

Moving the body painting into the art gallery — knowing about and appreciating works of Aboriginal art

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Western art history has developed with two complementary sides: a history of art objects in their own right and art as a source of information about people's lives and worlds — artworks as sources of historical information.¹ The former history is linked to the value creation processes that elevate certain objects to the category of fine art, evaluate them according to qualitative criteria and provide the basis for connoisseurship. The latter can leave the object, and the art in the object, far behind, focussing on its evidential value or even morphing into social theory. Until recently these differences in approaches to art objects have been associated with an opposition between two kinds of institutions — art galleries (or art museums in the USA) on the one hand and museums (of ethnography or social history) on the other. The distinction between the art gallery and the museum can be simplistically summarised as a difference of emphasis between appreciating and 'knowing about' the work of art. But it has also been associated with the very definition of things as fine art or non fine art. To simplify things significantly, art galleries have been associated with connoisseurship and have developed as privileged venues for viewing fine art and the appreciation of objects on the basis of their form. Museums have provided less privileged and more crowded viewing places for material culture including ethnography, and have tended to emphasise an interpretative perspective that places the object in its social and cultural context.

The value creation processes involved in the creation of fine art have affected art historians, anthropologists and archaeologists in different ways. They have all had to engage with the process of classification that has divided their data into different sets collected by different institutions on the basis of whether it is or is not held to be fine art. Fine art in this sense is a western category of relatively recent origins that until recently was largely centred on the history of western art.² Other works were included within the category of fine art on the basis of their relationship with western art history. Art historians as a profession, because of their focus on western fine art, had a closer association with art galleries than social history or ethnography museums, but were none the less often constrained by its definitions and connoisseurial requirements. Anthropologists and archaeologists of art found that the majority of the works they were interested in were excluded from the art

¹ See Irene Winter, *On Art in the Ancient Near East, Volume II, From the Third Millennium BCE*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, 494. Winter characterises these two approaches as belonging to the 'object-oriented connoisseur and the context oriented social historian'.

² Irene Winter, 'Defining "Aesthetics" for Non-Western studies: the Case for Ancient Mesopotamia', in M.A. Holly and K. Moxey, eds, *Art History, Aesthetics and Visual Studies*, Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002, 3-28.

gallery. This has had the effect of artificially creating barriers in the discourse between art history and anthropology and the separation of works from different cultures and times in different institutions on the basis of a Eurocentric categorisation.³

Art historians, archaeologists and anthropologists work between these two institutional frameworks often taking advantage of both. They contribute equally to the appreciation of the artwork in all its diversity and to the analysis of the art as a source of information about the world. None the less, the frameworks have provided a powerful underlying dialectic in which the categories of the art world have been contested and the lives of objects have been changed.⁴ Introducing new objects into these arenas both requires and stimulates change. In this paper I will argue that Aboriginal art has been an agent of change in Australian art discourse and has stimulated new approaches to the exhibition of art objects and influenced the categorical distinctions made between them.⁵ Museums and art galleries provide experimental situations for the inclusion of Aboriginal art — works for so long excluded from the category of fine art. In some exhibitionary contexts the Aboriginal artworks are positioned as exemplars of fine art, in other cases Aboriginal artworks are exhibited in ways that threaten to break down the categorical distinctions associated with fine art galleries and museums. The changes that are occurring are not restricted to Aboriginal art but are also a response to a more general performative turn in contemporary art practice. In this paper I will focus my argument on one of the most renowned works of Yolngu fine art, *Djan'kawu Creation Story, 1959*, by Mawalan Marika in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (figure 1), and a so-far unexhibited artwork, a body painting that is associated with the same ancestral beings (figure 2). My argument is that knowing about and appreciating works of art are two sides of the same coin. However the example will also show the ways in which Yolngu artists have played on the dialogical edge between the museum and the art gallery in acting through art over time and creating new works for new contexts.

³ Anthropology and art history had a close relationship in the 19th Century with overlapping interests in the evolution of forms and there have been recent strong signs of reengagement. See D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: studies in the history and theory of response*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; H. Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001; M. Westermann, Introduction, in M. Westermann, ed., *Anthropologies of Art*, Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005, vii-xxxi; Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories*, Oxford: Berg, 2007; Thierry Dufrière and Anne-Christine Taylor, 'By way of introduction' in Thierry Dufrière and Anne-Christine Taylor, eds, *Cannibalismes disciplinaires : quand l'histoire de l'art et l'anthropologie se rencontrent*, Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2009; Janet Berlo, 'Anthropologies and histories of art: a view from the terrain of Native North American art history' in M. Westermann (ed.) *Anthropologies of Art*. Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. 2005

⁴ Jacques Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986; Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 2007.

⁵ Ian McLean, ed., *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2010.

