

blak roots



acknowledgments

Cover. Right: Mark Hollingsworth, Bigin (rainforest shield) 2007
Left: Dawn Naranatjil, Yakuri (school of bait fish) 2007 (detail)
Back: Abe Muriata, Jawun, Lawyercane, 2007

This catalogue celebrates a body of work collated for the KickArts Indigenous Survey exhibition, *Blak Roots*, commemorating 20 Years of Wet Tropics World Heritage in collaboration with School of Creative Arts, JCU.

KickArts Contemporary Arts is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee and is supported financially by Arts Queensland and the Australia Council for the Arts through the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.

Sponsors and Partners

Arts Queensland
Australia Council for the Arts
Wet Tropics Management Authority
James Cook University, School of Creative Arts
QantasLink
Boom Sherrin
Black and Moore
Pawsey and Prowse

Publisher

KickArts Contemporary Arts
96 Abbott Street Cairns QLD 4870 Australia
Postal address: PO Box 6090 Cairns QLD 4870 Australia
www.kickarts.org.au
info@kickarts.org.au
Telephone: 07 4050 9494
International telephone +61 7 4050 9494

Published in association with the exhibition, *Blak Roots*, held at KickArts Contemporary Arts, commemorating 20 Years of Wet Tropics World Heritage in collaboration with School of Creative Arts, JCU. November 2008 to February 2009.

ISBN 978-0-9803402-4-2

Dimensions of works of art are given in millimetres (mm), height preceding width preceding depth where applicable.

Publication team

Artists: Group exhibition
Director: Rae O'Connell
Curator and catalogue editor: Russell Milledge
Writers and contributors: Russell Milledge, Rae O'Connell, John Grey
Design and production: Sam Creyton
Photography: David Campbell unless indicated otherwise
Proof reading: Beverley Mitchell
Printed by: GEON Printing, Cairns

With thanks to:

The dedicated Art Centre Co-ordinators in Far North Queensland who collected and entered work on behalf of many of the artists

KickArts Contemporary Arts Board Of Directors
Mike Fordham, Chair
Jenni Le Comte, Secretary
Robyn Baker
Jeneve Frizzo
Robin Maxwell
Billy Missi
Roland Nancarrow
Andrew Prowse
Gayleen Toll
Robert Willmet

KickArts Contemporary Arts Staff

Rae O'Connell, Director
Beverley Mitchell, Shop Manager
Linda Stuart, Administration Manager
Samantha Creyton, Curator
Andrew Weatherill, Business Development Manager
Jan Aird, Marketing Manager
Leith Maguire, Administrator
Morgan Brady, Administrator

© KickArts Contemporary Arts 2008

Copyright KickArts Contemporary Arts, the artists and authors 2008. This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced without prior written permission from the publisher. No illustration in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the copyright owners. Neither may information be stored electronically in any form whatsoever without such permission. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the publisher. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the publisher.

partners and sponsors



Australian Government
Visual Arts and Craft Strategy
Queensland

KickArts is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.



On behalf of KickArts, The Wet Tropics Management Authority and the School of Creative Arts JCU, I welcome the contributing artists and thank them for the power and energy of their individual and collective vision.

This project presents a wonderful opportunity to celebrate twenty years of preservation and management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The achievements include not only the Area's inscription on the World Heritage list but also the enactment of legislation, governance by a dedicated authority and the highly praised Regional Agreement recognising Rainforest Aboriginal tribal groups, as Traditional Owners in land and cultural management. The continuity of Indigenous cultural values allows us to draw strength while reflecting on thousands of years of Indigenous custodial stewardship of this land and the intellectual resonance that flows on to our understanding of environmental conditions in the present day. The continued management of the Wet Tropics and other land and sea areas in our region are best engaged in a co - management system in conjunction with Traditional Owners, statutory authority, contemporary scientists and researchers recognising that the heart and soul of our environments rest within the expert protection of traditional Indigenous knowledge.

It is a privilege to experience salient links to ancestral and kinship knowledge of the first Australians, evident in the intellectual and creative spirit embodied by these artists and manifest in the material objects they have created. It is equally exhilarating to experience the palpable contemporaneity of many of the works in *Blak Roots* as these artists engage with a modern world and bring to it, the ability to embrace a uniquely Indigenous Australian identity. What we interpret as expressive and exuberant uses of energy and colour, in our modernist tradition, are startling invocations of 'I am'. Through application techniques of direct and immediate mark making a physicality and immediacy remains with the work. Here a kinesthetic empathy connects us with the artist in a similar way that we might experience a dancer's movement. The artists

hands have danced across these surfaces and this activity, although leaving a permanent impression, is an ephemeral and metaphysical language; 'I am here'-'this is my place'. Nicholas Evans writing about *Dulka warngiid* the 2006 combined canvas by the remarkable women of Kaiadilt country relates,

Dulka warngiid allows many translations into English. Dulka can mean 'place', 'earth', 'ground', 'country' and 'land'; warngiid can mean 'one' but also 'the same', 'common, in common' and 'only'. Because Bentinck Island and its small surrounding islands were the whole world for the Kaiadilt people, they did not need a word for Bentinck Island itself, since in actual conversation what was always more important were the specific places whose names rub shoulders every few hundred metres.

