

## MAKING ARTWORK TOGETHER ON BLUE MUD BAY

Professor Howard Morphy

### *The journey*

The idea was for collaboration between leading Yolngu artists from eastern Arnhem Land and four distinguished visiting artists from elsewhere in Australia. Angus and Rose Cameron initiated the project. In the year of Charles Darwin the theme of the project was artistic engagement with natural world and the species dwelling within it. The visiting artists were Fiona Hall, Judy Watson, John Wolseley and Jörg Schmeisser. They were joined by the botanist Glenn Wightman, the photographer Peter Eve, and myself as the engaged observer. Perhaps most important of all was Basil Hall, for this was to an adventure in etching at Yilpara in Maḍarra clan country on the north of Blue Mud Bay.

We set off from Buku Larrnggay Mulka art centre in Yirrkala in two vehicles heavily laden with artists' materials and food on the four-hour journey on dirt roads. There was a hint of tension in the air. The etching plates were to have arrived a week before we set off, but had been delayed. We received advice that they had been dropped off the previous evening by the lorry driver in the bush just off the Central Arnhem Highway on the Yilpara road, third culvert on the left. Half an hour into our journey one of the vehicles broke down at the Giddy River Crossing. The remaining vehicle set off for Yilpara laden with supplies and Judy, Jörg and Fiona. The rest of us remained behind for six hours waiting for a replacement vehicle. Djambawa Marawili and the Yilpara community waited patiently and welcomed us at dusk with song and ceremony. We were then led to the clearing in the bush that was to be our home for the next week. The clearing had been made in the shape of Luḷumu, the ancestral stingray who had created this land in a short and angry foray inland before returning to the sea. Around the edge of the clearing a series of wooden platforms with roofs of stringy bark provided us with places to sleep. Djambawa sang of Luḷumu and the branches of the trees that waved above our heads in the evening breeze.

### *The artists*

None of the visiting artists had been to Yilpara but all had intimations of synergy with the people and the place. John Wolseley has been on an extended artistic journey across Australia, always sensitive to the Indigenous presence, 'to discover how we dwell and move within landscape – a kind of meditation on how land is a dynamic system of which we are all a part'<sup>1</sup>. Fiona Hall equally acknowledges that 'this land and the plants that grow in it, and the people whose land it was [and is], have together a very long history of coexistence that must be acknowledged and respected'<sup>2</sup> (quoted in Hart 1998: 202)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.johnwolseley.net/johnwolseley>

<sup>2</sup> quoted in Deborah Hart 'Fiona Hall's Garden: fertile interactions' *Art and Australia* Vol. 36 number 2 (1998).

The Waanyi artist Judy Watson has also explored closely the relationship between people and the environment, looking for the human footprint that manifests itself in different ways in the landscape — sometimes positive sometimes negative — and connects directly to the bodies of the living who inhabit it. An outstanding printmaker, she had worked for a while as a lecturer and resident artist at Charles Darwin University, passing on her knowledge to students and collaborating with Basil Hall at Northern Editions..

Jörg Schmeisser, Basil's teacher, played a crucial early role in contemporary Indigenous printmaking. In 1978, soon after he had arrived in Australia, he worked with the Yolngu artist Narritjin Maymuru on a pioneering series of etchings. At the time Jörg was the head of printmaking at Canberra School of Art, and Narritjin and his son Banapana were Creative Arts Fellows at the Australian National University. Jörg recognised the potential of applying Indigenous artistic practice to the medium of printmaking. The initiative was further developed by Basil Hall who became Director of Studio One in Canberra before moving north to Darwin to develop the print workshop at Charles Darwin University. Jörg was returning to somewhere he had never been in body but which had been part of his imagination ever since working with Narritjin all those years ago.

The Yolngu artists who took part in the project were all closely related to Yilpara. Gumbaniya Marawili and Djambawa Marawili of the land-owning clan are clan and community leader respectively. Mulkun and Liyawaday Wirrpanda belong to the Dhudi Djapu clan whose country lies close by, and who for generations have intermarried with the Madarrpa. Liyawuday is a grand-daughter of Narritjin. Marrnyula Mununggurr is of the Djapu clan, and Yilpara is her mother's country. The Yolngu artists and the community saw their role initially as making people welcome in place and showing them the ancestral footprint (*djalkiri*) on their land. The day's events and the landscapes we crossed were recorded by Peter Eve's analytic and photographic eye to be re-experienced later on. A pattern of interaction developed. During the day the artists journeyed together or shared the same 'studio' space, and in the evening showed photographed examples of their work, screened in the open air around the warmth of the campfire.

