mane djang karirra
the place where the dreaming changed shape

A Flinders University Museum of Art exhibition with Maningrida Arts and Culture
Maningrida is located on the traditional lands of the Ndjébbana/Kunibídji people at the mouth of the Liverpool River in north central Arnhem Land. The name is commonly translated as ‘the place where the Dreaming changed shape.’ The English name was adopted when a permanent government settlement was established at the site in the late 1950s. Today, Maningrida is a centre for 34 Aboriginal outstations and home to approximately 2,600 people from some 15 language groups.

Maningrida Arts and Culture, one of the nation’s longest-running community-based Aboriginal art centres, provides support to emerging and established artists from the region. The centre fosters diverse and dynamic forms of cultural expression and artmaking, principally bark painting, sculpture and woven work informed by deep and ongoing connections to Country and the Ancestral past.

The rise and recognition of women in the painting traditions of central and western Arnhem Land art is a relatively recent phenomenon. Quietly unfolding since the late 20th century, this development was illuminated on the national stage when Gun-nartpa artist Dorothy Galaledba made history in the year 2000, becoming the first woman to win the Bark Painting section of the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Since this time there have been numerous other female entrants from the region to the Bark Painting category including Kuninjku artist Kay Lindjuwanga, who was recipient of the award in 2004. mane djarr karirra reflects on the influence of Galaledba and Lindjuwanga, and their contemporaries Melba Gunjarawngi and Lena Yarinkura on a burgeoning generation of female artists today.

To develop their artistic skills, young people from Maningrida and surrounding outstations generally undertake a long apprenticeship under the guidance of one or more established artists of their clan group. They begin watching and then assisting senior artists at work, learning the repertoire of secular designs and painting techniques while honing the skills of harvesting and preparing materials. Emerging artists will practice on a small scale before graduating to larger formats enabling exploration of complex subjects and themes. Women like Galaledba and Lindjuwanga, who began painting in the late 1980s and early 1990s respectively, were first instructed by their husbands and worked as their assistants over many years before producing work in their own right. These women have since tutored their kin, sharing knowledge and actively fostering the participation of their daughters and grand–daughters.

Artists in this exhibition draw inspiration from traditional designs and experiment with visual language characterised by rarrk (cross-hatching). Their work bridges the natural and spiritual realms, the secular and sacred, with bark painting and sculpture depicting myriad djarr (Ancestral sites and stories, and associated spirit beings). These artworks feature a rich palette derived from natural pigments. Ochres, which are forms of iron oxide or limonite, provide red, purple, pink and yellow hues. Black typically comes from charcoal, while white is sourced from pipeclay. Obtained from the artists’ clan estates, these pigments hold deep associations with the Ancestral world. Pipeclay, for instance, is believed to be linked to the powerful rainbow serpent, Ngalyod, and the spirit essence of the Mardayin ceremony.

Flinanders University Museum of Art and Maningrida Arts and Culture are delighted to present mane djarr karirra in association with Tarnanthi 2023. More than 60 years after the first bark paintings were sold from Maningrida in 1957, the legacy of these painters finds expression through the methods and materials embraced by an emerging wave of talent today. This exhibition celebrates the prolific and flourishing community of women who are now at the forefront of contemporary painting practice—maintaining knowledge, language and culture while giving new shape and form to the traditions of central and western Arnhem Land art.

Brooke Ainscow
Manager
Maningrida Arts and Culture

Fiona Salmon
Director
Flinanders University Museum of Art
The first article that I published about Aboriginal art in 1982 was called ‘Artists and artisans in Gunwinggu society’ in a catalogue Aboriginal Art at the Top that looked to assert Top End Aboriginal art as fine art. In that article I noted how because the arts market valued symbolic art more than utilitarian craft, men were able to earn a great deal more from their arts practice than women. I highlighted this inequity that seemed especially unfair because the production of art and of ‘craft’ was equally labour intensive and deployed equal measures of customary skills and knowledge.

Maningrida Art is a Barramundi

The logo of Maningrida Arts and Culture is a barramundi. Its origin is a small practice bark painting found discarded on the scrap heap by then Cultural Officer Murray Garde at the outstation of Milmilngkan, ancestral home of renowned artist John Mawurndjul. It is reputed to have been painted by his late daughter Anna Wurrkidj who features in this exhibition and who was tutored as an apprentice-artist by her father. It was converted into a design and adopted as a logo in the mid-1990s at a time when Maningrida Arts and Crafts changed its name to Maningrida Arts and Culture emphasizing with greater attention to detail the cultural content of its expanding range of art.1

The barramundi is an iconic species with deep ritual and dietary significance across western and central Arnhem Land where the artists represented by Maningrida Arts and Culture reside. There is one spectacular sacred site Nimbuwa associated with barramundi and the barramundi features often in X-ray form in many rock paintings and as the key subject in many figurative bark paintings. 