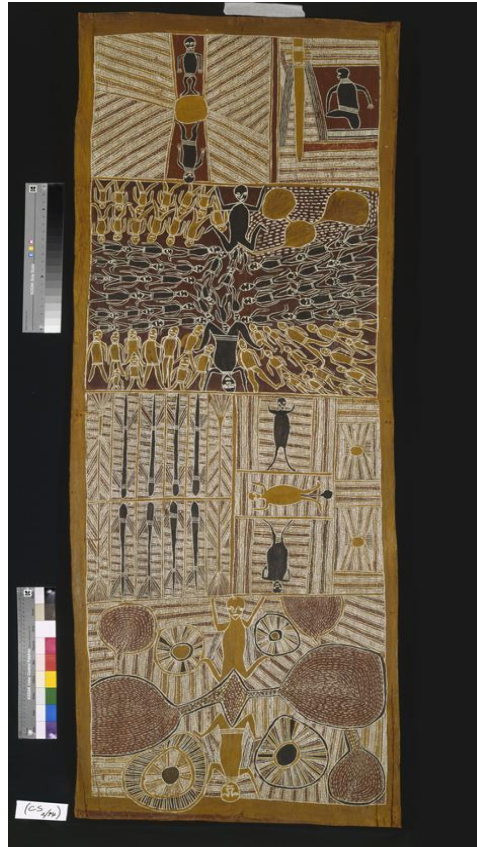


Figure 1 *Djan'kawu creation story*,. 1959, by Mawalan Marika, Rirratjingu clan, and Wandjuk Marika, Rirratjingu clan. Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, 191.8 x 69.8 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959. Reproduced with permission of Buku Larnggay Mulka Art Centre.



Figure 2 Body painting at a circumcision ceremony at Yilpara in 2001. Photograph Howard Morphy.

Becoming art

In my book *Becoming Art*⁶ I argued that over the period since European colonisation Aboriginal art has undergone a process of recognition as a member of the western category of fine art. In order to understand this process we need to acknowledge an underlying cross-cultural category of art that is independent of the western fine art concept, but which in a loose sense includes its objects. Art history needs to engage with this process to understand where these objects came from — how objects shift categories over time. Further, I would argue this is part of the normal process of world art history and an instance of a process that has seen the inclusion of Mesopotamian art, Egyptian art, Mediaeval art and Renaissance art within the framework of fine art. In the simplest terms, the recognition process has seen those objects collected by museums of ethnography and social history gaining access to those privileged viewing spaces — the art museums.

The process of inclusion has subtly changed the category of western fine art and in turn influenced contemporary art practice at all stages of recent western art history. Objects that were quite unacceptable as fine art works in the mid 19th century and would have been rejected by the Academy were included in the 20th century. I am referring here to categories of object — for example pottery, textiles, fibre arts and so on. The impact on art practice of previously excluded works is well known, including the influence of classical sculpture and architecture on western art from the Renaissance on, and the influence of Japanese, African and Oceanic art on modernism at the turn of the 20th century.⁷

Many forms of Aboriginal art being produced at the time of European colonisation were art forms that had no place in contemporary fine art practice of the time or belonged to contested categories such as craft or decorative art. Aboriginal artworks included body paintings (figure 2), hollow log coffins and memorial posts (figure 3), sand sculptures (figure 4), painted skulls, feather ceremonial baskets, and ceremonial digging sticks (figure 7). In addition Aboriginal art was integrated within performance genres in which the object had its effect when integrated within sequences of action.⁸ Thus from European colonisation perhaps until the mid 20th century many genres of Aboriginal art did not have analogues in the art gallery. In Aboriginal art those forms *preceded* movements such as expressionism, minimalism, performance art, installation art, conceptual art, the body as art — all movements in

⁶ Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 2007. See also Elizabeth Coleman 'Historical ironies: the Australian Aboriginal art revolution', *Journal of Art Historiography*, December 2009, for an excellent discussion of these issues.

⁷ W. Rubin, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: the affinity of the tribal and the modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.

⁸ See Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1991. Ruth and Vincent Megaw's position with reference to Celtic Art is also salient here: 'In dealing with Celtic art, it is necessary to abandon post-Renaissance definitions which are as meaningless in understanding Celts as they are for most other prehistoric or ethnographic material. Distinctions developed in our own society between "high art", popular art, and craft are alien in most other peoples at most other times. In particular, the view that "real" art, as distinct from craft, must exist primarily in the realm of ideas, and have no demonstrable practical use, is a very modern concept', Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art from Its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*, (second edition), London: Thames and Hudson, 2001,16.

western art practice that enabled ground sculptures, body paintings and minimalist sculptures to have a possible place in the exhibitionary space of the fine art museum. While such analogues often misrepresent Aboriginal art, they unquestionably have influenced its reception. Because Aboriginal art had its own history separate from western fine art it could not easily be fitted into that art history except as an analogue for possible early stages of its development — for example as primitive art. In many respects the arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas occupied that space much earlier, partly because of the influence they began to have on western artists.⁹



Figure 3 A Djuwany post made for a Djungguwan ceremony held at Gurka'wuy in 1976. The ceremony re-enacts the journey of the Wawilag sisters, two ancestral women, across north east Arnhem Land. The feather string suspended from the post represents their journey and the bags ones that they carried. The ceremony is the subject of Ian Dunlop's 1990 film *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy*, Film Australia. Photograph, Howard Morphy.

⁹ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1989.



