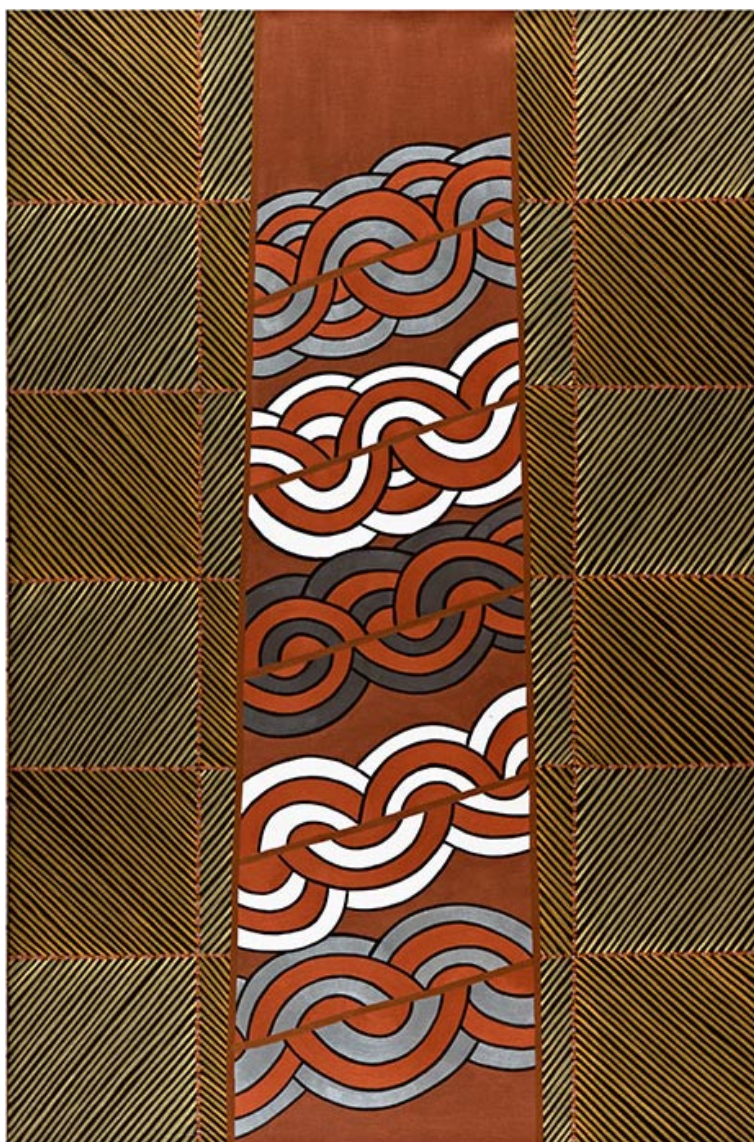


# ‘YOU CAN DO THAT OR WHAT?’

featuring Marshall Bell

Exhibition Dates: 11 May - 2 June 2012



*East Coast 3*, 2012, Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 120 cm

*woolloongabba art gallery*

This essay links current research on Gamilaroi art with oral histories, showing a continuation of practice, linking back to old Gamilaroi, a time before time itself began. The essay accompanying the 2010 exhibition “Why you paint like that” was delivered as a paper at the 2010 Cairns Art Fair Symposium. I stated that “*Art on the skin is why I use the grid design in my paintings and I cling so strongly to it.*” The animal skin gridding is a reminder of the disappearance of South Eastern Australian art styles from the psyche of Australian art. I wrote, “*For me this is an important part of my traditional art and therefore I consider it is an important part of me*”.

I am connected to this ancient art through my matriarchal ancestral bloodlines, running through my mothers line from the first Gamilaroi women on country. This art is an inheritance, I have in the past used to develop my art. In my ‘Why you paint like that’ exhibition essay, I explained why I write and make art like this. One reason is the way assertions to exclusive ownership of regional art styles is being imposed into the consciousness of the Australian psyche. I showed evidence on animal skin rugs and cloaks containing circles, dots and cross-hatching and other symbols. These animal skins existed from Tasmania to Queensland. The animal skin rugs and cloaks art together with other artforms provides evidence of recognisable aboriginal signs, symbols and designs occurred prolifically throughout South Eastern Australia. Tree carvings provide further proof of that assertion.

