Before Time Today
Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art
Before Time Today
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Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art
Edited by Sally Butler
JOE RIGALLANETTA
They're happy (Luke's poles) 
2002-2003
brickwood with synthetic polymer
paint and natural pigments
9 components
120 x 2500 x 2500 cm
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All such names and images in this publication are
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Commissioner

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Captions to Preliminary pages:

Page 1 (Frontispiece)
CHARLIE BOB POOTCHEMUNKA
Sea Eagle 2002
bronze, edition of 12
35.0 x 92.0 x 70.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Courtesy of Urban Art Projects

Page 3 (Title page)
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR
Untitled XXII (Walkan-aw and Kaiben designs) 2007
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder and
synthetic polymer paint on linen
168.0 x 122.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland,
purchased 2008
Photograph: Mick Richards

Pages 4–5
Coastline of red and white cliffs (Pera Head) known
to Wik people as Ikalath. It is a source of ochres
and the geographic reference for red and white
stripes in Wik art.
Photograph: Carl Warner
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UNKNOWN ARTIST

Freshwater shark c.1962
(Frederick McCarthy Collection)
ochres on wood with bone and glass
20.5 x 133.0 x 19.0 cm
Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: George Serras, courtesy of National Museum of Australia
Foreword

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art considers relationships between visual traditions of the past and contemporary art from the Wik and Kugu Aboriginal people of Aurukun in far north Queensland on the western tip of Cape York.

This publication brings together a broad scope of research across the disciplines of art history, anthropology, history and Indigenous studies to examine the life and culture surrounding one of the world's most outstanding carving traditions and how it inspires a flourishing new chapter of art production in the community today.

The University of Queensland Art Museum initiated this publication and associated exhibition two years ago when remarkable links were observed between contemporary Aurukun sculpture and historical sculptures held by the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum, items that were collected from the 1950s. Contemporary artworks from Aurukun, a number of which have been acquired in recent years for the University of Queensland Art Collection, demonstrate a strong lineage from the early sculptures. Contemporary Aurukun artworks, however, also display an unexpected diversity, with artists increasingly exploring media such as painting and innovative weaving practices. Artists who once made objects only for ceremony now produce works for exhibition and the art market.

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art presents the first major study to focus on contemporary Aurukun art and consolidates scholarly and community knowledge about the art and culture of the Wik and Kugu peoples. It builds on the Queensland Art Gallery's important exhibition and publication of 2003, Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest, a project which surveyed contemporary indigenous art across Cape York. The Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art publication, which is edited and in part authored by the curator Dr Sally Butler, presents essays by leading authorities on Aurukun cultural history, aesthetics and politics, along with commentary by the artists themselves.

The University of Queensland gratefully acknowledges the support of all those who have assisted this project, particularly the Aurukun artists and staff of the Wik and Kugu Art Centre. We thank Nick Mitzevich, Director of the University of Queensland Art Museum, Dr Sally Butler and the authors who have contributed to the publication. We also acknowledge the public and private collections that have
loaned works to the exhibition and have assisted with reproductions, including the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum, the Queensland Art Gallery, the National Museum of Australia and the Wik and Kugu Art Centre.

This publication has been supported by the Gordon Darling Foundation, the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA) and The University of Queensland Centenary Committee. We also gratefully acknowledge funding received for the associated exhibition from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art contributes to The University of Queensland’s celebration of its centenary in 2010. The exhibition and publication are highlights in the University’s centenary calendar.

Professor Paul Greenfield AO
VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
UNKNOWN ARTIST

Walakin or Bonefish sculpture (detail)
© 2012 (Frederick McCarthy Collection)
137.0 x 296.5 cm

Ochres on wood and string

Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: George Serras, courtesy of National Museum of Australia
Preface

Sometimes the less said the better. Sometimes you can know a lot – too much even – yet you still do not know what to say. Explanation suggests we know what we are seeking to explain. It suggests that explanation is possible.

Let concrete practices be our guide. Not so much the objects but the practices and yearnings underlying them. It may be improper to single out Joe Ngallametta's law poles – his *thapa yongk* – for special consideration, for in fact each group has striven to represent itself as best it could. If one were to say anything it would be that beneath the apparent similarity of practice, histories lurk that serve to differentiate as well as to align within something like a common or shared field of meaning. The Wik are not into 'one knowledge, one knowing': knowledge is local, particular. It is presented as such even when they know more broadly than they will readily admit. It is alright in the Wik world not to know, to feign ignorance. For knowledge can be interpreted as creating a claim, or being the claim itself. In this sense ignorance is prudent, if not bliss.

Joe's poles are modelled on an earlier version brought forth by Peret Arkwookerum, the great *wanam* leader in the early 1970s. This was an exceptional time of innovation and neo-traditional assertion; an assertion ultimately founded on a view that a proper moral life could only be constituted within the framework of traditional alliances. It was the very opposite of inclusiveness; not them but us.

It is not always an easy matter to engage the present and the past in an active dialogue. Modernity gives up on the ancestral; and to relinquish the ancestral is to risk succumbing to a real loss of humanity, human sentiment and proper human accountability. The self-made man triumphs over leadership, properly speaking. People become people without history; there is no acknowledgment of the gifts and triumphs of the past. There is no sense of being beholden. To retain that sense of indebtedness means a commitment to a certain conception of life. The now is always tenuous, fragile. It shudders with deep, maybe inarticulate yearnings and a profound sense of imminent loss. It can be careless. Art is probably an inadequate means of self-redefinition. It may, however, look like the route of last resort when all else has failed. The great leaders are never artists. That is one thing I have learnt.

Let us abandon any simple idea that we are dealing with the deep past; we are dealing with the now. Yet there are precursors of course, there are referents.
Joe Ngallametta with Law poles at Story Place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery, 2003
Photograph: Andrew Baker

J O E  N G A L L A M E T T A
Kang’khan brothers 2004
milkwood with synthetic polymer paint, natural pigments, fibre, feathers and cotton thread
Two figures: 153.0 x 56.0 x 30.0 cm and 153.0 x 39.0 x 38.0 cm
Reproduced by permission, from the Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Purchased 2004 Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
In recent times the Wik have achieved native title. From a certain point of view this might be seen as a momentous event. From another point of view it is nothing at all, for it merely recognises an extant and long-enduring state of affairs. Indeed, it might be seen as a secondary form of dispossession, placing the recognition of law, lawfulness, in the hands of outsiders. This is a comment that might be extended to the apparently unproblematic terrain of art. Who is it for, what is it for? Who defines its meanings and intentions?

Innovation is always a form of lawlessness and transcendence. What drives it is necessity – a need to speak, a need to assert. It may be protest. It may also be an attempt to seize the main chance. Opportunism and innovation go hand in hand. To take up the opportunities that present themselves moment by moment, under whatever compulsion, creates the conditions of the new. But unless the new constitutes conditions of viability, then it may let loose a self-destruct. The main modality of self-destruction is, in my view, withdrawal. The cataclysm is the exemption not the conflict.

Conflict involves engagement; however, if the society decides that it has no interest in resolution, the conflict will lead nowhere. The collapse of moral spheres arises through a progressive social distancing which can involve among other things a refusal to participate in those events in which the ‘moral’ is reasserted.

Death has become the final terrain of the moral.

Without wishing or even being entitled to give too much of the game away, these ‘law poles’ mediate between two orders of reality; between the mythic account that subtends the magnificent wanam ritual held at thaha-kungadha (wanam-au), at the mouth of the Holroyd River, and funerary practices.

If the wanam ceremony is no longer performed in its entirety it was not for want of trying. In 1978 Peret Arkwookerum died near the mouth of the Kendall River while trying to re-establish his ‘mob’ on their traditional lands as a prelude to performing the ceremony at the right place.

History had split the wanam mob between Aurukun and Edward River, or Pompuraaw, and an administrative fiat had established boundaries across what should have been treated as an integral space. The divisioning was principally inspired by an agreement between cattle managers in a particularly grotesque example of colonial ‘quaintness’.

Yet history is something you negotiate around. If you can.

In 1972 Peter made a prototype of thapa yongk as it now appears, in association with a massive ceremonial dance revival at Aurukun. (Edward River was maintaining its own ceremonial life in its own
ways). The reference was to ironwood logs which the two kaba-ngken brothers attempted to carry on their travels. From time to time they let one drop, almost inadvertently.

History involves the leaving of such traces.

Ironwood has a particular significance in this environment; with the possible exception of shell from the larger shell species, it is the most durable material locally available. Objects made from it are made only with the greatest difficulty. Being more or less termite resistant, objects made of ironwood (yuk yongk) will survive from generation to generation. What people in one generation may have seen in ceremonial contexts others may see too. They are a guarantor of historical continuity -- not just as principle but as concrete presence. They link the living with the ancestral. They link the present into the future.

This contrasts dramatically with the systematic clearing and cleansing of country after a death when all signs of the newly dead are ruthlessly expunged. Traditionally the body itself was preserved in mummified form and carried from camp to camp in bark bundles when movement was made necessary. Eventually it would be cremated. These cremation sites (thum munth), mounds modelled on the prototype of bush turkey mounds, tended to be marked with the trunk of an ironwood tree, planted upside down with the roots in the air. In certain accounts these roots attract dancing spirits: kompo puugam or mutjuwa.

Joe Ngallametta and his sadly missed father, Joe (minh padha) Ngallametta, have a particular relationship to death being members of the Dead Body Clan (Kugu-mutjuwa). Their traditional estate is on the coast at thugu (Sanke River), not far north of the wanam sites. Traditionally, they played an important adjunct role in this ceremony; among other things, they were assigned the role of the final wallaby in the great wallaby dance (mink pangku).

