BARK & WOOD

16 JANUARY – 24 FEBRUARY 2023

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Bark & Wood

Bark and wood are the raw, essential materials of a uniquely Northern Australian identity. Their organic, often weathered forms encounter the senses through the surface of ochre-painted imagery, each a single object that embodies the earth, body and spirit. Cut and stripped, burnt, smoked and flattened, oiled, sealed and sanded, the metamorphosis from organic life to one of immortality is guided by the transcendent tradition of ritual and ceremony, physical labour and acoustic qualities of narrative and song.

Bark painting, in particular, is one of the primary traditional art forms in northern Australia that is connected to other long-established artistic traditions such as rock painting and ceremonial body painting. As Curator Djon Mundine has stated, 'the skin of the trees is a metaphor for the skin of the human body' and the static imagery that graces sheets of stringy bark is created with the same reverence and devotion as the mark-making applied to the body in ceremony. The story, knowledge and life imbued in the medium express a unique material characteristic like no other contemporary art form.

D'Lan Contemporary is delighted to present a special selection of artworks that observe the diversity of bark painting and wood carving across the areas of the Kimberley, Wadeye, Eastern and Western Arnhem Land, Groote Eylandt, Northern Queensland and Tiwi Islands. Each with their artistic movement and masters of the medium, this collection celebrates the regional histories of a people, distinct creative expressions and the continuing testimonial of self-definition and cultural authority.

VANESSA MERLINO
Head of Research, D'Lan Contemporary

Wadeye

Wadeye, also known as Port Keats, is situated 420km by road southwest of Darwin. The Murrinh-patha-speaking people of the Daly – Fitzmaurice Rivers region have a painting tradition seldom mentioned in publications of Indigenous Australian art yet have the most prolonged involvement with commercial art production in the Daly-River district. Central and western desert acrylics, topographical representations of the Kimberley and intricate rarrk work to the east in Arnhem Land usually dominate narratives of contemporary painting from remote Australia. Yet, the striking and enigmatic barks of Wadeye are an essential part of Australian Aboriginal art history.

The rich landscape of the Daly-Fitzmaurice is conducive to developing the Wadeye bark painting tradition, and its origins can be traced to its original contexts. The region varies widely from coastal beaches, riverine lagoons and swamps to rugged uplands dotted with caves, which bear the rock paintings of well-confirmed wet weather activity. For those who could not retreat to the uplands, bark sheets were constructed and decorated in the same way as cave shelters. As there are only scarce records of this, bark painting in the region is said among many sources to have only started in the 1950s when many senior men took up painting. The establishment of the Christian Mission in Port Keats in 1935, although initially attempting to sever the traditional cultural practices by destroying sacred material, became a site for new forms of visual material that provided the framework for artistic and cultural innovation and continuation.

A fusion of politics, cultural innovation, religious revision, and syncretism developed the distinctive bark painting of the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1920s, senior Wadeye men travelled far beyond their own country's borders in search of Western commodities such as tobacco and steel unavailable to them on their traditional lands. Through their travels, they learned different languages, kinship systems, songs, stories, ceremonies, and associated designs, all of which inspired their painting once they returned to Wadeye. Bark painting across Australia's northern territories has been a formidable political vehicle, and paintings produced at Wadeye illustrate and demonstrate similar claims to country and repossession. The specific oval shape that became a development of Wadeye barks was cut to emphasise their association with the sacred objects destroyed in the early days of the mission.

DJINU TJIMARI
circa 1901 – deceased
Untitled 1968

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
94 × 31 cm

AUD 18,000

CHARLIE MARDIGAN
Untitled circa 1960

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
70 × 31cm

AUD 12,000

CHARLIE NEEWILI BRINKIN
circa 1910 – 1993
Untitled 1965

natural earth pigments on bark
70.5 × 22 cm

AUD 7,700

The Kimberley

The Kimberley is a highly complex region – linguistically, culturally, and artistically. The art of the Kimberley Region reflects the diverse cultural traditions of the four main areas – the north and central Kimberley, the east, the west and the south. Artists across the vast area depict country, Law, and ancestral beings in contrasting ways. Despite the regional differences in style, subject matter and materials used, the works affirm a shared aesthetic of raw and irregular forms, and textually that connects the concept of the Ngarranggarni or Dreaming in a regionally specific way.