Figure 4 Sand sculpture representing the ancestral stingray, Lulumu, who created an inland path as he fled an ancestral hunter in Wangarr Times. The sand sculpture was recorded by the anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s and is a semi-permanent feature of the landscape near Yilpara on the northern coast of Blue Mud Bay. Fish bones thrown into the two circles that represent the eyes can bring success in hunting. Photograph Peter Eves.

This history of inclusion indeed is important partly because it is integral to the history of western art practice, but it is not the dimension of history that I wish to dwell on in this paper. My focus here is on the contextual information that is required to understand the artworks that are included in collections and exhibited in art museums. The historic background of artworks, including the history of techniques and form and socio-cultural context is vital to understanding works that are in art museums. There should be no absolute separation between the kind of information concerning provenance, date and sequential position required by art connoisseurs and the evidence required for more broadly conceived art histories. Such information is going to be of differential relevance to different viewers. Some audiences will have a primary concern with the impact of the form of art alone whereas others may view artworks wherever they are displayed as historical documents, and art museums have to cater for those differences. But, in building collections and developing exhibitions, contextual information about the objects is a vital ingredient.

Much art history is concerned with objects, actions, events and contexts, which cannot be included in the galleries' collections but which are integral to understanding the work of art. In understanding Renaissance paintings it is important to know the iconographical referents of religious imagery, their context of placement within the Church, the objects included within the paintings, and the significance of the textiles and so on. Such information is not only of intrinsic historical interest but is often critical to understanding the history of artistic practice itself — to understanding the intention, influences and background knowledge of the

artist.¹⁰ The history of perspectival representation can only be understood by connecting artistic practice to the historical contexts of viewing artworks at the time of their production, to the history of science and to artistic experimentation, none of which are fully independent of the others.¹¹

In the case of Aboriginal art, precisely the same journey outside the contents of the art gallery is required to connect the works of art to a history of art practice that can only ever be partially contained within the walls of any institution. However there is a crucial difference between this and the background research required to fill in our understanding of the significance and creative practices of the Renaissance or 19th century Japanese art, that is the fact that Aboriginal art is being produced today. The art history we are producing is also the contextual information about contemporary art practice, albeit the practice of artists who have only recently gained recognition as such. A second difference that might be posited is that the sources and associated disciplinary discourses are different. The sources of information that provide a background to Renaissance art are primarily material and written, the resources for filling in the history of Indigenous artworks are material, often in the form of photographs, film and sound recordings, and ethnographic writings recorded by the methods of participant observation — learning within a cultural context. However differences in data should not in itself mean that approaches to Indigenous and non-Indigenous art should differ radically. The history of art objects requires many different sources of data and different research methods according to the nature of that data but the objectives should be broadly similar. The reasons why ethnographic data, usually resulting from anthropological research, is the main data available for researching the significance of Indigenous art in the context of its production is that in many cases it is the main data that exists. It does not mean that the data cannot be used for art historical research. Most data used by art historians was not originally made for the purpose of studying art history, but as records of accounts, description of events, diaries from the Grand Tour and so on.

Implicit in my argument is that there are two different foci for art history. One focus is on the set of works that have been selected out for inclusion in the world's museums of fine art, and the other is the broader topic of art as a form of human action in the world.¹² I think that both projects are important but they need to be contained under the same umbrella even though they are likely to share umbrellas with other disciplinary clusters. The acknowledgement that art history shares its subject with other disciplinary frameworks has encouraged some to shift the focus of the discipline towards more neutral concepts such as image or picture.¹³ While I have

¹⁰ e.g. Michael Baxandall, *Paintings and Experience in 15th Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972; Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

¹¹ A good example of this is the debates that surround the painting practice of Johannes Vermeer, see for example Robert Huerta, *Giants of Delft: Johannes Vermeer and the Natural Philosophers. The Parallel Search for Knowledge during the Age of Discovery*, Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003.

¹² Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 2007.

¹³ e.g. Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 1989 and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

no desire to follow such a terminological switch¹⁴ the broader framework is necessary to understand the significance of art both inside and outside the museum.

Yolngu works that presently are prominent in art gallery collections and exhibitions are very much a subset of works that fit into the broader Yolngu art category. There are no sand sculptures on permanent display, no body paintings, no painted skulls, no ceremonial digging sticks, no spear throwers, and fibre arts are only beginning to creep in around the edges. There are different reasons for all of these exclusions and indeed if my analysis is correct there is every possibility that in the future many of these forms will be included. However Aboriginal art entered the Gallery in the form of analogues with what at the time were the most conventional western art forms – painting and sculpture. There had been a number of isolated attempts to include Aboriginal art in the Gallery in the first half of the 20th century, but in retrospect the defining moment was the acquisition by the Art Gallery of New South Wales of the Scougall/Tuckson collection in 1959-60, and equally important its exhibition in the forecourt of the Gallery (Morphy 2001).¹⁵ I say ‘in retrospect’ only because at the time, and for many years after, its inclusion was contested. The Scougall/Tuckson collection comprised a set of *pukumani* poles from the Tiwi Islands and a set of bark paintings from Yirrkala. The two sets of objects fitted a significant implicit pragmatic criterion for inclusion in art gallery collections; they were portable, durable exhibitable objects. The Tiwi poles were large ironwood sculptures that could be appreciated as abstract forms. The bark paintings were impressive in scale and combined the figurative and geometric forms of Yolngu ceremonial painting. Since my focus is on Yolngu art I will at this stage leave the *pukumani* poles behind and concentrate on the bark paintings.

