcher Joe Nangan is something of an elusive figure, particularly in the mainstream art world. Perhaps this is because his work defies definition, resists the categorisation so loved by art historians, or perhaps simply because many of the drawings and paintings he produced for others slightly pre-dated the efflorescence of attention paid to Kimberley art in the 1980s. He has always had, however, a staunch group of aficionados; anthropologists, linguists, musicologists, missionaries and collectors who treasured his depth of knowledge, commitment to cultural preservation both within and without his own culture, as well as the gentle sensibility of his artwork.

Like many Kimberley people Nangan was, by birth, kinship and residence affiliated with a number of cultural groups in a broad area of the Kimberley. He was born at Kanen in Yawuru country on the northern shores of Roebuck Bay near Broome around 1902, and spent his childhood and much of his adult life in the west Kimberley. His father, Dicky Djulba, was a Walmajarri man from Paliara in the desert country much further east. His mother however, Anne Binmarring, was Nyikina. She was from the beautiful and varied terrain of Jirrkaliy Creek north of the Edgar Ranges.<sup>[iii]</sup>

It was this maternal ancestral country to which he turned for his primary cultural identity. Perhaps this was linked to the fact that Nangan lost both his parents in his youth, at the time of the Mowla Bluff massacre of 1916. This event, the memory of which is kept alive by the Nyikina today, resulted from a reprisal attack by pastoralists against a large number of people in the vicinity of Jirrkaliy Creek.<sup>[iv]</sup> At the time Nangan was away working at a stock camp, and therefore was one of the few to survive. It is likely this event contributed to his sense of a deep responsibility to keep the cultural knowledge of his country and kin alive later in life, particularly as exemplified by the body of artwork he left behind.

Much of Nangan's adult life was spent as a stockman working at various sheep and cattle stations in the west Kimberley. He walked with a limp, endowment of these years of hard riding far from good medical care. The name 'Butcher Joe' was acquired during a period later spent working as a butcher in Broome and Beagle Bay, where he moved after marrying a local woman. These basic biographical details however do not indicate the depth of his connection to life as a cultural leader, singer, dancer, dreamer-poet, Law man and *Maparn* (healer, 'clever man'). The determination to preserve and pass on this life-long accumulation of cultural wisdom and knowledge of country and story in the face of inevitable change, shared with a group of whitefellas willing to learn and support this drive, resulted in the focused development of an archive of around six hundred pencil drawings and watercolours produced over some three decades.



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Untitled*, 1982, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 37 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Aside from the personal memories and knowledge of his extended family, much of what is known about Nangan now comes from the documentation compiled by these researchers and associates. Some of this material is published and readily available for interested readers. Whilst background material has been drawn from these sources, this essay will instead rest on the memories of Nangan's granddaughter Brigid Drummond to draw a more intimate picture, before taking a closer look at the artworks themselves from an art historical rather than ethnographic perspective.

Brigid grew up with her mother, grandparents and two brothers at Beagle Bay (then a mission community). They lived at the little settlement for Christianised families on the outskirts of the mission known, in a curious semantic inversion which permitted these families to be settlers of their own land, as 'the colony'. She was known as a 'colony girl', as opposed to the 'dormitory kids' cared for largely by the Catholic Sisters and male missionaries. Her maternal forebears were Nyul Nyul people from the country where the mission was first established as a Trappist outpost in 1895. They are descendants of Nyul Nyul leader King Felix, whose land was selected to be the site of the (now renowned) Beagle Bay church. Her grandmother was Josephine Balgalai, whom Nangan married after his first wife died. Together they had just one child, Brigid's mother Mary Joseph.

Brigid recounts a happy childhood growing up with her brother Louis. Her *Nyami*, grandfather Butcher Joe, was a particularly influential figure when she was young. The family would often go fishing and hunting outside the mission on weekends (sometimes taking 'dormitory kids' with them). They would all sleep on big sheets of canvas on the ground by a fire, and before the children drifted off *Nyami* would so enthrall them with Dreaming stories they would fight for the privileged position of sleeping by his side. Brigid says whenever they were out bush, *Nyami* would always be talking to the old people now gone. He always told them how important this was, to never forget what their ancestors did for them.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Rainmakers with Riitji*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, 16 x 24.5 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

When Brigid was about six years old she remembers making a trip with her family to *Nyami*'s country, to Jirrkaliy Creek on Dampier Downs station. This trip was with 'Nora' (likely to have been linguist Nora Kerr who was researching in Broome with BJ in 1967/8). Brigid remembers that her grandfather made everybody wash themselves in a waterhole, to introduce them to the sacred Rainbow Serpent there. She remembers watching the water level gently rising and falling, and *Nyami* explaining to her that this was the serpent breathing. They all collected lots of different

coloured ochres to bring home for body painting for *Nurlu* (public song and dance performance).



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Wadmulla and Pintja Pintja (Spirits and Butterfly)*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

She says that the *Bugarigarre* (Dreaming) was his life, waking and sleeping he was imbued with that world. He made sure his grandchildren knew where they came from, and taught them that everything in life was important; all people, the land, all the animals and plants. He said they should always be respectful, and nurture the earth. He was often overheard talking to the animals, insects and plants and used to say if you need anything, just ask them for it. If you caught a fish or an animal (and you only took what you needed), you should always thank them.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Wilarmintj - Blue Mountain Parrot*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

He was compassionate and kind, and always mindful of others. In Brigid's words he was a funny old fellow too. He loved cowboy and Indian films; if there were black cockatoos about he would get the kids to ask them if there was one due to be screened at the next community film night, and if they squawked back he would know the answer.

Brigid remembers him dreaming new songs and dances. As soon as he woke up he would repeat the songs to retain them - she remembers him lying on his back, one leg propped up on the other, singing and beating a rhythm on his tobacco tin with a pen-knife. Sometimes he tapped boomerangs together for rhythm instead, as occurred during performance of *Nurlu*. He always wanted Brigid to come and listen to the new songs, but he had a very powerful, loud voice and she would tell him to quieten down. He was patient though, and she was a good girl and listened, but admits with a laugh now that she thought the songs all sounded the same.