Unlike Rainbow Serpents known throughout most of Aboriginal Australia, the Wandjina are unique to the Kimberley and synonymous with the whole region in the popular imagination. The works from Mowanjum and Kalumburu in the northwest and northern Kimberley reflect the spectacular rock art in these regions, and the religious icon of the Wandjina predominates over all other subject matter as the most powerful visual expression of cultural reverence. However, the Wandjina tradition and its expression are specific only to the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Woonambal peoples, who trace their descent from Wandjina spirit ancestors.

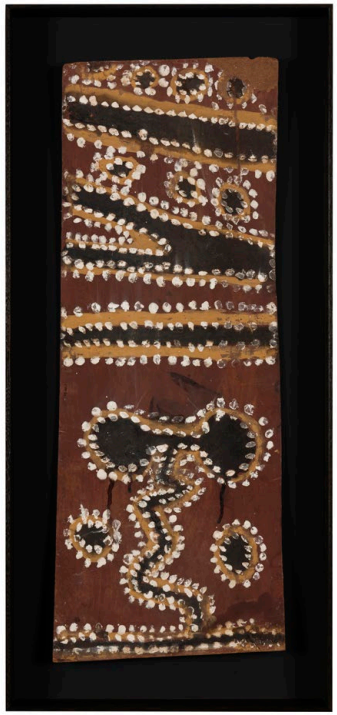
Most contemporary depictions of Wandjina emanate from the Kalumburu community, where the Benedictine Mission was established in 1907. Ochres are gathered from the creek beds and include onmal, jajal (red) and goombarroo (yellow), with charcoal used for black. Compared to their counterparts in Arnhem Land, artists have not adopted wood glue as a fixative, preferring to boil up goorim (gum) from the boorngor tree. Husbands and wives work alongside and support each other in their art practice with imagery often painted with thick red-ochre outlines on white background.

Gija artists from the East Kimberley community of Warmun represent the connection between art and ceremonial and public performances and dances. Balga is a classification of public dance, an innovative performance that permits the emergence of new visual and conceptual forms within a formal, ceremonial setting. The Gurrir Gurrir ceremonial cycle is affiliated with Warmun, and like the balga, it embraces and conceptualises recent events. This continuity of the past, entwined with the recent changes in people's lives, is the foundation of the emergence of contemporary art at Warmun and Kimberley.

WAIGAN DJANGHARA
circa 1929 – 1996
Wanjina 1977

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
116 × 62 cm

AUD 22,000



PADDY JAMINJI
circa 1912 – 1996
HECTOR JANDANY
circa 1929 – 2007
Untitled; Untitled circa 1984

natural earth pigments on wood
73 × 28 cm; 69 × 42 cm (2)

AUD 15,000

Tiwi – Bathurst & Melville Islands

The Tiwi, landowners of Melville and Bathurst Islands, which lie approximately 80km northwest of Darwin, have maintained a strong cultural identity through the continued occupation of their islands for centuries. The Islands were formed by the original creative ancestor Murtankala. The narrow channel of Apsely Strait or Pirlangimpi that runs between the two islands with a forceful and dangerous current is depicted in art and legend as the pathway of Ampiji, the rainbow serpent. The masterful carving tradition that has made Tiwi sculpture famous is a legacy of early contact with outsiders. Vessels that foundered on the shores were, among other goods, foraged for the metal, which would significantly impact the art of the islands, particularly the Pukamani - carved burial poles that mark Tiwi culture as unique.

Among the Tiwi regional groups, the story of Purukapali and Bima are island-wide themes and the conceptual basis of the two main cultural events, the pukumani (mourning) and kulama (coming of age) ceremonies. The ancestral woman Bima left her baby to die in the sun while she lingered with her husband's brother, the moon-man. Her husband Purukalpili, grief-stricken at the passing of his son, declared that death would be the common fate of all humanity and then performed the first mortuary rituals, which still determine Tiwi conduct following death. Each Tiwi person is expected to participate in customary visual and performing art – carving and painting tututni (poles), making tunga (bark baskets) and body adornments, creating jilamara (body painting designs), and performing kawakawayi (songs) and yoyi (dance). Individuality and innovation are highly valued in the cultural identity of Tiwi artists. Rather than reproducing inherited and encoded totemic designs that accord with lines of descent or kinship systems, individual artists are custodians of the significance of their original representations. Therefore the meanings depicted in Tiwi artworks, although not kept private, belong to the respective artist.