Where do bark paintings come from?

I will centre my discussion on two images: a bark painting and a body painting. The bark painting (figure 1) is titled *Djan'kawu Creation Story, 1959*; the body painting could share that title (figure 2). In terms of time the body painting is the most recent, in terms of art history it is arguably logically prior to the bark painting, if only in the sense that works such as this one are necessary to understanding the history of development of bark painting. However because of the recursive nature of Yolngu art it is possible to argue that the body painting, because of its later date, is a contemporary work of art while the bark painting belongs to a moment in the past and could not be remade today.

The body painting was painted on the chest of an initiate during a circumcision ceremony at Yilpara on Blue Mud Bay in 2001. I have written elsewhere in detail about the ways in which paintings are integrated within Yolngu ceremonial performance and can only touch on the topic here.¹⁶ A major theme of Yolngu circumcision ceremonies is the establishment of the boy's connection to the Wangarr,

¹⁴ Howard Morphy, ‘Not just images but art: pragmatic issues in the movement towards a more inclusive art history’, in Jaynie Anderson, ed., *Crossing Cultures: Conflict Migration and Convergence: the Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art*, 2009, 60-3.

¹⁵ Howard Morphy, ‘Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery’, *Humanities Research*, 2001, 7 (1): 37-50.

¹⁶ Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 1991, Chapter 7.

the Ancestral dimension, by re-enacting the foundational events that led to the formation of the landscape and the institution of Yolngu law (*rom*). The substance of the ceremony is the performance of the *madayin* — songs, paintings, dances and power names — of clans belonging to the same moiety as the initiate. These *madayin* are manifestations as well as representations of particular Wangarr beings and the events associated with them. In this case the painting represents a place associated with the Djan'kawu sisters who are believed to have given birth to the founding ancestors of clans of the Dhuwa moiety. The painting was a collaborative effort by a number of men, each taking a turn in infilling the design with cross hatching. The leading artist who did most of the work and set the design was Dhukal Wirrpanda of the Dhuḍi Djapu clan. Paintings by Dhukal are in many art galleries in Australia and in structure, technique and composition this painting could easily have joined them. But painted on the body of an initiate this was designed to last little beyond the duration of the ceremony. It is a temporary work yet required just the same time, skill and creativity as a painting made for sale to the outside world. And indeed the occasion required that it was produced and judged by the highest standards of Yolngu cultural aesthetics. I will return to the significance of this painting at later stages in the argument.

The history of bark paintings like the history of much Aboriginal art prior to European colonisation has to be reconstructed largely from indirect evidence. In eastern Arnhem Land the nature of the environment means that we do not have the rich record of rock art that exists in many other regions of Australia. We do not have any bark paintings from Yolngu country prior to European colonisation that began in the 1920s, and that has led some to assume that bark paintings themselves were a post-colonial artefact. However the history of Yolngu art from the time of European colonisation on, from the establishment of mission stations, is perhaps better known and better documented than elsewhere in Australia. The collections and writings of missionaries, explorers and anthropologists are immensely rich from the 1930s on. And from the evidence provided it is quite clear that bark was a medium for art at the time of the establishment of the mission stations and before the development of an art market. Paintings were made, as elsewhere in northern Australia, on the inner walls of bark huts. However bark was used to produce ancestral designs in certain ceremonies and bark was used in making containers for carrying the bones of the deceased and in the construction of ceremonial objects. Donald Thomson also records that bark was used as a medium for teaching designs and exchanging knowledge about designs.

Yolngu have many different categories of paintings according to their status as religious objects and their contexts of use. These categories of painting cut across medium or rather surface — the same painting can be produced as a bark painting, a body painting, on a hollow log or on a skull.¹⁷ The technique of painting is similar in all cases with paintings being built up from an overall ground colour followed by the delineation and blocking out of design elements including figurative representations, followed by the fine cross-hatching of the surface of the bark using a thin brush of human hair. Paintings such as those collected by Tuckson and Scougall have their origins in the sacred paintings used in ceremonies. They comprise the same design

¹⁷ Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 1991, xx.

elements that would occur on body paintings in a wide range of ceremonial contexts or bark bone containers.

The first bark paintings from Eastern Arnhem Land that were made for sale to Europeans fall into one of two categories, paintings based on ancestral designs associated with particular places and secular paintings largely comprised of figurative representations that Yolngu refer to as *wakinngu* — a term which can be loosely translated as ordinary or mundane or colloquially as ‘hunting story’. The sacred paintings were the kind of paintings that would be painted on a boy’s chest prior to circumcision or on a body prior to burial. This association is reflected in the fact that a number of the early bark paintings collected by the anthropologist Donald Thomson and missionary Wilbur Chaseling conformed to the structure of body paintings, including the extensions of the design down the thigh and the lines drawn over the shoulders (figure 5).