*Nyami* encouraged Brigid to sit with him when he was drawing and painting. She and her younger brother Louis had jobs to help him – they would lay out his papers, or pearl shell if was carving, and

set up his brushes, pencils, water and paints. Louis would tap the old ashes out of his pipe and fill it with fresh tobacco. They would then sit next to him to watch and listen to him explain the stories he was depicting. He also liked to talk to the old ones who had passed away while he drew. Louis would run off quickly, but Brigid was interested and would be patient for a while, until she too ran off to play. *Nyami* wanted them close, but wouldn't tolerate being bumped, or his equipment being played with, or any humbug or noise from them while he was working. Sometimes he would encourage them to draw with him, but they weren't allowed to use his good pencils or paints, and were given his discarded paper to use.



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Kantjiba*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Brigid thinks her grandfather enjoyed talking to the visiting researchers who tracked him down, and that these interactions were positive experiences for him. She remembers him also spending many hours talking to elderly Father Francis (Franz Hügel) at Beagle Bay, and that he even occasionally visited the church for special events. Perhaps he found something of a kindred spirit in this man, also with strong spiritual inclinations and far from home and extended family. Later in life, after his second wife died and his daughter moved away from Beagle Bay, he moved permanently to Broome where he was cared for by the Roe family. As a young man he had developed strong connections with them and had always been particularly close to Nyikina cultural leader Paddy Roe.

Such is a selection of the fond memories of Nangan's grand-daughter, but is it possible to step beyond these details of the life of the man to a sense of the spirit of the drawings? Or perhaps this question should be inverted, to suggest that a full appreciation of the drawings hinges on a sensitive response to Nangan's life and social and cultural priorities.

Researchers were drawn to Nangan for his vast repertoire of cultural knowledge – Helmut Petri, Peter Dalton, linguist Nora Kerr, Pallottine missionary Father Frank Hügel, author Hugh Edwards, ethnographer/linguist Stephen Muecke, anthropologist Kim Akerman and art dealer Mary Macha all feature prominently in the story of Nangan's engagement with non-Aboriginal Australians, and all were deeply touched by him. The first seems to have been German anthropologist Petri, who met him at Beagle Bay in 1938 and later worked with him in the mid-50s when he obtained drawings and paintings. It is not known whether these were amongst the first naturalistic works on paper Nangan produced, though Petri believed this to be so. Certainly Petri was primed to encourage the translation of his mythological stories into artwork, as he had already obtained drawings from men in the LaGrange mission area, as well as painted barks produced by informants in the north Kimberley decades earlier. Nangan was the first of these, however, to develop a signature naturalistic style.

Perhaps this was a refinement of the process of conveying a complex Aboriginal ontology to a western mind. However his facility for illustrating in this way and passion for his subject matter suggests that this was not his only motivation.

Petri himself was not the first to employ this research method with Aboriginal cultural informants. He is likely to have heard of the ethnographic studies undertaken by Daisy Bates around 1907 in the Broome and Beagle Bay areas, and particularly her collaboration with Broome man Billinge, which resulted in several sketchbooks filled with vibrant pencil illustrations of aspects of local life and material culture. Many of these have also been drawn using a degree of naturalism, hardly surprising for a number of reasons. Firstly, evidence from early collections of portable Kimberley cultural material, particularly boab nuts and pearl shell, indicates that styles of engraved embellishment began to include increasingly naturalistic figurative elements from the early days of settlement, particularly as such objects quickly became collectible to Kimberley newcomers, available to be exchanged or sold and therefore one of the few points of entry into the new cash economy available to local people. Figuration itself was not a new development, as the rock art of the area attests, however early experiments with perspective and realism evidently grew in a cross-cultural milieu where a visual language had entry where a spoken language did not.



Butcher Joe Nangan, engraved pearl shell. Photo courtesy of the Broome Historical Society

Petri probably wasn't responsible for encouraging this particular style in Nangan; although there is no firm evidence yet that the natural realism of Nangan's works on paper was earlier being used on the boab nuts and pearl shell he was known to engrave, it is very likely. Other accomplished engravers in the west Kimberley, such as Jack Wherra, Biggie Albert and Lockie Nollier, had been utilising it for some time. Dating and ascribing authorship to these earlier pieces is difficult, yet it is probable that Nangan's facility for drawing and his signature style began to be developed during a prior period of embellishing objects more readily available.

Where Nangan diverges from the artwork of his peers however, is in his particular combination of style and subject matter. He rarely drew secular themes, instead depicting narratives and characters from the Dreaming almost exclusively. In this he is unique; in contemporary times Aboriginal artists

working figuratively have chosen to use traditional styles for classical subject matter (Kimberley artist Ngarra for example), or a western style of natural realism for secular themes (Jack Wherra), but not the opposite. Perhaps this explains why some first-time viewers don't take his drawings very seriously, as if they were merely charming sketches of fairy tales. This is to underestimate the subtle power of the work and their back-stories (both mythological and biographical) however, as well as their place at the very core of the artist's heart and world view.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Piwit Driven off by his Mother*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Drawing on paper probably offered Nangan a certain freedom beyond the limitations of pearl shell and boab nut (although he continued to incise these after taking up drawing and painting). The ability to express a story using a larger surface area and shades of colour enabled explorations of distance perspective for example, rare in traditional Aboriginal styles of figuration. He also exploited shadow and tonal variation, and 3/4 profiles to indicate three-dimensionality. But as if to pre-empt the perception that these were secular illustrations, he never covered the entire sheet of paper, preferring to let his Dreaming subjects come together as in the Dreaming, floating in the centre of the work unfettered by time or space.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Kantjiba*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

The characters in his works, whether animal or human (and the two are emblematic of transmutation in many instances) are central, somewhat unusually for an artist working with traditional subject matter where symbols of country are often foregrounded, often doubling for the dreaming beings which are symbiotically entwined with it. Nangan inhabits the dynamism of these beings in his artworks, enlivening them for viewers with individualised form and personality. They are by turns dark or comical; mischievous, despairing, enraged or incredulous, enacting the Dreaming narratives on which human lessons in religious philosophy and social behaviour rest. As his grand-daughter attests, these beings were very real for him; he slipped into Dreaming consciousness readily.