DEAF TOMMY MUNGATOPI
circa 1923 – 85
Coral 1965

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
52.5 × 38.5cm

AUD 48,000

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Untitled – Pukumani Ceremonial
Designs, circa 1950

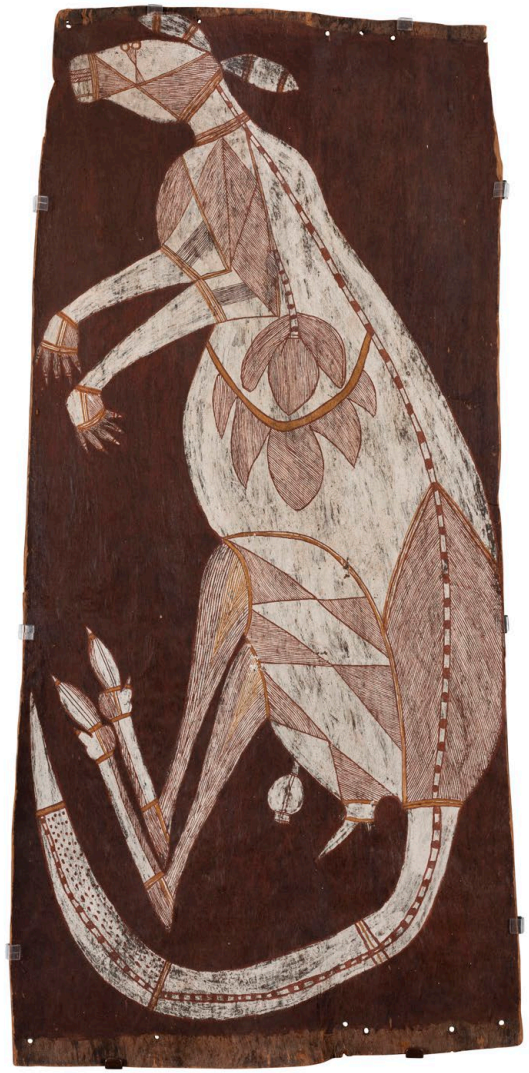
natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
52 × 35 cm

AUD 18,000

MANI LUKI WOMMATAKIMMI
circa 1914 – 1980
Bima 1965

natural earth pigments on
carved hardwood
68 × 10 cm

AUD 25,000



Western Arnhem Land – Maningrida / Croker Island

Western Arnhem Land is one of the world's great rock art provinces. The Arnhem Land Plateau, a vast expanse of fissured rock country, dominates the landscape of the western and south-western sides of the region. The energy of the Djang or Dreaming reverberates through the creative transformations found in the vast number of symbolic forms and styles that map the great western escarpment. The ancestral world of the Kuninjku people is unique in its figurative emphasis, where X-ray images, mimih spirits and other dynamic spirit beings are found nowhere else. These rock faces are a millennia-old well of inspiration that has stimulated some of Australia's great bark painters to develop new interpretations of the powers of ancestral beings and their role in maintaining life forces.

The influence of rock painting can be seen in the multitude of different figurative styles of artists of the Maningrida area. A key artist in this group was Yirawala, a significant figure in the development of Western Arnhem Land bark painting. Yirawala lived on Minjilang (Croker Island) in the early 1960s and produced an influential series of images that documented the Kuninjku ceremonies and used the body painting designs of Mardayin and Wubarr ceremonies to invigorate the subjects of his paintings. This ceremonial style played a crucial part in the development of Kuninjku art as artists discovered that the visual connections that resonate ancestral energy could be modified and used in the public context of bark painting, allowing for a more innovative and creative platform than that of ceremony. Both subject matter of mayh – food/animal and djang – Dreaming, interpenetrate and reveals the cosmic within the concrete in Kuninjku art. A conjunction of elements forms a dialogue between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and intangible, which are bound together, revealing extraordinary transformations of the seen world.