It may be no accident that their clan segment is also closely tied to the mongkom myth involving another set of brothers who inaugurated the system of personal names but also, importantly, established a tradition of industrious practice. This industriousness is one of the less-remarked features of traditional life.

But the renegade was also present. And it may be one of the ironies of history that the renegade should be cast as the bearer of tradition.

That may be a price one has to pay for playing the ‘wild man’. Wik law is full of such manoeuvres.

Professor John von Sturmer

SENIOR FELLOW OF THE INSTITUTE OF POSTcolonial STUDIES, MELBOURNE
CRAIG KOOMEETA

Apielech brother: Face markings 2005
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on Belgian linen
83.0 x 56.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

JOE NGALLAMETTA

Kang'khan brothers (detail) 2004
milkwood with synthetic polymer paint, natural pigments, fibre, feathers and cotton thread
Two figures: 153.0 x 56.0 x 50.0 cm and 153.0 x 39.0 x 38.0 cm
Reproduced by permission, from the Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Purchased 2004
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
JOE NGALLAMETTA

Kang'khan brother: Face 2004
natural pigments with PVC fixative
on linen
76.0 x 52.0 cm
Reproduced by permission, from the Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Purchased 2005.
The Queensland Government’s special Centenary Fund

JOE NGALLAMETTA

Kang’khan brother: Face and body painting 2004
natural pigments with PVC fixative
on linen
56.0 x 42.0 cm
Reproduced by permission, from the Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Purchased 2005.
The Queensland Government’s special Centenary Fund

Photograph: Carl Warner
Introduction

A collection of early to mid-20th century Wik ceremonial carvings from the Aurukun region of far north Queensland resides in the University of Queensland's Anthropology Museum. These carvings were collected by the missionaries JB McCarthy in 1949, and William McKenzie between 1954 and 1958. A further collection of slightly later Aurukun carvings, gathered by Frederick McCarthy of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1962, is held at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Collectively, these carvings are an important cultural archive about the Wik Aboriginal people of the Aurukun region and their unique and sophisticated visual traditions.

Only 300 metres from where these ceremonial carvings are located at the University of Queensland, another archive of Wik carvings from Aurukun is taking shape. The University of Queensland Art Museum has been building a collection of contemporary art from Aurukun for several years, featuring carvings with strong cultural and aesthetic relationships to the earlier material. Recent Aurukun artworks such as these, together with innovations in weaving, canvas painting and a small amount of printwork, are now held in almost all of the major public and private art collections in Australia, and are gaining increasing recognition internationally.

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art is an art exhibition and book that examine relationships between contemporary art from Aurukun and visual traditions of the past. Its point of departure is the proximity of these old and new carvings at the University of Queensland, and the questions they raise about relationships between different generations of Wik culture. This juxtaposition of artworks and ideas suggest that the flourish of art practice in Aurukun today is driven by artists who are reinventing their heritage of Wik visual traditions as expressions of contemporary art that respond to life in the twenty-first century. The concept of reinvention places emphasis on the creativity of the process – to invent again – and diminishes allusion to repetitive cultural practices that persist within stereotypical ideas of a static, unchanging Aboriginal culture.

The Wik people who live in the Aurukun region on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula consist of five clans: Apelech, Winchanam, Puch, Wanam and Sara. Stanley Kalkeeyorta, a cultural spokesperson and artist from Aurukun, describes links between these five clans as akin to the five fingers of a hand. They are separate, but they are one. This distinction within unity is a striking element of Aurukun art,
Introduction
Three feather flowers for Carlo Yunkaporta house opening, Aurukun (detail) 1990
natural bird feathers and artificial dyes
variable dimensions
Private collection
Photograph: Peter Sutton
and embodies the Wik people and their homelands in a profound bond of reciprocity and respect. Wik country, which lies between the Embley and Edward Rivers, is a spectacular tropical terrain characterised by wild rivers, wetlands and dense woodland.

The engine room of art production in Aurukun today is the Wik and Kugu Art Centre located in the centre of Aurukun township. Carving, weaving and other material such as the beautiful feather flowers, and olik headdress, were produced in Aurukun for commercial purposes from the 1970s, when the Queensland Government initiated an Aboriginal arts and crafts market for material produced in remote Queensland Aboriginal communities. During the early 1990s the production and sale of Wik art and craft was administered by the Manth Thayan Association, which was a Wik-controlled community development organisation providing support for visual and performing artists. It represented approximately 200–300 practising artists. Today, the Wik and Kugu Art Centre is controlled by the Aurukun Shire Council and administered by a full-time art co-ordinator. A small display area in the art centre pays homage to tradition and change with a selection of carvings and weavings from past generations represented alongside the contemporary art.

Dynamic art production over recent years has resulted in the representation of Aurukun art in several significant exhibitions. These include the Queensland Art Gallery's 2003 Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest; Kank inum-Nink inum (Old way – New way) at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2002; the National Gallery of Australia's 2007 Culture warriors, national Indigenous art triennial, and representation in the annual Telstra national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art award exhibitions. Aurukun art is now at the forefront of redefining the face of contemporary Aboriginal art through inclusion of Queensland art that was largely ignored in the history of the Aboriginal art movement since the early 1970s.

This book takes a multi-disciplinary approach to Aurukun art and culture, developing a framework of understanding through overlapping disciplines of Indigenous studies, anthropology, art history, sociology and political history. The book is anchored by the scholarship of Professor Peter Sutton, an honorary staff member of the South Australian Museum, and the University of Adelaide, who has worked closely with the people of Aurukun since the early 1970s. Sutton is a unique scholar with expertise in both anthropology and art history, and was curator of Dreamings, the Aboriginal art of Australia in 1988, one of the most significant survey exhibitions of Aboriginal art to tour internationally. Sutton’s chapter on art and Aurukun cultural history in Before time today provides the critical framework for how contemporary art negotiates Wik cultural traditions, and elaborates on what impacts upon contemporary art production in Aurukun.
From this first chapter on cultural history and art, my following chapter considers the issue of tradition and change in Aurukun aesthetics and speculates on what motivates aesthetics today when carvings seldom serve a ceremonial purpose. In describing a ritual of reinvention in contemporary Aurukun art, I survey innovations in the different genres of carving, weaving and painting.

The centrepiece of the book is a chapter where Indigenous artists themselves speak about their art and culture. Stanley Kalkeeyorta, a leading spokesperson from Aurukun and highly skilled carver, describes issues of cultural revival and what is required for the future of Wik culture. Mavis Ngallametta, a renowned weaver and painter and president of the Wik and Kugu Art Centre, explains the inspiration for her art and how she learnt her techniques from an intriguing blend of traditional and contemporary sources. This chapter involving conversations with artists concludes with ‘old man young man’, a commentary from one of Queensland’s leading Aboriginal artists, Tony Albert. This sensitive account of an artistic collaboration, and personal friendship, between two generations of Queensland Indigenous artists strengthens the bond between tradition and change and illustrates how Aboriginal culture evolves on its own terms in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 4, ‘The art of Wik politics and the politics of Wik art’, David Martin from the Australian National University considers how Wik art embodies the social and political history of Aurukun in the wake of the pivotal High Court Mabo and Wik native title decisions. Martin’s expertise in the social and political history of Aurukun also derives from many decades of research and close ties with the Wik community.

The final chapter involves an international perspective of Aurukun art, with a story that commences in 1606. Georges Petitjean, curator of the Aboriginal Art Museum in Utrecht, outlines the background that led to a unique event in art history when Aurukun artists donated a tableau of law poles to the Netherlands nation, in a gesture of reconciliation.

Australian Aboriginal art is yet to take its proper place in the history of world art, and deserves a much greater degree of critical analysis from international, as well as Australian scholarship across a diversity of disciplines. Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art takes a modest step in this direction.

Sally Butler
UNKNOWN ARTIST
Cripple man c.1958
ochres on milkwood
120.0 x 28.5 x 18.5 cm
Collection of The University
of Queensland Anthropology
Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner

UNKNOWN ARTIST
Human shape (Pole) c.1955
ochres on milkwood
105.0 x 18.0 x 15.0 cm
Collection of The University
of Queensland Anthropology
Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner

UNKNOWN ARTIST
Human shape c.1943-1949
ochres on milkwood
196.5 x 28.0 x 26.5 cm
Collection of The University
of Queensland Anthropology
Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner
LEX TONY NAMPONAN
Waanggan (Stingray) 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
5.0 x 80.0 x 38.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards

UNKNOWN ARTIST
Stingray c.1958
ochres and wax on milkwood
7.0 x 43.0 x 23.0cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner
HORACE WIKMUNEA

Walram (Dugong) 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
43.0 x 113.0 x 25.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008
Photograph: Mick Richards
Chapter 1

Art and Aurukun Cultural History
ntroduction

The Wik peoples of western Cape York Peninsula became widely known in Australia in the 1990s because of their historic native title claim, but they have also become renowned for their unique sculptural tradition.²

Ritual sculpture has been recorded and collected from Aboriginal people in western Cape York Peninsula since the early 20th century.³ The impact of steel tools, introduced carpentry techniques such as morticing, and Presbyterian mission support of ritual activity, including initiations, influenced the flowering of this type of religious art from the 1930s through to the 1960s at Aurukun. Over this period the works became more elaborate and more complex in construction. The large collection in the National Museum of Australia, a gift of Aurukun Mission in 1962, strongly represents this phase.⁴
Under the traditions of that era and into the 1970s, the painted Wik sculptures were not made for sale and were normally allowed to rot away in the bush after ceremonies had ended. Senior men told women and children that the sculptures were not made by human hands, but were the ‘real’ totemic beings themselves; however, by the 1980s there was no longer any secret about who had made them.