According to Kim Akerman:

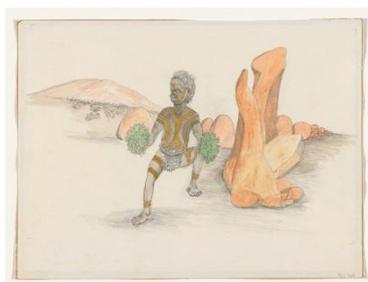
He regularly experienced spirit visitations in the course of his dreams. In the mid-1920s, during one such visitation, the spirit of his dead 'aunt' Kintimayi emerged from her grave at Wayikurrkurr at Dampier Downs. The spirit bestowed the pelican being, *Mayarta*, upon Joe as a personal *jalnga* or spirit familiar and taught him the *marinji-rinji nulu*, a dance depicting the transformational processes by which spirits of the dead may reveal themselves and communicate benevolently with the living.<sup>[v]</sup>



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Mayata - the Pelican*, c1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Illustrating the esoteric in this way for researchers and visitors to his country enabled them to glimpse one dimension at least of this intangible aspect of Nangan's life, without necessarily revealing the deeper layers of meaning these stories can hold. Nangan himself used a mnemonic device as a clue to which stories were being illustrated; a tiny animal or insect in the bottom right corner of drawings functioned as a key to theme of each work. It's tempting to view these miniatures as a kind of signature, with the purpose of ensuring the endurance of the story rather than the artist. But unfortunately, in a move which completes the uncoupling of the artwork from its socio-cultural origins as it enters the mainstream art market, this detail was sometimes cut off when pages of his sketchbooks were separated by collectors unaware of their significance. The opportunity to link the artwork with its transcribed explanation is lost for many of these works.

Nangan could draw many iterations of the same story, hence the value of these mnemonics. In these repetitions he was mirroring the re-telling of story, song and dance which kept narratives alive across generations, the essence of the story remaining the same yet inflected by individual expression. His style is also reminiscent of performance; many of his keen depictions of human and animal movement and facial expression bring to mind the drama of public song and dance ceremony in the Kimberley. His figures are always interacting and his compositions rarely static; he fully exploited the rhythmic potential of curves and diagonals to imply action both within and beyond the drawn image.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Tjitjingtatirr- the Ant Bed Spirits*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Nangan used colour judiciously. It's possible he occasionally ran out of watercolour or coloured pencil, but there seems to be a logic behind his choices. He mostly used a soft lead pencil to delicately outline, shade and add texture, reserving brighter colours or soft washes for the features he wished to highlight – body paint, weaponry, creatures and vegetation in particular. Rocks were also treated to a light earthy wash. These have their own special place in the artworks; often identified rocks in specific places, they are mute participants in the drama unfolding on the paper, oddly fecund shapes hinting at an inner life animated by the Dreaming.



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Rai meeting*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Brigid would like her grandfather to be remembered not only for his legacy to future generations, but also his stature as a man. 'He was a person of few words but what he did say meant a lot – he was wise, connected, and emotional'. Unfortunately it is difficult for family and other west Kimberley people to access his artwork as so little of his extensive artistic output remains there. Whilst he doubtless knew that the researchers he worked closely with would honour his hope for cultural preservation, and indeed collections and documentation of his vast cultural knowledge are held at a number of institutions nationally, he might not have anticipated this outcome for those closest to him.

Nangan's pencil lines were always gentle, provisional even, as if coaxing out an image already immanent in the paper. Towards the end of his life the pencil marks became less distinct, the colour softer, possibly as his eyesight and steady hand weakened. Thirty years after he left the material world his legacy is the energy of a man still pulsating life through his drawings, subject and object finally indistinguishable; two-dimensional representations of the rising and falling waters of the sacred Nyikina waterhole...

The grave of Butcher Joe Nangan OAM can be found in the Broome cemetery, under a casuarina tree. Mary Macha organised a bronze plaque for him. Small letters gleam in the shade:

*'bookarri karraniyi yinnmin agayoo liyan'*

*'that dreamtime it gave me my life'*



Butcher Joe Nangan in Mayarta headdress. Photo © Roger Garwood

With thanks to Roger Garwood for the generous permission to include his memorable photograph of Nangan on the final page. Also to the National Museum of Australia and the Broome Historical Society for the contribution of additional images.

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[i] S Muecke 1988, 'Two Texts and One Other', in A. Rutherford, *Aboriginal Culture Today*, Dangaroo Press, Sydney, p. 57-8.

[ii] Thanks to Kim Akerman for this lead, and his description stating Nangan is 'wearing a *Mayarta* (pelican) headdress, part of the costume for a *nurlu* (song cycle) he composed after a visitation from the spirit of his dead 'mother's sister' – a woman called Kintimayi.' Image from W Robertson 1928, *Bringa's Cooee Talks*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

[iii] <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nangan-joseph-butcher-joe-14981>, accessed 07/05/2016.