The Kaiadilt words *Dulka warngiid* were given the translation of 'land for all' but, as Evans indicates, it can also be translated as 'the one place', or 'the whole world'.

Indigenous visual culture offers an alternative response and an appropriate interpretation of our relationship to land. Many of the Indigenous cultural forms that emanate from ancestral origins inform an embodiment of the physical earth as an aesthetic representation. Relationships with the bush, through its direct physical qualities, and a mythological sense of place and time are transformed through the body and hand into objects of art. This is a deep relationship and reliance on country to establish identity and belonging. Indigenous material culture, such as traditional or contemporary paintings and ephemeral forms such as body movements, are definitive statements inextricably linking tribal and clan membership with custodial ownership of the land. These cultural values establish a metaphysical citizenship that has leveraged landmark decisions affecting us all, such as the 1992 Mabo determination which, in the High Court of Australia, overturned the doctrine of terra nullius (land belonging to no - one). To have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture as a significant component of our national identity places all Australians in the forefront of cross-cultural reconciliation. This shared

embrace and fusion of national identity is also an opportunity to transform our lives in relationship to unfolding environmental crisis, and to move forward appropriately restoring quality of life and ecological justice.

The aesthetic appreciation of the land in Western cultural traditions can, at times, either distance through objectification or romanticise through viewing the environment in simply human terms, for example, as picturesque. To interpret country as a landscape, in the Western aesthetic sense, requires us to view nature as static and essentially two-dimensional. It is increasingly apparent that this is inappropriate and, as Allen Carlson points out in his collection of essays *Aesthetics and the Environment*, appreciation through this lens is 'suspect not only on ethical grounds, but also on aesthetic grounds.' Essentially it is time to adopt an attitude to the land that is active in its response rather than the passive states of contemplation and awareness that drive current Western aesthetic appreciation. Former chairman of the Mornington Island Council, the late Jagarairee Larry Lanley's words reverberate from the welcome screen of the Woomera Aboriginal Corporation website,

At the heart of everything is the land. It is the way we think and feel about the land that makes us Aboriginal. It is the only way to keep our culture. For many, many years our ancestors worked out how we should live in this country, how we should use everything around us, what to do to keep our relationship with it strong. These are the things the Europeans don't understand about the way the bush can help us. These things can help Europeans too when their own way of living makes their lives sad. We can teach Europeans all about these things.

Indigenous Australians have endured many challenges in a post-contact world. Violent encounters, dispossession, missionary zeal, amoral assimilation policies and racial discrimination are firmly committed to the historic record of European encounter in Far North Queensland. Many pre-colonial links to heritage became tenuous due to the dispossession of lands brought on by the incursions of

industry such as pastoralism, plantations and mining. The historical authors Edwina Toohey and Dorothy Jones researched alarming stories of Aboriginal resistance to harsh treatment and recorded these in their books. Jones used back copies of Brisbane's Courier newspaper for her 1960 book *Cardwell Shire Story* compiling the savage reaction of Aboriginal people to European intrusion. Though the Courier of the 1800s may be a questionable source there is little doubting the atrocities committed on both sides. In the Wet Tropics area Christian missions established in the 1800s include those at Yarrabah, Mona Mona, Daintree and Mossman. The detention mission on Palm Island accompanied these places. By the early 1900s some missions had been transferred to state operated Aboriginal reserves, but the power of the state to relocate Indigenous people remained current until 1965 and the power to remove children until 1971. Various reviews and reports have informed policy reform since then. However, Indigenous rights remain subject to new and reviewed acts of legislation by both state and federal governments effecting cultural tenure. Indigenous corporations continue to lobby and work in partnership with governments to formulate and implement policy frameworks toward the rights of self-determination. Despite the destructive encounters with colonial processes contemporary Indigenous people have revived the currency of traditional knowledge and the value of thousands of years of engagement and intellect, imbued with a sense of place, making the Indigenous culture strong and vital as a humanising force.

In 1988 the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area was recognised for its natural heritage values. Further recognition through cultural heritage inscription would affect eighteen clan groups, inclusive of the Bama or Rainforest Aboriginal people, allowing empowerment through understanding and a specific focus on Indigenous heritage and values. Such efforts to recognise the cultural significance of the Rainforest People's Indigenous nation has required some persistence. Vincent Mundraby, who chaired the steering committee for the 1998, Review of

Aboriginal Involvement in the Management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, began his foreword,

The nomination of the Wet Tropical Rainforests of North Eastern Australia in December 1987, for its natural values, was not without controversy and political intrigue. Rainforest Aboriginal groups were drawn into the debate at an early stage and they have continued to lobby for position and certainty with respect to their rights, interests and cultural integrity, with little gain.

