

AAK
NGENCH
THAYAN
STRONG
COUNTRY



22 MARCH – 3 MAY 2024

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STRONG
COUNTRY

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In association with Wik & Kugu
Arts Centre, Aurukun

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KEITH WIKMUNEA

Wik-Mungkan and
Wik-Alken languages
Alapech ceremonial clan
born 1967

Theewith yot.a! 2024 (detail)

STRONG COUNTRY

Since 2019, Wik & Kugu Arts Centre has reorientated itself to give rise to a new era full of fresh, innovative ideas that have breathed new life into the artistic endeavours of the community at Aurukun. This movement has been characterised by a dedicated emphasis on refined cultural storytelling, aligning traditional practices with contemporary artistic expression. During this period, the centre has re-emerged as a custodian of the region's rich cultural heritage, utilising various artistic mediums to convey the profound narratives and wisdom of the Wik & Kugu people. Through their art, the preservation of cultural heritage is made possible. It becomes a powerful means of communicating to a broader audience, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of their culture.

The community has a strong heritage of contemporary art, with legacies left by the late Mavis Ngallametta and Arthur Pambegan Sr. Recently a new guard of high profile artists have risen from the pool of creative talent in Aurukun, such as Keith Wikmunea, Garry Namponan and Alair Pambegan and painters Janet Koongotema & Vera Koomeeta. These artists represent the forefront of contemporary art and storytelling from Cape York and are helping to steer Wik & Kugu in a new and exciting direction.

Aak Ngench Thayan: Strong Country is a concept that was brought to life by senior Wik & Kugu artists. The exhibition was created as an immersive cultural experience for collectors and art enthusiasts to grasp the depth of Aurukun's sculptural traditions. Keith Wikmunea's cockatoos in a tree, a pack of camp dogs and Alair Pambegan's flying foxes are just some of the works that have gone into creating one of Wik & Kugu Art Centre's most refined installations. Owls by Leigh Namponan have also been hung from the ceiling to signify in-flight movement, and a single-channel film installation by Aurukun's Woyan-min Project sets the tone for a deep dive into the ceremonial heritage of the five clans living in Aurukun.

GABE WATERMAN

MANAGER, WIK & KUGU ART CENTRE, AURUKUN



AURUKUN

Aurukun is a remote township in north Queensland that lies at the junction of three large rivers (the Archer, Watson and Ward) and the Gulf of Carpentaria. Arriving by air is the usual way of reaching this settlement of some 1200 people, where the vastness of this convergence of water is all-encompassing.

One can walk the perimeter of the Aurukun township in less than an hour. Suburban lots, high-set and low-set houses are fenced off from each other, and the red dirt and bitumen streets. Dogs roam unchecked, scrapping when packs converge. In the middle of the cross-section of roads is the shop, the takeaway, the church, the school, the Indigenous Knowledge Centre, the health centre and the Wik & Kugu Arts Centre.

In Aurukun, there are seven different seasons that are discernible across the calendar year. Um Kaap.ak (Build-up to the wet), Kaap (the true wet season), Onchan Wayath (thunder and lightening now coming from the east), Onchan min (Beginning of the dry season), Kayaman Maal (beginning of hot dry weather), Kayaman Pung Nganth Ling-ling (really hot season), Thurpak (thunder and the first of the storms for the calendar year). There are wet and dry times but the seasonal variations are unique to Aurukun and summed up in the seven seasons called Kaap Thonam (One Year).

The Wik and Kugu groups that live in Aurukun may share family, language and social connections. These families belong to specific homelands, diverse natural environments that stretch hundreds of kilometres along the west coast of the Cape York Peninsula, spanning aquatic ecosystems, freshwater biodiversity, tropical savannah landscapes and dense stringybark eucalyptus forests. Each clan still performs songs and dances linked to the region, with principal dancers historically drawn from the fully initiated men of each clan, with women participating as separate groups.

The clans are linked through 'culturally specific associations with the land based on each clan's distinct traditions and laws'. They were united when establishing the mission and community between 1904 and the 1970s. The Art Centre describes Aurukun's five clan groups as all having 'their unique histories and understanding of the Land as well as interlinked connections with other Clans. There are no simple political or linguistic groups in Aurukun. The people own, by right of Clan birth and Country, a recognised variety of languages.'

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 Excerpts from *YYALKANG KEE'THAN | Ceremony & Art of the Wik People*
 Louise Martin-Chew and Wik & Kugu Art Centre, upcoming publication, 2024

Cartographer John Frith, Flat Earth Mapping, in *Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art* edited by Sally Butler and published by the University of Queensland Press, 2010.