[iv] In 2000 a monument was placed at this site by the Nyikina, Mangala & Karrajarri people; the plaque reads: *This site acknowledges the massacre of the Nyikina, Mangala and Karrajarri people in 1916. The massacre took place near Geegully Creek close to Mowla Bluff station after a beating of a pastoralist took place.*

*In 1918 a police enquiry in Broome concealed the truth about the killings. The Mowla Bluff incident was closed and forgotten by the authorities but never forgotten by us, and is supported by the evidence in the 1918 enquiry. This plaque is in memory of all our family members who had their lives taken away in the massacre.*

[v] K Akerman 2004, in Australian National University Institute for Indigenous Australia, & W. Caruana (ed.), *Likan'mirri-Connections: The AIATSIS Collection of Art: an Exhibition at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery*, Australian National University Institute for Indigenous Australia, p. 40.



Image Credits: (L to R) Marika Riley and Lyndsay Malay at the Warmun Art Centre stall, Philippa Jahn and Eva Nargoodah at the Desert River Sea stall and film screening area and The Warlayirti Artists stall at DAAF 2016 ©

# Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair 2016

Two weeks ago a significant and challenging annual migration to Darwin occurred, the combined efforts of which are pretty astounding. Hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, their families and art centre staff packed artworks then boarded planes, boats and 4wd vehicles to travel countless kilometres from communities all across the country, some journeys taking multiple days. The destination? The annual Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF).

DAAF celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Held over three days at the Darwin Convention Centre, this event is unique in that it only hosts Indigenous owned and operated art centres from across Australia, providing a promotional platform for these organisations to a national audience. Every year the fair grows bigger and its reputation for generating sales and exposure, and enabling new relationships and experiences for artists and arts workers is well recognised in the arts industry. Casual visitors, private collectors, gallerists and other industry specialists alike value DAAF for the chance to explore an extensive range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork showcased all in the one place, as well as the rare opportunity to engage with artists and arts workers from remote places.

Of the sixty art centres who attended the fair this year the Kimberley was represented by the following: Nagula Jarndu (Broome), Marnin Studio (Fitzroy Crossing), Warlayirti Artists (Balgo), Warmun Art (Warmun), Mowanjum Aboriginal Arts & Culture (Derby), Waringarri Aboriginal Arts (Kununurra), Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency (Fitzroy Crossing) and Kira Kiro Arts (Kalumburu). All of these Kimberley art centres had attended previous DAAFs however for some staff it was their first visit. Ribnga Green from Warlayirti Artists enthused: "This is my first DAAF. It's great, I didn't realise how big it was, I've been to Desert Mob and Revealed before but this is the biggest by far. I like it because it's not just paintings, its weavings and textiles and everything. I like that it's all together in one place, all the different styles. I don't normally get to see all this living in the desert." It was Marika Riley from Warmun Art Centre's first experience too. When asked what her favourite aspect of the fair was she replied "Looking at all the different stalls, seeing all the different art and meeting artists... sales, getting new ideas. I'm amazed at the woven works; they take hours and hours of work! We're both inspired by all the different kinds of merchandise too." The ever-exuberant Kirsty Burgu from Mowanjum Art & Culture Centre was all smiles and it came as no surprise that the favourite aspect of her second DAAF experience was "Talking and mingling with other artists and arts workers, networking!"

Desert River Sea decided to return to the event this year with an industry stand, as in previous years we had found ourselves very busy talking to eager art-loving visitors keen to know more about the artists and art centres of the Kimberley. This year we chose to promote awareness and encouraged new audiences by screening our recently produced short artist films as part of our display, and as always specifically directed visitors to the Kimberley art stalls at the venue. These were scattered throughout the three exhibition halls combined for the event, and their displays were as varied as the diversity of art they each offered. DRS were lucky to be positioned next to the Warlayirti Artists stall all weekend - their vibrant canvas paintings glowed under the lights and lured many passers-by in for

a closer look. Eager to share the experience and encourage more Balgo artists to come along next time. Ribnga told us: "I'm going to take photos on the iPad and put together a little presentation for people back home. It would be great to have more artists along next time - it helps customers feel that connection when they talk to artists."

Marika Riley has recently completed the DRS Visual Arts Leadership Program workshop on Curating. She spent much time back at Warmun applying these new skills preparing for the fair, carefully selecting works, arranging and photographing them to perfect the look of the display. "I selected all the works for DAAF and arranged the hang and thought about how they would look next to each other." Marika intentionally selected works by emerging artists and the gamble payed off as by the second day they had sold almost all their paintings. Marika's husband, artist Lindsay Malay said, "We're working on building new customer networks. If there were more artists here and if younger, emerging artists were here we'd sell even more. I feel that people are really interested in emerging artists and what's new at Warmun".

Warmun neighbours (some 200km down the road) Waringarri Aboriginal Arts used the DAAF opportunity to sneak preview their new jewellery range and launch their inaugural selection of hand-printed textiles and bags onto the market. Kira Kiro Art Centre maintained an inviting presence via their corner stall next to Waringarri, showcasing their detailed ochre paintings and arguably some of the best works on paper at the whole fair. Incorporating clever use of visual merchandising the Marnin Studio stall set themselves apart with a sophisticated boutique atmosphere which did their delicate hand dyed and printed garments justice. Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency opposite showcased a high quality selection of works which gave visitors an insight into the energetic versatility of current arts practice amongst Fitzroy Valley communities. Their contemporary re-workings of traditional and modern objects, bright acrylic paintings and new etched enamel on tin works constituted a visual feast. Next door, Nagula Jarndu proved a magnet for textile lovers with the fresh and varied fabric designs and textures proving irresistible for touching and draping. Over at Mowanjum Art & Culture's stall, arts workers Stanley, Dean, Sherika and Kirsty fielded questions about Mowanjum and Wandjina culture along with sales, with Kirsty stating that their boab nuts and prints had been particularly popular.

The DAAF public program offers more to visitors than simply the opportunity to purchase artwork. This year artists led interactive workshops and demonstrations in screen printing, basket weaving, bark and canvas painting. As in previous years the dance performances on the main stage were a highlight with visitors and the stall holders. This year the Waringarri Dancers from Kununurra returned with another energetic performance and for the first time the Zugubal dancers from Badu Art Centre offered a Torres Strait Islander cultural experience. Marika was very keen not to miss out, "I loved the dance performances, I took so many photos of them on my phone yesterday that I have to delete some so I can take more today and film it!"