When expectations were high, for recognition of unextinguished native title to areas of the Wet Tropics, Rainforest Aboriginal groups faced frustrating bureaucratic and policy delays. However, this same 1998 review marked a turning point in the negotiations and, by 2005, a Wet Tropics Management Authority media release announced a Premier's Award for the Regional Agreement launched earlier that year. The award recognised partnership and reconciliation in the cooperative management between Rainforest Aboriginal people and the Queensland and Australian Governments. The Wet Tropics Regional Agreement provides a framework for the meaningful and beneficial involvement of Rainforest Aboriginal people in land and cultural heritage management. Meanwhile the World Heritage nomination for cultural values remains on a Federal Government priority list for reassessment. The natural and cultural significance of the Wet Tropics region warrants recognition and there are processes in place to ensure Indigenous cultural involvement.

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area incorporates 894,420ha and comprises mostly protected areas including a series of National Parks ranging between Townsville and Cooktown on the north - east coast of Queensland. The zoning represents approximately 50% of the Wet Tropics bioregion which consists of 1,976,000ha. Its geophysical backbone, the far northern section of Australia's Great Dividing Range, extends north beyond the Wet Tropics into the Peninsula Ridge of Cape York and culminates with the near Western Islands of The Torres Strait.

Accompanying this mountain range to the west are tablelands with a narrow gradient between rainforest and tropical savannah; to the east are lowlands dominated by meandering rivers and floodplains.

Theories interpreting the archaeological evidence of prehistoric Australia, recorded in Josephine Flood's 1999 volume, describe trading routes that were active from Papua New Guinea through The Torres Strait and Cape York to what is now the Wet Tropics region. The migration of technological ideas and processes from Melanesia, including use of the outrigger canoe and semi-agricultural practices of tending to yams, made their way into the lives of northern Australia's first people. Significant cultural material from the clans of the tropical east coast and gulf region, notably, prized bailer shell body ornaments, were distributed widely into other regions of Australia and as far as the southern coastline and Western Australia. It is suggested by archaeologists that these objects were carried along the river systems that marked ancient trading routes. Superior spears, spear throwers, rainforest shields and wooden swords from the Wet Tropics region were also traded widely, with specialised four barbed spears particularly coveted by spear fishing Islanders in the Western Islands of the Torres Strait. Established Indigenous populations created enduring designs in rock shelters as both engravings and elaborate paintings west of the coastal rainforest strip. At Laura, legendary rock art galleries found over an area of 10,000–15,000 square kilometres define Quinkan Country after the mythological spirit figures represented there. Pigment from one of these sites has been dated to 25,000 years before present. These same designs inform the continuity of contemporary work by a number of artists in *Blak Roots*.

It is especially gratifying to celebrate this unique part of the world through the visual language, material culture and stories of the region's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. It is also apt to mention the role of the community-based art centres which, for many of the remotely located artists, act as

mediators bridging the tyranny of distance between urban populations. These art advisors focus on developing markets, documenting, authenticating and wholesaling the artists' work. Jon Altman's 2002 discussion paper to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, identifies that often the role of the art centre and art advisor extends beyond their core function, serving as agency for both commercial and cultural purposes in the artists' life. The position of the art advisor becomes pivotal in market success and overcoming market failure. They are required to develop and maintain successful connections and consistent funding and distribution networks. When based in remote settlements art advisors often commute long distances to outstations and homelands with their artists. This project would like to acknowledge the following centres for their contribution:

Girringun Aboriginal Corporation
Hopevale Arts & Cultural Centre
Lockhart River Arts & Cultural Centre
Mona Mona Cultural Education Centre
Mornington Island Arts & Crafts Centre
Pormpuraaw Arts & Cultural Centre

Not all of the artists in *Blak Roots* are represented through a community art centre, there are also a number of urban Indigenous artists in *Blak Roots* who make their own networks in the art world and market. Commercial galleries which then distribute and wholesale their work represent some of these artists exclusively, while others represent themselves and may access support networks through not-for-profit art centres, educational institutions and galleries. Historical indifference on the part of government funding towards support for urban Aboriginal artists, as reported by Sallie Anderson in her 2001 doctoral thesis, has to some extent been ameliorated through foundation funding to UMI Arts and Djumbunji Press, both located in Cairns. In some instances commercial gallery representation is relied upon exclusively and this can inhibit the supply and display of leading artists' work, and in particular makes the availability of significant

major works for display in Cairns and for regional audiences difficult and expensive. To a degree this situation may be reversed with the inauguration of the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair in 2009. This initiative of the Queensland Government's \$10.7 million, Backing Indigenous Arts program and managed by Arts Queensland, aims to bring commercial dealers, collectors, and collecting institutions together with art centres and artists in Far North Queensland. The project has enormous potential to focus attention on Indigenous cultural and creative innovation, becoming a catalyst for an accelerated revival and popular celebration.