JIMMY NJIMINJUMA
circa 1945 – 2004
Rainbow Gagis Ngalangru 1980

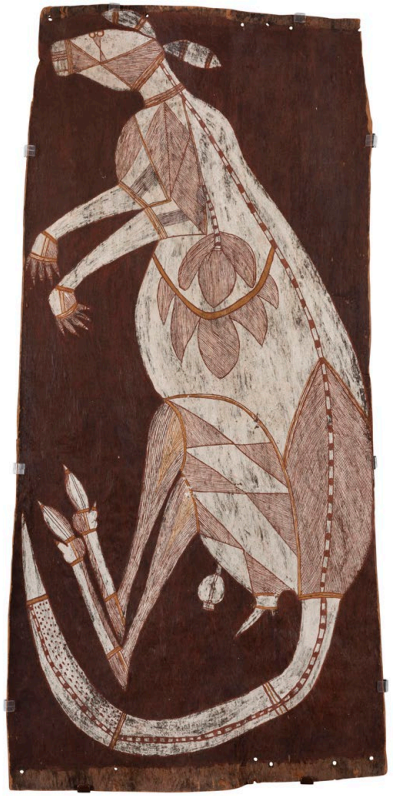
natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
70 × 50cm

AUD 15,000

YIRAWALA
circa 1903 – 1976
Bush Turkey and Snake
circa 1970

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
70 × 29.5 cm

AUD 24,000



DICK NGULEINGULEI MURRUMURRU
circa 1920 – 1988
Kangaroo circa 1970

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
125 × 60 cm

AUD 9,600

Central Arnhem Land – Miligimbi and Ramingining

Milingimbi and Ramingining are two of the most significant art–producing settlements in Central Arnhem Land. The art of the vast region has traditional independence, yet the painting style is strongly associated with the artistic practices of the surrounding areas. Bark paintings were first collected from the Ramingining area, 30 km from the Arafura sea, in 1924 by a British Museum expedition. There is a direct connection between contemporary art and temporary art made in the context of sacred ceremonies. Artists soon adapted the imagery for exposure to an uninitiated audience, and bark painting became the vehicle for innovation and experimentation.

The island of Yurriwi, more commonly known as Milingimbi, is the largest of the Crocodile Island group, which lies off the coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. In the 1950s, a group of artists of varying ages and experiences worked together. Their styles and approaches and shared visual language resulted in a distinct style of painting that had never before been seen. They created striking images that expressed the cultural identity of the Gupapuyngu Daygurrgurr-speaking people, capturing the dynamism of country, the ancestral forces that have given form to the land and later the intertwining of Christian doctrine and the Dreaming.

The history of Milingimbi greatly informed the flourishing artistic movement as it had long been a meeting place for the trade of valuable items. For centuries Macassan trepangers from Sulawesi visited the island to live and work with the Yolngu people harvesting sea slugs, a delicacy that would make its way to Asia. Upon the arrival of the missionaries and, subsequently sociologists and anthropologists, the systems of trade continued, and bark painting thrived not only as a commodity but in its facility for gaining appreciation and value of the local people, culture and cultural practices. The power of art was equal in educating outsiders as much as it was in strengthening the existing power structures of Milingimbi artists.

DAVID MALANGI
circa 1927 – 1999
Gurrimirringu the Mighty Hunter circa 1965

108.5 × 52 cm

AUD 24,000

BURRUNDAY
circa 1914 – 1980
Untitled – Crucifixion Study circa 1963

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
87.5 × 60.5 cm

AUD 30,000

HENRY GAMBIKA NUPURRA
born 1932
Banumbirr – Morning Star Pole 2000

natural earth pigments, feathers, bush
string and cotton on carved wood
178 × 10cm

AUD 7,700

MAWALAN MARIKA
circa 1908 – 1967
The Milky Way 1964

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
66 × 28 cm

AUD 16,000

Eastern Arnhem Land – Yirrkala

The Yolngu people of the north-east coast of Arnhem land have an art practice that is amongst the earliest commercial Indigenous art marketed by Methodist Overseas Mission. Yirrkala is ancestral land that belongs to the Rirratjinu/Gumatj clans. The art of Yirrkala has been developing since the township was founded in 1935 when artists recognised the potential use of visual art as a powerful political tool. Rather than continue to resist invaders encroaching on their country, leaders of the Yolngu clan groups decided to teach non-Indigenous people about their culture, opening a dialogue between Yolngu and balanda (non–Indigenous people) on Indigenous terms. The release of knowledge to this new audience and the marking of paintings in which encoded this knowledge and asserted the value of Yolngu culture and Yolngu clans' undisputable rights in land. The famous Yirrkala Church Panels and Yirrkala Bark Petition dating from 1963 and the more recent Wukidi installation in the NT Supreme Court and the Saltwater Collection in the Australian Maritime Museum are powerful legacies of cultural affirmation and identity.