The barramundi is an unusual fish species that changes gender as it matures. In western biological science this is described as sequential hermaphroditic. The Aboriginal people of central and western Arnhem Land are acutely aware that barramundi migrate from fresh to salt water to reproduce and that on maturity most sexually invert from male to female. However, in both ritual contexts and everyday language the barramundi remains male and of the Yirritja moiety, it changes in some ways, but remains the same in others.

It was quite coincidental that the design on a simple practice or ‘toy’ bark painting by a female novice artist was adopted as the logo for Maningrida Arts and Culture. But today looking back nearly 30 years later this coincidence is very apposite as it coincides with the pivotal transformative moment when women were emerging as artists in the region. Since then, as this exhibition documents, women’s art has flourished. Maningrida is the European name for Manayingkarírra from the phrase mane djang karirra, commonly translated as ‘the place where the Dreaming changed shape’.2 It is on the land of the Dhukúrrdji patri-clan; senior artist Joy Garlibin is a key Traditional Owner. Maningrida Arts and Culture is a community-based and controlled arts organisation that was founded in Maningrida. Like the barramundi it has changed and has supported transforming artistic practice over its 60 years of existence.

When I first went to Maningrida in 1979 as a doctoral student there was a very clear gendered division of artistic labour: men were the artists reproducing iconography from men’s ceremonies in non-secret public manifestations and from rock art sites in the hinterland onto flattened bark. They were assisted on occasion by their female kin, usually their wives. Women were the producers of craft: finely made baskets, durable decorated dilly bags and circular woven mats all made from naturally-occurring materials collected in the bush.

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However, I did not foresee the extraordinary transformation that was about to occur. Like most barramundi, arts practice in the Maningrida region began to gender invert. In the 1990s women began to paint on bark, on hollow log coffins and on wooden sculptures; and they converted their customary skills in fibre weaving into exquisite art objects representing sacred places and iconic species, all highly prized by the mainly non-Indigenous arts market.

The biological transformation of the barramundi is a bit of mystery. But the transformation of arts practice is, with the benefit of hindsight, less so.

Art was first produced for sale by men from 1957 when Maningrida was established as a government settlement. From 1963 Gowan Armstrong the Uniting Church minister who was interested in both men’s ceremony and art began to assist a handful of male artists to sell their works. The designs painted invariably originated in men’s-only ceremonies with clear stylistic variations based on clan-owned motifs and individual totems. In the process of converting this art from secret contexts and ephemeral designs painted on bodies to more durable objects on public display, the content of art had to be altered to ensure nothing sacred was divulged.

In 1973 with some support from the new Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, Maningrida Arts and Crafts experienced its own transformation as a salaried arts coordinator Dan Gillespie was appointed to assist with the marketing of arts, most of which was produced at remote seasonally accessible homelands surrounding the Maningrida township. In the 1970s and 1980s a battle was waged and won to see the acceptance of Aboriginal art not just as ethnographic curios, but as fine art.
Over time, as more art was produced, its durability and public presentation, including in community and in the arts centre, opened the way for women’s participation. As artist Melba Gunjarwanga noted in 2003:

“When I was about 20 years old James [Iyuna her late husband] started to teach me bark painting... I used to help him and the two of us worked together making mimih sculptures and bark paintings. About four years ago [1999] I started working independently as an artist creating my own bark paintings and carvings.”

This transformation did not occur overnight. First there was a need for acceptance of this change at the family and clan level as men divested their monopoly rights in designs to female kin. And then there was the need for consensus at the level of the community-controlled arts marketing organisation to eliminate historic gender divisions in arts practice. This involved the activation of different female interpretations of the Dreamings, of ceremonies and of sites of significance.

As an economic anthropologist, perhaps I should have predicted the financial imperative that has been an important driver of this transformation. Art production provides the main opportunity to generate income, including in local and remote regions, in this remote area where there are high levels of unemployment and associated deep poverty. When the opportunity emerged for women to earn far more income from their arts practice than from the sale of crafts it was quickly seized. While not the elixir for socio-economic disadvantage, arts income empowers women to better care for and improve livelihoods for their family and kin in this highly relational society.