### *Being there*

Art is a way of establishing connections between people across cultures — works becomes the memory of an event, an impression of what has been seen, heard and felt. The project began by establishing connections, exploring country, visiting places, and in the case of the visitors,

making collections. The visitors were new to the place and the resident artists deeply connected. But both were equally excited by the idea of exploring new ways. The first morning we left our Lulumu-shaped campsite, and followed the route that the stingray took in ancestral times. We saw the bites in the ground that Lulumu made as he headed back towards the sea from inland. We stopped at an enormous sand sculpture in the shape of Lulumu and together walked around its contour. We stood by the shade of the single tree where the great Yolngu leader Wonggu had sat some eighty years ago with Gumbaniya's father Mundukul and made this Lulumu sculpture. We looked into the stingray's eyes where for many years hunters had cast the bones of fish and shell fish hoping for a beneficent catch. We travelled closer to the shore pausing at a place in the dunes that too had been carved out by Lulumu's body. Djambawa dug deeply into one of the eyes, the bites in the ground left behind by Lulumu, to find the fresh water hidden beneath the surface. And then in the distance we saw the beginnings of the reef that is Lulumu's tail extending out into the bay. When we returned to our camping ground we were uncertain of the boundaries between ancestral design and the human hand and the division between 'nature' and 'culture'.

On the mornings that followed, the visiting artists proved to be the hunters and gathers respectfully finding out about the land. The Yolngu, knowing the country, felt they stood on firm foundations. We went to the floodplains of Garrangari, waterless at the height of the dry season. We crunched our way across the middens and the dry corrugations of the plains decorated by the imprints of broilga punctuated and punctured by the heavy feet of buffalos. We learnt that in ancestral times it was two broilga women Barrnyili and Ganaypa who had walked across the dry plain, creating waterholes as they journeyed, piercing the ground with their digging sticks. The clumps of trees dotted across the plain are signs of those ancestral acts

The visiting artists shared in common a passion for collecting — the desiccated skin of a snake, a crab's carapace, a stingray barb, seeds, shells, feathers, broken toys, mechanical debris. And they collected images with their cameras and sketched in their notebooks. Yolngu guided, interpreted and made connections; and made the process of collecting into a process of exchange of ideas and knowledge. They were aided by Glenn Wightman whose linguist's ear and profound knowledge of the botany of Arnhem Land made him a great cross-cultural interlocutor. Artists shared things with one another talked about where else they had found such things, where their paths may have crossed in Moscow, Sydney, Darwin. It is the fate of artists — Yolngu and non-Yolngu — to be travellers.

We travelled on to Yathikpa on the coast the place of Bäru, the ancestral crocodile. Djambawa talked about the importance of the place in the Blue Mud Bay Native Title Claim, the court case that recognised Yolngu ownership of the intertidal zone, clarifying ambiguities in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*. It was the dance of Bäru, bringer of fire, that greeted Mr Justice Selway when he arrived at Yilpara, and paintings of Bäru were submitted in evidence to

the court. It was Bāru who in Yolngu thought laid the firm foundations for the court action. When we returned to Yilpara we saw the blue and white flags standing in the sea just below the low water mark. The flags, symbolic of the saltwater country called Mungurru had been placed there when the High Court finally determined the court case in favour of the Yolngu applicants.

### *Artwork*

After travelling and collecting, the art work began. The places we visited made sense of the etchings the Yolngu artists worked on. Gumbaniya's Luḷumu was where we slept and where we walked, and the stringray barbs we could find in the middens. Djambawa's Bāru took us to the waters of Yathikpa where the angry crocodile tormented by fire dived into the waters. The pattern of fire stretched across the acetate sheet, apparently engulfing the crocodile. Yet when the work was completed the crocodile remained strongly visible carrying the fire into his surroundings. Mulkun and Liyawaḍay in their different ways represented their country on the Garrangari floodplains. In Mulkun's work we could see the footprints of the ancestral Broḷga connected to the circles that represented the waterholes and the overall pattern represented the flow of water across surface and the waving fields of grass. Liyawaḍay's focussed on the waving grasslands and evoked the quivering forms of grass caught by the wind. Marrnyula's first work belonged to a place we had not visited, the Djapu clan fish trap at Larritpira. Her second referenced the past times when Macassan voyagers had visited the coast. The central image was the sail of a Macassan ship (Bawu) divided into two sections one blue and the other white the same as the celebratory flags. The white represents the clouds and the blue the water — Mungurru .