Figure 5 *Fish Trap at Baraltja, 1942*. Bark painting by Mundukuḷ Marawili. Collected by Donald Thomson at Caledon Bay on 17/9/1942, while he commanded the Special Reconnaissance Unit of Eastern Arnhem Land ‘warriors’ to monitor Japanese activity. The painting represents the Mouth of the Baraltja River associated with the ancestral snake Burrut’ tji or Mundukuḷ. The background design represents the form of an ancestral fish trap made out of the snake’s ribs, and the flow of brackish water through the river mouth during the wet season. The Donald Thomson Collection on loan to Museum Victoria from The University of Melbourne. Copyright the artist’s family. Reproduced courtesy of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Later on these additions were left out but the designs were of the same type and centred on a particular place. These paintings reflected the underlying structure of clan paintings in which a core design exists for each *yindi yaku* (big named) place

associated with a particular ancestral being. Each clan possesses a number of designs each of which is focused on a particular named place and, usually, those designs are reproduced individually.

There are perhaps three main ways in which the Scougall bark paintings differ from a body painting produced in a ceremonial context: scale, the number of figurative representations and in the incorporation of a narrative structure within the composition. The move towards larger, more narrative artworks was encouraged both by anthropologist Ronald Berndt in the case of his collection of crayon drawings and by Scougall in the case of bark paintings. Both used artworks to elicit narratives that placed Yolngu designs in their broader cultural context and as we shall see made the paintings do something that in a ceremonial context was achieved through the performance as a whole — by a combination of paintings, dances, song and the incantation of power names. However, although interaction with key European visitors stimulated certain trajectories for Yolngu art, those developments quickly found a place in internal contexts. The panels in the Yirrkala church painted in 1962 and placed on either side of the altar were of an even larger scale than the Scougall barks and were produced as a means of establishing a Yolngu religious presence in the new church. When painted coffin lids substituted for painting the chest of the deceased they too provided a larger scale canvas. Indeed there is some evidence that prior to European colonisation hollow log coffins provided a surface for composite designs that linked together more than one place associated with the person being interred.

The discussion so far hints at the complex array of historical factors that are going to be required to explain the form of the bark paintings that became the foundational collection for Yolngu art in the Gallery.¹⁸ However my main concern in this paper is with the interpretation of the iconography of the images themselves and showing how this requires researching the depth of their connection to Yolngu culture.

Mawalan's painting *Djan'kawu Creation Story* needs to be approached from three interpretative frameworks which in Yolngu art are interrelated: myth, ceremony and place. The Djan'kawu sisters are the founding ancestral beings of many of the clans of the Dhuwa moiety. They arrived at Yalangbara in the country of the Rirratjingu clan — Mawalan's clan — having set off from the island of Buralku to the east. On landing they began a journey that crossed much of north east Arnhem Land. In each clan's country they undertook certain canonical acts.¹⁹ They used their digging sticks to dig into the ground to make wells where they drank. They thrust their digging sticks into the ground beside the wells and the digging sticks were

¹⁸ See Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 2007, chapter 4 for a more detailed account.

¹⁹ The myth, art and ritual of the Djan'kawu sisters are well documented in a number of publications. The song series of the Rirratjingu clan is translated in Ronald M. Berndt, *Djanggawul: an Aboriginal religious cult from north-eastern Arnhem Land*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952. Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon press, 1994, provides an account of a Ngärra ceremony that centres on the Djan'kawu. See also Margie West, ed., *Yalangbara: the art of the Djang'kawu*, Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008. This book, which was produced collaboratively with the Rirratjingu clan, illustrates and documents many of the paintings associated with the Djan'kawu sisters at Yalangbara. The film *In Memory of Mawalan* directed by Ian Dunlop (1983, Sydney Film Australia), records the public rituals associated with the Dhuwa moiety Ngärra.

transformed into beautiful trees, and in the branches of the trees they hung their feather-decorated sacred baskets. And at some of these places they gave birth to the children of the clans who were to succeed them in occupying and owning that area of land. They gave birth under the cover of woven mats and released the children while holding onto their digging sticks for support. These ancestral events are known about because they are re-enacted in ritual and because there are places in the clans territory that were created through their actions — the waterholes can still be seen, the trees still grow there. The core image that signifies the presence of the Djan'kawu is that of them walking with digging sticks in either hand, moving the sticks from side to side in the ground as they continued their journey (figure 6). The digging sticks represent their creative acts in making the waterholes, in creating the trees that surround them, in giving birth to the children and indirectly the journey they travelled. Unsurprisingly among the main sacred objects of the Djan'kawu are the ceremonial digging sticks – finely carved and elaborately decorated with feather tassels.



Figure 6 Mawalan Marika 2 leading dancers at the launch of, *Yalangbara: the art of the Djang'kawu* by the Administrator of the Northern Territory Tom Pauling at the Administrator's House, Darwin 12 March 2009. Photo Howard Morphy.