Etheridge, in his book “Denroglyphs or Tree Carvings” 1915, states, “the Gamilaroi and Wiradjirri areas are the stronghold of where tree carvings are”. He further states “the only massive carvings of the Australian Aborigines are to be seen on carved trees, which have a wide distribution in New South Wales, to which state they are limited”. He states, *I think, therefore, it may be safely assumed that wherever tribes with the same Kamilaroi, Wollaroi, Wiradjirri social organisations roamed there will be teleteglyphs (tree carvings) to be found*”.

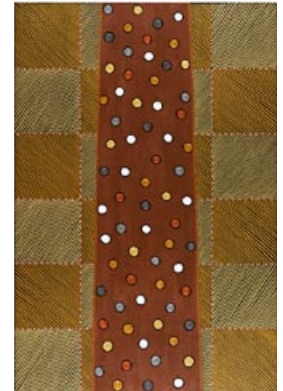
R.H. Mathews was a surveyor, employed by the government of New South Wales in the 1890’s, Mathews gave five descriptions of tree art:

*The specimen of the native art found upon trees are executed in various ways. (1) The mode of drawing most adopted is to outline the object by a nick cut with tomahawk into the bark of a tree. (2) In other cases the whole of the bark within the outline of the figure is removed. (3) In some cases a portion of the bark is removed from the tree and the designs are then cut into the wood, (4) some of these native drawings are merely scratched upon the bark of trees. (5) Others again painted on the tree with ochres and charcoal.*

**Mathews R.H., Australian Ground and Tree Carving, The American Anthropologist, Vol. IX, Washington, D. C. 1896**



Walker,  
Town & Country, 1896



Spirits, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm



Fraser  
1800’s



Places, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm



Mathews  
1896



Fishes and Net, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm



In various part of Gamilaroi country, ground and tree carving art has different names. These names were shared with Gamilaroi neighbours. Matthews, in recording a Wiradjirri ceremony, Gamilaroi's south westerly neighbours, states the word used was *Yowum*. a shortening of *Yummanyuman*, word used in the west by Wailwan, and Yallaroi and Kooma and across the north to the Bigembul. Matthews suggested that the Bunjalung people who are further to the east of Gamilaroi country also used the word *Mombarai* to describe tree and ground carvings. This shows a wide ranging regional connectedness and very large inter-connected social network. This is why I have now taken a south east Australian approach.

In the early 1990's my nephew, Marcus Waters, work with local youth at Toomelah. He has a degree in Film and Television from UQ, a Master of Art in Visual Arts from QCA of Griffith University and a Masters of Art for Screen Writing. He teaches Creative Writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus. He's in the last stage of completing a Doctorate focusing on being a Gamilaroi person. He speaks Gamilaroi fluently. So it's fair to say he has a solid history in the arts.



*Charlie Bingle Tree Carving*



*Rex McGrady & Charlie Binge*

Cedric McGrady and Charlie Binge, Two Toomelah elders, wanted Marcus to use Gamilaroi art in his work with the youth in order that they then use this knowledge in developing their own art. Cedric McGrady was the chairman of Toomelah mission at the time and Charlie Binge was teaching Tree Carving at the nearby Boggobilla TAFE. Marcus showed the two elders this page of what was asserted as Gamilaroi Art from an unknown source.

Marcus wanted the unsourced Gamilaroi art to be verified by Cedric and Charlie and in exchange they gave Marcus a copy of Matthews drawings of the Talwood site. The two elders took Marcus through the unsourced art and explained their understanding of the drawings. They put a cross next the ones that they considered incorrect and ticked the ones that were correct. They inserted additional corrections and explained the drawings in depth. An example of the corrections made is the drawing of the Goanna (*Gobi*). The changes made to the *Gobi* is that it is always drawn with movement and can be drawn with two heads. The Gamilaroi corrections are attached below. Then they demonstrated how a Creation story was drawn.