Typically, the carvings are of characters in religious legends, legends specific to the clan countries of those who make and dance with them. They include heroic humans such as the *Pungk Apeleb brothers*, and totemic animals such as Echidna, Dingo, Estuarine Shark or Saltwater Crocodile. They are part of performances in which dance movements and song words go together with specific carvings, re-enacting ancient legendary events at known, specific sites.

Gradually the carvings began to be made for the arts and crafts market also. At first they were sold unpainted, and hence in a not very sacred form. In the 1980s painted works also began to be sold on the market or donated to museums. A famous donation was in 1987, when the Wik people gave *Two young women of Cape Keerweer* to the South Australian Museum. In 1988/89 several 1962 Aurukun works from the National Museum of Australia, and a large collection of Aboriginal art from elsewhere, travelled to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Melbourne and back to Adelaide. Wik sculpture was now on the international art map.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, increasingly supported by an arts and crafts facilitator, Wik sculptors began to meet a rising demand for their works from outside. They had become collectible. At the same time they continued to make carvings for use in the mortuary ceremonies of Aurukun, the ‘house openings’. At these events, sculptures relating to the country of the deceased are placed in front of the house in which the person formerly lived. Traditional clan-totemic dances in this first phase usually include ritualised interaction with the carvings, often involving aggressive actions, with the thrusting of spears in repeated stabbing motions towards them. Second, adaptations of (Torres Strait) Island dance and (Polynesian) hula are usually performed, before the house is opened and the spirit expelled. Then, sometimes, the carvings are taken back to the workshop to be sold. Such works are neither simply ritual sculpture nor art made for the market. They are hybrid works at the intersection of a once intensely inward-looking local tradition and an unavoidable external world that has come to stay.

Between the 1960s and 2000s there were further changes in the way sculptures are made. Increased mechanisation, including the use of chainsaws, electric sanders and sawn lumber, led to smoother and more regular surfaces. Natural pigments are often augmented with, and in some cases replaced by, commercial paints such as acrylics. Increasing pressure to meet exhibition deadlines has at times led to haste. Because of regular surfaces being combined with non-overlapping colour fields and haste in production, some of the carvings lack the finesse, unpredictability and energy of older styles, and thus lack the aesthetic impact wanted by the fine arts market. Some works have been worth less as a result.
CRAIG KOOMEETA

Abelech brothers 2002
milkwood with natural pigments
2 components: 112.0 x 35.0 x 15.0 cm,
124.0 x 58.0 x 11.0 cm
Reproduced by permission, from the
Collection of the Queensland Art
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Ritual of the first birth. The male mother has just given birth and the father holds the bees’ wax figure of the first child-man. The myth belongs to the Hair Story south of Uthuk Aweyn (Big-Lake).
Photograph: Ursula McConnel, Aurukun area, c.1934
Courtesy of South Australian Museum

Ron Yunkaporta
Fertility figure 2009
native bees’ wax, ochre, giddee-giddee beads and human hair
27.0 x 7.0 x 4.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, gift of an anonymous donor 2009
Photograph: Carl Warner

The Bull-roarer and the Two cockatoos. The story for this ritual was told to McConnel by Lampus Wikmunea, to whose country Kencherrang it belonged.
Photograph: Ursula McConnel, Aurukun area, c.1934
Courtesy of South Australian Museum
JOE NGALLAMETTA

Pole design 2004

natural pigments with PVC fixative on linen
40.0 x 60.0 cm

Reproduced by permission, from the Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Purchased 2005. The Queensland Government’s special Centenary Fund
JACK BELL
Ku (Camp dog) 2008
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
42.0 x 73.0 x 18.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

UNKNOWN ARTIST
Male dingo 1958
ochres on wood
35.5 x 85.0 x 10.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photography: Carl Warner
However, in the 2000s, Wik sculptors, almost all of whom have been men, began to grapple with this new challenge, and many created their finest works using traditional materials.

**History**

The people who practice this tradition come from the area between the Embley and Edward Rivers on the Gulf of Carpentaria. When Aurukun Mission was set up by German Moravians on the Archer River in 1904, it very slowly began to draw in people from both north and south, although it was not until after World War 2 that the majority of the land’s inhabitants settled more or less permanently at Aurukun or at the nearby missions of Weipa and Edward River.

Those who lived in the Aurukun Reserve became significantly isolated from their neighbours as a matter of conscious mission policy, from the 1920s until the 1960s. This may have contributed to a localised refinement of the sculptural tradition discussed here, centred on Aurukun.

But there is another factor: certain forms of traditional Wik life were encouraged by the Aurukun Mission in this period, including those ceremonial forms deemed acceptable to William MacKenzie, the all-powerful Presbyterian superintendent from 1923 to 1965. He himself was initiated at Archer River and spoke at least basic Wik-Mungkan, the regional *lingua franca*. Western-style changes were also imposed or encouraged, and among these were the engagement of Wik men as workers in the mission sawmill, and in learning carpentry for building and repairs. The woodworking skills they already had were augmented not only by the use of better steel tools but also by the use of carpentry techniques, including sawing, morticing and nailing. The men applied these skills in the development of their pre-existing sculptural tradition, encouraged by MacKenzie’s use of the sculptures for attracting government attention to Aurukun’s needs. At least since the 1940s, Aurukun people have produced some of the most visually arresting ceremonial sculptures of Aboriginal Australia, with their attached or inlaid limbs, teeth, breasts, fins and eyeballs, their highly figurative approach to representation, and their strong use of bush colours.

The major general collections of Wik material culture come from Ursula McConnel, whose 1927 collection is mainly held by the South Australian Museum, and from Donald Thomson whose 1932–33 collection is held by the Museum of Victoria. The first substantial collections of Wik ceremonial sculptures, however, were made by missionaries JB McCarthy in 1949 and William MacKenzie in 1954, 1955 and 1958. These are held by the Anthropology Museum at the University of Queensland. The largest single collection of Wik sculptures was made by Frederick McCarthy of the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, at Aurukun in 1962, and is held by the National Museum of Australia.
Thinking and carving

Traditional Wik thought is profoundly human-centred. This may sound strange, especially when said of their recent ancestors, whose lives were so minutely attuned to the physicalities of the bush on which they formerly lived and depended daily for very life. But it is made plain in a number of different ways.

One such way is the constant placing of human relationships above so much that has been thought by others, since colonial times, to have deserved greater attention. Health, peace, economic sufficiency, ownership of labour-saving devices, comfort, privacy, schooling and work, while they have their places, are frequently suborned in Wik practice to the greater values of belonging, of valued status as a relative, of the emotional comforts of dependency and of power, of showing unquestioning kin loyalty in times of trouble, of drinking to enter emotion.

This is not about setting priorities. It is a brace of practices embedded in a particularly human-centred cosmology of great age. The totemic beings who gave their identities to the Wik clans forever were just like men and women. The different ways in which they spoke, their languages, are how their human successors in each case speak (or should speak) today. Sometimes their body shapes can be seen reflected in the body shapes of the living. These totemic men and women were typically animals, birds, plants, sometimes other natural phenomena and, occasionally, people. They were there at the start of the world. They are referred to in English as ‘stories’. According to the old Wik people in the 1970s, the start of the world was a very, very long time ago, so long ago that they themselves had not seen it, maybe it was just before their grandparents’ time. What seems to be an unexpected temporal closeness to the present here can be understood as a tying of cosmic time to the limits of humanity, and of human memory. The past is only as deep as the time just outside one’s own genealogy.

‘Story’ is the more widely common English translation used for group totems and for ‘Dreaming’ myth characters in Cape York Peninsula. It is not a literal translation from Aboriginal languages. The Indigenous terms have other semantics, such as ‘meat sibling’ (minb koonbiy), ‘vegetable sibling’ (may koonbiy), and ‘dear father’s father’ (puul-way), terms usually translated by anthropologists, and some Wik people, as ‘totems’. But it is revealing that story is the approximation best found in English for this deeply Australian concept. For similar reasons, the Aboriginal peoples of southern central Australia translate similar categories of ‘Dreaming’ being as ‘the histories’. The Cape York stories are often found inherent in a particular site, sites known in translation as story places. This is so, even if there is no narrative ever known to have been associated with the sites. Not all clan totems or stories have associated narratives. Rather, they are stories in the nature of their being. A story, whether as a trope or not, is a projection, a representation. It is something told. This brings it back to the human centre of things.
DAVID MARPOONDIN

Kor (Brolga) 2009
natural ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder and synthetic polymer paint on milkwood
137.0 x 37.0 x 38.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009
Photograph: Mick Richards
UNKNOWN ARTIST

Striped shark carvings c.1943 -1949
natural ochres on wood
32.0 x 84.0 x 26.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner
The sculptures I describe in this chapter are mostly representations of Wik stories, and many are associated with traditional mythic narratives and with specific story places in the Wik landscape. The carvings themselves are spoken of as *maayn*, ‘images’. The same term is used for the imagined or for mental imagery, as well as for photographs, drawings and films. One of two afterlife spirits of human beings is *koetheh maayn*, the ‘spirit-image’.17 This is not the inner soul that goes, after death, across the Gulf of Carpentaria to Onchen, the collective, unpoliticialised home of the dead.18 The *koetheh maayn* is instead the image of the bodily and social and local geopolitical self. It is called up by singing, soon after the death, and ritually sent back to a spirit-image centre in or close to the totemic estate from whose clan the person had sprung.

In the deep past the sculptures used by Wik people in their sacred ceremonies were available to be seen by initiated men, and in some cases by women and children as well. Either way, the men presented the *maayn* as transformations of the story beings themselves. In time this changed, as the human makers showed their craft openly and no men-only category of sculpture, or of ongoing ceremony, survived in Wik ritual life. Secularised sculptures went on the market. Even carvings still considered a little spiritually dangerous were released to the wider world. The carving men of Aurukun, once performers and warriors, were now also becoming artists who made their works in the shire council’s arts centre, wearing blue Aurukun Council overalls.

