

Shimmering Light

Essay by Howard Morphy from the book *Jörg Schmeisser Bilder Der Reise – a man who likes to draw, 2013*

In the dry season of 2004 I was sitting in the shade of a tree high on a coastal dune at Yilpara, a Yolngu community in the North of Blue Mud Bay. I was watching Galuma Maymuru as she painted. She was using a brush (marwat) made from a few long strands of human hair bound to a short stick to apply the ground ochre pigments to the sheet of bark. I remarked to her how much I admired her work, but that I had no ability as an artist. She continued painting before pausing to reply. She agreed that I had no talent as an artist but added kindly that I was very good at watching artists at work. Galuma is the daughter of Narritjin Maymuru, the artist I spent most time with when I began my research into Yolngu art as a doctoral student in the 1970s. Narritjin insisted that I should not interrupt him as he painted. Or if I did, I would have to pay for the interruption as he was a professional artist and painting was how he made his living. So I used to sit quietly and watch him work; when he rested I was free to talk to him. It was through Narritjin Maymuru that I first met Jörg Schmeisser.

In 1978 Narritjin spent three months at the Australian National University in Canberra. Together with his son Banapana he was awarded a Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship. Narritjin and Banapana were given the Melville Hail Annex as a studio. In addition to producing works for an exhibition, they took part in classes and opened their studio to visitors. Jörg was one of the visitors. He had just taken up his position as head of the print workshop at Canberra School of Art. He had already developed an interest in Aboriginal art through visiting the rock art sites of the Alligator Rivers region of Western Arnhem Land with his friend George Chaloupka. Jörg asked Narritjin if he would be interested in working with him to produce some etchings and Narritjin agreed to experiment with the process.

Jörg sensed that cross-hatching, which is such an important technique in Yolngu art, might have synergies with the production of images through etching. Hatching with the etching tool could potentially create subtle contrasts across the surface of the image. Jörg demonstrated to Narritjin the use of the needle. He cut a series of lines in one direction and then a number of intersecting lines to demonstrate how cross-hatching could achieve an effect on a plate. Narritjin appeared a little uncomfortable. No, he said, he could not produce a design like that. Jörg was surprised since he had not consciously been producing a design, just demonstrating a technique. But in demonstrating cross-hatching Jörg had inadvertently produced a sacred design, a diamond pattern. Narritjin focused on the pattern rather than the technique and thought that Jörg was asking him to produce a diamond design. Jörg had unknowingly crossed the boundary from technique to design and entered the murky waters of cultural property. Diamond designs belong to particular clans (not Narritjin's) and the right to produce them is restricted. The confusion was eventually resolved and Narritjin commenced work.

It is not easy to transfer skill and technique from one medium to another. Using the fluent strokes of the marwat Yolngu effortlessly and skillfully produce crosshatched infill. Using an etching tool requires the hand to learn to perform a very different task. While Narritjin's etching appeared to me less fluent and controlled than his painting, Jörg was confident from the beginning that the result would be successful. And once processed and printed by Jörg, Narritjin's image of Nyapililngu, the ancestral progenitor of the Manggalili clan, appeared indeed as a powerful image.

Narritjin's Fellowship ended and he returned to Yirrkala. He remained to be convinced that printmaking was an appropriate medium for Yolngu sacred designs (*miny'tji*). He was nervous about the idea of reproduction, and the production of multiples beyond the

artist's control. But over the next few years there were developments. Jörg, Theo Tremblay and Basil Hall made Canberra School of Art the centre of engagement with Indigenous printmaking, working with young artists including Dennis Nona and established artists like Banduk Marika. And overtime Buku Larrnggay Mulka art centre at Yirrkala where Narritjin lived, became a centre for Yolngu printmaking. The print workshop at Yirrkala developed in a considered manner, experimenting in the medium but only slowly opening up the designs. Narritjin's caution was shared by others until people understood the nature of printmaking - the integrity of the medium and the unique nature of each print. It was Narritjin's grandson Djambawa Marawili, a great artist and at the time chairman of Buku Larrnggay, who played a leading role in adapting *miny'tji* to the print medium, working with Basil Hall at Northern Editions in Darwin.

In 2010 the circle was completed when Jörg took part in a cross-cultural venture in printmaking that brought four non-Yolngu artists to work with a number of Yolngu artists at Yilpara, hosted by Djambawa Marawili. *Djalkiri: we are standing on their names – Blue Mud Bay*, was a project conceived by Angus and Rose Cameron of Nomad Arts in Darwin. In addition to Jörg and Djambawa the participants were John Wolseley, Judy Watson, Fiona Hall, Gumbaniya Marawili, Liyawaday Wirrpanda, Mulkun Wirrpanda, and Marrnyula Mununggurr. Basil Hall joined the artists as master printer and worked with them for several months to produce a major edition of prints. I was fortunate enough to be present during the workshop.

Jörg was returning to a place where he had never been in body but which had been part of his imaginary ever since working with Narritjin all those years ago. 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. The Yolngu artists guided, interpreted and made connections; and made the process of collecting into an exchange of ideas and knowledge. And while the Yolngu artists painted ancestral space the visitors transformed what they had gathered into works of art. I watched Jörg focus on a crab's skeleton retrieved from the beach, drawing it precisely and at such a speed that the image seemed to appear magically before the eye. But then, with etching, the work has only just begun.

The artists - visitors and Yolngu - worked together in the same space, talked about their work, walked over the same country, but did they influence each other? To an extent the fact that all recognised each others' artistry despite differences in background and tradition was sufficient - they were aware of synergies in the artistic process cross-culturally. And yet it is tempting to see in the etchings that Jörg produced from Yilpara the evidence of a journey that had taken him from the early European heritage, through a lifelong engagement with Japanese art to a deep appreciation of the form and aesthetics of Aboriginal art. I can see all of these in the exquisite etching *Mangrove Tree* (2010) with its transparency and sparkle—it is ethereal yet also substantial. Jörg sees this image as a journey of the senses through time and space 'touching the cliff of the distant rock face with the etching needle. I follow the confusing lines of the mangrove roots - I taste the air and dust - I feel the rough stones'. For my part I can see in Jörg's etching the shimmering brilliance (*bir'yun*) that Yolngu artists aim to create to evoke the scintillating light of nature that is the spirit of place.

Howard Morphy

Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University. Professor Morphy was an integral part of the Nomad Art Djalkiri project at Blue Mud Bay in 2009.