The Macassans too had been visitors and they too had exchanged dances, designs and songs with Yolngu at the same time as acknowledging their sovereignty over their land. In their long history interacting with outsiders Yolngu have learnt of the importance of cultural exchanges and often reference past histories. Marrnyula dreamed about the Bawu and asked Gumbaniya if she could paint her mother's design. They agreed and she was able to use it for the first time. Mulkun too produced a design, Birrkuda or wild honey, from her mother's clan, Dupuditj, which is close to extinction. In this case Mulkun's own clan the Dhuḍi Djapu are holding the ancestral law on its behalf . Thus the project became a context for passing on Yolngu law.

As an outside observer I became entranced with watching all the artists at work, almost obsessed by the movements of their hands and their exceptional control over their work. The Yolngu artworks were built up in stages beginning with a structuring of the overall design and then adding increasing detail and effect through the process of cross-hatching with a *marwat*, the long thin brush of human hair. The cross-hatching styles differ — Gumbaniya lays each line in place with the length of the brush while Liyawaḍay covers the surface with rapid and elegant strokes — each technique having its own subtle effect.

The visiting artists brought their collections back to the camp and worked on them meticulously in their different ways. I saw Judy Watson use the powerful light of the sun to transform the shape of a plant into a sharply defined outline shadow and then paint it exquisitely on the surface of the plate. Fiona Hall engraved in detail the form of a green ant photographed in the bush and then with apparent impatience hammered a series of dots across the surface that turned out to be equally thoughtfully placed. And Jörg Schmeisser having brought a crab's skeleton from the beach, etched it onto the copperplate at such a speed that the image seemed to appear magically before one's eye.

It seems to me that all artists must have a remarkable capacity to switch scale from the grandest of ideas to the most detailed execution of forms, to keep a composition in mind without which the most exquisite execution of the part will result in failure. The process of producing the parts is the magic of execution, the process of producing the whole reflects the magic of composition, thought and imagination. The visiting artists built up their final compositions over different periods of time taking images away in notebooks, engraving them directly onto the plate, or holding them in their memory. Each had their own ways of building up a whole in dialogue with evolving ideas and sense of form — and all carried away them the potential to add new parts. John Wolseley produced one version of a whole before one's eyes through the process of contemplating and documenting his vast collection of accumulated debris from nature, and finally creating a composition he was satisfied could be transferred to a more durable medium. But that too was only a stage in a process. Judy Watson's work grew over her time away from Yilpara as she thought deeply about the landscape she had encountered and the historic significance of the Blue Mud Bay native title claim. She sought images that brought the two together and then had the task of creating the whole.

In each case the artists seemed to build up a work in dialogue with an idea. Although in this project Yolngu artists were working on an established trajectory that connected them to their history in place, their works were no less a dialogue with time and the product of technique, thought and the exercise of the imagination. The patterns associated with ancestral beings in place are part of the ancestral law of the country, the blazing diamonds of the Bāru and the rectangular pattern of the Djapu clouds. But in executing the design Yolngu lay an emphasis on thought. The *marwat*, the brush of human hair becomes the metaphor for the mind that guides the hand. And the dangerous dialogue between composition and technique is as present in Yolngu art as in any other. The complexity of Djambawa's painting was such that it was only in the final stages that it was possible to see how the whole would come together.

#### *Etched together*

Etching is a magical process in which unique ideas are created in reproducible form, where technique and the imagination come together, where the question that recurred was 'is it

possible?'. During the entire time we were at Yilpara and in the months that followed Basil Hall had to be dedicated to the tasks of working with the individual artists to help their ideas materialise. Basil had spend many years working with Yolngu artists collaboratively developing methods that transferred Yolngu technical processes and aesthetic effects to the medium of print. The transfer of techniques from one medium to another is integral to the creative process and the ideas that have been developed over time have been important to the success of the print workshop at Buku Larrnggay Mulka. Basil's relationship with the visiting artists was equally one of dialogue, though perhaps in the case of Jörg Schmeisser it entered the more esoteric domain of discourse between master printmakers as artists.

Basil had little time to enjoy the journeys through the country with the rest of us. He remained in the camp working with the artists who had stayed behind and getting things ready. His journey required him to follow the artists to the final stage of production, as the inks were impressed onto the paper. At Yilpara Basil moved constantly between the artists, thinking of the consequences of their every action on a later stages of the etching process and the final form of the print. In Brisbane he worked with Judy Watson on the complex possibilities of combining very different forms. In Darwin he worked with the Yolngu artists and with John Wolseley and Fiona Hall as they continued to develop their works. And in Canberra he worked with Jörg Schmeisser in his studio.

Etching has the advantage, in a collaborative project, of requiring that the dialogue with the artists continues long after the first encounter. It has the second advantage that many can share in its results. The relationship with the printmaker is something the artists all share in common connecting to a history of image making that cuts across time and place. I have been a privileged observer able to experience the magic of engagement and knowledge exchange out of which appeared miraculous and individual works.