

CUSTODIANS



country and culture

Bardayal NadjamerrekAO (dec)

Dorothy Napangardi

Gawirrin Gumana

Gulumbu Yunupingu (dec)

Janangoo Butcher Cherel (dec)

Jean Baptiste Apuatimi (dec)

Judy Napangardi Watson

Kathleen Petyarre

Lena Nyadbi

Regina Pilawuk Wilson

Essay by Margie West

The Custodians: Country and Culture Print Folio brings together ten of Australia's highly respected Indigenous artists. Bardayal Nadjamerrek AO, Gawirrin Gumana, Gulumbu Yunupingu, Kathleen Petyarre, Dorothy Napangardi, Regina Wilson, Lena Nyadbi, Jean Baptiste Apuatimi, Janangoo Butcher Cherele and Judy Napangardi Watson are artists with considerable creative achievements to their names. The first six cited painters have won awards at the Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award 1. Butcher Cherele has recently been listed as one of Western Australia's State Living Treasures, while Yunupingu and Nyadbi have had their iconic imagery incorporated in the new Parisian Musée du quai Branly as part of the largest international commission of Australian Indigenous art.

These men and women from remote communities across the tropical north and desert regions of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley are indicative of the diversity and vitality of contemporary art practice from these regions. It's here that the nation's most compelling art forms flourish, despite often being produced in environments of borderline poverty, poor health and living conditions. And while these artists obviously create in order to sell their work, they also want to present and communicate something about their cultural realities to the outside world and art has become one of the most successful ways of doing this. Selling their art is therefore a cultural as well as an economic transaction that seeks recognition and some sort of rapprochement with the broader society. Gawirrin emphasises this in relation to his Baraltja print, 'We will always draw that snake this way thinking that's the way we show ourselves to the Yolngu (Aboriginal) and to the Ngapagi (non Indigenous).' Gulumbu Yunupingu also reflects on how her Garak, galaxy of stars, connects us all in common humanity because, 'there is a link between people everywhere.'

This communication and engagement between different cultures is also an integral aspect of the contemporary Indigenous practice itself, with artists often working in close association with their non-Indigenous peers, exchanging ideas and learning new

ways to express themselves. As one aspect of this process, printmaking has become an important adjunct to the usual practice of many remote community artists today, and its maturity is reflected in the sustained and meaningful creative partnerships that now exist between the artists and the skill providers. The success of the Custodians folio reflects this process of thoughtful dialogue and real collaboration between selected artists, Basil Hall and his team of expert printmakers. Every step of the production is developed in consultation with the artist until the print is finally signed and editioned.

The process begins by identifying synergies between each artist's painting style and extant printing techniques – in some truly inspired instances this has resulted in the birth of new methods such as the punograph, that utilises the artists' familiarity with pyrography to burn images onto a plywood plate.² For example, silkscreen printing faithfully echoes the vibrancy and tonal richness of Jean Baptiste and Judy Napangardi's paintings and their colourful palettes.

The other artworks are better suited to etching, with either silkscreened colours or additional etching plates being used to create images of great subtlety and depth. The final result is a set of richly textured prints that capture the very soul of each artist's style. The predominance of abstract imagery in the resulting prints is striking, yet they are all very different, reflecting the varying artistic histories and cultural backgrounds of each artist. Most are informed by the iconographic elements that typify their regional style. Even so, few of the works could be considered as classic because over time, even some of the most senior artists have experimented with their visual language within accepted stylistic boundaries. Others have created their own highly personal idioms of expression to manifest some aspect of their cultural identity. For those familiar with the artists' work, many of the images are recognisable, in fact iconic depictions of their oeuvre: the strikingly bold graphics of Nyadbi's stone points, the delicate tracery of dots in Dorothy Napangardi's Mina Mina, and the Gulumbu's shimmering canopy of stars. Others, like the prints by Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Gawirrin Gumana, surprise

us with their freshness of interpretation sparked by the experimental possibilities of the print making technique.