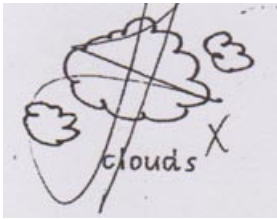
In authenticating Charlie and Cedric's explanation and changes, Marcus showed them to Reggie Knox. Reggie is an old indigenous artist living in Brisbane. Reg was a participant in the Venice Biennale in the 1980's. He is one of the last Gamilaroi speakers to have learned Gamilaroi as his first language and had to learn English when he was older. He confirmed the changes were correct and added that the creation story drawn in the top left hand corner was like something they would do when they were in primary school. Reg had gone to school in the 1920's. It was something most kids were taught and had been handed down by their parents for generations. I spoke with Charlie Binge in Tamworth at the Gamilaroi



*Reg Knox, Marcus Waters, Paul Spearim & Marshall Bell*

# Art Symbols

## KAMILAROI SYMBOLS



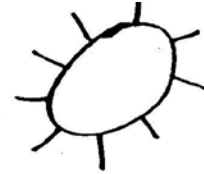
McGrady / Binge  
Correction



mountains



fire



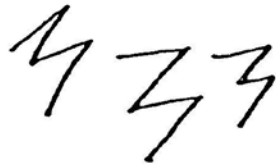
sun



tree



McGrady / Binge  
Correction



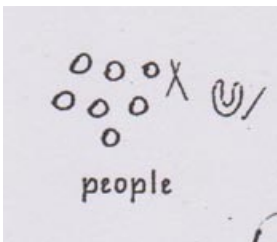
lightning



animals



boomerangs



McGrady / Binge  
Correction



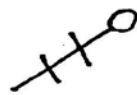
spears



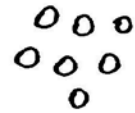
clouds



creator



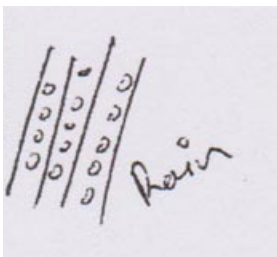
goanna



people



emu



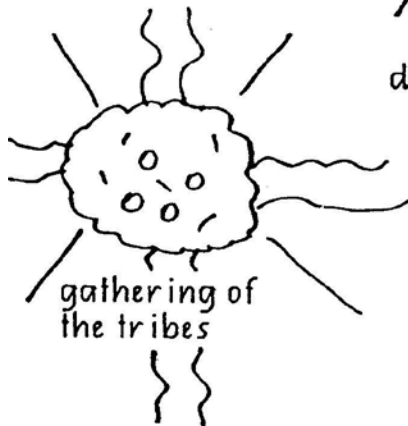
McGrady / Binge  
Correction



days



bundar



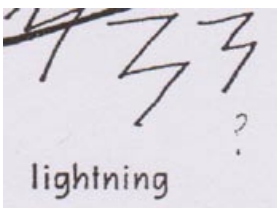
gathering of  
the tribes



fish trap



people sitting  
around a fire



lightning

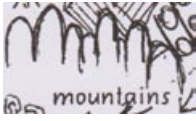
McGrady / Binge  
Correction

Un sourced Kamilaroi Art





people sitting  
around a fire



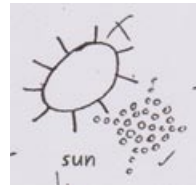
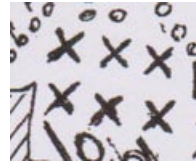
mountains



*Namoi, 2012*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
150 x 90 cm



*Big Mob Women Under The Sun*  
2012, Acrylic on canvas,  
150 x 90 cm



sun

*McGrady / Binge*  
*Corrections*



*Man Under The Stars, 2012*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
150 x 90 cm



