

Warmun Art Centre



GIJA

Exhibition Catalogue 2018

WARMUN ART CENTRE STORY

'The most important thing I want to communicate is that our Art Centre is our last line of defence. It is living the Warmun dream, chasing Gija destiny. Corroboree and painting are like our archives. This is what the Art Centre is. That's what the old people wanted. It keeps us strong and keeps connection to country and gives us strength to live in the white man's world.'

Gabriel Nodea, 2009, Warmun Art Centre Chairperson

Local Kimberley History

Aboriginal people believe they were created at the beginning of time. Gija people of the East Kimberley refer to their creation and all their Laws and knowledge as the *Ngarranggarni* (Dreaming). As part of this belief, people, places, rock formations and all the creatures are created from Spirit Beings and are as one with this place. Archaeologists believe Aboriginal people have occupied the Kimberley region for at least 60,000–80,000 years. In 1879 Europeans arrived in search of natural resources and potential areas for farming and over the years, cattle were brought to the region. A wave of migrants also came during a brief gold rush at Halls Creek around 1886. So began the traumatic displacement of Gija people and their traditions. In the following years, a number of pastoral properties were established in the Ord Valley. Turkey Creek, where the Warmun community is now situated, was initially established as a rations depot and a service point for the telegraph line from Wyndham to Derby. The old Art Centre (next to the present gallery) was built around 1920 and, although occupied in different ways during its history, is commonly known as 'the Old Post Office.'

In the decades following settlement, the relationship between pastoralists and Aboriginal people was often very hostile and fed by ignorance. Atrocities were committed against Aboriginal people in retribution for spearing cattle. It was a time of massacres, violence, fear and destitution.

As the pastoral industry grew, Aboriginal men and women were employed on the stations and usually paid in tobacco, clothes and rations. Families camped on the stations and raised their children. New affiliations for country developed in these places. When Aboriginal people were given equal wage entitlements in 1969, most pastoralists rejected Aboriginal workers and their families from the stations because it was unprofitable to pay wages equal to the non-Aboriginal workers. This was the second displacement of Aboriginal people. Many Gija workers and their families chose to move to Turkey Creek (renamed Warmun) as a result. Senior Warmun artists still talk of their days as drovers and station workers. When they paint now, they will sing the country and retell their creation stories but will also remember working on the stations, walking around, riding their horses and droving cattle on these lands. Gija people established the Warmun community around 1975 and it is now one of the largest Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region. The main languages spoken are Gija, English and Kimberley Kriol.

The Warmun Art Movement

The Aboriginal art movement of the East Kimberley began at the Warmun Community early in the 1970s. Founding artists Paddy Jaminji, Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie, George Mung Mung, Jack Britten, Henry Wambini and Hector Jandany became recognised internationally. All of these artists have now passed away but their legacy is carried forward by today's Gija artists; Patrick Mung Mung, Betty Carrington, Mabel Juli, Shirley Purdie, Phyllis Thomas, Gordon Barney and Rusty Peters – all of whom have spectacular careers, and who were encouraged by the first wave to carry on the tradition and to 'always paint your own country.'



Mabel Juli, *Garinkiny Ngarrangkarni (Moon Dreaming)*
2017, Natural ochre and pigments on canvas, 45 x 70 cm

The seniors are joined by a group of emerging and mid-career artists; Lindsay Malay, Kathy Ramsay, Evelyn Malgil, Marlene Juli, Mark Nodea and April Nulgit, who are exciting to watch as they adapt new ways of expressing the Gija contemporary art movement.

Artworks from Warmun draw on traditional *Ngarranggarni* (Dreaming) stories, contemporary life and historical events. A majority of the artists

use ochre to convey their stories, which is carefully hand-sourced from the country all around in special ochre-digging trips. While ochre has been used for thousands of years by Aboriginal people in ceremonial and cultural activities, applying it as paint on canvas is somewhat of a modern practice. Painting helps maintain the artists' cultural connection to their country and keeps stories alive in a rapidly changing environment. It is also a way of passing on cultural knowledge to the younger generation, and having records of such important teachings and stories passed down from the artists' ancestors.



Patrick Mung Mung, *Ngarrgooroon Country* 2015, Natural ochre and pigments on canvas, 60 x 80 cm

Warmun Art Centre was established in 1998 by Gija artists and the Warmun Community to represent Warmun artists and market their work to collectors, museums and galleries worldwide. The Art Centre is a wholly Gija-owned and governed enterprise, and artwork sales support Warmun artists, their families and the operation of their Art Centre.

Senior Warmun artist Patrick Mung Mung explains, the Art Centre is: *"For our people and our kids so we carry it on with them. So they can take it on, like us, take it on from the old people, but they still come here; [the] young people, so the Art Centre is good to be a Centre. It reminds the kids so they got to learn from this. Then they get strong. Then they know the painting. But the real thing, we should take them to the country. Show them what's left in the country with these old people and what they have taught us. Things like where they given them just round here. Where bad country is for them, part of us that country, some of them have been in that place. I hope these old people give it [the knowledge] away. Look at them. That's all right then."*

Over the two decades since its formal inception, the Art Centre and its artists have been part of a unique history— one of commercial success that saw the boom of the nationwide contemporary Aboriginal Art Movement, and, within the first three years of opening, Warmun Art grew sales from \$0 in 1998 to \$650,000 in 2001. And one that took a turn for the worse, after the Global Financial Crisis, and later, an epic flood, known as the *Warrambany of Warrman* submerged the whole of Warmun in 2011 during the *Jardagen* (wet season), and unwittingly destroyed most of the Art Centre and some 600 paintings that washed down the river. The whole community was evacuated immediately to Kununurra, and the resilience of Warmun artists was apparent when they began painting again with a sense of urgency and immediacy. The *Warrambany* had some unexpected positive outcomes— such as a long-lasting partnership with the University of Melbourne's Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, who not only conserved hundreds of flood-damaged artworks, but jointly launched a 'two-way' *Ngarrangarni* learning program, recognising elders for their teaching capacity, and awarding them equal wages to the University's professors with subsequent visits to Gija country sites around Warmun in the years following 2013. 2013 was also the year that Warmun Art had commercial success in Paris for the second time, through a special project which saw Lena Nyadbi's *Dayiwool Ngarrangarni* (Barramundi Dreaming) blown to epic proportions, covering the entire rooftop space of the Musée du Quai Branly, visible by some 7 million tourists who climb up the Eiffel Tower each year.

In 2018, the Art Centre celebrates its 20th anniversary, and while it is a great milestone – two decades of economic empowerment, Aboriginal self-determination and a driver of sustained cultural practice for Gija people, it is also a time to reflect on its history and its mandate. The Warmun Art Centre mission is and always has been to: *Celebrate and encourage the expression of Gija culture through the arts, and to support the continued development of innovative contemporary art by both established and emerging Warmun artists. We strive to facilitate this through developing and maintaining a commercially viable arts enterprise, which provides a diverse range of cultural and economic opportunities for both individuals and the community as a whole.*

Edited by Stephanie Rajalingam (Manager, Warmun Art Centre)



Phyllis Thomas, *Untitled* 2014, Natural ochre and pigments on canvas, 90 x 120 cm

front image:

Betty Carrington, *Burning of the Moon* 2014, Natural ochre and pigments on canvas, 150 x 150 cm

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