

woolloomgabby art gallery



May May's Rocks 2012
Acrylic on canvas 76 x 76 cm

Claudia's Story

Claudia Moodoonuthi **By Susan McCulloch**

Throughout the development of modern Aboriginal art there are many instances of Indigenous people reconnecting to their heritage through art. Rarely though, does one witness this in an artist of such a young age as Claudia Moodoonuthi. Born on the small and largely isolated Bentinck Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1995 Moodoonuthi is already proving a formidable art talent.

Claudia Moodoonuthi spent her first 7 years on Bentinck and Mornington Islands before moving with her family to Aurukun in Cape York. Previously a student at Brisbane's Clayfield College and now at CAIA, Griffith University, she regards Aurukun as home and the culture of its Wik people one she fundamentally identifies with.

'Home' too, however, is very much her Bentinck Island birthplace. Especially significant in her early years on this beautiful low lying island was the influence of the late May Moodoonuthi who largely raised her in her formative childhood years. May Moodoonuthi, with her sisters who included Sally Gabori, became one of the founding artists of the Bentinck Island painters whose work shot to prominence when they first started painting in 2005. May Moodoonuthi had no surviving children of her own, but as the second wife of Claudia's grandfather acquired classificatory children and grand children such as Claudia.



Body Markings 2012
Acrylic on canvas 152.5 x 51 cm



Red Rocks on Bentinck 2012
Acrylic on canvas 61 x 61 cm

The younger Moodoonuthi speaks fondly and with great clarity of the grandmother she calls 'May May' and the hunting, fishing, and grass gathering trips they went on regularly, while living a 'sea country' life together.

It is clear that these experiences have formed an indelible part of Claudia Moodoonuthi's psyche and soul. Now they are finding expression in the broader world through an extraordinary and prodigious output of confident, brave and vibrant paintings. Here, in wonderfully lush brushstrokes and

fabulously rich colouration are her depictions of waterholes, grasses, aerial views, the sealife and the many rocks of the coastline of Bentinck Island. While there are distinct stylistic similarities to some of her late grandmother's imagery (Claudia says she had not seen May Moodoonuthi's paintings before she started painting), these rich canvases are very much her own.



'Sissy Ann' Photograph by Claudia Moodoonuthi



Wet Season 2012
Acrylic on canvas 76 x 76 cm

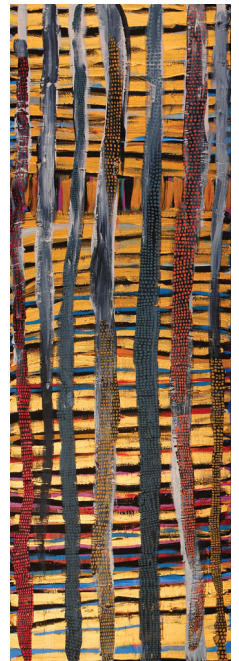
One of the most striking series are those of the rocks which abound on Bentinck Island - small flat rocks used in the game of skimming across the water, half submerged large rocks to which an abundance of oysters cling and a great variety of larger rocks used by the Island's Kayardild people to make stone traps to entrap fish and other sealife for easy catching.

Often she paints her grandmother's favourite rocks, near to which May would 'sit on a log and call the water gin (spirit) to us'. Each rock, she says, tells a story.

'Pick them up, listen to their story and hear them sing,' she says.

It is an eloquent observation from a 17 year old. But then one gets the distinct impression that as well as being a confident, cheeky and smart teenager with a wicked sense of humour, Claudia Moothoonuthi's memories are older by far than her physical years.

Often, says her carer Vicky Jones whose family she has lived with for several years and is now an integral part of, Claudia's nights are often punctuated by dreams of spirits - good and bad - that remain as real to her the next day as they were at night. 'Often she simply has to paint the minute she gets up,' says Jones.



Marriage 2012
Acrylic on canvas 152.5 x 51 cm

In interview Claudia herself describes the 'little hairy men' - Yowie like figures who inhabit the Wellesley Islands (in the Gulf of Carpentaria), that protect country and 'tell people where the good hunting is'. (1)

And in a stream of consciousness poem, written during the course of preparation for this exhibition, she graphically describes a dream of how the 'little people' rescued her from harm, spiriting her away to a cave in which resides the spirit of her grandmother that tells her:

'Mother Earth chooses her painters and you my darling girl are a Kayardild artist to the day you die. It is your destiny. Take your gift and make our people proud. And remember, I will always be with you.'

Fanciful, unquestionably, but also indicative of both the fertile imagination of the true artist and of indissoluble links to her heritage and country. Combined, these make for the blossoming of a rare artistic talent of enormous vitality whose works have already won her a significant award, a deal of public recognition, a personal reconnection with her birth place and the promise of a rewarding artistic future.

Susan McCulloch OAM is Victorian-based art writer, publisher and curator. Her books include McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art and McCulloch's Contemporary Aboriginal Art: the complete guide

(1) Mike Bruce, Sunday Mail, August 12, 2012



'Greta' Photograph by Claudia Moodoonuthi