



THE BERNDT MUSEUM AND
MILINGIMBI ART AND CULTURAL CENTRE PRESENT

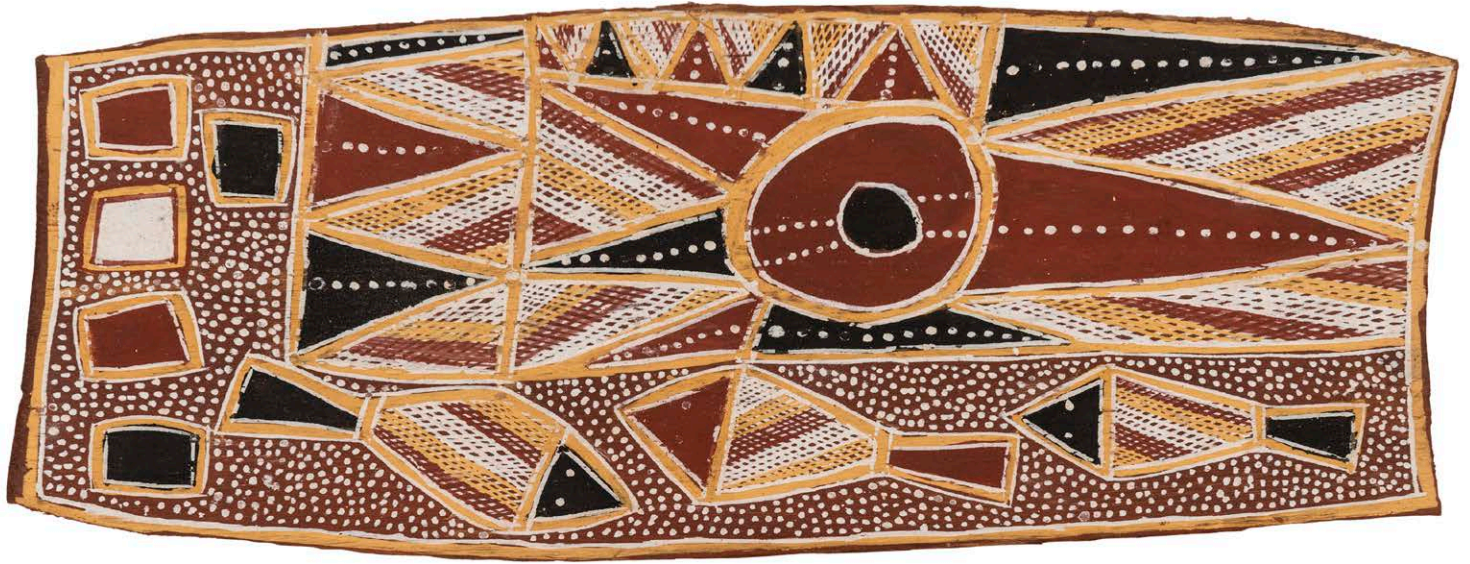
MILINGIMBI: A LIVING CULTURE

A BERNDT MUSEUM EXHIBITION AT
LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY

29 JULY - 16 DECEMBER 2017







MILINGIMBI: A LIVING CULTURE

The Berndt Museum presents *Milingimbi: A Living Culture*, a selection of works from the school of art from Milingimbi Island just off the north-east coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. This exhibition draws on works from our collections as well as the Janet Holmes à Court Collection, with the support of the Milingimbi Art and Cultural Centre. Although the value given to art today often minimises the cultural meaning, by no means should it remove the human touch, the knowledge and know-how which always leads back to the makers, the families and the communities that essentially protect Milingimbi Island. Nor does it romanticise the challenges faced by Aboriginal communities across Australia, but reminds us that their unique nexus, their centre of the world, is as important to the continent as the cities in which most Australians reside. It should also remind us that like all human endeavours, Aboriginal people need to be themselves reminded and reunited with culture on a regular basis. Although the balance required to manage public collections and community expectations is always in flux, we all can acknowledge that culture gives life its purpose and connects the human spirit with meaningful experience, thereby building our resilience to the challenges we face in this ever changing world.

Milingimbi is one of over 20 islands known as the Crocodile Islands and is around 500 kilometres east of Darwin. It includes about 40,000 hectares of land, 200km of coastline and 6000km² of sea country.¹ Members of the community have links to many of the islands, to parts of the sea and to Milingimbi itself. It is also known as Yurruwi and is the largest of the Island group. Prior to colonial impact the only other outside sway came from the Macassan traders from Indonesia, as well as Japanese fishermen. The Macassans left behind a level of influence which is still evident today, including the practices

with pandanus basket making. The Japanese influence ended with the bombing of Milingimbi Island in World War II, at that time the Island was one of Australia's first strongholds in the north of Australia. In 1923 the Methodist Overseas Mission was established and it too influenced the lives of those living on the Island. It also supported a new market for cultural material that was initiated by the curiosity of anthropologists, doctors and other Europeans who visited, and today the Island is home to around a thousand Yolngu from more than twenty clans.