The substance or content of the ceremonies that re-enact their ancestral journeys were set by the ancestral beings themselves. The Djan'kawu on their travels performed song cycles that both described their creative acts and reflected upon them. They sang about the goannas that played on the banks of the waterhole, shifting the sand with their movement and then plunging deep into the waters. They sang of the rainbow lorikeets clustering in the trees above their heads and the red

glow of the sunset as it caught the tops of the dunes.²⁰ They sang about the process of birth and later on of the theft by men of the *sacra* they carried with them and the appropriation of their ritual. The songs of the Djan'kawu and the sacred objects that commemorate their acts provide poetic and aesthetic evocations of the founding acts of creation and it is these that are reproduced today in ceremony.

In ceremony different manifestations of the Djan'kawu, different representations of their creative acts, are brought together in performances that bring the ancestral past into the present. The world of the Djan'kawu can be brought into being for any number of purposes — a circumcision ceremony, a memorial ceremony for a dead relative, a regional initiation ceremony when different clans come together in communion to perform the sacred events that occurred in their separate lands. And today they can be performed on special occasions as part of the opening of an exhibition, the welcoming of a dignitary or the launch of a book. In ceremonies the events are re-enacted by combining together and ordering in sequences the songs, paintings, dances, ritual incantations and sacred objects that represent the ancestors' lives. They are brought together in analogous form to opera in which all the separate components are integrated into the overall performance.

I will give two brief examples of how paintings and sculptural forms are integrated within ceremonial performances. The body painting which I discussed earlier (figure 2), was done on the chest of a boy during his circumcision ceremony. The painting refers to events that happened in the country of the Djapu clan in the north of Blue Mud Bay.²¹ The heat of the sun burnt the skin of the Djan'kawus and they had to rest in the shade. The painting shows the place where this happened and the arc represents the sun. The shimmering brilliance of the cross-hatching of the design in this case conveys the intense heat of the afternoon sun.

Yolngu circumcision ceremonies have many themes and I will touch on three here. The ceremony is a celebration of a boy's journey towards manhood and his separation from the world of the mundane and to an extent from his mother and his sisters. The ceremony also moves the child closer to the spiritual dimension of his clan and links him to other clans that share the same spiritual substance. The body painting is central to the ritual. The boy will lie still for several hours while the painting is made on his chest and soon after it is completed he will be led in triumph

²⁰ Yolngu song-poetry provides a lyrical evocation of nature. This extract from the Djan'kawu song cycle translated by Ronald Berndt working with Wandjuk and Mawalan Marika in 1946 provides a good example.

What is this crying? It is a parakeet nestling, perched on the sacred *djuda* tree.

Clasping the tree, cocking its head from side to side, crying softly:

It saw the rays of the sun sinking beyond Milingimbi:

Crying, it saw the warm red sunset, the red reflections in the clouds ...

Saw the glare of the sun's glow, crying softly...

Perched on the *djuda* tree, clasping the limbs in its claws, moving down the branches...

It saw the red sun sinking, the spreading sunset.

.....

Quietly solemnly, watching the sinking sun

They look at the mouth of the sacred basket hanging there

Always clasping the limbs of the *djuda* tree, moving their claws.

We hear them within the mouth of the mat! (Berndt, *Djanggawul*, 1952: 235, song 144)

²¹ The ceremony is the subject of Howard Morphy and Pip Deveson's 2008 film *In Gentle Hands*.

to the place of circumcision carried on the shoulders of his mother's brother. In this particular ceremony songs were sung and dances performed that related to the Djan'kawu sisters' journey and to the place of the sun as the painting progressed. Yolngu circumcision ceremonies have a strong element of rebirth, as is often the case with rites of passage. When the painting was finished a dance was performed that in effect awakened the boy from the trance-like state he had entered into and made him ready for the ceremonial ground. The performance re-enacted the Djan'kawu on their journey and the process of birth. The initiates were lifted by their shoulders from where they lay on the ground and their bodies were moved gently from side to side — the same action that is made with the digging sticks in ceremonies that recreate the original moment of birth. The boys with sacred paintings of the Djan'kawu on their chest had become the digging sticks in the ancestral women's hands — they had become part of the ancestral presence.

The second example is the ceremony for the launch of a book on Yalangbara — the Rirratjingu country where the Djan'kawu first landed and first gave birth. The book was initiated and conceived by Mawalan's daughter Banduk Marika working with Margie West and a team of Yolngu and non-Yolngu collaborators.²² The book comprised a selection of paintings and sacred objects produced by three generations of Rirratjingu clan members beginning with the crayon drawings and bark paintings made for the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt at Yirrkala in 1946 and ending with silk screen prints made by Banduk herself. The book was to be launched in Darwin by the Administrator of the Northern Territory, Tom Pauling. Yolngu dancers organized a ceremonial performance to open the proceedings and they did so by re-enacting a phase of the journey of the Djan'kawu and the digging of the first waterhole at Yalangbara. The performance was supposed to take place outside in the administrator's garden but a torrential storm broke out so the performance had to be moved to the enclosed veranda surrounding the building. My intention here is not to provide an analysis of the ceremony but to draw attention to elements of the performance that are relevant to the themes and images of Mawalan's painting (figure 1).