For its tenth anniversary year DAAF introduced four new additions to the program. These included children's art activity stations, a panel discussion, the fashion show 'From Country to Couture' and a

film festival including the screening of *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* and new animations from Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing.

The inclusion of a fashion show came about through a combination of public demand and the success of the textile design movement in remote Indigenous communities including the Kimberley. In *From Country to Couture*, the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Foundation aimed to celebrate the connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary art and high end fashion by facilitating collaborations between Australian designers and nine art centres, showcasing the results at the runway special event. The show was a highly entertaining and successful fusion of art and fashion with charismatic emerging model Magnolia Maymuru from East Arnhem Land adding a certain star power to the sell-out event.

The first collection to hit the runway was the collaboration between designer Jaimee Millar and Nagula Jarndu. The silhouettes of the designs were said to be inspired by the distinctive hand printed textiles of the Nagula Jarndu artists, themselves inspired by the natural surrounds, textures and colours of the land and seascapes surrounding Broome. Also included in the collection were new screen-printed fabrics, the outcome of a recent workshop with Bobbie Ruben which Desert River Sea had earlier witnessed in action in the studio. There was a definite thrill in following the designs from conception to transformation into couture garments worn by professional models. The delight of the artists at seeing their designs parading down the catwalk was evident in their astonished faces and enthusiastic applause; at one point a beaming Maxine Charlie jumped to her feet for an unobstructed view. The event no doubt boosted interest and sales in Indigenous fabrics, as well as inspiring other artists and art centres to follow suit. Kirsty admitted, “I really like looking at the textiles. We’d like to do textiles at Mowanjum; we’re interested in branching out. I even bought one of the bags from Injalak.”

When first conceived DAAF was intended to coincide with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA) an exhibition held annually at the Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), as further assistance to the large numbers of visiting artists and art centre staff in town for the awards. Ten years later, both events are still run concurrently and the NATSIAA award opening night is a must do for many DAAF art centre staff and artists and a great place to catch-up in the celebratory and scenic setting of the lawns of the museum at sunset. The exhibition is always worth seeing; the exhibition curation and judges’ choices often incite passionate debate and visitors always find something inspiring and of interest amongst the diverse range of works on show.

This year three works from the Kimberley were finalists in the NATSIAA: the striking *Raining on Kurtal* by Ngarralja Tommy May and *Rabbits* by Isaac Chere, both from Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing, and the powerful triptych *Gilbany, On Garlungkudi and Mistake Creek – All massacre places* by Shirley Purdie from Warmun Art Centre. When asked what he thought of this year’s award Ribnga said “Yes, it was great... It’s good to see young people like Ishmael Marika being recognised for their work and people from my mother’s country (APY lands). We don’t see much contemporary [new

media] art so it's great to see people winning awards for that kind of art, I like it. Good to see people awarded for their hard work. I would like to do it too, I find it very powerful.”

Another notable exhibition run simultaneously with the NATSIAA and devised to be a counterpoint to it is the Salon Des Refuses. As the name suggests, this is an exhibition of artworks not selected as finalists in the main award. The Salon, presented at the CDU Art Gallery, exhibited a further six artworks by Kimberley artists as well as many other excellent artworks from other regions, providing them a further platform of exposure via a professionally curated and increasingly popular show.

By the end of the third day of DAAF art centre staff were weary but still buoyed by the social atmosphere and general excitement around Darwin. Some were already looking forward to the next fair; Marika had already formed plans for 2017, “I'm going to bring more next year! Next time I would bring more artworks by emerging artists and encourage other artists about DAAF”. Kirsty had taken note of successful presentation methods employed by other art centres and when asked if there was anything she'd do differently next time said, “Improvements on how to make our stall more eye-catching, more info for visitors. Perhaps we can change the hang of the stall every day next time and put the curating skills I learnt at VALP (DRS Visual Arts Leadership Program May 2016 Curation workshop) into action. We should bring bigger works next time and stack the small ones on a shelf like some other art centres did. We should bring the stands for the boab nuts along and display the ochre on canvas and acrylics next to each other. We also need to find ways to display the labels.” She was keen for more Mowanjum mob to get involved too, “the Junba mob should come and dance here. I think it would be good if we could run a workshop too.” When asked if he would come again, Ribgna Green replied “Definitely! I love it here – checking out the other stalls, their art and networking. Art brings people together.” And how! We couldn't agree more.

For this article and more images click [here](#).

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## Feature artworks

This issue we would like to acknowledge the three Kimberley finalists in this year's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award: senior artists and cultural treasures Shirley Purdie from Warmun Art centre, and Ngarralja Tommy May and Isaac Cherel, both from Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing.



**Shirley Purdie**, *Gilbany, On Garlungkudi and Mistake Creek – All Massacre Places*, natural earth pigments on canvas, 45 x 180cm. Image courtesy the artist and Warmun Art Centre.

‘This tryptich recalls three massacres that have occurred on Gija country. Each massacre was inspired by very different motives. These different events, placed side by side, are seemingly unrelated, however each is significant to Purdie as they shape the experience of her country and mark the enormous changes that have been witnessed, and remain in the living memory of Purdie and her family.’



**Ngarralja Tommy May**, *Raining on Kurtal*, etched enamel on tin, 120 x 120cm. Image courtesy the artist and Mangkaja Arts.

"*Kurtal* is the Kalpurtau (rainbow serpent) that brings the rain. He is extremely powerful, not just anyone can talk to him. There is an important Junba (ceremony) that happens for him. He'll come out then, he'll bring the storm, and it will rain."

Ngarralja Tommy May is a senior Walmajarri man, artist, former cowboy and former chairman of ANKAAA. Tommy lived in the Great Sandy Desert with his family before migrating to the cattle station country further north.

