

Warmun Landscape Painting and the *Ngarranggarniny* of Mabel Juli

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Mabel Juli painting at Warmun Art Centre, October 2014 © AGWA

In the Gija language, *Ngarranggarniny* describes the moment at which the Dreaming ancestors lay down to become the landscape of the East Kimberley, and the way that this laying down recurs eternally in the minds of the living. *Ngarranggarniny* is a different word to *Ngarranggarni*, that instead ends with an *i*, and describes the archaic Dreamtime, events of long ago. The emphasis of Mabel Juli's paintings is on the *Ngarranggarniny*, the laying down that is a psychic suspension in the land. So that the Dreaming woman *Ginngennayn* becomes *Ginngennayn Hill* as she turns to look at her dog, while *Goolarbool*, the rainbow serpent, disappears into the land as a shimmer, and *Karnginy* steps into the sky as the moon. The drama of this moment of the Dreaming is ongoing, as today the Kimberley confronts a new Dreamtime of agriculture and mining that once again is changing the laws of time and space and transforming the country in its wake.

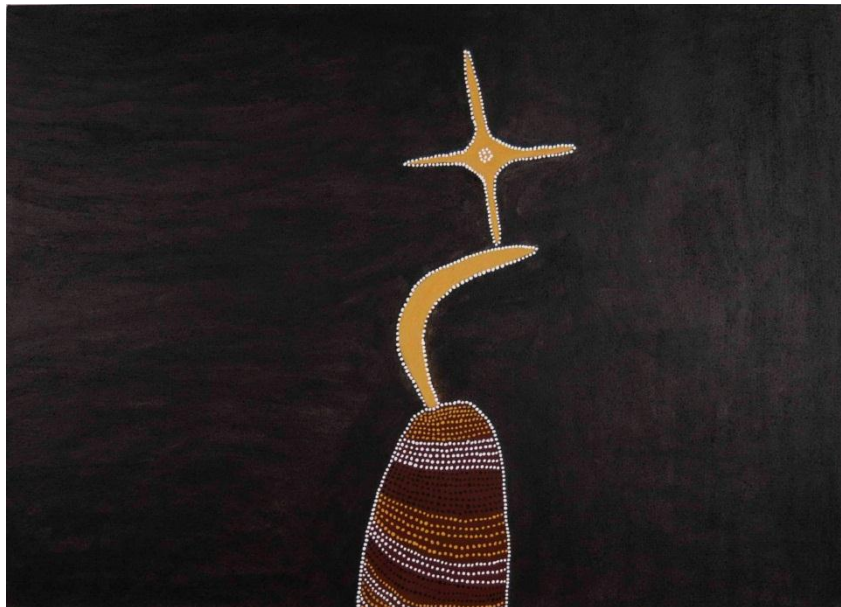
Juli's determination to picture Dreaming beings like *Ginngennayn* and *Karnginy* represents a very different strategy to the one commonly employed by her fellow artists at Warmun. Most painters here follow the example of Rover Thomas who made Warmun, then called Turkey Creek, famous through his landscape paintings. Yet Thomas's success came from painting landscapes rather than Dreaming beings, and it was left to his less well known collaborator Paddy Jaminji to illustrate the Devil Devils *Jimpi* and *Manginta* who were guides for the *Goorirr Goorirr (Kuirr Kuirr)* ceremony that Thomas had received in feverish dreams.¹ They peer at us from Jaminji's paintings, just as we can see the Dreaming beings *Ginngennayn*, *Goolarbool* and *Karnginy* in Juli's *Ngarranggarniny* landscapes.

While *Jimpi* and *Manginta* travel far through the air and over the land, for Juli such airy Dreamings are represented by Christian themes, in such paintings as *The Holy Spirit* (2007) that show a great white dove descending to greet a group of worshippers. Mostly, however, Dreaming beings are embedded in the land or follow fixed orbits in the sky. Jaminji's *The Dreaming Kangaroo at Nine Mile, near Wyndham* (1983) and

Tawurr the Kangaroo at Kanmanturr (1984) are inscribed on the rocks at Nine Mile and *Kanmanturr*, while Juli's paintings of *Karnginy* are of the moon who in the *Ngarranggarniny* stepped into the sky. He fell in love with *Darwool*, Snake Woman, but because she was wrong skin she could not marry her. Juli sings the story:

He was angry with them and walked away, to the top of a hill. There he said to them: 'You mob will all die, but I will come back alive.' He turned into the moon. That two promised ones, *nyawana*, turned into *wardul*, the evening and morning stars.ⁱⁱ

So it is that Juli paints not only this moment of the *Ngarranggarniny*, but the ambiguous place of the Dreaming beings in their own stories. While it is tempting to turn these stories into moral narratives, to say as the artist does that 'the full moon is a reminder to all Gija people to respect the rules - "right way marriage"', here the transgressor also becomes a powerful Dreaming being who eluded death.ⁱⁱⁱ The woman *Ginnennayn* exists in this state of suspension but through no fault of her own. She has been looking for her dog, and hearing it growl she looks over her shoulder, to become the shape of *Ginnennayn Hill*. Structured like a Zen koan, *Ginnennayn's* place in the land is one that remains tied to what the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called the 'everywhen', an infrastructure of the country that also describes Gija consciousness itself.^{iv}