The dancers carried the ceremonial digging stick with them and at intervals paused and performed a dance that represented the Djan'kawu digging the well and placing their digging stick in the ground (figure 7). The dancers carried a ceremonial basket with them that would be hung over the Administrator's shoulders (figure 8). The dances referred to the animals that the Djan'kawu saw on their journey and which they named and sang. In the final dance they became the goannas that played in the waterhole at Yalangbara and that are in turn analogues for the women themselves.

²² West, ed., *Yalangbara*, 2008.



Figure 7 Male and female dancers re-enact events in the lives of the Djan'kawu sisters at the launch of *Yalangbara: the art of the Djang'kawu*. Yalmay Marika is in the foreground carrying the sacred digging stick. Photograph Howard Morphy.



Figure 8 Dancers perform before the Administrator Tom Pauling at the launch of *Yalangbara: the art of the Djang'kawu*. Photograph Howard Morphy.

We are now in a position to return again to Mawalan's painting (figure 1) and begin to interpret its iconography. The painting centres on the waterhole of Balma, where the sisters gave birth, that lies within the estate of Yalangbara. The top panel shows the women sitting on either side of one of the waterholes they had created. The panel below is a graphic representation of the sisters giving birth. The human figures with yellow skins represent the female children who were protected from the sun by being shielded beneath woven mats. The black figures represent the male clansmen left out in the sun to make them harder and tougher. The next panels refer again to the creation of the waterholes. The figures on the left represent the digging sticks transformed into the various trees that grow beside the billabong. The figures on the far right represent the sun and its rays at Lilirrtja. It is the kind of painting that could be painted on the chest of a boy during a circumcision ceremony — analogous to that painted on the boy's chest at Yilpara (figure 2). In Mawalan's painting the reference is to the warming rays of the sun at dawn and the red evening glow. The journey of the Djan'kawu followed the sun from sunrise to sunset.

The lower panel provides another perspective on the creation story. The red circles that flow out of the women represent the afterbirth and the circular forms represent the woven mats under which they shielded the female children, an event that is re-enacted in ritual. The panel on the top right links the painting directly to the artist and the ceremonial enactment of the ancestral events. It shows the artist Mawalan himself contemplating the ceremonial digging stick; perhaps the very one we saw being carried through the Administrator's house. We can see the feather tassels hanging down either side, tassels that in turn have multiple references to rainbow lorikeets that illuminated the trees and to the feather dilly bags that the Djan'kawu hung in the branches.

I hope that I have been able to show by this analysis how the contextual information that places Mawalan's painting in the context of Yolngu society is relevant to appreciating it as a work of art. The information is of the kind required to place a Renaissance altar painting in its art-historical context. The analysis of the iconography provides a partial explanation of the form of the painting but it is only one strand of historical research. It is necessary to ask where those forms come from, why the content is represented in the particular way it is and how it has been influenced by the wider historical context — in particular the developing articulation between Yolngu and Australian society and their respective institutional frameworks.²³ It is also important to develop a broader understanding of the aesthetic dimension of Yolngu art since aesthetics is almost a default factor in western definitions of fine art.

The expressive dimension of Yolngu art is just as important as the iconographic though of course the two are not strictly independent. For example Yolngu aim through the process of cross hatching to create an image that shimmers in part or as a whole and this effect expresses the power of the ancestral being and connects that power to different emotions. The body painting of the sun is intended to represent

²³ Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: the Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, explores these issues with reference to the development of the Western Desert art movement. See also Howard Morphy, 'Acting in a community: art and social cohesion in Indigenous Australia', *Humanities Research*, 2009, 15 (2): 115-132.

the scintillating rays and express the shimmering light and intense heat of the day. On the other hand at Yalangbara the specific referent is to the rays of the sun at sunrise and sunset striking the dunescape.²⁴ Such references are never absolutely fixed and can vary according to context, perspective and the gender of the viewer. The clan design in the lower section of the Djan'kawu creation story refers to the sand hills of Yalangbara and the effect of the cross hatching has multiple possible referents, to the sun's rays reflected on the sand, to the shifting patterns caused by the movement of the sand, to grass waving in the wind and so on. However in interpreting a similar painting Mawalan's daughter Dhuwarrwarr Marika refers to the background designs as both the dunes and the pain of childbirth, beginning gently with the initial contractions and becoming more intense as they gave birth to so many different clan groups.²⁵

Conclusion

Much of what I have said so far should be unproblematic. The information I have presented should be a useful adjunct to appreciating Yolngu art. It does not impose any restrictions on how the work is to be seen by visitors to an art gallery. And yet it would be easy to frame what I have written in oppositional terms and say that I have diminished the art by presenting it ethnographically or anthropologically and that the very abundance of information I have presented threatens the movement of Aboriginal artworks from the museum into the gallery. The Gallery is a place to celebrate excellence in fine art and in order to do so has created a privileged environment for viewing. However it would be a great mistake to move from that position to one in which it is argued that the only way art can be appreciated is on the basis of form alone untrammelled by art history or free from the knowledge and expertise of the creator. However this naïve position has often been advocated by some who see the absence of labels being crucial to the definition of art, or in a weaker version that too much information takes away from our capacity to appreciate works as art. However this has never been the case in the work of art galleries, either in acquisition or exhibition. Except in certain experimental situations, curatorial knowledge about the works and their significance has always been vital. And that knowledge is reflected in a multiplicity of ways from labelling, to contextual panels, in what is included in the exhibition, in the juxtaposition of works in the overall sequence, in the division into rooms or spaces — there are an infinity of subtle and not so subtle ways in which art history is an essential ingredient in the practice of the art gallery. The modesty — or is it the hubris of the curator — is sometimes found in the assertion that it is all in the mystique of the hang — but a lot of knowledge and expertise lies behind the placing of pictures in an exhibition. The problem with the entry of new objects into the category 'art' is that there is both an absence of curatorial knowledge about the works and the canons of excellence are in