The creative process?

Classical Aboriginal ideology regarding human creativity is basically that there is none. Newly devised sacred songs or images are ‘found’, not ‘composed’, and the maker is the vessel, not the originator, of the discovery. This places the creative process theoretically above personal choice or egoistic pride, in that sense offering it a particularly functional role in a society that was formerly without overarching institutions of government. Yet, paradoxically, this distancing itself traditionally enhanced and maintained the power of the gerontocracy, who depended on this particular mystification for the underpinning of their privileged role as custodians and enforcers of the law. Sacred designs, songs and narratives are not just depictions of religious subjects but are themselves sacred, hence part of ‘the law’.
ARNOYD YUNKAPORTA

Father Apalech and Thuuth Thaa Mu nth (Law poles) 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer paint on milkwood,
feathers, bees' wax and grass dimensions variable (tallest
pole 132.0 cm)
Collection of The University of Queensland, gift of an
anonymous donor 2009
Photograph: Mick Richards

UNKNOWN ARTIST

Mask c.1954
ochres on wood, cord and fibre
47.5 x 46.0 x 2.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology
Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner
Taipan man 1990
ochres with synthetic polymer paint
on wood and bark
106.5 x 27.0 x 17.0 cm
Collection of Peter Sutton
Photograph: Michal Kluvanek.
Taipan man, who lost his hands after
breaking a taboo at the poison
ground of Moolench, south of Cape
Keerweer. The paint is Puch design,
the red ochre meaning sunset, and
the white dots meaning daybreak.
The hair and skirt are the bark of
the messmate tree. Carved openly
in Aurukun in 1990 by James
Kalkeeyorta and Clive Yunkaporta,
for the mortuary ceremony of Clive's
grandson, Carlo Yunkaporta.
UNKNOWN ARTIST
Eagle or KangKang 1958
ochres on wood
74.0 x 134.0 x 50.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner

UNKNOWN ARTIST
Emu c.1963 (Frederick McCarthy Collection)
ochres on wood
57.5 x 61.0 x 21.5 cm
Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: Georges Serras, Courtesy of National Museum of Australia

Art and Aurukun Cultural History
From secrecy to publicity

The sacred ceremonial sculptures of the Wik people were in the past carved in secret by men who later revealed them to others as non-human creations, as the ‘real’ thing, not just an image, even though ‘image’ was the term used for them. They were regarded as dangerous objects that could make people sick. The word translated as ‘sacred’ in Wik languages, as in so many others in Australia, has connotations of dread, awe and prohibition, as well as of separation from the mundane. One translation I encountered among older Wik people was ‘no llow’ (forbidden); another was ‘danger’.

On my first exposure to the carvings in August 1976, in the bush near Aurukun, I was told not to tell my wife or sister about the anthropomorphic two sisters shark effigy that was shown to me, nor about the carving and painting processes that I had observed and, on a senior man’s invitation, photographed. This was consistent with the mystification of the uninitiated as to the sculpture’s being ‘real’, although there was evidence that senior women, at least, also knew who made the figures. It was the day before the mortuary ceremony (house opening) being held for the man who earlier that year had taken me as a son, Victor Wolmby, and the figure was one of several being carved and painted for this event.

Links between the deceased man’s clan estate, his totemic identities, the mythology of the particular landscape with which he was identified, his ceremonial group (Apelech), and the subjects of the carvings, were precise. The shark sculpture related to a myth that connects opposite banks of the Kirke River estuary (Man-yelk). A senior man from each of the estates on these opposite sides rubbed me with his armpit sweat to protect me from the potentially harmful power of the sculpture. Similarly, many years later, when I was given two sculptures for the South Australian Museum collection, it was on the understanding that I could redress any ill effects they might have on anyone who accidentally touched them by giving them my armpit sweat and singing an appropriate wuungk (mourning song). When asked about this by the main sculptor (Angus Namponan) I duly sang a wuungk belonging in myth to one of the two sides of the estuary, originally sung by one of the two sisters, and the sculptures were moved to Adelaide, where they remain.

By 1976 photography was permitted for some but not all of the ritual tableaux in which the sculptures were used. The Long Yam sculptures, which no one was permitted to photograph when they came close, were revealed only from a distance by the dancers who bore them.

In the 1970s, as far as I can tell, none of these works were made to be sold and I knew old men who were much opposed to the idea. In the 1980s I saw some unpainted small carvings for sale at Aurukun, of animals related via totemic sites to their makers. They were not ‘dangerous’ because they were
unochred, and I bought them for the South Australian Museum. As time went on, painted Wik sculpture began to appear in fine art galleries in the south of the country, and the Wik sculptural tradition began to receive greater curatorial exposure in travelling exhibitions such as *Aboriginal Australia*, and had a significant impact in *Dreamings*, which opened in New York in 1988 and then moved to Chicago, Los Angeles and Melbourne, finishing in Adelaide in 1990.

Wik sculptures also toured internationally in the *Cultural exhibition of Queensland*, in Japan in 1989, *Aratjara: art of the first Australians* in western Europe in 1993 and 1994, and *Contemporary Australian Aboriginal art in modern worlds*, in western and eastern Europe in 2000. These were exhibitions that used Wik carvings made in the past, some from the 1940s and 1950s, but most of them created in 1962 for the ceremonies held at Aurukun as a display for the visiting representative of the British Crown, the Queensland Governor.

The most significant exhibition of contemporary commercial Wik sculptures made by living artists until now has been *Story place*, shown at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2003, for which there was a quite sumptuous catalogue. Most of these works were acquired by the gallery but some belonged to private collectors Aimé and Jacqueline Proost. Most were made using synthetic polymer paints, or a mixture of synthetic paints and natural ochres. They were made for exhibition or purchase or both, not for traditional ceremonial performances. Their makers' identities, photographs and biographies were extensively published in the catalogue. Back in Aurukun, sculptures were also still being made for the traditional reasons, but their origins were no longer concealed. In 1990, men who had in 1976 held the sources of the images secret from the uninitiated themselves sat openly at Aurukun working on a *Munjemanbung* sculpture for a mortuary ceremony, as I interviewed them about its story. They were brothers-in-law Clive Yunkaporta and James Kalkeeyorta. Both men had been reared in the bush.

In 2001 a metal sculpture workshop took place at Aurukun and an enterprise called Urban Art Projects helped Wik people to create limited editions of metal images based on this same tradition. The first exhibition of these was called *Kank inum – Nink inum (Old way – New way)*, and was shown in 2002 at the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) meeting at the Sunshine Coast. Once again, the sculptures had been drawn into the political realm, this time the international one.

So the Wik sculptures have had an expanded, not just a transformed, role. There are now, in a sense, three kinds: first, the sacred ochre-painted objects used in ceremonies at times of high emotion communion at Aurukun, but not sold; second, the art objects that are made only to be sold; and third, those made in the workshop, borrowed for ceremonies, returned to the workshop, and then sold on the art market.

The narrative meanings of all three are rooted in the past and in religious oral traditions; indeed, this is part of what makes them attractive as Aboriginal ‘art’ to their consuming audience. Without these
UNKNOWN ARTIST
Crocodile 1968
ochres and resin on wood
30.0 x 268.0 x 64.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner

Pikkuw (Saltwater crocodile) 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
32.0 x 241.0 x 75.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased with the assistance of an anonymous donor to commemorate the University’s Centenary, 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards

CRAIG KOOMERTA
Pikkuw (Saltwater crocodile) 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
32.0 x 241.0 x 75.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased with the assistance of an anonymous donor to commemorate the University’s Centenary, 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards
meanings they would merely be carvings of animals and people and, indeed, at times some such secular works are made by Aurukun sculptors ('it's just a bird'). Without higher meanings, any aesthetic shortcomings they might have would remain unrescued by the ethnological and spiritual auras they otherwise carry.

Djon Mundine has said of this recent phase of the Wik art tradition:

*These developments point to a new generation of artists. In the context of art production – in mediating between the spiritual source within Wik society at Aurukun and its interaction with Australian contemporary Western society – the spiritual and historical connection is never forgotten.*

*In the new millennium Aboriginal art from Queensland is seen as a resource of both financial and spiritual importance with strong support and appreciation from both the government sector and the art world.*

A look at the sponsor list for that exhibition shows it to have been extensive, but dominated by some interesting entities: the Queensland Government, ATSIC (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), and Comalco (a bauxite mining company with a large stake in the Cape York Peninsula region). Other sponsors included the *Courier Mail* newspaper, Channel Ten (TV) and Tourism Queensland. This is a fair mix of government and private interests. It is not hard to see how most of them saw their own aims or needs reflected in the support they gave. That is the usual *quid pro quo*. The blurb under the Queensland Government's sponsorship notice discussed aiming for a better quality of life for the Cape's Indigenous people, and about half of the words were devoted to revealing the traineeship programs funded through the exhibition process by the state. ATSIC, true to form, stated its interest frankly as one of pursuing irredentist politics through cultural identity shows. Comalco was at pains to stress its policy of mutual recognition between itself and traditional owners of the land, and its support for the social and economic development of the Aboriginal communities on the Cape. The company's support for 'recognition of land rights' represented an astonishing about-face for anyone who remembered the 1970s in that region, a period known for the hostilities between supporters and opponents of Aboriginal land rights.