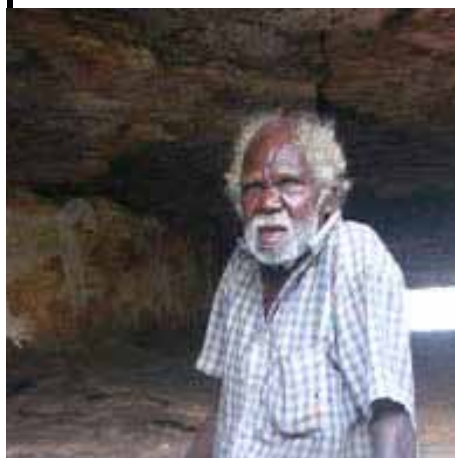
Collectively these illustrations of material objects, food species, ancestral sites and beings all have a resonance with the artist's lives, and all have meaning, because everything in their society reflects the totality of ancestral creation. In this respect mark-making is rarely a random or meaningless act. What an artist can and cannot paint though, is largely governed by their status as custodians and their attendant responsibilities to their ancestral law and their land. This is what provides the foundation for many of the images in the folio, especially those produced by the most senior and ceremonially important artists such as Gawirrin Gumana, Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Janangoo Butcher Cherele. The women also have certain custodial roles that are expressed in their illustration of significant sites and stories. The only artist who eschews any ancestral references in her work is Regina Wilson, who as a master weaver, has chosen to work with the imagery of string.

Many in this group of seasoned artists started painting seriously in the 1990s. Only Gawirrin Gumana and Bardayal Nadjamerrek have been painting for a longer period, starting their commercial careers in the 1960s. Both are now at the point of handing on their custodial responsibilities because of increasing age, and it is likely that Bardayal's print is one of the last works he will ever produce. Over the past few years he has been passing on his artistic legacy to younger members of his family and to emphasise this, his print includes a superimposed image painted by his grandson Gavin Namarnyilk. The imagery here is particularly poignant, because it symbolises the age-old transferral of custodial rights and responsibilities to the next generation. In this way Aboriginal culture continues to endure, to be reinvigorated and to inspire.

Margie West
Emeritus Curator
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

Bardayal 'Lofty' Nadjamerrek, custodian for country of the upper Mann and Liverpool Rivers in western Arnhem Land, is revered for his encyclopedic knowledge of the region. Bardayal lives in the heart of Ankung Kunred or sugarbag (native bee honey) country, where he was born and walked while growing up. Through his paintings he brings to life stories of ancestral beings and the fauna and flora of his country. 'I am looking after this place, this my dreaming place put here by the earliest ancestors, the old people a long time ago, maybe by Djingalarrewoni or by God ... My ancestors gave me this place and I myself have a longing for this country.'³

Bardayal Nadjamerrek AO



'Mina Mina is our place – we are custodians of that place. My aunties were born there and they teach me – proper way. Same way like in the Ukurrpa – when Napanangka and Napangardi women danced and sang up the country – the spirits that still live at Mina Mina want us to visit, to dance there, to know the songs and to sing right way but nobody sleeps there – people go visiting but long way away sleeping – too sacred – the spirits are inside. No talking loud – no singing out. I grew up there as a little girl and we walked around near Mina Mina long way. My father digging water hole and all the kids sitting down – This country makes me smile – my paintings are all about this place. My spirit belongs here.'

Dorothy Napangardi



'Only my children can paint like this. I am custodian. There is nobody past me. That's why I am always staying at this wanga (snake hole/place). That's why I can't move to other places. Gangan, Garraparra, Baraltja, those three that I am looking after, it's in my memory these places, its connected with the Gapu (water) Dhalwangu and Madarrpa (clans). I am a Dhalwangu and Madarrpa I callgutharra (grandchild) Now I'm interested to hear what the Ngapagi (white mans) law (Australian High Court) has to say about this saltwater country.'

Gawirrin Gumana



'When I look at the stars, I think about the universe, all around, and about every tribe, every colour. In every corner of the world people can look up and see the stars. This is my vision. There is a link between all people everywhere. The link between people on earth and stars in the sky – it's real. It's like Garma, where people from everywhere can come and relax, look up and see stars. The Garma Festival is held at Gulkula. My land where I grew up and learnt from my father. Like the trees they grow UP. People sit UP. They stand UP. The life force is UP. What is UP? The stars – where the spirits go in death. We are all growing UP.'