²⁴ For a detailed analysis of the aesthetics of Yolngu art see Howard Morphy, 'From dull to brilliant: the aesthetics of spiritual power Among the Yolngu', in Jeremy Coote, Anthony and Shelton, eds, *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

²⁵ West, *Yalangbara*, 2008: 93.

the process of being established. Time is needed to develop the equivalent body of knowledge and experience of viewing upon which judgements about art are made.

The inclusion of Aboriginal art in the fine art gallery is a recent phenomenon and the art is new to the curators and public alike. Certainly the exhibition of works allows for that attention to form that is so crucial for the appreciation of works of art and upon which expertise is also in part based. It is vital for the appreciation of Aboriginal art and an understanding of the creative practice of individual artists that the opportunity should be given to see the works in the best light! However at the same time it is important to create an environment where people can develop their understanding of the work through contextual information and get into the mind and eye of the artist, as much as that is possible. Renaissance art has long been studied by art historians and exhibited in art museums. There is a vast background literature. Many people who view the works in Galleries are aware in a general sense of their historical significance and have some access to their iconography, and can apply that knowledge to their viewing. In the case of Aboriginal art there is a need to educate a public that is less informed about Aboriginal art than it is about the art of the Renaissance, the history of Impressionism or the significance of Ned Kelly as a figure in the Australian cultural landscape.²⁶

However there is also an interesting difference in the case of Aboriginal art. Aboriginal art is entering art history almost at the same time that it is both being acknowledged as part of contemporary Australian art and beginning to be accepted into the category of fine art. It could be argued that Aboriginal art history has a very different positionality to the art history of either the Renaissance or Australian modernism. Aboriginal involvement in the exhibition of Aboriginal art varies regionally but in the Yolngu case the artists themselves have wanted the contextual information to travel with the works, have wanted the audiences to understand the significance that lies behind them and have been concerned to attune people to their aesthetic values. One of the ways in which this has been achieved is through the ceremonial performances that have accompanied the openings; another is by encouraging the documentation of works and the production of catalogues. Interestingly in the case of two significant Yolngu touring exhibitions the catalogues will have preceded the exhibitions. The Saltwater paintings that are today housed in the National Maritime Museum were published before they were acquired²⁷ and the Yalangbara book was published well in advance of the exhibition that opened late in 2010.

The boundaries between the Art Gallery and the Museum are not precisely defined even though arguably their core business is very different. However in the Australian context the combination of curatorial pragmatics and Aboriginal agency may be leading a breakdown of the categorical distinction between the Museum and the Art Gallery at least as far as exhibition design and context is concerned. Art galleries have always shown great diversity in their exhibitionary practice and have

²⁶ Sydney Nolan's engagement with the bushranger Ned Kelly began in 1945. In 1946-7 he produced the now iconic series of paintings in the National Gallery of Australia's collection and continued to return to the theme throughout his life.

²⁷ Buku Larnggay, *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country*, Buku Larnggay Mulka Centre and Jennifer Isaac Publishing, 1999.

always bridged the divide between appreciating and knowing about art. And museums, despite constraints of space have in general always allowed qualitative factors to influence their exhibitionary practices and allowed them to create favourable viewing environments for selected objects. There is evidence that in recent exhibitions museums have developed formats that allow the audience to focus on the materiality of the object and appreciate its form without reducing the interpretative information. The recent *Canning Stock Route* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia utilises many of the presentational techniques of the art gallery – for example the attention to lighting and the space allowed for each work of art.²⁸ On the other hand the pioneering 1997 *Painters of the Wagilak Sisters' Story* exhibition at the National Gallery over a decade earlier exhibited the works with due attention to their cultural significance and meaning – for example in the sequence of paintings and the distribution of rights in clans among other things.²⁹ Certainly in the case of Aboriginal art the same works can appear in the two different contexts. The magnificent exhibition of Thomson barks migrating from Museum Victoria to the Ian Potter Museum of Art is one example, and the Mawalan painting that I have been focussing on graced the National Museum of Australia with its presence when the Yalangbara project moved from book to exhibition.

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²⁸ National Museum of Australia, *Yiwara Kuju: The Canning Stock Route*, Canberra, 2010.

²⁹ Wally Caruana and Nigel Lendon, *The painters of the Wagilak Sisters' Story 1937-1997*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1997.

Howard Morphy

Moving the body painting into the art gallery

committee of the major CIHA conference in Melbourne, *Crossing Cultures: conflict, migration, convergence*.

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