So many interested parties are now added to the old mix; for example art institutions, collectors, government bureaucracies, a publicly funded political representative group, a mining company, media companies and a tourism agency. Under the old conditions, the sculptures had their meanings and roles defined by a small, culturally homogeneous population, although they were also shrouded in a certain amount of secrecy and people were in awe of their power. As they have become public objects in a global context they have also taken on a form in which many no longer have the same spiritual power and danger as objects.
Something else is very apparent, although here we enter a more subjective world than ever. The aesthetic of the works has changed considerably. The earliest known wooden carvings (and grass sculptures) from this region were either simple and abstract or at least rather roughly executed. The wax figurine collected by Ursula McConnel near Aurukun in 1927 or 1928, with its inset eyes, detailed genitalia, and attached head and pubic hair, perhaps indicates how much iconic realism earlier Wik people might have attained in wood, had they had the tools to do so. Then, from the 1940s to the present day, we see the impact of the use of steel tools, nails, pins, and the resultant developments in style that might be summarised as an increasingly gracile approach to form; much greater structural complexity resulting from the attachment of limbs, hair, teeth or other objects, through morticing, pinning, gluing and nailing; and a possible increase in the maximum size of sculptures.

However, in the most recent phase, works of that stylistic character have been complemented, although not replaced, by works of another, quite different, aesthetic character. These carvings, which are by younger sculptors, are smoother, more neatly painted, more symmetrical, more likely to be made using synthetic paint and, in some cases, more likely to have been inspired by old photographic sources. In 2006 and 2007 copies of earlier catalogues were regularly being consulted by Aurukun sculptors at the council’s art centre.

I suspect that when many metropolitan gallery visitors look at these latter objects, they are more likely to see their continuity with the past, their ‘Aboriginality’, and their spirituality, than their various departures from the past. That is, the objects’ ‘creativity’ or ‘traditionality’ depends to a degree on the knowledge behind the eye of the beholder, just as the extent to which the objects mediate political or welfare objectives, or offer something exotic in the way of tourism prospects, or represent the results of a training program, depends on which finger in the pie is doing the connecting between the observer and the thing. Observers of the images include local Indigenous people, other Indigenous people, members of the art world, the government world, and the industrial and media world which, despite their differences, nevertheless share an elementary basis for occupying common cultural ground.

Just as Aboriginal novices create their knowledge out of shreds and patches, rather than comprehensive explanations offered on a platter, so it is likely that art audiences looking at the Wik sculptor’s *Pungk Apelech* carvings, and Aurukun artists coming to grips with the art world of Brisbane, are both engaging in a shared frontier conversation that is patchy, to say the least. They do so from partly unshared bases or viewpoints, unshared assumptions. They certainly are not doing the same thing, but merely in reverse direction. This is in spite of the fact that both share a common underlying set of intellectual tools that makes the exchange possible, and a will to make something of each other. They often also share a common need not to publicly recognise these sometimes profound differences between their conceptions of what is going on. This is the contract.
The Indigenous art industry in Australia has a quite long history of concentrating its public output, its exhibitions, catalogues and books, on a few basic central themes and providing lots of pictures and often very thin analysis or historical context. The number of scholarly works in the field is beginning to grow but is still small. It seems to have taken a long time for the wider world to grant recognition to the unique body of work by the sculptors of Aurukun. More than 40 years ago, Karel Kupka wrote:

While the [Arnhem Land] Reserve holds nearly the entire output of bark painting, the same cannot be said for sculpture, which is widely spread across Australia. It has not yet been satisfactorily surveyed, and still waits for its investigators – who should make first and foremost for the Cape York area, where they will find, among the rough, bulky forms in wood, which are rarely collected, true sculptures.30

Peter Sutton
HORACE WIKMUNEA

Two Ngum (Divers) 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
59.0 x 33.0 x 39.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008
Photograph: Mick Richards
Chapter 2

Tradition and Change in Aurukun Aesthetics

The art we make today is the same as the past. It’s like the Old Testament and the New Testament in the Bible – the old way and the new way, both going in the same direction.

STANLEY KALKEEYORTA, AURUKUN, JANUARY 2010
Reinventing visual traditions in Aurukun art encourages new ways of thinking about Aboriginal culture in, or perhaps as, a process of change. Colonisation made most traditional practices impossible and necessitated radical transformations in almost all aspects of life: to the point that Aboriginality today arguably defines itself as a culture of change. Change is survival. But survival also requires continuity with the past, and maintaining inherited traditions in threat of disappearance is of equal importance. How do these seemingly opposing directions come together as a coherent expression of contemporary Aboriginality? At what point does the new lose faith with its past? What are the limits of traditionalism before art becomes artificially exotic? These kinds of questions set the parameters of production for today’s artists in Aurukun, and their pursuit of reinventing visual traditions is a vital characteristic of Aurukun aesthetics.
Aesthetics involves a cohesion of intellectual and emotional sensitivities that creates new ways of seeing and perceiving the world. Visual aesthetics allows us to apprehend ideas or experiences that cannot be expressed in words; concepts take shape through the potential and contingency of an image, an appearance, and visual appeal. Referring to Aurukun's pre-contact era, Peter Sutton draws on anthropologist Jacques Maquet's concept of 'aesthetic locus' to understand what makes cultural expression coherent. Sutton describes it as the 'center from which the aesthetic drive and criteria for artistic excellence radiates.' In other words, it is the event or activity that brings beliefs, ideologies and aspirations to bear on aesthetic value. Examples include the tea ceremony in 16th-century Japan and industrial design in mid-20th century North America, western Europe and Japan. In traditional Aboriginal cultures, Sutton identifies the ritual ceremony as the seminal event that motivates aesthetics. Such ritual ceremonies were a vibrant aspect of traditional Wik culture, endowing the spiritual and social frameworks of life with a visual order, and determining aesthetic excellence in terms of powerful distinct expressions of Wik law.

But what of aesthetics now, when ceremony is rarely performed? What determines the criteria for visual excellence today? Critical discourse regarding contemporary Aboriginal art constantly debates this issue of aesthetic criteria, or aesthetic judgment. Standards of artistic excellence are, of course, contingent on differing cultural value systems, but this notion of 'aesthetic locus' helps to contextualise aesthetic value with how and why art happens. In Aurukun today the art market determines most rituals of art production, and creates an environment for reinventing visual traditions. The act of reinvention risks diminishing cultural authenticity in the perception of outsiders, but it also negotiates new modes of authenticity in its place. Noel Pearson, a leading spokesperson and activist from Cape York, and former Executive Director of the Cape York Land Council, raised this issue of tradition and change in relation to far north Queensland Aboriginal art in his foreword to a 1994 exhibition catalogue. Pearson wrote:

*In the context of current trends in art criticism and in response to Australia’s renowned cultural cringe, Eric Michaels has suggested that ‘What Australia (and postmodernism) may not have a vocabulary to deal with … is the unwelcome appearance of any possible claims to authentic creativity as with our own indigenous art’ (Eric Michaels, Bad Aboriginal art: tradition, media and technological horizons VIII, 1994, Allen and Unwin Australia.) Arguably the search for such a vocabulary of creativity will form a necessary part of Australia’s process of decolonization, involving the recognition of our own worth and ability to attain a reconciled and unique national identity, and of vital importance, allow the recognition of Aboriginal cultural strength and survival.*
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN SR
Bonefish man c.1962 (Frederick McCarthy Collection)
wood, nails, feathers and ochres
72.0 x 55.0 x 23.0 cm
Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: Courtesy of National Museum of Australia
Fifteen years on, this drive towards authentic creativity, or reinventing tradition, is in full force in Aurukun. Issues about tradition and change are frequent topics of conversation with artists. Stan Kalkeeyorta, an artist regarded as having considerable knowledge about cultural traditions, identifies Aurukun art today as being the same as the past, but he also speaks of the importance and urgency of cultural revival, innovation, and continuity. Mavis Ngallametta, a leading weaver and painter, and president of the Wik and Kugu Art Centre, describes how the depletion of traditional knowledge is a concern to community elders, signalling a need to build new energy around their culture for younger generations. This drive for a sustainable self-image for the twenty-first century underpins art practice in Aurukun today.

Developing a contemporary self-image also involves dismantling stereotypes and misunderstandings about Aboriginal culture. One of the most significant misunderstandings is the image of an ‘ancient culture’ that plagues representations of contemporary Aboriginality. Art and tourist industries conventionally represent Aboriginal culture as an ‘ancient culture’, apparently hotwired to prehistoric times through unbroken traditions. While the activity of ancestors in the present is a vital aspect of Aboriginal spirituality and culture, the Aboriginal concept of an ‘ancestral past’ is very different to a western concept of an ‘ancient past’. Numerous scholars have dealt with this issue; however, it is worth noting that communicating this different concept of the past and its relationship to the present is an ongoing mission of contemporary Aboriginal art. This is particularly the case in Aurukun, where carvers and weavers work closely with a formal language from the past, layering it subtly with centuries of intercultural contact. Indeed, Aurukun art is not ‘timeless’ so much as it is ‘time-complex’. Artists create channels of communication with different outside influences, and they also develop a language of exchange with their own past. Thus, reinventing tradition is about shaping a framework of understanding with the many faces of the past that imprint themselves on the present.

Of course, there is always an aspect of invention with any interpretation of tradition, but contemporary Aurukun art is unique in the way it gives new life to old forms. The past, present and future converge in an open-ended relationship that emphasises creativity as the mainstay of culture and survival.

Carving

Aurukun carving has an exceptionally interesting history of tradition and change. Sutton and earlier anthropologists noted that Aurukun figures were produced originally in moulded clay. Figures were often painted and carried in ceremonial performances that acted out the mythological activities of
GARRY NAMPONAN
*Ku’ (Camp dog)* 2008
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
46.0 x 76.0 x 18.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008
Photograph: Mick Richards

LEIGH NAMPONAN
*Pengiky (Saltwater shark)* 2009
natural ochres and synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
55.0 x 105.0 x 49.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards

Following pages: Sculpture studio at Wik and Kugu Art Centre, Aurukun 2010.
Photograph: Carl Werner
ancestors. The medium of clay gave way to carved timber with the arrival of metal tools, particularly after the Aurukun Mission introduced carpentry lessons and equipment. But the aesthetics of smooth moulded clay forms remained intact within this transfer to wood. Aurukun carvings from the mid-20th century in the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and the University of Queensland (UQ) Anthropology collections are distinctive for the eloquent characterisation in their sculpted forms. The sculptures give the impression of being characters from a particular story; they are never just types or motifs of fish, birds, men or women. Aboriginal visual culture was always embedded in mythological stories, but Aurukun carvings have an emphatic narrative quality, even within this context.