Gulumbu Yunupingu



Butcher is the custodian of Imanara, the area north east of Fitzroy Crossing where he grew up and later worked. 'In his own words, Butcher paints from his heart, his eyes, his fingers and his mind. He makes images every day, with only an occasional announcement of a holiday, 'a no work' day. Butcher considers his painting as work and that it makes him happy. He makes this comment: 'It is very hard. Like a job I do my painting. Thinking and feeling, "what job have I got to do"? Sometimes I dream. I think, I'll make that, what I was dreaming last night, (the) same thing (I paint).'⁴

Janangoo Butcher Cheral





Jean Baptiste Apuatimi

'I was born at Pirlangimpi. My country is Imalu, from my father's country, and that's my husband's country too. My mother and father gave me to marry Declan Karrilikiya Apuatimi. Declan was doing all the painting and carving then. I used to help him. He tell us stories and sang songs in Tiwi language. I am the only one that knows those songs now. For Custodians I chose to do Jirtaka, lovely tucker. My husband used to get that fish. After we eat it we get that bone and paint him up. First black, then jilamara (body paint design). When he die they paint up that bone for ceremony. When I paint that I think of him.'



Judy Napangardi Watson

Senior Warlpiri custodian Judy Napangardi Watson has lived much of her life close to her ancestral country, north-west of Yuendumu. 'I paint to share my culture, my country, my story. Working at Warlukurlangu Art Centre gives me a chance to be busy and to earn money for my family. I am proud and happy to support them with my painting.' Mina Minais an important ceremonial place belonging to Napanangka/ Napangardi women and Japanangka/ Japangardi men. Judy's work captures the landscape and significant sites created by the procession of ancestral women as they travelled on an epic journey. The sacred Nngalyipi a vine used for healing and initiation ceremonies, and the majarrdi, fringed ceremonial dancing skirts, are represented.



Kathleen Petyarre

Kathleen Petyarre is senior custodian of Arnkerrth, Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming. Kathleen depicts the lizard's journey through Atnangkere, north east of Alice Springs where she was born and walked as a child, developing an encyclopedic knowledge of the area and it's significant sites. She says of her work: 'All the old women, the aunties and the young nieces, well all of us do our awely ceremonies to hold onto our country ... Thawertengerl woman might come and have a look and she'll say 'That's really good what you are all painting - your country. You all holding onto it' ... The country that our grandfathers and grandmothers handed onto us'.



Lena Nyadbi

'We always look after 'im and everything, you know? Going 'round, look at the country, going talk talk that country. The spirit still there from the old people. We talk to that spirit: "You look after that country for we." ' 'When strange people come, we mandhathem gad [with] smoke. When tell 'em when we go la that hill, on top, we sing that song now. But after that we tell that spirit, "Give it up meself that diamond. You give that diamond la all the gardiya [non-Aboriginal people] show 'im you know alabad," how much there so they can get all the diamond. "Don't get angry la them. Don't do anything la them, keep 'em safe".'



Regina Pilawuk Wilson

'I am a custodian because I came here with my husband many years ago and we built Peppimenarti. First we settled near the river, over near the food plain, but a fire burnt our camp so we had to start again, in another place. I started painting after a workshop and now I can teach and help the others paint. I paint the traditions of weaving, of message sticks, durmu dot body painting and my mother's dingo dreaming. This one is asyaw (fish-net). Only my family paints this one.'