Mabel Juli, *Garnkiny Ngarranggarni* 2010 © Mabel Juli. Image courtesy of Warmun Art Centre

Some of Juli's landscapes are not painted for their significance in the *Ngarranggarniny*, but for their significance in her own life. These works include paintings of Warmun itself, and a painting of *Young Wumbi and the Crocodile* (1998), depicting her grandson turning up to a *Goorirr Goorirr* performance with a freshwater crocodile that he had killed slung over his back. Even with these secular themes Juli is able to turn them into enigmatic shapes, stark and clear conceptualisations in ochre. In this, Juli is a surrealist, as she turns the everyday into the uncanny. As Joan Miro brought the qualities of the unconscious to abstract, organic shapes, so Juli turns the contours of Gija country, its *gawarre* (ranges of steep hills) and *ngarriny* (hillocks), into mindscapes. As Max Ernst stylized birds to fold in on themselves like spectral hallucinations, so Juli shows us the way that *Ginnennayn Hill* is peering back upon us. Like Jaminji, she is able to render the lifeworld around her into the strange shapes of the 'magnicanny', a term that combines magnitude with the canny, the sublime with the familiar. For while aesthetics after Kant and Freud grappled with the sublime and uncanny, Juli turns these concepts around by making the immense a part of what is familiar. While *Ginnennayn Hill* is a spectacular rocky rise, it is also a place within which the *Ngarranggarni* beings of Juli's unconscious reside, impressing itself upon her mind and spirit. Or in a painting of *Goolarbool*, Juli illustrates the snake disappearing into the landscape as it is being photographed by a young girl. The snake becomes a 'shine', a shimmer that

Juli says is a warning to whitefellas not to photograph what they shouldn't.^v For Juli's Dreaming is historical rather than mythical, as she turns the *Ngarranggarni* of the deep past, the archaic time of the Dreaming, into this ever present poignancy of the *Ngarranggarniny*.

This is what Henry F. Skerritt describes, after Edouard Glissant, as a decolonising strategy in which colonised people enter into 'Relation' with the coloniser.^{vi} While being defined by the coloniser as Other, the colonised artist works to open an inter-subjective space of difference, and to articulate this difference not as an opposition but as a part of a multiplicity of differences. So that Juli paints very precise differences at work in the landscape, the differences of *Gingennayn* at *Gingennayn Hill*, and *Goolarbool* on Springvale Station. The distinct history of the Kimberley lends itself to Juli's enchantment of the landscape. For in this region the first invaders were pastoralists who largely took the law in their own hands, giving rise to a landscape of fear. Amidst the brutality of the 'Killing Times' Aboriginal people from different parts of the region banded together on missions, stations and on the outskirts of new towns. So it is that the Kimberley remains a cosmopolitan place even today, as people with different languages, ceremonial cultures and working lives negotiate their place alongside each other and incorporate each other's differences.

As the *Goorirr Goorirr* and other dances staged what Glissant calls a 'unity-diversity' between different groups living across the Kimberley, so Juli articulates a 'definite quantity' of difference by which she enters into 'Relation' with the world created by colonialism.^{vii} She envisages the haunted dimensions of the land, and the spiritual infrastructure by which the country remains the province of Dreaming beings. Simmering within the spectacular *ngaarriny* and *gawarre* of the Kimberley lie the energies of what for outsiders remains an unknown continent, that suspends within itself powers whose majesty can be glimpsed but briefly, from the corner of the eye, in the *Ngarranggarniny*. In this Juli overturns the naturalism of the Warmun landscape school, and instead turns the Kimberley into a playground of the Dreaming imagination, ordering its shapes into the infrastructure of the Dreaming mind.



Mabel Juli, *Garnkiny du Wardel du Lalanggarrany du Darndal (The moon and the star, the crocodile and the turtle)* 2012 © Mabel Juli. Image courtesy of Warmun Art Centre

ⁱ See Will Christensen, 'Paddy Jaminji and the *Guirr Guirr*' in Judith Ryan with Kim Akerman (eds), *Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 32-35 at 32-33.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Mayke Kranenbarg, 'Painting Authenticity: Aboriginal art and knowledge in an intercultural space (Warmun, Western Australia)', Master of Arts thesis, University of Nijmegen, June 2004, p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Kranenbarg, p. 36.

^{iv} W.E.H. Stanner, 'The Dreaming' in William A. Lessa and E.Z. Vogt (eds), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An anthropological approach*, Row, Peterson and Co., New York, 1958, pp. 512-23 at 514.

^v This is documented in Kranenbarg, p. 47.

^{vi} Henry F. Skerritt, 'Strange Relatives: Negotiating the borderlines in East Kimberley painting', in *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art at the Hood Museum of Art*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, U.S., pp. 93-103 at 94.

^{vii} See Skerritt, p. 94.