*Fraser*  
1800's



*East Coast 1, 2012*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm



*Fraser*  
1800's



*East Coast 2, 2012*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm



*Fraser*  
1800's



*Moiety 2, 2012*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm



*Fraser*  
1800's



*Moiety 1, 2012*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm

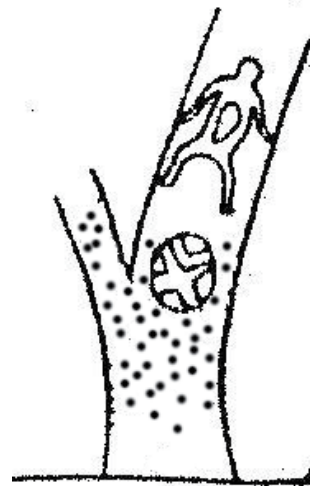


Native Title authorisation meeting in June 2011. Marcus showed the Gamilaroi drawings to Charlie and asked if he remembered them, to which Charlie nodded. This confirmation shows a continuation in connection of Gamilaroi's art practices.

This shows a Gamilaroi association with dots, circles and other Aboriginal signs and symbols. This art is not recognized as coming from South Eastern Australia. I now give examples of cross-hatching on Gamilaroi tree carvings. In R.H Mathews 1896 paper, "The Bora or Initiation Ceremonies of the Gamilaroi Tribes", he showed drawings of a number of carved trees (plate XXI, figures 9 to 13) from a ceremony held at Talwood, just on the Queensland side of the New South Wales/Queensland border.

I remember my family telling me family lived at Talwood. I was told aunty Gracie Talbot who married Walter Binge had lived there. They had Knox's living there with them. At the June 2011 native title meeting in Tamworth, I met up with Rex McGrady, a Gamilaroi descendant of elders who jointly co-presided over the Gundabluie and Talwood ceremonies recorded by R. Matthews. He told me that in the 1980's, he was concerned about the Talwood site. He stated that he had photographed and recorded the Talwood site. He sent this research to the Aboriginal Institute in Canberra. Several other Gamilaroi people, who prefer not be named, told me they had also visited the Talwood site.

Paul Spearim is another descendant of Gamilaroi elders, jointly presiding over the Matthews recorded Talwood ceremony. Pauly is highly respected and widely regarded as our Gamilaroi song and dance man. His father was Dave Spearim, one of the last fully initiated Gamilaroi men. Old Dave Spearim was taking Paul through some of the Gamilaroi young mens business, but he died before he could take him through all of the mens business. Paul is a qualified dancer and teacher and own a business teaching culture. Matthews records the Talwood site as a Kuputhun ceremony ground. Kuputhun is the Emu section of the Gamilaroi moiety system. Paul Spearim has a special relationship the Emu. As part of the preparations for manhood ceremonies, Dave Spearim and other respected elders took Paul to the Emu and Durrumbulum site at Kunopia. He also visited some of the older knowledgeable Gamilarois and shared songs and and dances for most parts of Gamilaroi country.



Matthews  
1896



How Turtle Got His Shell, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
150 x 90 cm

Paul didn't want the meaning of the Matthews drawing to be made public. He told of Trumby Leslie (recently deceased) visiting him and his mother in the early 1980's. Trumby wanted to do paintings from photocopies he had of tree carvings from a site at Collemungle. Trumby raised the question of cultural protocols and restrictions that apply to the photocopies. He was told to change the image so they are not exact copies. Paul also advised me do the same. Many years later Trumby, in conjunction with the Moree Plains gallery, did some tree carvings and from what I have seen of them he did adhere to that advice. This is why I so admire Trumby's work.