(left to right)

LEIGH NAMPONAN

Wik-Alken, Wik-Mungkan
and Wik-Ngathan languages
Alapech ceremonial clan
born 1965

Ku' Eeremangk 2023

natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood
37 × 67 × 15 cm
AUD 7,000

LEX NAMPONAN

Wik-Alken, Wik-Mungkan
and Wik-Ngathan languages
Alapech ceremonial clan
born 1971

Ku' Wewm (Red Ku')

natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood
41 × 78 × 25 cm
AUD 7,000

LEO NAMPONAN

Wik-Alken, Wik-Mungkan
and Wik-Ngathan languages
Alapech ceremonial clan
born 1973

Ku' Ngekanam 2023

natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood
42 × 90 × 17 cm
AUD 9,000

BRUCE BELL

Wik-Mungkan language
Apalech ceremonial clan
born 1967

Ku' Flame 2023

natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood
62 × 57 × 16 cm
AUD 8,000

GARRY NAMPONAN

Wik-Alken, Wik-Mungkan
and Wik-Ngathan languages
Alapech ceremonial clan
born 1960

Ku' Eeremangk 2023

natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood
65 × 102 × 17 cm
AUD 12,500

BRUCE BELL

Wik-Mungkan language
Apalech ceremonial clan
born 1967

Ku' Manyi (Puppy Dog) 2023

natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood
43 × 38 × 16 cm
AUD 6,000



KEITH WIKMUNEA

Wik-Mungkan and
Wik-Alken languages
Alapech ceremonial clan
born 1967

Theewith yot.a! 2024
natural earth pigments
and synthetic binders
on carved milkwood
303 x 160 x 120cm
AUD 75,000



ALAIR PAMBEGAN

Wik-Mungkan language
Winchanam ceremonial clan
born 1966

Kalben – Flying Fox Story 2024
natural earth pigments and synthetic
binders on carved milkwood,
discarded rope hand dyed with
Aurukun red bush roots, discarded
steel frame with a brushed finish
181 × 185 × 60 cm
AUD 40,000



(left to right)
STEVE NGAKAPOORGUM
YUNKAPORTA
 Wik-Ngathan language group
 Alapech ceremonial clan
 born 1969

Minh Kayyuw
(Sacred Ibis) 2023
 natural earth pigments
 and synthetic binders
 on carved milkwood
 55 × 40 × 45 cm
 AUD 7,000

STEVE NGAKAPOORGUM
YUNKAPORTA
 Wik-Ngathan language
 Alapech ceremonial clan
 born 1969

Mont (Jabiru) 2023
 natural earth pigments
 and synthetic binders
 on carved milkwood
 107 × 54 × 39.5 cm
 AUD 8,000

HANS POONKAMELYA
 Wik-Mungkan language
 Puch ceremonial clan
 born 1970

*Minh Keech (Great
 White Egret)* 2023
 natural earth pigments
 and synthetic binders
 on carved milkwood
 51 × 33 × 10 cm
 AUD 5,000

GARRY NAMPONAN
 Wik-Alken, Wik-Mungkan
 and Wik-Ngathan languages
 Apalech ceremonial clan
 born 1960

*Minh Keerk (Red-tailed
 Black Cockatoo)* 2023
 ochres and acrylic with
 binders on milkwood
 51 × 60 × 26.5 cm
 AUD 5,000

STEVE NGAKAPOORGUM
YUNKAPORTA
 Wik-Ngathan language group
 Alapech ceremonial clan
 born 1969

Minh Kor (Brolga) 2023
 natural earth pigments
 and synthetic binders
 on carved milkwood
 77 × 23 × 23 cm
 AUD 6,000



TRAVERSING NEW TERRITORIES: CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE FROM AURUKUN



ABOVE: Garry Namponan in the workshop left and above with finished *Ku' Eremangk*

Late in 2023, several large crates arrived in Melbourne, having travelled from the remote township of Aurukun in north Queensland. A dense and unusual scent filled the gallery as the containers were cracked open, the shift in the atmosphere a potent reminder of the distance between Naarm and the clan Countries of the Wik and Kugu people. As the inhabitants of the crates emerged, the floor was jam-packed with carved and painted animals that signalled a changing dynamic for the gallery. *Aak Ngench Thayan: Strong Country* is the first collaboration with the artists of the Wik & Kugu Art Centre and the first all-sculpture exhibition for D'Lan Contemporary. As they stared fixedly around their new space, these signature carvings created a commanding presence. Once filling a role as ceremonial ancestral performers, they were now acclaimed objects of contemporary art.