The narrative quality stems from the shaping of figures. Subtly expressive forms create a narrative line that suggests activity; something is happening. A dog shifts his weight to turn sharply. Birds flex their wings ready for uplift. A carving of a man's head in the NMA collection is so animated with character that you expect him to start speaking. The sculptures generally have very little carved decorative detail (the incised detail on a crocodile's back is an obvious exception), and this enhances the eloquent charm of the overall form. Sacred sites in Cape York are called story places, so it is not difficult to see why the story comes through the carvers' hands into the shape of sculpted characters. As Sutton mentions in chapter one, adaptation of joinery methods lent a quirky character to these forms. Small sheets of metal were bent into the shape of a dog's ear or nails used as human feet or toes, or even as an ear. Ingenuity and resourcefulness were part of the carvings' story even at this early stage.

Traditionally, stories were performed in ceremonies and the 'aesthetic locus' came alive in a multi-dimensional ensemble of song, dance, music, body painting, visual objects and designs, all utterly coherent in their unified purpose. The fact that Aurukun carvings were carried during dancing suggests that they were regarded as performers rather than just representations or symbols. This notion of the sculptures as performers was apparent recently in the 2009 Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, where carvings stood facing the audience at the front of the stage as the Aurukun dancers performed behind them. The sculptures were an integral part of the performance.

In the latter part of the 20th century, when carving for ceremony became less common, the eloquent expression in Aurukun carvings lost some degree of fluidity, sometimes appearing stiff or inactive. It would seem that the narrative line lost its vitality and sense of purpose as knowledge about traditional stories diminished. The proliferation of recent carving in Aurukun indicates a return of this vitality and a new sense of purpose. Carvings by artists such as the brothers Garry and Lex Tony Nampanon show the regeneration of this narrative spark with a keen sense of characterisation and animation in their sculpted form. The early stages of this eloquent contouring are visible in a photograph of an unfinished sculpture of a sleeping dog by Lex Namponan. There may be no story of mythological significance
associated with this dog, but it nevertheless seems animated by sleep and peacefulness. This dog obviously belongs somewhere, and that's its story. This is perhaps the contemporary reinvention of what Peter Sutton refers to in chapter one as a story in ‘the nature of being’.

Other carvings produced today, such as crocodiles and ancestral figures of the Apelech brothers and Moon sisters, help to anchor ongoing efforts to gather and document important creation myths and keep them for future generations. Carvings represent both mythological and everyday stories, but it is the presence of story as a sense of purpose in itself that matters. It is art making sense of the world.

The innovation of Aurukun group sculptures such as the Apelech law poles by Ron Yunkaporta and Arthur Pambeena Jr's Flying fox and bonefish story tableaux, plays an important role in countering primitivistic attitudes about Indigenous carving that are associated with an international market in ‘tribal art’. There is a substantial demand for Indigenous carvings from around the world, but value rests heavily on the degree of traditionalism. This is not a market for contemporary art, but a desire for the exotic, untouched ‘other’. Contemporary carvings by Indigenous cultures become absorbed into the periphery of this market simply because the medium of carving itself seems to suggest ‘tribal’, but the contemporary works suffer low valuation because they are deemed to lack ethnographic purity and ‘traditional’ authenticity.
Aurukun’s group carvings disrupt this mindset. The groups of standing law poles and the installation of *Flying fox and bonefish* hanging from suspended twine differ little stylistically to earlier sculptures used for ceremonial purposes. However, as an innovative form of installation art, these sculptures sit comfortably within the various spaces and media of international contemporary art. Indeed, they have a profound effect on exhibition spaces in the way that they command respect for a ceremony that is absent but not forgotten. They evoke a contemporary idiom of cultural heritage that will not submit itself to stereotypes about ‘tribal art’ and yet maintains a profound dimension of traditional value in the perception of outsiders. This is not to say that they are any more nor less ‘authentic’ than other Aurukun carvings or artworks in general. The difference is in the way these installations profoundly disrupt and disturb categorisations about traditional versus contemporary in the minds of audiences.

The impact of Aurukun’s group installations takes us back to the words of Noel Pearson over 15 years ago. As expressions of a contemporary idiom of cultural heritage, the group carvings develop a vocabulary of authentic creativity that Pearson regards as essential to processes of decolonisation. Yet these processes of decolonisation are painfully slow, as indicated in the following quote from a 2007 scholarly publication on *Culture and authenticity*, where the author writes:

*Remnants of this (shamanistic) way of thinking may be seen in present-day Australian aboriginal art, which originates in dreams or represents traditional stories and motifs. For Australian aboriginals, these objects are not art but paraphernalia required for ritual performance. So, while Western collectors of aboriginal works are likely to be interested in ascertaining their authenticity, the fame of the maker, and the aesthetic quality of the piece, aboriginals look for aspects that fit them for ceremonial use.*

An entire book could, and needs, to be written about the relationship between the ideas in this paragraph and the law poles and *Flying fox* artworks. The idea that present-day Australian Aboriginal people lack any concept of art and produce only ceremonial paraphernalia ignores how and why these artworks are produced today. The synergy between these carving tableaux and contemporary art museums counters this mindset by their capacity to authentically invoke the heritage of Wik ceremony, even though they are not produced today for ceremonial use. The artworks intrinsically provoke this issue of authenticity, and substantiate that Indigenous cultural traditions have an authentic place in contemporary art museums, and that contemporary Indigenous art has an authentic role in Indigenous traditions.

Aurukun carving also extended the vocabulary of authentic creativity with the development of sculptures being cast in bronze and aluminium. In 2002, nine Aurukun carvers participated in a project titled *Old way – New way* in collaboration with Brisbane-based Urban Art Projects (UAP) to produce a
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR
Flying-fox story place 2007 – 2008
ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood, bush rope and bush string
188.0 x 190.0 x 35.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
series of carvings that were to be cast in bronze and aluminium by UAP. The essentially modern aesthetics of aluminium were particularly effective in conveying the sense of ‘reinvented’ carving traditions. Craig Koomeeta, one of Aurukun’s younger and most recognised artists, was a leading figure in this project and produced several stunning sculptures, including a crocodile in which the hard-edge finish of the metallic medium enhances the deep incisions in the scaled form of the reptile’s back. The metal finish makes the abstract design element of this natural feature obvious and suggests how abstraction and figurative art have an ambiguous distinction in Indigenous art.

The UAP project was a significant expression of contemporary innovation in Aurukun art, and turned attention to how the medium of sculpture itself carries a message. Craig Koomeeta’s aluminium crocodile carries a message that also speaks directly to the trade in ‘tribal art’. The message is that Aurukun art has no place in this market; indeed, it rejects the whole premise of ‘tribal art’.

Weaving

Fibre art, or weaving, has been one of the mainstays of cultural production in Aurukun throughout the transition from pre-contact to modern times. Because the craft of weaving itself suffers from stereotypical ideas of primitive craft and folk art, qualities of innovation and individualism rarely featured in relevant discourse until recent times. But reinvention is woven into the very fabric of Aurukun weaving. The most spectacular example of this reinvention is the recent innovation of ghost net baskets made by female Aurukun artists. Ghost net baskets and figures are woven from discarded fishing nets found on the Aurukun seashore, and are an outcome of an initiative by the Carpentaria Ghost Net Program to eradicate marine debris from the ocean, in particular, fishing nets that have been lost or discarded at sea. These nets are a major marine hazard, trapping species such as turtles, dolphins and dugong, as well as fish, in knots that are sometimes of enormous scale. With the assistance of a number of weaving workshops run by Sue Ryan in conjunction with the Ghost Nets Program, several Aurukun artists now use these collected ghost nets to create woven baskets and figures. The synthetic nets are a thick, coarse material, lacking the pliability of natural fibres, and weavers are required to employ considerable adaptations in technique and design. Bright synthetic colours and materials replace fibres coloured with plant dyes and natural ochres.

It is the continuity of an ethos of ‘looking after country’ that is perhaps most significant with this innovation. ‘Looking after country’ is an Aboriginal expression that equates to ‘maintaining a sustainable environment’ in public discourse today. Weaving the fishing nets becomes an expression of care for the
RITA WIKMUNEA
Basket 2005
Pandanus leaf with natural dyes
5.0 cm x 25.5 x 25.5 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2006.
Photograph: Mick Richards

MAVIS NGALLAMETTA
Basket 2008
Cabbage palm fibre with natural dyes
7.0 x 30.0 x 33.0 cm
Collection of National Gallery of Australia
Photograph: Mick Richards

HERSEY YUNKAPORTA
Basket 2005
Pandanus leaf with natural dyes
7.5 x 31.0 x 31.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland. Gift of an anonymous donor to commemorate the University’s Centenary, 2010.
Photograph: Mick Richards

DOREEN MARPOONDIN
Basket 2005
Cabbage palm fibre with natural dyes
9.0 x 31.5 x 31.5 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland. Gift of an anonymous donor to commemorate the University’s Centenary, 2010.
Photograph: Mick Richards
DOREEN MARPOONDIN
Galah 2009
synthetic fishing net, raffia and rope
46.0 x 38.0 x 38.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards

ANNIE KALKEEYORTA
Dilly bag (Waangk waangkam) c.1974
cabbage palm fibre and plant root dye
35.0 x 25.0 cm
Courtesy of Professor David Trigger
Photograph: Carl Warner

ANNIE KALKEEYORTA
Dilly bag (Waangk waangkam) c.1974
cabbage palm fibre and plant root dye
30.0 x 30.0 cm
Courtesy of Professor David Trigger
Photograph: Carl Warner

Left: Mavis Ngallametta weaving discarded fishing net into ghost net basket, Aurukun 2010
Photograph: Carl Warner

Tradition and Change in Aurukun Aesthetics
marine environment in a contemporary context. One of Mavis Ngallametta’s baskets includes a woven thong as a decorative motif on the lid. Thongs are part of beach culture today, and a common feature of the wash-up of life at the water’s edge.