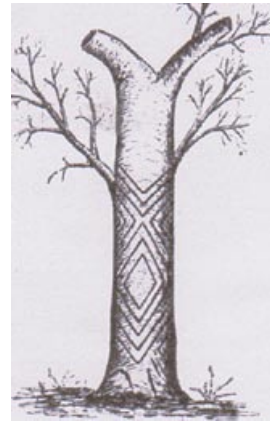
The Collemungle site is near Collierendebri, near the junction of the Barwon and Gwyder rivers. It is where 80 carved tree were cut down in 1948 for protection and preservation. While a few remained at the site, most were scattered to Museums throughout Australia. PJ Swan is a long established Gamilaroi researcher who has located and photographed many of the Collie carved trees. The cutting down and removal of carved trees has been very wide spread, occuring over a long period and continues even today. Along with the denial of access, these actions are considered acts of cultural genocide.



*Milne photo in Etheridge  
1910*



*Bunda Murri, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm*



*Walker,  
Town & Country, 1896*

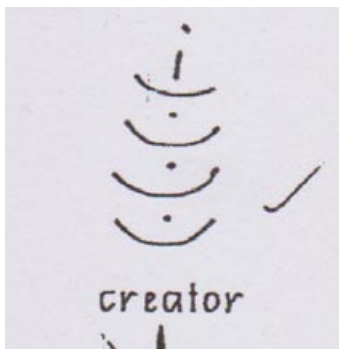


*Fish, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
150 x 90 cm*

In addressing Gamilaroi cultural protocols, both Matthews and Etheridge record that tree carvings are found at burials, cemeteries, ceremonial sites, and sites where significant events have taken place or occurred. Some sites where tree carvings occur have no restrictions, while others, such as ceremonial sites, are restricted to men and that these are considered sacred and their meanings are secret. Tree carvings were prolific throughout Gamilaroi country. They are recalled as existing at every ceremony ground. There are ceremony sites where large numbers of carved trees were, such as Collemungle(80) and Aberdeen(120). There are very numerous ceremony sites where smaller numbers of tree carvings were, such Boomi, the junction of the Peel and Namoi, Terry Hi Hi, Gundabluie, Kunopia and Talwood etc. It cannot be assumed that the sites with bigger numbers of carved trees have a greater importance over a site with smaller numbers.

Paul Spearim and Reg Knox both told me that whilst each site had its own story to tell, each of these sites were connected to the others. Each of these sites had a very particular order in which they were introduced. They both agreed, that it was only with knowledge of all of the sites that the whole Gamilaroi story is revealed. These sites were a non-linear education for the Gamilaroi. They were often revisited at various times in an individuals life. The same story told again and again at various ages of a persons life gives a deeper understanding on each visit.

I have create this exhibition while strictly adhering to Paul Spearim's and his mother's request to stay within Gamilaroi cultural protocols. At the same time I have followed through on Cedric McGrady and Charlie Binge request to produce Gamilaroi artwork that is accessible to our younger generation. I have retained the grid as a continuum of the art on Indigenous animal skin rugs and blankets. In this exhibition, the images incorporate trees with paintings that represent tree carvings. I have incorporated Gamilaroi art to develop images of new tree carvings. When taken in total, this artwork represents a modern day Indigenous animal skin blanket. ~ *Marshall Bell 2012*



*McGrady / Binge  
Correction*



*Creator, Line Of Descent,  
Man and Woman, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
150 x 90 cm*

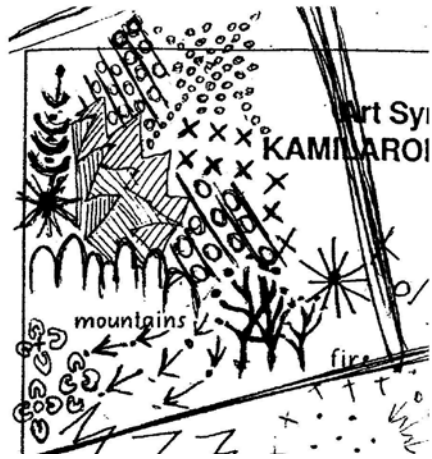


*McGrady / Binge  
Correction*



*Bunya Gathering  
and Pathways, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
180 x 120 cm*





McGrady / Binge  
Correction



*Gamilaroi Creation Story*, 2012  
Acrylic on canvas,  
240 x 120 cm

artwork photography: Mick Richards