The art practices at Aurukun have evolved with the changing circumstances of the Wik people. Clan and government politics, mission life, Native Title and the art market have all provided various contexts through which the sculptural tradition has endured and evolved, prompting, in turn, the continuation of the narrative tradition. The storytelling and performative function of ritual sculpture at Aurukun has also undergone change over the different generations of Wik culture. Most significantly, though, the maintenance of clan Law relating to Country is what drives contemporary carving and creates its enduring power. Yet, making art is as much an irrepressible human activity as it is an assertion of knowledge and cultural survival. The liveliness of the characters, such as Bruce Bell's perky *Ku' Manyi* (Puppy Dog), could be read as a playful take of its modern context and an eagerness to share the Wiks' vibrant culture with the rest of the world.

The first time sculptures of Aurukun were made public in their ceremonial context was through films by the ethnographic filmmaker Ian Dunlop, who travelled to Aurukun in 1962 with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. With the permission of clan group members, *Dances of Aurukun* captured days of dancing by the five Wik ceremonial groups, the carved totems being made specifically for each performance. These were not representations of ancestral figures but active participants, animated and carried by the performers. After the event, the sculptures were taken to the National Museum of Australia to assume the role of stationary tokens of a traditional cultural practice. Yet, the artists of Aurukun had already begun to modify the context of their work before the filmed event, which, as perceived by anthropologist Peter Sutton, was modified to appease the strict conservatism of the mission.¹ Carvings held in this institution and others comprise an essential cultural archive for the Wik and Kugu people, illustrating the area's ceremonial traditions. Yet the meaning and function of the sculpture made for this particular public context also hint at the visibility and commerciality of art making and the contemporary practice to come.

The carved characters of Aurukun take up residence within the gallery milieu in just one of the expanded roles that have transformed Wik sculpture since 1962. These sculptural objects are made to be sold, yet sacred objects are still made today and are used during significant ceremonial occasions in the community; others are made in the public arena of the Wik and



Kugu workshop, and are then lent for ceremony. This has meant loosening the parameters of Wik Law to accommodate the different type of performance these works fulfil within the gallery space.

An essential function of contemporary sculpture is to continue documenting creation stories, keeping them alive for future generations. Alair Pambegan's artworks are based on the stories passed on to him from his father, the late revered lawman, Elder and artist Arthur Koo'ekka Pambegan Jnr (1936–2010). However, presenting a record of community life is also important. The Ku' or camp dogs of Aurukun are some of the most recognised and celebrated characters to emerge from the Wik & Kugu Art Centre. There is playfulness in these everyday, ostensibly anti-heroic beings that have captured the attention of astute collectors. Yet, they are also bold spirits with inherent contemporary qualities and are a vehicle for cultural recognition and notoriety for the Aurukun region.

Immediately recognisable, the canine sculptures evoke the camp dogs synonymous with life in remote First Nation communities across Australia. Camp dogs are free to come and go and are a prominent community fixture. They are cheeky and affectionate companions to their owners, but to those outside the community, they are harassing, annoying and unsettling in their vast numbers. Regardless, the humour often portrayed in 'cheeky dogs' can be sensed in the Ku'. The dogs nonetheless perform a vital role, helping to shape both the earthly and spiritual realms of the places and people to which they belong. The dogs of Aurukun have essential ties to the ancestral Ku' who brought language to the Wik people. The Storyplace of the Ku', associated with the Apalech ceremonial clan, is located south of the Wik and Kugu region near the mouth of the Knox River.

The sculpted ku' was made prominent by the region's most well-known artists, such as the Namponan family, who have injected animation and character into this common animal with its important ancestral origins. At first glance, they seem to posture aggressively. But their heightened energy is alleviated by their eyes, which reveal their contentment at being on both sides of the threshold: as a natural species and companion to people and as a formidable spirit-being in the supernatural realm.

ABOVE: Alair Pambegan installing
Kalben – Flying Fox Story 2024



TOP: Alair Pambegan painting
Kalben – Flying Fox Story

BOTTOM: Wik & Kugu artists
gathering milkwood

Aak Ngench Thayan contains an abundance of birds and dogs who are both totemic and common. Their initial ordinariness – as representations of animals – conceals their power. Sometimes a bird is just a bird, but even so, it cannot escape the sense of place and purpose it possesses.² The bird is not isolated from its origins, even if it is created without any sacred association, such as with Hans Poonkamelya's delicate *Minh Keech (Great White Egret)*. Frequently seen on the artist's traditional lands near Kendall River country, the bird's long legs sink into its stand, emulating the water in which it wades and feeds, forever grounded in Country. Such a delicate creature could be seen as a study of innocence or naivety, or as capturing the narrative of its ancestral belonging, for its story begins at the start of the world, which, as one of the ancestors, it was there to witness.

Storytelling in Aurukun sculpture remain unchanged from its ancestral roots, yet there has been a recent resurgence of creative innovation that is waiting to be 'pushed through the sieve of art history'.³ The vision of Apalech artist Keith Wikmunea is to keep his culture strong and alive, and his breakthrough work *Ku', Theewith & Kalampang: The White Cockatoo, Galah & the Wandering Dog* achieved the highest accolade when it won the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2023. The tree and its inhabitants, masterfully carved by Wikmunea, represent the strength and resilience of a culture and its power to reach beyond the Aurukun region.