Reinvention actually has a long history in Aurukun weaving. The style of pandanus basketry used today, for instance, came to Aurukun via Cloncurry, a Queensland town many hundreds of kilometres south-west of Aurukun. This is documented in a 1995 exhibition catalogue essay by Jeanie Adams, a curator and former arts advisor in Aurukun (the same exhibition catalogue included Noel Pearson’s foreword, mentioned earlier in this chapter). Adams described how the subculture of Queensland missions and state administrations encouraged contact between different communities, and particularly influenced the local weaving tradition. She wrote:

For example, young Goanka Golpendun went away from Aurukun in the thirties or forties to Cloncurry to get experience in a hospital, and came back bringing an idea of new style of pandanus basketry. With the encouragement of the missionaries and help of an Islander woman working in the community at the time, a local Aurukun style developed and local dyes were applied, and from then most woman have learned the craft.

This raffia technique was taught to today’s weavers in Aurukun by the Mission administration during their youth, yet they have constantly individualised these techniques with inclusion of different decorative features such as feathers, shells and beads, and original design features such as creating holes in the weave and staggered herring-bone joins. Techniques in weaving also draw on longstanding traditional practices handed down from mother to daughter over many generations, such as the five different weaves of string bags made from young fronds of the Cabbage Palm. These fronds are rolled into two-ply twine and then woven into bags with extensive stretch.

While Adams directs attention to innovation in Aurukun weaving, another curator, Eliza Cole, described the aspect of individualism in contemporary Aurukun weaving in her catalogue essay. In a recent exhibition of fibre art from North Queensland, titled The woven purpose, Cole described these aesthetic traits in the fibre art of Mavis Ngallametta:

Individual artists have a place in their community that can sometimes be identified through graphic elements. For example the representation of two white circles in body painting or fibre work can be linked to the identity of Mavis Ngallametta from the Aurukun region. Mavis demonstrates a change in aesthetics that propels her work into a personal realm quite different to that of her peers. The woven work takes on
new directions that lead away from practical applications thereby resulting in a unique premise in which to impart individual stories. Different techniques and elements of weaving have come together to form unique works that represent how ‘Mavis’ fits into the Aurukun community.9

The idea of self-expression in woven art is something that has only recently developed in western art discourse, but is an area in which Aboriginal artists have led the way in transforming conventional ideas about art and craft. The genre of fibre art is now a recognised field of aesthetics, and a unique platform for the interplay of traditional technique and individual style in Aboriginal aesthetics.

Aurukun’s leading weavers include Rita Wikmunea, Hersey Yunkaporta, Doreen Marpoondin and Mavis Ngallametta. Coloured patterning is a strong aesthetic characteristic of Aurukun weaving, including an ‘Island style’ influence of zig-zag colouration in the tightly coiled work of Doreen Marpoondin. Aurukun’s proximity to the Torres Strait Islands reflects in cultural material such as grass skirts and Island-style music and stories. This history of innovation and influence in Aurukun weaving provides contemporary weavers with a sophisticated repertoire of techniques and aesthetic styles that reads as an ongoing language of reinvention.

Painting

The coastal region north of Aurukun township has a spectacular formation of cliffs, where the dark red bauxite that is common to the area is overlaid with bands of contrasting white kaolin, or clay. These unusual bands of red and white are the most distinctive feature of the coastline and have a striking resemblance to the red and white bands of colour in the traditional body painting, sculpture decoration and canvas painting of Aurukun. It is also the place where certain kinds of ochre are obtained for paint. In Wik this place is called Ikalath. Once you have seen this geographical feature of Wik country, it changes the way you see Wik art. The substance of Wik country is embedded deeply in the ‘aesthetic locus’, and clearly has been for a very long time.

Canvas painting is a relatively recent art form in Aurukun but it is perhaps the art form that now carries the essence of the Wik aesthetic. Since 2004 a number of male artists have been producing canvas paintings based on traditional body painting designs. The most significant of these series are the artworks by Arthur Pambegan Jr and are based on the Walkan-aw and Kalben designs. Produced in traditional ochres and acrylic paint, the entire series is a symphony of red, white and black, laid down in the striking linear and geometric patterning of decorative designs seen more commonly on his sculpture. Indeed,
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR

Untitled XXXIII (Walken-aw and Kalben designs) 2008
ochres with synthetic polymer binder
and synthetic polymer paint on linen
61.0 x 46.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

Photograph: Andrew Baker
one painting that includes a rare figurative element shows two bonefish, with these designs placed above vertical stripes of these three colours.

Strict rules once applied to body painting designs in the era of Wik ceremonies. Different markings in a myriad of combinations were designated for different parts of the body such as the face, torso, upper arms and legs, and lower arms and legs. The graphic elements of these designs consisted mainly of dots, lines and bold geometric shapes painted in red and white ochre onto the skin. When transferred from body to canvas, the designs become visual essays in organisation, order, and maintaining balance in shifting relationships. The colour relationships and repetitive graphic elements are abstract expressions of the fundamentals of social organisation in Wik life.

In a discussion regarding the sculptures of Leigh Namponan, Peter Sutton offers a remarkable insight about colour relationships in the Wik aesthetic imagination. He writes:

_Crow, Night and Gecko are thematically linked by darkness. This suggests something about how colours mean. By sharing colours, but being different things, these different things may remind us of each other. In classical Aboriginal thought, great power comes when resemblances and contrast are mixed together._10

Pambegan’s paintings are powerful, and despite their limited palette and figurative simplicity they are unique within the genre of contemporary Aboriginal painting. They embody the essence of Aboriginality; the essence of a distinctive Wik culture; and in their translation into canvas painting, they embody the essence of change and innovation. Other canvas paintings pertaining to the body painting series include works by the late Joe Ngallametta that document the body painting related to the _Apelech brothers_ story. The paintings show how the simple organisation of lines and arcs shows a semiotic relationship, in which a slight change in the orientation of one mark signifies a particular aspect of the story. Craig Koomeeta also works with canvas paintings, and has painted a number of diptychs that play off the idea of contrast, as discussed by Sutton. Contrasts between age and youth or old and new are common themes.

A number of female artists have commenced canvas painting recently since attending a workshop run at the Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun. The women are exploring original expressions of country and life in Aurukun without recourse to any traditional iconography. Even in paintings such as those about particular places by Mavis Ngallametta, there is no topographical element or Dreaming track iconography such as in central desert paintings. According to the artist, they are an imaginative idea of the geographical and mythological features of the land, with no particular visual reference to a pre-existing aesthetic.11 And yet, one can still see those red and white cliffs, the rivers, the wetlands and the beautiful contrasts that are the life and land of the Wik.

_Sally Butler_
LEONIE POOTCHEMUNKA
Father and mother looking for two daughters 2008
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
60.0 x 53.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

KEITH WIKMUNE A
Moon sisters 2009
natural ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder
on milkwood and grass
92.0 x 60.0 x 34.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
MAVIS NGALLAMETTA

South of Ikolet 2009
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on linen
124.0 x 90.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009.
Photograph: Carl Warner
MAVIS NGALLAMETTA

*Kendall River story place* 2008
synthetic polymer paint on linen
72.0 x 126.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

Following pages:

CRAIG KOOOMEETA

*The Apelech brothers* 2005
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on linen
two panels, 91.0 x 182.0 cm overall
Collection of The University of Queensland, gift of an anonymous donor 2010
Photograph: Carl Warner
Before Time Today
Chapter 3

Conversations with Artists

Stanley Kalkeeyorta, Mavis Ngallametta and Tony Albert

The following commentaries by Stanley Kalkeeyorta (shown opposite) and Mavis Ngallametta are extracts from interviews conducted by Sally Butler in Aurukun in January 2010.
Stanley Kalkeeyorta

We have five different clans here in Aurukun. The five clans are based on the human senses. There's Wanam, Apelech, Winchanam, Puch and Sara. So they are the seeing, hearing, feeling, smell, taste. Each clan, we looked after each other when we were out in country. We still look after each other. So if there's a bush fire near my country then someone from the fire end might see it and they'll send a messenger over to our country. And then if there's a fire burning near your country, you have a look out for others. You might go to a swamp in another man's country and these tribes will say that's bad water and you can't drink it. So it's looking out for each other in various ways. It's the taste, the smell, the hearing. This hand (holds up hand with fingers spread apart) represents the five clans and that we look out for each other.