01

Bardayal Nadjamerrek AO



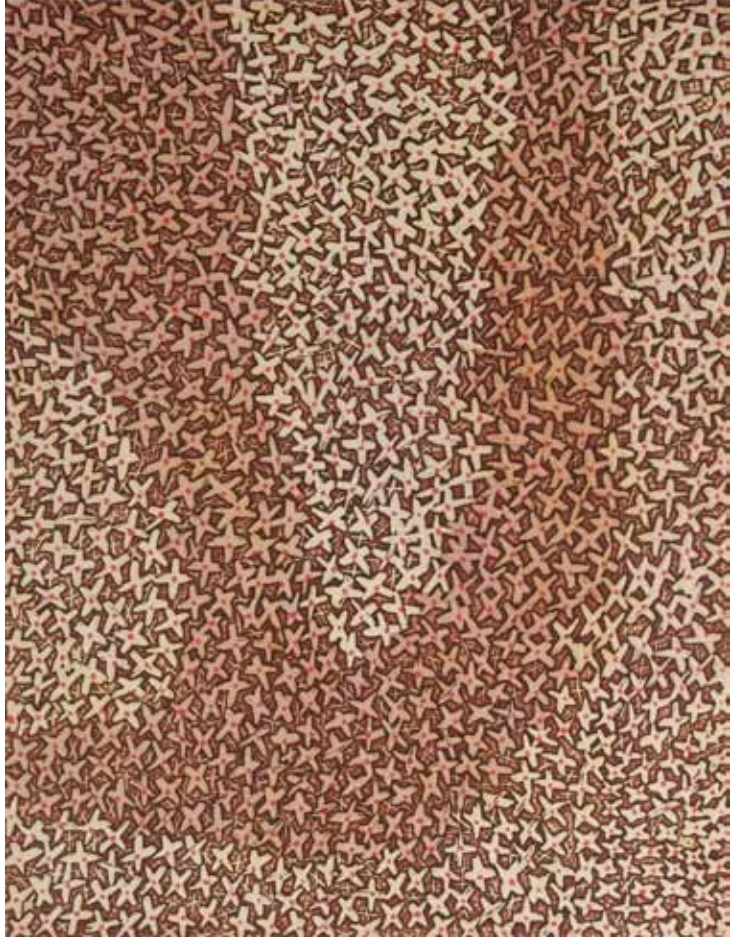
02

Dorothy Napangardi



03

Gulumbu Yunupingu



04

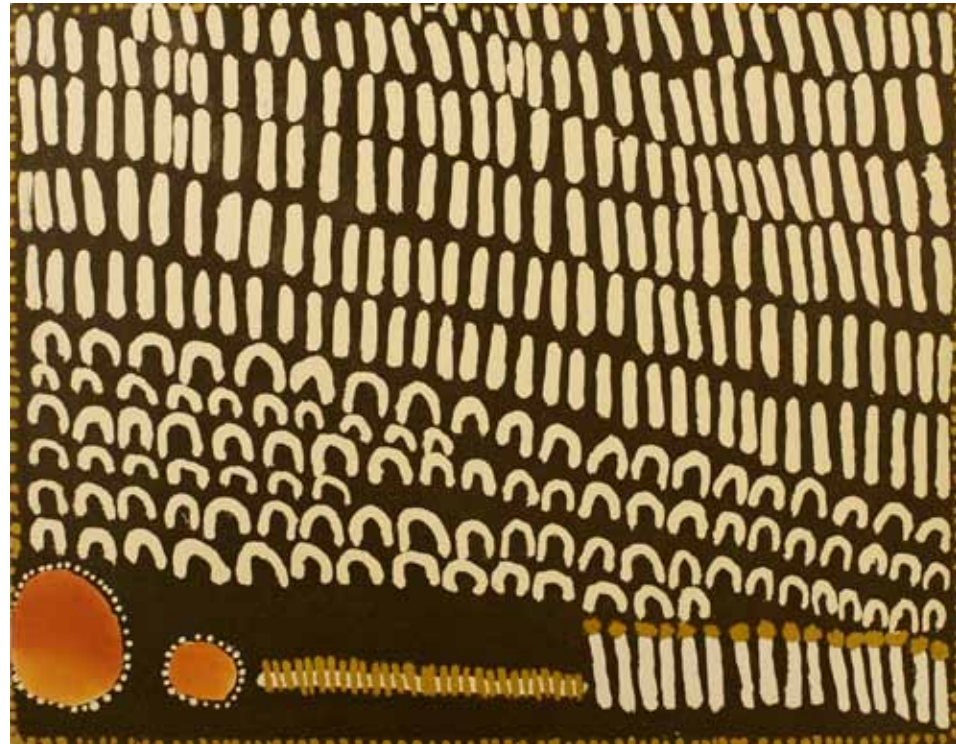
Gawirrin Gunana



05

Judy Napangardi Watson





08

Janangoo Butcher Cheral



09

Regina Pilawuk Wilson



10

Jean Baptiste Aputimi



Notes

- 1 Bardayal Nadjamerrek (1999 Telstra Work on Paper Award), Gawirrin Gumana (2002 Telstra First Prize), Gulumbu Yunupingu (2004 Telstra First Prize), Kathleen Petyarre, (1996 Telstra First Prize) Dorothy Napangardi (2001 Telstra First prize, 1991 Museum & Art Gallery Award), Regina Wilson (2002 Telstra General Painting Award)
- 2 The term 'punugraph' was coined by Basil Hall after developing this printmaking method with artists at Tjala Arts in South Australia.
- 3 Quoted to Margie West, 1994.
- 4 Karen Dayman, Mangkaja Arts, Clemenger Contemporary Art Award catalogue, NGV, 2006.



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Custodians: Country and Culture

is a boxed folio of ten limited edition prints by ten outstanding Indigenous Australian artists.

Custodians celebrates the strength and diversity of leading Aboriginal contemporary artists in a representative survey of art from the Top End, Kimberley and Central Australia. Custodians is defined by a carefully focused curatorial process in which artists were selected and invited to participate on the strength of their artistic output and cultural standing.

Each artist reflects upon the nature of their custodial role within their own society; whether as a custodian of a particular image, story, area of country, practice or in a wider ceremonial or cultural context. The works were created in collaboration with Basil Hall and his team of specialist printmakers in 2008. Custodians includes a variety of print mediums including etching and screenprint.

Credits

Thank you to Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, Durumu Arts Peppimenarti, Gallery Gondwana, Gallerie Australis, Injalak Arts and Crafts, Mangkaja Arts, Tiwi Design Aboriginal Corporation, Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association and Warmun Art Centre. Basil Hall Editions Printers: Basil Hall, Jacqueline Gribbin, Merran Sierakowski, Monique Auricchio, Clinton Barker and Sean Smith.