Ronald and Catherine Berndt were first at Milingimbi in 1946-47, and though this was not recorded as a long stop over, they followed in the footsteps of the likes of William Lloyd Warner and Donald Thompson who had visited a decade earlier. The Berndts as students of A.P. Elkin at the University of Sydney, set out to Milingimbi on the barge known as the *Aroetta* from Darwin in around 1946-47, this barge was owned by the Mission but at the time it had been loaned to the Army. It was the only lifeline for communities across the north-east of the Northern Territory and allowed the Berndts to criss-cross from Darwin all the way around to Groote Eylandt in the east. They returned to Milingimbi in 1950 and maintained strong ties to the people there over the next few decades. The research suggests that it was the missionaries like Reverend Edgar Ted Webb at Milingimbi who supported the acquisitions of many of the barks on show today (1940-50), with reference to the receipts held in our archives.

Milingimbi is not the whole island, but actually one place, a water well where the mission was built and is more commonly known as the Macassa well that belongs to the Yirritja moiety. The story of the well is that it was made by the snake called Mundukul who came flashing lightning from Worral.² Being such a unique and fertile land, Milingimbi has produced some of



the most memorable cultural material; and like a seed pod its disbursement has stretched across the land and sea to faraway places like here in Perth. It is also reflected in the movements of people to places like Ramingining, which is evident in the work of Jimmy Wululu who started out in Milngimbi. Though its essence is comparable to language and song, these works are bound to people and place, and embedded in the estuaries and rivers, shell middens and the forested landscapes of Milngimbi. This pulse of culture continues to enrich all our lives and is evident in every bark and Larrakitj on show today.

The concept for this show was inspired by another seed event that was held in August 2016 on Milngimbi Island. The event was the *Makarraṯa: Bringing the Past into the Future*,³ which brought together representatives from major collections around the world and the community of Milngimbi and its extended connections to the Crocodile Islands. It is a part of the Australian Research Council - Linkage project *The Legacy of 50 years collecting at Milngimbi* that was being run by Lindy Allen (Museum Victoria) and Dr Louise Hamby (ANU), and included the late Dr Joseph Neparrnga Gumbula (1954-2015) (Milngimbi). The *Makarraṯa* as a peacemaking ceremony, set out to challenge invited parties to pursue change in the way in which collections worked with the community and to resolve any underlying conflict that may have arisen over time. It included directors, curators, librarians, community organisations and community leaders from State and Federal collections to museums, libraries and galleries around the world. The outcome was a resolution that would be signed by participants to recognise the event and to commit to a shared practice of knowledge exchange and access between collections and community, to benefit its living culture. The Berndt Museum's response was to participate by sharing information, engaging discussions and to bring out of the

boxes, works that have not been on show for decades. We also acquired new works from the Milngimbi Larrakitj project along with a number of collecting institutions who attended, partly out of a sign of respect but also to support the connections between our past and present collections.

Dr Vanessa Russ
Associate Director, Berndt Museum

Bibliography

1. Crocodile Islands Rangers. *About Us*. 8 May 2017. Website.
2. Christie, Michael. *Teaching Aboriginal children: Milngimbi and beyond*. Edith Cowan University. ECU Publications Pre. 2011. Online
3. Hamby, Louise. Lindy Allen. *Makarraṯa: Bringing the Past into the Future*. ARC Linkage Grant LP130100346

Image credits left-right

Artist Unknown, Yolŋu, *Rarrtji, Bush foods*, natural pigments on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [Acc.No.1318]

Djangubali, Yolŋu, *Waterhole, Fish and Storm Clouds*, natural pigments on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [Acc.No.1310]

Tom Djawa, Yolŋu, *Marabinjin, Saw Tooth Fish*, natural pigments on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [Acc.No.1098]

Jananbinal, Yolŋu, *Fire Dreaming Myth*, natural pigments on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [Acc.No.1092]





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We pay our respects to elders past and present upon whose lands we live, work and travel.

We would like to thank the Milingimbi Art and Cultural Centre and Janet Holmes à Court Collection for sharing knowledge, making new works and loaning to us. Your support has made a great contribution to the success of this exhibition.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the Berndt Museum, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and Cultural Precinct staff in ensuring such a successful exhibition is possible. Special note should go to: Chris Durkin, Joe Dhamanydji, Jack Roy, Sarah Ridhuan, Sofie Nielson, Eva Fernandez, Lyle Branson, Anthony Kelly, and Clare McFarlane.

We would like to acknowledge and thank Louise Hamby (ANU) and Lindy Allen (Museum Victoria) for the Makarrata in 2016, and for their contribution to our research.

To our artists past and present, we could not have done this without you. A special thank you for our new works must go to: Daryl Yatjany, David Yarrung Roy, Helen Ganalmirriwuy, Joe Dhamanydji, Jack Roy and Raymond Bulambula.

Published by the Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia, 2017.
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ISBN 978 1 876793 89 0

Cover image and inside cover image: Vanessa Russ, photographer, 2017



BERNDT MUSEUM
LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY
OPEN TUES - SAT 11AM - 5PM
FREE ADMITTANCE



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