The works represented in *Blak Roots* have been created in a variety of media and this catalogue uses these attributes to group the representations of art throughout its pages. Each type of object, whether it is a carved Rainforest Shield or an etching printed from a laser - cut copper plate, has a particular relationship to Indigenous kinship knowledge, traditional story or technique. Often when we are confronted by the overt connection to spirituality that is inherent in much Indigenous material culture we experience an intricate link to a time before time. With one eye on the past as purposeful as our gaze on what is to come, we can look forward to a shared future where the world has become so much smaller—so much more fragile. David Burnett's introduction in the catalogue accompanying the 2003 Queensland Art Gallery project *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, identifies the struggle to translate Indigenous concepts of time and of an ancient paradigm where myth and reality fluidly combine,

Appellations such as 'Dreamtime', 'before time', 'ancestor time' are inadequate to describe the cycle of belonging in which the land, language, cultural practices, songs, ritual and belief is inscribed. Perhaps the nearest we can come is to invoke the idea of forever.

Sally Butler, in the same volume, articulates this as 'time in motion', an Indigenous dimension of reality where the past and present are renegotiated

and where the terms of each coalesce generating continued motivation, creativity and innovation.

It is wonderful that the inclusive works of art represent great diversity and strength from individual artists and communities well beyond the cartographical boundaries of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The artists included in this exhibition have come forward with their creations to join in celebration of our shared destiny and culture. They offer their vision to a project that empowers cooperation and an appreciation for the depth of knowledge preserved in their marks. Just as preservation and management of the Wet Tropics region is a responsibility for us all; its heritage values and natural ecological attributes, affect the quality of life for all Australians, vis - à - vis all humanity, as the act of World Heritage inscription attests.

Bibliography

- Altman, JC & Australian National University. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. 2002, *Some competition and consumer issues in the Indigenous visual arts industry*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Canberra, A.C.T.
- Anderson, SS 2001, *The Aboriginal art industry in Cairns, Queensland : an ethnographic study*, Australian National University, Canberra, A.C.T.
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2005, *Overturning the doctrine of Terra Nullius : the Mabo case*, AIATSIS, Canberra, A.C.T.
- Burnett, D 2003, *Art of the Cape: an introduction in Story Place : Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Qld.
- Butler, S 2007, *Our Way : contemporary Aboriginal art from Lockhart River*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld.
- Callaghan, M 2006, *Mangal-bungal : clever with hands : baskets and stories woven by some of the women of Hopevale*, Cape York Peninsula, Hopevale Community Learning Centre Aboriginal Corporation, Hopevale, Qld.
- Carlson, A 2002, *Aesthetics and the Environment : The appreciation of nature, art and architecture*, Routledge, London.
- David, B & Wilson, M 2002, *Inscribed landscapes : marking and making place*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.
- Evans, N, Martin-Chew, L, Memmott, P, Mornington Island Arts & Craft. & Woomera Aboriginal Corporation. 2008, *The heart of everything : the art and artists of Mornington & Bentinck Islands*, McCulloch & McCulloch Australian Art Books, Fitzroy, Vic.
- Flood, J. 1999. *Archaeology of the Dreamtime: the story of prehistoric Australia and its people*, Rev.ed. edn, HarperCollins, Pymble, N.S.W.
- Jones, D 1961, *Cardwell Shire Story*, Jacaranda Pr. and Cardwell Shire Council, Brisbane, Qld.
- Jones, J 2007, *Feasibility Study : Cairns Indigenous Art Marketplace*, Arts Queensland, Brisbane, Qld.
- Ulm, S, Reid, J 2000, *Index of Dates from Archaeological Sites in Queensland, QAR, Vol. 12*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Qld.
- Kerry, A 2006, *The Universal Citizen: An Indigenous Citizenship Framework for the Twenty-first Century*, Issue 2 Australian Aboriginal Studies.
- Lanley, L (n.d.) *Welcome*, <http://www.woomerami.org/>, accessed 7 November 2008.
- Mundraby, V 1998, *The Review of Aboriginal Involvement in the Management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area*, Wet Tropics Board of Management, Cairns, Qld.
- Toohey, E 1994, *Kie Daudai: notes and sketches from Cape York*, Ravenshoe, Qld.
- Wet Tropics Management Authority, 2006-2007 State of the Wet Tropics Report, http://www.wettropics.gov.au/res/res_report.html, accessed 6 November 2008, Cairns, Qld.