Cover image:

Bardayal Nadjamerrek in his country, 2008

Photographer – Monique Auricchio

Art Photography - Zephyr L'Green

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| <p>01 Bardayal Nadjamerrek AO
Ankung Kunred 2008
etching and screenprint
50 x 39cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Basil Hall and Monique Auricchio
Printers: Basil Hall, Jacqueline Gribbin and Clinton Barker</p> <p>02 Dorothy Napangardi
Salt on Mina Mina 2008
etching
50 x 39cm
Collaborator/plate-maker: Basil Hall
Printers: Basil Hall and Merran Sierakowski</p> <p>03 Gulumbu Yunupingu
Garak 2008
etching
50 x 39cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Basil Hall and Jacqueline Gribbin
Printers: Jacqueline Gribbin and Monique Auricchio</p> <p>04 Kathleen Petyarre
Arnkerrth 2008
etching and screenprint
39 x 50cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Gallerie Australis staff and Basil Hall
Printers: Merran Sierakowski and Sean Smith</p> <p>05 Judy Napangardi Watson
Mia Mina Jukurrpa 2008
screenprint
39 x 50cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Warlukurlangu staff and Basil Hall
Printer: Clinton Barker</p> | <p>06 Gawirrin Gumana
Baraltja 2008
etching
50 x 39cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka staff and Basil Hall
Printers: Basil Hall and Merran Sierakowski</p> <p>07 Lena Nyadbi
GimenbayinCave 2008
etching
50 x 39cm
Collaborator/plate-makers: Warmun Arts staff and Basil Hall
Printers: Basil Hall and Merran Sierakowski
Lena Nyadbi courtesy Warmun Art Centre</p> <p>08 Janangoo Butcher Cherele
Girndi 2008
etching and screenprint
50 x 39cm
Collaborator/plate-maker: Basil Hall
Printers: Clinton Barker, Basil Hall and Merran Sierakowski</p> <p>09 Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (fish-net) 2008
etching
50 x 39cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Basil Hall and Jacqueline Gribbin
Printers: Jacqueline Gribbin and Monique Auricchio</p> <p>10 Jean Baptiste Aputimi
Jirtaka (sawfish) 2008
screenprint
50 x 39cm
Collaborators/plate-makers: Tiwi Design staff and Jacqueline Gribbin
Printer: Clinton Barker</p> |
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