Tommy's recent work has shifted to the use of paint pens and etched tin. In this work depicting the sacred waterhole, Kurtal, Tommy used his car keys and tool made from a windscreen wiper to etch the paint.



**Isaac Cherel**, *Rabbits*, synthetic polymer paint on plywood, 111 x 122cm. Image courtesy the artist and Mangkaja Arts.

‘This painting is about the rabbits and centipedes living in holes on that flat country, on Goonyiandi country. OR, says Isaac now, its Mamu! That tall bugger, Yawoonkatji (sorcerer), who lives in the cave by the spring, on Fossil Downs station. He's looking for women, he likes the soft ones!’

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*Image credit: (L to R) Camels on the side of the road to Balgo. Artworks on display in the Warlayirti Artists Art Centre galleries. The welcome sign at the entrance to Warruyanta Art Centre in Mulan. © AGWA 2016*

## **In the Tracks of Camels; visiting Balgo & Mulan**

Balgo (Wirrimanu community) is still something of an under-utilised attraction for visitors to the Kimberley. Perhaps the reputation of the sometimes challenging Tanami Road is off-putting to some, however for those willing to go the extra mile the rewards are spectacular. All within a day's drive of Halls Creek visitors can see the gigantic Wolfe Creek meteor crater, the impressive view of the desert from the Balgo Pound and of course be welcomed to the vibrant Warlayirti art centre. For those wishing to stay in the area, camping is possible with permission for those willing to leave nothing behind but friendship and footprints. Paruku (Lake Gregory) is within reach, bird watchers will never be disappointed and the night sky is one of the clearest in the country for star gazing.

The Kimberley dry season (May – Sep) is the ideal time to travel off-road in the Kimberley. The weather is generally predictable and the risk of dirt roads being flooded or washed out minimised. With this in mind Desert River Sea recently headed to Balgo on the edge of the Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts. The last time we tried to visit we were thwarted by road closures due to bushfire so this time when we hit the Tanami Road turnoff we were pleased to sail past the 'road open' sign and encounter a freshly graded track to boot.

Only three hours down the road we knew we were in the desert when a family of wild camels greeted us at the threshold of the community. Scattering a flock of green and yellow budgerigars we pulled up at the car park of our destination, the Warlayirti Artists Aboriginal Corporation art centre. Drawn inside by the dazzling artworks in the galleries at the entrance to the art centre, we met arts workers Geraldine Nowee and Jackie Williams as they prepared canvases and paints for upcoming NAIDOC week activities and Ribnga Green cataloguing new artworks. We'd scheduled our visit to take advantage of an exciting time for Warlayirti, after two successful exhibitions (a solo show for Helicopter Tjungurrayi in Broome and the other in Singapore, showcasing the work of Imelda Yukenbarri Gugaman and family) as well as the handover between new managers Fiona Lee & Aaron Crowe and their predecessor Sheryl Anderson.

Sheryl toured us through the extensive building while offering her reflections on the centre's achievements during her tenure as manager. She showed us a large collaborative canvas depicting the history of the art centre, which artists were painting in their spare time for permanent installation in

the cultural wing of the building. Particularly impressive was the Warlayirti archive room, a small space filled with carefully wrapped and stacked artworks, as well as sliding shelves packed with organised folders of artwork documentation dating from the earliest days of the centre. This collection is of national significance and Sheryl has directed a lot of energy to marshalling it from its previous state of precarious storage and disarray to a condition in which it can be further preserved and worked on for future generations, both within and beyond the Balgo community. Much of the material in the archive, including audio and video recordings and photographs, requires further sorting and digital archiving and Sheryl was pleased that a partnership with Melbourne University had been secured to digitally record the artwork stories on paper currently filling the shelves. The necessity for this to occur was the impetus behind the Warlayirti volunteer program which she instigated last year; it was participation in this program which originally drew Fiona and Aaron to the art centre. Speaking with them about current and future art projects and practical approaches it was clear that their appointment, and the enthusiasm and energy they bring with them, was a positive step for Warlayirti.

It's always a pleasure and a privilege visiting and chatting with artists and documenting new activity. It was great to catch up with Helicopter Tjungurrayi again so soon after seeing him in Broome the previous week at his exhibition and no surprise that working alongside him on the veranda studio was Larry Gondora, his best mate. Gondora is known to experiment with paint application, his style is unique amongst Warlayirti artists and his paintings are instantly recognisable (visitors to the Revealed exhibition at Fremantle Art Centre earlier this year would be familiar with his swirling circular design canvases). It is evident how intently he focuses on the canvas he is currently working on as the end of his whiskers are blotted with paint.

We knew it was a busy time at the art centre, particularly with their preparations for attending the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair the following week, so after we had finished meeting with artists we let ourselves be put to practical use in the workshop fitting frames and stretching canvases. Fortunately, we were also in the right place at the right time to attend artist and author Kim Mahood's local launch of 'Desert Writing – Stories from Country' edited by Terri-Ann White and published by UWA Press. Comprising contributions from the remote communities of Tennant Creek, Coober Pedy, Mulan & Balgo, the book is a cross-cultural compilation of authored and transcribed oral stories with Gracie Mosquito, Jane Gimme, Joan Nangamarra, Imelda Gugaman, Cathy Lee, Helicopter Tjungurrayi & Sheryl Anderson contributing locally.

Having hoped to visit the recently resurrected Warruyanta Art Centre in Mulan the next day we were fortunate that Kim was currently working there and happy to introduce us, as well as facilitate a viewing of the large scale collaborative canvas maps that local artists had made of the Paruku area. After dodging brumbies along the 40km drive from Balgo, the community came suddenly into view from the crest of a small rise, with the art centre cheerfully signposted by that resourceful outback tradition of up-cycling an old car bonnet.