The dualism of Yolngu society is manifest in the moiety system. According to this system, the cosmos and its parts are divided and balanced by two complimentary moieties – Dhuwa and Yirritja. Each clan, along with its land, song, plants and animals, belongs to one of the moieties, and as such, the artistic system of north-eastern Arnhem land is also strictly clan-based. Artists adhere to a fixed repertoire of esoteric signs and symbols that reinforces clan divisions and interrelationships. Yet, the individual identities are transferred through the skill of cross-hatching and the application of linked sequences of diamonds, squares, ovals and triangles that encode meanings according to their context. A characteristic of Yolngu bark paintings is the subdivision of feature blocks circumscribed by a yellow-ochre border and features both geometric and figurative components within this template. The patterned areas between the figures transmit clan and moiety affiliations within the mythological topography.

Groote Eylandt

Bickerton Island and Groote Eylandt, named by the Dutch explorers in the seventeenth century, lie in the Gulf of Carpentaria off the east coast of Arnhem Land and are home to the Anindilyakwa people. Although people share languages and religious ceremonies with mainlanders, the art styles of this area are distinct and ancient, with cave paintings on the islands dating back tens of thousands of years. Over 4000 rock paintings have been recorded on the islands. Depictions of canoes, dugongs, turtles, fishes, parties of human figures and hunting scenes found on rock faces of caves were also painted on bark shelters, connecting iconography in rock and bark paintings. Isolated as they are, the Anindilyakwa experienced contact much later than most Indigenous Australians, although Macassan traders from Indonesia occasionally visited them in the pre-contact period.

The unique bark paintings of Groote Eylandt were first collected in the 1920s with the arrival and settlement of missionaries to the area. The Anindilyakwa, however, were not interested in adopting settlement life until the 1940s, when the Church Missionary Society established a mission inland at Angurugu. Bark paintings collected from this early period have an ethereal quality that refers to the infinite and permanent spirit world and its presence in the everyday. Finely painted figures float weightlessly in the blackness of manganese, a brittle metal that is crushed and mixed with water to create the base coat of the bark. Rich manganese deposits are unique to Groote Eylandt, and the island is one of the world's largest manganese ore producers. Coinciding with the beginning of mining operations in the 1960s and 1970s came stylistic change as painting production increased with the market for bark painting. Senior artists who had been painting since the late 1940s diverged significantly with the thematic and stylistic shift that emerged during this period. Paintings became more complex, with artists filling the entire surface of the barks with abstract and highly stylised forms.

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Untitled circa 1950

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
41.5 × 29cm

AUD 9,600

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Untitled – Charts of the North-West Wind and Geographical References circa 1950s

natural earth pigments
on eucalyptus bark
37 × 58 cm

AUD 5,500

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Untitled – Transitional Shield

natural earth pigments and
pokerwork on carved wood
43.5 x 22 cm

AUD 8,000

North Queensland – Rainforest

The term 'Rainforest people' refers to the different Indigenous language groups that occupy a vast area of tropical North Queensland. Partitions of north, south and central rainforest areas have changed in the context of historical and political considerations, which has changed how the rainforest boundaries have been defined. Although tropical rainforest environments extend from Lockerbie Scrub at the tip of Cape York to Eungella National park near Mackay, the coastal strip from Helenvale, south of Cooktown, to Paluma, north of Townsville and west to Ravenshoe is now the region that defines the 'rainforest people' today. In the past, however, Indigenous groups crossed over these areas, and few were confined only to the rainforest environment.

Shields have long played a functional and symbolic role in mediating relationships between Australian Indigenous groups and the colonisers who encroached on their Country. The materials used for carved shields in the rainforest region are the buttress roots of the fig tree (Ficus macrophylla) which formed the soft wood, usually kidney-shaped shields used in ceremonial battles and warfare. The bold designs of the shields in red, yellow and white represent totems of plants and creatures such as trees and shrubs and spiders, crabs or fish. A human spirit would be permeated the shield, as the maker's blood would be mixed in with the red ochre to strengthen and enhance its protective qualities.

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