

Paintings from Warmun

ST PAUL St Gallery One

25 September – 23 October 2015

These paintings all come from artists working in Warmun, a community of about 400 people located 200 kilometres south of Kununurra in the Kimberley region of far north Western Australia. The Warmun Art Centre there was founded by Queenie McKenzie, Madigan Thomas, Hector Jandany, Lena Nyadbi, Betty Carrington and Patrick Mung Mung, members of the contemporary painting movement that began in the mid-1970s. Warmun Art Centre is owned and governed by the Gija people, its income returned to the community. Today some 50 emerging and established Gija artists work there.

The works are by Warmun artists Mabel Juli, David Cox, Lena Nyadbi, Churchill Cann, Gordon Barney, Phyllis Thomas and Shirley Purdie. In these paintings the material is the work; they are earth and mineral as well as images. While they are stylistically very different in approach, all share the ochre, charcoal and natural earth pigments that typify contemporary Aboriginal painting in the Kimberley region. Coloured by iron oxide, ochre ranges from subtle yellow to deep red-brown. Mawandu or white ochre (extensively used in Mabel Juli's work, alongside black ochre) is distinctive to the Kimberley area. This is a naturally occurring white clay that forms deep in the ground along certain riverbeds. Mixing natural pigments with mawandu provides range of colours including lime greens, greys, and a rare pink, all of which are produced at Warmun and traded with art centres across the region.

'I don't paint another country, I paint my own', says Mabel Juli. Each of these works is a narrative vividly connected with the place it was made. As Anna Crane (community programmes coordinator at Warmun Art Centre), has written, while the social contexts and physical landscapes in which these narratives are founded and sustained are unsettled – historically and today, through colonial governance structures that have violently denied Aboriginal access to land, resources and cultural inheritance – oral traditions, and latterly, painting, have been significant in carrying stories from one generation to the next.

In Crane's text on *Garnkiny*, the Ngarranggarni 'big story' of the Moon Man (often painted by Mabel Juli, alongside his promised wife, the star), she refers to such stories as 'intricate networks or constellations of related knowledge – of country, of human behaviour, of the natural and social world.'¹ They hold important understanding about ways of being in the world, about social and ecological relationships, about forecasting weather and adaptation to climate shifts. In March 2011, when a major flood devastated Warmun, the event was widely attributed to the will of interfering humans who had destabilised the ecological balance.²

These social and cultural practices and knowledge also ground a strong political voice. Recent reforms in the Indigenous Affairs Department under the Tony Abbott led federal government, and the closure of remote Aboriginal communities proposed by Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett, have already impacted the funding, and threaten the wellbeing of the Warmun community and many others. The Indigenous Affairs portfolio suffered a \$534m cut in the 2014 budget, replacing 150 indigenous programmes and services with five.³ While Warmun is considered 'viable' under the government's new legislation artists and others from the community have been strongly outspoken in resistance to the shut down of other indigenous communities. Warmun has also been a centre for Gija language revival initiatives.

Works by these artists have travelled all over the world; in Lena Nyadbi's case her painting *Dayiwul Lirlmim* (2013) is recreated large-scale on the rooftop of the Musée e du quai Branly in Paris, following her 2006 exhibition there. Exhibited in Auckland, the paintings from Warmun shift again into a new place and cultural context, one not so far from home, but the limits of language, the knowledge of stories and even the formal vocabulary of painting make the distance a very real one.

This exhibition is intended as a space to acknowledge these 'constellations of related knowledge', and their complex connections with the social and material world. Asked how she learned the story of the Moon Man – an important dreaming for her country – Mabel Juli says: 'My mother and father. And he's a, his Ngarranggarni [Dreaming rock] is right there in Springvale, in Yari. My mother and my dad used to take me everywhere, walkabout. Show me all the Ngarranggarni everywhere.'⁴

This exhibition was made possible through working with Auckland art dealer Tim Melville to select and borrow the works exhibited from New Zealand collectors. Tim has been showing Warmun artists' work in New Zealand since 2010. His interest in fostering a trans-Tasman indigenous dialogue means he travels frequently to Australia. In 2014 he visited Warmun for the first time and met most of the community's senior artists, including Mabel Juli, Phyllis Thomas and Lena Nyadbi. Tim continues to maintain close connections with Warmun Art Centre and showed their artists' work most recently at the 2015 Sydney Contemporary Art Fair.

1 Anna Crane, introduction to *Garnkiny: Constellations of Meaning* (Warmun Art Centre, 2014), 3.

2 Alana Hunt, *Jadagen – Warnkan – Barnden: Changing Climate in Gija Country* (Warmun Art Centre, 2015), 13.

3 For a summary of these changes see <http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2014/05/13/government-dramatically-reduce-indigenous-programs>

4 Mabel Juli, 'Nginyjiny Berdij Laarne, The one who stands on top', *Garnkiny: Constellations of Meaning* (Warmun Art Centre, 2014), 47.