The Warruyanta Art Centre, now serviced by Warlayirti Artists, is housed in an old community building adequate for the needs of the group of local women who keep it running. We knew we'd see

acrylic paintings there, but also really enjoyed the other more experimental forms that the women were producing using materials easily available. Unconventional woven sculptures made with scrap metal such as bicycle wheels hung in unexpected corners, and the array of hand painted canvas shoes proved irresistible. Artist Shirley Yoomarie showed us her work on a seasonal calendar for the local school. A bi-lingual painted document incorporating both the western calendar and Aboriginal perceptions of seasonal change, it indicates the times when different kinds of bush tucker are ripe, plentiful, fat and good to harvest.

With senior artist Veronica Lulu's permission Kim showed us the much anticipated collection of collaborative painted maps combining scientific and cultural information of the region, which she had been facilitating with the artists over some years. One depicted the changing annual burning patterns of bushfires, others showed the changing water levels of Paruku, the links between family groups and places, sites of local significance and archaeological activity. As each map was unfurled from storage with a flourish and placed on top of the last we were fascinated by the multiple layers of information being presented. They are still works in progress, except for the largest which was completed as part of the Canning Stock Route project and is destined for the National Museum in Canberra. These maps stand as valuable resources not only for environmental and heritage management, but also for deepening cross-cultural understanding of place, and we appreciated being able to see them in situ.

Our last stop on this trip was Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency in Fitzroy Crossing, where our visit was timed to coincide with a directors meeting in order to meet with as many senior Mangkaja artists and directors as possible. Whilst waiting for their official business to be over, we able to not only have a thorough look through recent artwork, but also spend a few relaxed hours with elderly artists Jean Rangi, Tarku Rosie Tarco King and Penny K Lyons as they painted in the studio.

Now back in Broome we're already planning our return to Balgo and Fitzroy Crossing to implement plans hatched with artists over the trip – stay tuned!

For this article and more images click [here](#).



# Art Centres in the Kimberley

## By Darren Jorgensen

The first Aboriginal art centre in the Kimberley was Waringarri Arts in Kununurra. Established in 1985, it was set up to service artists working in Kalumburu, Kununurra, Port Keats, Warmun (then Turkey Creek) and smaller settlements. Like art centres across Australia, Waringarri differed from art programs that had previously been run for Aboriginal people. For artists across Australia had long been making 'ethnic and tourist arts' on their own initiative, and occasionally working in art studios run by adult education programs, hospitals, missions and prisons.<sup>[ii](#)</sup>

The arrival of art centres however marked an era of Aboriginal agency in the arts, so that the day to day work of non-Aboriginal arts managers was answerable to the artists themselves, rather than to a Church, clinic or government department. The other Kimberley art centre that dates back to the 1980s is Warlayirti Artists at the Wirrimanu Community (or Balgo) on the Tanami Road into the Western Desert. Warlayirti was established in 1987 out of the success of a local adult education program, and the success of a 1986 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*. At Warlayirti and elsewhere around Australia, a series of art centre managers facilitated the exhibition of local work in the galleries of Australia's southern cities. The role of managers is to enable artists to access the artworld, while ensuring they are fairly treated. Consultant Tim Acker emphasises this ethical and intercultural role of art centres:

Art centres are independent enterprises, owned and governed by Aboriginal artists; they identify and nurture artists, promote and sell works of art, provide accountability and reinvest in the livelihoods of their communities. In short, art centres are hybrids; highly effective, inter-cultural, somewhat mercurial commercial ventures operating successfully in remotest Australia, using an enterprise model built on the artistry and energy of an economically marginalised people.<sup>[iii](#)</sup>

So it is that art centres are aligned with the politics of remote Aboriginal communities themselves, a politics of self-determination that coincides with an era in Australian Federal politics dating back to the early 1970s. The economist Jon Altman has theorised the way that art centres are a part of hybrid economies developed in this period in remote Australia, 'born of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal processes, they are both black and white.'<sup>[iiii](#)</sup>

In Fitzroy Crossing, Mangkaja Arts was established in 1993 after a series of art programs were run in the 1980s at the Karrayili Adult Education Centre, and after a landmark exhibition at Tandanya in Adelaide in 1991. The Warmun Art Centre began in 1997 so that local artists would no longer be dependent on Waringarri, located down the road in Kununurra, or upon private operators who were not representing their interests.<sup>[v](#)</sup> The artist Queenie McKenzie was crucial to the establishment of Warmun, but not everyone wanted to work in this community arts situation. Some artists still worked for private operators, while in 1998 Freddie Timms, in close collaboration with Melbourne art dealer Tony Oliver, set up private arts organisation Jirrawun. This was designed to operate at a distance from community-based art centres, creating work by and for an elite group of local artists and selling

to high end collectors. At this time too a former manager of Waringarri established a private gallery in Kununurra representing Billy Thomas and Nancy Noonju among others. In 2001 another private gallery, largely catering to the tourist trade, also established itself in Kununurra. In just a few short years, the East Kimberley artworld had been transformed.

Through this diversity it is possible to see the impact of art centres upon the history of art practice in the region, for different studios made decisions about what kind of work they would support. Artists at the Warmun Art Centre deliberately chose to only use local ochres, while Waringarri employed a mix of ochres and processed pigments, giving both centres distinct colour palettes. Waringarri's reflects its own cosmopolitan situation, based as it is in a large town where different Aboriginal groups mingle, and further from sources of natural ochres. Warmun's restricted, ochre palette continues to embody its grounding in the local community and country. Jirrawun's artists were among the most minimal of the Kimberley's painters with Paddy Bedford, Rammey Ramsey and Timmy Timms emulating Rover Thomas with lateral landscapes. The group's style reflected the freedom of their studio situation, their ambition evident in large, bold compositions.