On regular visits, I observed these changes firsthand. Initially, women assisted their husbands in the preparation and completion of art works. Then male artists tutored their wives and daughters and female kin with bark preparation, design, and painting techniques. And finally, key individuals such as now senior artists Dorothy Galaledba, Kay Lindjuwanga, Melba Gunjarwanga and Lena Yarinkura, all represented in this exhibition, launched the way for women’s participation in the arts market, in commercial and public exhibitions both domestically and overseas, and in winning national art awards.

Their success was supported by changes at Maningrida Arts and Culture with the appointment from the late 1980s of an increasing number of female art coordinators from outside the community. One pathbreaker was Diane Moon, although her focus was family-based arts marketing. Subsequently, Apolline Kohen was arts director for the Australian government to financially assist remote art centres with the logistical challenges of getting the art to market.

Today most artists who are represented by Maningrida Arts and Culture are women. And today women are no longer taught by their senior male kin. Instead, women tutor their offspring and female relatives and even male kin. As now senior artist Irene Ngalinba stated in 2006:

“Now it is my turn to teach others. I have been teaching my husband and I am now teaching my brother Seymour, sister Alleena and Badigo [youngest brother] is also painting a little bit. They watch me and I show them how to make good rarrk [cross-hatching], how to draw Yawkyawk or Wakwak.”

Consequently, a multi-generational arts practice has emerged alongside design lineages that female artists trace back through maternal and paternal lines of inheritance.

After the barramundi changes gender, it does not change back. Female artists who have adopted these new art forms are now further innovating into new domains by producing totemic and clan designs in fibre weavings and in block and screen printing and most recently using batiking techniques learnt on a visit to India. These techniques cultivated at the affiliated Bäbabara Women’s Centre, where many female artists also work, have not yet been adopted by men.

Maningrida Arts and Culture has demonstrated remarkable sustainability and growth, despite more recent vicissitudes in the arts market and helpful vaccinations in government policy and funding support. This community-based and controlled organisation has facilitated previously unimaginable artistic transformations. This dynamic art movement will continue to be driven by the creative energy and agency of the artists. It will also require ongoing support provided by Maningrida Arts and Culture. Thirty years on and still swinging strongly, Maningrida art is a barramundi. It will reproduce year after year, under the right conditions.

Jon Altman
Emeritus Professor
The Australian National University

These changes at the local level were greatly influenced by an explosion of interest in the aftermath of the 1988 Bicentennial, with more Australian public art institutions purchasing and exhibiting serious collections of Aboriginal art; and associated international interest ignited by the Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia ground-breaking exhibition held in New York. In response to these developments, that coincided with heightened global interest in the art and culture of indigenous peoples, a national review of the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry was undertaken. This resulted in enhanced support from the Australian government to financially assist remote art centres with the logistical challenges of getting the art to market.

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Acknowledgements

FUMA acknowledges the Kaurna people as the traditional owners and custodians of the Adelaide region. We recognise and respect Kaurna heritage, beliefs and spiritual relationship with Country, and respectfully acknowledge Kaurna Elders past, present and emerging.

This exhibition has been assembled with the support and involvement of the team at Maningrida Arts and Culture including Brooke Ainscow, Kelly Butler, Derek Carter, Alison Cooper, Chloe Gibbon and Be Keillor. We thank them for their research assistance and input and cooperation enabling participation of the artists. We acknowledge the generosity of Freya Black in sharing her unpublished essay ‘Women who Rarrk’, Hen Vaughan who provided exhibition research support and Carolyn Coleman for advice regarding the very recent interpretation of the Kunibidji phrase mane djang ka-rrra. We express our sincerest thanks to the Art Gallery of South Australia, Australian National University, Charles Darwin University and private collectors in Canberra and Melbourne for generously lending works to the project. For his erudite essay in this publication, we thank Jon Altman.

We acknowledge Jess Wallace for the beautifully executed short film accompanying the exhibition and the linguistic expertise of Murray Garde and Margaret Carew who provided translations. To Dorothy Galaledba, Christelle Nulla, Gwenda Baymabiyma, Antonia Pascoe, Lena Yarinkura, Yolanda Rostron, Helen Kelly and Philimena Kelly – all of whom feature on screen – we are indebted to your enthusiasm and patience while filming on location.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Tarnanthi which made mane djang karirra possible.