Artist bios

Gordon Barney was born and grew up on Alice Downs Station. His father taught him stockwork and he became known as a skilled horsebreaker and buckjumper (rodeo rider). When Barney worked as a stockman, he would often carry with him a saddlebag for collecting ochre. At the end of his mustering stint, he would have a bagful of ochres that he sourced from riding through his country. While working on Mabel Downs Station he met Shirley Purdie, who later became his wife. He started painting in 1998 when Warmun Art Centre opened, often painting various hill lines located in his traditional country. Barney's sense of concentration and focus on country are often reflected in these landscapes. Barney is well known in Warmun community as a strong law and culture man and as an important ceremonial dancer.

Date of birth: 1/1/1946

Language: Gija, Kimberley Kriol

Ngarrangarni / totem: Hill kangaroo, Wedge-tailed eagle

Skin: Jaangari

Churchill Cann was born and grew up on Texas Downs Station, northeast of Warmun, where he worked as a stockman for most of his life. His bush name is Yoonany. Cann has travelled extensively throughout the Kimberley, working on many different cattle stations between Warmun and Broome. When station work finished, he moved to Warmun Community to live, where he is known as an important ceremonial dancer, bushman and senior artist. Cann is one of the few remaining medicine men for the Gija language group, a role he inherited from his father. Many of his siblings are also artists; they include Nancy Nodea and Katie Cox. Cann's daughter, Charlene Carrington, is also an artist.

Cann's painting style is distinctive. He views the landscape aerially and maps out his country in soft, painterly marks; carefully observed topological maps of this region. These paintings involve aspects of traditional Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) stories as well as his own experiences in this country as a stockman and station hand. When Cann undertakes a painting, he will often spend some time reflecting and considering what aspect of his country or experience he will communicate.

In 2013, Cann won the Western Australian Artist of the Year at the Western Australian Artist Awards.

Date of birth: 31/12/1944

Language: Gija, Miriwoong, Kimberley Kriol

Totem: Ngarrangarni

Skin: Juwurru

David Cox was born at Yiyili, between Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing. He went to school at Yiyili and spent his early years there. This area has many creeks running through it, which feed the Fitzroy River in the west of the Kimberley. Cox now lives in Warmun Community, Turkey Creek. He is part of a younger group of artists at Warmun interested in the Dreaming of their ancestors and in exploring new ways of communicating these stories. Cox learnt to paint under Warmun artist Churchill Cann, whose aerial approach to viewing landscape and fine sweeping 'watercolour' strokes have greatly influenced Cox's work. Many of Cox's stories were passed to him from his mother. His father,

also an artist, taught him to paint. Cox is the cousin of well-known Warmun artist Katie Cox.

Date of birth: 31/12/1968

Language: Gooniyandi, Walmajarri

Ngarrangarni / totem: goanna, ant, White-necked heron

Skin: Jangala

Mabel Juli's status as one of Australia's most revered painters has emerged from a body of work characterised by bold yet simple compositions that are informed by detailed stories passed on from her family. She was born at Five Mile, near Moola Boola Station (south of Warmun), and was taken as a baby to Springvale Station, her mother's country. Mabel's bush name is Wiringgoon. She is a strong law and culture woman and an important ceremonial singer and dancer.

Juli started painting in the 1980s, at the same time as Warmun artists Queenie McKenzie and Madigan Thomas. The women used to watch Rover Thomas paint and one day he said to them, 'You try yourself, you might make good painting yourself'. She now primarily paints the Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) stories of her country Darrajayin, largely covered by Springvale Station.

Mabel started work on the station as a girl, and as a young woman moved to be with her husband, working at cattle stations including Bedford Downs Station and Bow River Station. Mabel and her husband had six children. Juli is one of seven children: six boys and one girl. Artist Rusty Peters, who also works at Warmun Art Centre, is Mabel Juli's brother. Her husband passed away in 1982.

In 2013 Mabel was awarded the Kate Challis Raka Award for Indigenous Art.

Date of birth: 31/12/1932

Language: Gija, Kimberley Kriol

Ngarrangarni / totem: emu, echidna

Skin: Nyawurru

Birth place: Barlinyin: Springvale Station

Lena Nyadbi was born at Warnmarnjulugun Lagoon (near Greenvale Station) and grew up on Old Lissadell Station. Like other young girls she was put to work on the station at an early age. She worked a wide range of jobs including mustering cattle, milking the cows and general station duties. She moved to the new Lissadell Station when it was relocated due to the development of Lake Argyle, and it was there she met her first husband, Ben Bandi.

Nyadbi spent many years watching and learning from well-known Warmun artists who have now passed away, in particular Paddy Jaminji, who taught her the techniques of grinding ochre and charcoal, and of rubbing the charcoal into the canvas with her hands. However, Nyadbi did not start painting until 1998 as she was always working at other jobs in the community. Nyadbi has painted at the Warmun Art Centre since it opened in August 1998 and has developed an international reputation as a painter. In 2006, she was one of eight artists featured in the Musée du quai Branly project in Paris; in 2013 Nyadbi's work *Dayiwul Lirlmim* was recreated on the rooftop of the museum.

Lena Nyadbi cont.