Other decisions about style were being made on the other side of the Kimberley in this same period. In 1997 Mowanjum Artists Spirit of the Wandjina Aboriginal Corporation was incorporated outside Derby, before becoming the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre in 2006, housed in new premises built in the shape of a Wandjina head. Their decision to paint Wandjinas would have an influence on another art centre at Kalumburu, a community on the northern coast. Here at the Kira Kiro Art Centre, which emerged out of a series of art programs run at the community, the artists tend away from Wandjinas and instead to paint what at Kalumburu is known as *Kiro Kiro*, but elsewhere by the Ngarinyin name of Gwion Gwion rock art figures.<sup>[vi]</sup> To the south, in the coastal community of Bidyadanga, artists also decided upon their style. Here, Yulparitja painters from the desert negotiated with the local Karajarri people to use coastal colours, while the subjects of their paintings remain the dry, desert country from which they had walked some decades ago.<sup>[vii]</sup> In the absence of an art centre, the Yulparitja were represented by Emily Rohr of Short Street Gallery in Broome, and began exhibiting around 2002. In their use of bold acrylic colours, they joined desert exiles at Mangkaja and Warlayirti, who also used loud painting styles as if to proclaim their feelings and fidelities for the countries that they had left.

Today there are ten art centres across the Kimberley, including a new art centre at Bidyadanga called Bidyadanga Artists, Kira Kiro at Kalumburu, Laarri Gallery in Yiyili and Yarliyil Artists at Halls Creek, plus two textile studios. These late additions to the art centre scene are not all entirely supported by government funding, as was typical for art centres of the 1980s and 1990s, but also by other organisations, including a local school, a local shire and a TAFE college. Today, the expanded number of art centres, as well as the contraction of the art market since the Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008, has impacted upon the sales made by art centres nationally.<sup>[viii]</sup> 2007 also marks a definitive change in Federal policy toward remote communities, one that is no longer interested in self-determination, and a shift to funding tied to education and employment outcomes.<sup>[ix]</sup> On the one hand, this change has benefited art centres as the Indigenous Employment Initiative brought employment to local people.<sup>[ix]</sup> However, a drop in sales and the increasing impoverishment of

Aboriginal people in remote Australia through this new era of government policy has also meant art centres have begun to increase their focus on supporting community development, employment and training.<sup>[xi]</sup> One part of this shift lies in an increased number of projects being run through art centres, such as the *Motika* (Motorcar) Project at Warlayirti, as well as the *In the Saddle—On the Wall* travelling exhibition. The Art Gallery of Western Australia's Desert River Sea project is also supporting new art projects in art centres across the Kimberley.<sup>[xii]</sup> Such projects may be the beginning of a new stage in the history of art centres. For they tend to refunction these organisations as cultural centres, moving beyond the art market to also work with institutions and funding bodies to produce major exhibitions. This shift in the everyday work of art centres will likely change the history of Australian art, and the role of the art centre within it.

You can find images and this article in full on the Desert River Sea

website: <http://desertriversea.com.au/the-people/research-and-commentary-/contributing-author-darren-jorgensen-art-centres-in-the-kimberle>

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[i] Here I am borrowing the terms used by Nelson Graburn to title his edited collection from the period, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976.

[ii] Tim Acker, 'The Art of Community: the place of art centres in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands', in Tim Acker and John Carty (eds) *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands*, Perth, UWA Publishing, 2012, pp. 37-47 at p. 42.

[iii] Jon Altman, 'Art Business: The Indigenous visual arts infrastructure' in Hetti Perkins, Margaret K.C. West and Theresa Willsteed (eds), *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, pp. 43-49 at p. 43.

[iv] See Suzanne Spinner, 'Three Certificates are Not Enough: Rover Thomas and art centre archives', in Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean (eds), *Indigenous Archives: The making and unmaking of Aboriginal art*, Perth, UWA Publishing, in press.

[v] Philippa Jahn, 'Between Rocks and Hard Places: Mary Puntji Clement and the Kalumburu Art Project', in Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean (eds), *Indigenous Archives: The making and unmaking of Aboriginal art*, Perth, UWA Publishing, in press.

[vi] Personal communication with Emily Rohr, 18 August, 2014

[vii] See Tim Acker and Alice Woodhead, *The Art Economies Value Chain Reports: Art centre finances*, CRC-REP Research Report CR006, Alice Springs, Ninti One Limited, 2014, ix.

[viii] Marked by the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (or 'The 'Intervention').

[ix] Acker and Woodhead, p. ix.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] For more information on *In the Saddle—On the Wall* see < <http://desertriversea.com.au/the-people/research-and-commentary-/in-the-saddle-on-the-wall>>

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# Kira Kiro Art Centre Edits

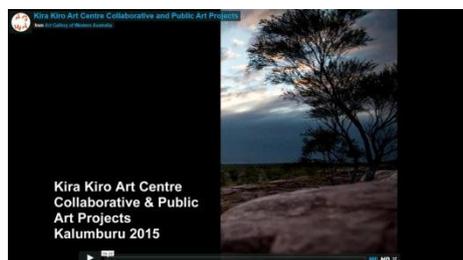
In 2015 Desert River Sea travelled to Kalumburu to meet with the artists of the Kira Kiro Art Centre. There we teamed up with a film crew from Indigenous Community Stories to produce the following short films which have recently been finished and approved by the artists for release. On their behalf we are pleased to offer them on our website for viewing:



Betty Bundamurra: <http://desertriversea.com.au/artists/77>



Mary Puntji Clement: <http://desertriversea.com.au/artists/78>



Kira Kiro Art Centre Collaborative & Public Art Projects: <http://desertriversea.com.au/art-centres/kira-kiro-art-centre>

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## Desert River Sea would like to acknowledge a Kimberley artist who recently passed away

Desert River Sea acknowledges the loss to the Kalumburu community of artist Mr Waina. He was a gentle man dedicated to sharing his knowledge of country and the reproductions of rock art which he painted, as an independent artist, for the many visitors to the Kimberley he befriended over the course of his life. Our sympathies to his family.



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