The Wik & Kugu Art Centre has fostered a 'ritual of reinvention' that has helped dislodge discriminatory narratives of what art is and has made space for new perspectives. The performativity of the Aurukun sculpture lives on, yet the participatory role has been flipped with regards to Keith's trees. As the work invites the viewer to engage and interact with its form, it inspires patterns of human movement, reflecting the kinetic quality and tradition embedded in Aurukun sculpture.

The practice of carving still holds strong to its ceremonial roots and maintains its authority today. The potency of the Country is intrinsic in the dynamic and diverse characters that emerge from the region. The carved and painted animals are objects of strategic and aesthetic importance that make powerful statements of spirituality and identity. The beauty of Aurukun carving is its openness and emphatic narrative qualities, which give the impression of characters that have been suspended or removed from a particular story. They are expressions of action and activity, whether in this realm or another.

VANESSA MERLINO

1. Peter Sutton, 'Sacred Images and Political Engagements' in *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, 2003, p. 53.
2. Sally Butler, 'Tradition and Change in Aesthetics' in *Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art*, University of Queensland, 2010, p.
3. Natalie Rudd, *Contemporary Art*, Thames & Hudson, 2023, p. 3



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ABOUT

Formed in 2016, D'Lan Contemporary sources, exhibits and sells exceptional works of art by leading and emerging First Nations Australian artists in Australia and overseas.

ETHICS

Our mission is to create a transparent and sustainable marketplace for Australian Indigenous art and to respect and protect the integrity of the artist, the buyer, the seller – and the marketplace – from fraudulent sales or unethical procurement.

We maintain strict ethical practices and only exhibit and sell works of art with a clear line of provenance.

D'Lan Contemporary allocates 30% of annual net profits to centralise and distribute proceeds from art sales back to Australian First Nations artists and their working communities.

PROVENANCE

Every work of art exhibited and sold by D'Lan Contemporary has a clear line of provenance.

Documentation we draw upon to establish provenance includes:

- Community art centre certificate of provenance/authenticity
- Transfer of ownership documentation
- Purchase receipt or invoice
- Inclusion in academic / art historical publications
- Inclusion in exhibitions, and exhibition catalogues (private and/or public institution)
- Collection/exhibition inventory numbers (private and/or public institution)
- Inclusion in auction catalogues
- Documented appraisals

D'Lan Contemporary's guidance on best practice for buying Australian Indigenous art is:

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS ART (1980–PRESENT)

All contemporary Australian Indigenous works of art should be accompanied by documentation linking the artwork to the artist via their Community Art Centre or their primary gallery/representative.

Community Art Centres operate with an ethical focus and establish their own individual guidelines by which all artworks are sold.

Primary market artworks should only be bought from a Community Art Centre or an official artist gallery/representative.

Secondary market artworks should only be bought with a source of provenance from a Community Art Centre or an official artist gallery/representative.

MODERN INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN ART (1950S–1980)

For artworks created prior to the establishment of Community Art Centres, such as bark paintings, Hermannsberg watercolours, Papunya boards and sculptural artworks made for sale, there is less necessity for Community Art Centre provenance.

However, artworks from this period with no traceable history are likely to have less market value than those that do – even when an artwork is clearly authentic.

Highly desirable provenance for artworks from this period includes Papunya Tula Artists, Stuart Art Centre and Maningrida Arts, or a clear link to a primary collector such as Geoffrey Bardon, Dorothy Bennett, Sandra Le Brun Holmes or Dr Scougal – who were all active in the 1950s–1970s.

ARTEFACTS AND OBJECTS (1880S–1950)

With artefacts, often much of the important collection history has been lost over time. Therefore, provenance can greatly impact value.

Before acquisition, research should be undertaken to ascertain the origin of the artefact or object, and how and when it left its country of origin.

Best practice in this segment is to obtain advice from a trusted industry expert before buying or selling.

PROTECTION OF MOVEABLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ACT

The *Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1985* (PMCH Act) implements Australia's obligations under the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 1970 (1970 UNESCO Convention), to which Australia is a State Party.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention requires State Parties to ensure that no collecting institution accepts illegally exported items.

The Australian Government administers the PMCH Act through the Ministry for the Arts. The PMCH Act regulates the export of Australia's most significant cultural heritage objects by implementing export controls for objects defined as 'Australian Protected Objects'.

If you have any questions about acquiring or selling Australian Indigenous Art, please contact us at: enquiries@dlancontemporary.com.au



Drone over Aurukun, image courtesy of Gabe Waterman

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