Date of birth: 31/12/1935

Language: Gija, Kimberley Kriol

Ngarrangarni / totem: emu, echidna

Skin: Nyawurru

Shirley Purdie has been painting for more than twenty years and is an artist of increasing significance. She is also a prominent leader in Warmun community and an incisive cross-cultural communicator. Inspired by senior Warmun artists including her late mother, the great Madigan Thomas, as well as Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie, Purdie began to paint her country in the early 1990s. Her uncle, artist Jack Britten, said to her, 'Why don't you try painting for yourself, you might be all right.' Purdie says: 'It's good to learn from old people. They keep saying when you paint you can remember that country, just like to take a photo, but there's the Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) and everything. Good to put it in painting, your country, so kids can know and understand. When the old people die, young people can read the stories from the paintings. They can learn from the paintings and maybe they want to start painting too.'

Purdie's work explores narratives associated with the country of her mother and father, and is characterised by a bold use of textured ochre. Significant places such as Baloowa, Jirragin and Gilban lie on country now taken in by Violet Valley and Mabel Downs cattle stations. Much of her work also explores spirituality and the relationship between Gija conceptions of Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) and Catholicism. Colonial histories of the region also figure in work in which she relates accounts of early contact, massacre, warfare and indentured labour since the incursion of pastoralists into Gija land in the late 1800s.

In 2007 Purdie was awarded the Blake Prize for Religious Art for her work *Stations of the Cross*. Purdie is presently working on a major exhibition and publication of great cultural and ecological value, documenting through painting and in Gija language the plants and trees of her country.

Date of birth: 31/12/1947

Language: English, Gija, Kimberley Kriol

Ngarrangarni / totem: crow

Skin: Nangari

Birth place: Gilban: Mabel Downs Station

Phyllis Thomas was born at a place called Riyarr on the Turner River, south east of Purnululu. When young she worked on Turner Station looking after poultry, gardening, grinding salt and carting water from the well. However she often preferred to run away into the bush with the old women to hunt, collect dingo scalps and look for gold. Thomas is a Gija woman of Ngarra skin whose bush name, Booljoonngali, means 'big rain coming down with lots of wind'.

She began painting when Freddie Timms set up the Jirrawun Aboriginal Arts group in 1998. She focused on Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) places and bush tucker from Roogoon (Crocodile Hole) area as well as the country around the middle reaches of the Ord and Turner Rivers where she was born. Phyllis was represented in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA) in 1999 with the work *Boornbem Goorlem, Hot Water Spring II*. Her painting *The Escape* was

highly commended in the seventeenth NATSIAA (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award) in 2000, and was purchased as part of the Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory's Telstra Collection.

Phyllis was also a singer and dancer with the Neminuwarlin Performance Group in its production of *Fire, Fire Burning Bright* which premiered at the Perth International Arts Festival in February 2002. Phyllis sings the haunting Warnalirri with Peggy Patrick on the second half of the group's CD.

Most recently Phyllis has been working on Joonba, Junba, Juju, a collaborative project with Kimberley Aboriginal Artists (KAA) that focuses on sharing song and dance cycles across Indigenous language groups in the Kimberley. Phyllis has also worked extensively with young people on cultural projects that incorporate media and is a key teacher in the language programme for young adults at Warmun Art Centre.

Date of birth: 1/1/1933

Language: Gija, Kimberley Kriol

Ngarrangarni / totem : black Cockatoo, Kingfisher

Skin: Ngarra

Biographies edited from Warmun Art Centre

<http://warmunart.com.au/>.

Works list

1. Mabel Juli
Wardel and Garnkiny, 2012
natural ochre and pigment on canvas
Private collection
2. Phyllis Thomas
Gemerre, 2013
natural ochre and pigment on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery
3. Mabel Juli, *Garnkiny Ngarranggarni*, 2010
natural ochre and pigments on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery, acquired by the Chartwell Collection August 2015.
4. Phyllis Thomas
Gemerre, 2015
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery
5. David Cox
Sing Out Spring – Yiyili Country, 2008
natural ochre and pigment on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery
6. Shirley Purdie
Gija Kinship, 2015
natural ochre and pigments on canvas
Private Collection
7. David Cox
Sing Out Spring – Yiyili Country, 2013
natural ochre and pigment on canvas (diptych)
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery, acquired by the Chartwell Collection August 2015.

Works list continued...

8. Gordon Barney
Gurndalngany, 2012
natural ochre and pigment on linen (diptych)
Private collection

9. Churchill Cann
Spring Creek, 2013
natural ochre and pigments on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery

10. Churchill Cann
Yunurr, 2012
natural ochre and pigments on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery

11. David Cox
Sing Out Spring – Yiyili Country, 2011
natural ochre and pigment on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery

12. Phyllis Thomas
Gemerre, 2014
natural ochre and pigment on canvas
Courtesy Tim Melville Gallery

13. Lena Nyadbi
Jimbirla (Spearheads) & Dayiwul (Barramundi Scales), 2014
natural ochre and pigments on linen
Private collection

Floorplan