This song is from the Puch tribe. I never sang this because my dad didn't want me to. Now my dad is gone I can sing to this carving that I made out of hardwood. [Points to his crocodile carving, and then sings in Wik]. That's the song about how the ancestor connected to swim with the crocodile, to make the crocodile their dog of water. The croc is a hunter for the water. The dingo is for the land. He hunts on the land for kangaroos and other food. The croc is for the river; you can cross the rivers with a crocodile. It'll get you sea turtles; it'll get you dugong. I don't have the ability to sing for the croc and swim with a croc because I lost it. I saw my dad swim with a croc and he was given a big sea turtle to eat. I was about seven or eight when I saw that. So a croc, it's your mate for the water. Although it's a creature that you can't be face to face with, but I know people that can make it calm by singing to it. When you sing to it, it knows who the owner is, who it belongs to. You don't own it or he doesn't own the croc. He's just there for the company. Someone can control it by talking to it. The croc hears you walking by. Some people say a croc can hear you if he lies even about 200 metres away, lying on the sand. Other people say don't look because he has already heard you, because the sand told him. It's the vibration on the sand that carries the footsteps to the croc and he hears you. So the croc and the human share one shore, the fishing shore they share together. You fish from there but you leave room for the croc. He comes up there and sunbakes, and when it's time for you to fish, he sees you or the sand tells him, and he'll go away. If you respect the croc, he respects you.

Our art has this power. Everything must have the power. It's made by power. The powers are the colours that you see. I love that. It's the power that will kind of, I don't know how to put it, but it'll attract you. Say you walk into a room and you see this object and your eyes just go for the thing that's sitting there in the corner. That's the power that will let you see; the power that kind of sucks you in and you want it. It's like with a book. When a story becomes a book, it's the same as this. It's a part of the story. So if you read a book, it has power. When you start a page you want to read more, then you turn over the page, that's the
STANLEY KALKEYORTA
Pikkuw (Saltwater crocodile), 2010
hardwood
7.5 x 71.5 x 22.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Carl Warner

Timber ready for carving outside of Wik and Kugu Art Centre, January 2010.
Photograph: Carl Warner
power. You want to know, but you can’t know. The one who wrote it, he had power in his mind to think of these things to put in the book. So, books and stories have got power in them. So power is within everyone. The things that we make have that connection to the land where they’ve been made. If a person from that tribe went and saw that same thing that was made years back when he was a child, he will memorise it. He thinks, ‘I saw this when I was a child; my uncle or my dad did this’, and he feels that power inside of him. He might feel sad, or he might feel strong. These are the powers in that object that some people buy. They already have power. It’s just a way of shaping the power, to get that thing into a shape.

It’s like with a ghost net. A ghost net is waste. It’s a danger for sea creatures and things. So it has powers to trap and kill. A human made it for that purpose, so what we try to do is take away that ‘killingness’ to transfer it to here, (points to ghost net woven basket) which is then for something to eat in a good way. From a bad thing it’s transferring into a good thing. See, it’s part of culture. You can have bad culture, good culture. No more ghost net; instead, you have a bag full of apples, oranges or yams. Nets are good but don’t leave it there in the sea, because if you leave it there and fish get killed then that’s when the good people come, the environment people. They pick up this waste and we make them into good. It’s the ladies that make them good. Everything has power, they have power, the nets have power to kill. But then we draw that out and make it into this, and from the fishing net it becomes a food bowl.

Some people think there’s two various ways, one traditional and one the urban way, but it points in the same direction. The art we make today is the same as the past. It’s like the Old Testament and the New Testament in the Bible, the old way and the new way, both going in the same direction. So that’s the thing here with the ghost net basket.

I have two boys that go out bush with me, one is a little bit older, he’s in his 20s and another one is 12 to 13. They go out in country with me and I teach them. I tell them not to lose the culture because the culture is the identity of each individual, even the language. That’s why I tell the two young ones that the carvings and the paintings that we do are part of the land; it is part of us. I was telling them about the wood that we use for carving. One is yongk, in Wik it is yongk. In scientific ways I don’t know, but they call it Ironwood and the other one is thanchal in Wik. They call it milkwood. So the thanchal is the soft wood, and yongk is the hard wood.

What I am trying to do is to revive the culture because people are losing their culture. It’s not their problem that they lost their culture. It’s sad and I don’t want to talk about how they lost their culture. I don’t want to get into that. I’m just here to get that culture going, surviving the culture, reviving it. See my people, I teach them. The young ones, sometimes they get it, and sometimes they don’t. They follow on the right track and then they turn off because of the influence that, what white society brings around. All
MAVIS NGALLAMETTA

I/k (Basket) (detail) 2010
synthetic fishing net, reffia
and rope
38.0 x 48.0 x 48.0 cm
Collection of The University of
Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards
that. But then they come back on track. Go off track, come back, but when they are older they will know which one is the right one and it is the one that I followed. I follow the culture of the Wik warrior. I follow it from the Wik warrior to the Kugu warrior. My mum is a Wik, my Dad's a Kugu. So I learnt both ways from both parents. I was taught my mum's way, my Dad's way, and the English white society way.

But most of all we have to remember we are the ones, the actual land owners, the real people. We don't belong to the land, the land owns us. When we die the land will claim our body. See, we just look after the land for the next generation to come. That's why I try to tell these pupils of mine to make carvings from the land, make paintings to maintain the culture of the Indigenous person. So the identity might not be lost. The language and the paint that we wear and the song that we sing, it is the identity of that tribe. But it's hard for me to go out and talk to a young one, and say, 'Hey come on and have a dance in a traditional dance'. I can't say that because their parents won't allow that because I am from another tribe. If they had their singer there or tribal man they could teach them in their way. I can't teach their little ones some of my tribal ways. It's no good because I am trying to collect people from here and there to put in my clan. It doesn't go that way. In a spiritual way they have to find themselves. If someone wants to do a cultural thing, people have to dream of it. Some people dream of a certain bird or a certain snake. These reptiles and birds belong to these five different tribal groups, the five clans. So everything around the country here, from animals to little creepy crawlies, they are totems to each and every one within those five clans.

It would be good, too, if we can have more of this conversation with whitefellas, and letting people know that we still speak language, we still dance, we still believe in our all beliefs. If we could have a bigger place like a bigger art centre where we would help people to understand us. If we had a bigger art centre then we could get people in to tell them what this or that is; how and why, when and where, what it's from, what it's for, all that. A bigger space would help, and it would help if we had our own festival thing, right here in Aurukun. Everybody could be coming together to a certain point at a certain time. We won't hold it in the Aurukun town here, but we'll hold it out somewhere like we used to have it in the dry swamp back in 1962. If we could have a festival here then everybody would love it if Aurukun had one. See, we don't have these festivals but we go to a place called Laura. It's in the middle of the Cape. We go there; well, I used to go there earlier when I was younger, but not anymore. If we had that festival here at a certain time it would be great because only certain children go out to other places in dance groups, but here we can have the children, all the children, dancing as well.

If we had a cultural centre sort of thing we could bring the kids out of school sometimes. They need to be taught the way of the Indigenous way. Each and every one. Even if there's a non-Indigenous person, then he could join in the rest of the mob. They will be taught things like bushfire burnage, all
that. If they would help us get a better facility, art facility, we could help the kids there for half an hour to restore their culture and then they go back to the school and do their thing there. See, it's like for me ... I know in my tradition, I know that much [indicates very small gap between two fingers]. From that much [shows large gap between two outstretched arms] I know that small amount, but I can still track. See that's the problem, because it happened to me, I lost that culture, the big bit. I only got that much left [small amount] so that much I have got to give away to the kids. So that much I got to give away before I pass away.

Stanley Kalkeeyorta in Aurukun, January 2010,
Photograph: Carl Warner
Above and right: Aurukun dancers performing at the opening ceremony of Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, August 2009.
Photograph: David Campbell, courtesy of Cairns Indigenous Art Fair.
Mavis Ngallametta

I am Mavis Ngallametta. That is my married name. When I was single I was Marbunt. When I was a child I used to be in the dormitories at six in the afternoon then got up in the morning; six in the morning it was 'out'. I taught in the school when I was 14, 15. Then after school myself and my school mates used to weave out of Pandanus, making fruit bowls and mats. I was making these but I used to see my mum and my aunty making a dilly bag out of Cabbage Palm and they used to make mats and fishing nets differently. Our old parents, old people didn’t do it like that. There’s a special string they used to go out and collect in the bush. When we worked together, we used to roll it in our laps. I still do sometimes. I roll strings in my lap and make part of a rope, like for grass skirts, the waist part. I don’t make any dilly bags now but I did make one for an exhibition recently. It is very hard to learn, but when young girls want to learn, when you start young then you can learn. It’s about showing the youngest how the eldest are making dilly bags.

I used to make dilly bags out of cabbage palm and now I’m weaving out of ghost net, which is good for me. And now people can see how it’s amazing for me to weave from a net, a fishing net. It’s very hard to make these ones. I have to think a lot like and everyone is now asking me to make bowls and baskets. I have been doing this since last year when a lady, Sue Ryan, came here and ran a program. She asked me if I can do weaving from fishing net, then I said yes after three ladies came here to show different weaving. They did weaving using special grass. After that Sue ran a program about weaving fishing nets.

They were here for about two weeks. Then myself and another lady, Doreen Marpoondin, went to collect the ghost nets along the beach, and we took some girls from the school. We had to go by boat to a place called Ikalath. It’s a nice place. It’s where the cliffs are red and white. We always go there and collect the nets from along the beach, bringing it back to the art centre. It’s good showing the young ones because they always come to the art centre and when I am weaving they always come and sit with me and they ask me how to do it. They sit really near to me. It’s good telling kids or young girls if they want to do it. Myself, I was taught weaving at school, so I work with different ways of doing it. Fruit bowls and mats were made out of Pandanus, and now I’m making them from ghost net.

I’m really busy weaving, and now painting. In 2008 the coordinator’s wife, Gina was her name (wife of Guy Allain), was here and she ran a program in painting for the ladies. First of all Gina asked me; do you paint? So I told her, I don’t know how to paint. In our school days we used to do painting but I forgot. Then she said to me, have a try, you have a try with this. So she gave me good, strong paper and I was trying with ochre. We always go out and collect the ochre from the saltpan. We always prepare the area first where we see it, where it’s a little bit salt, like you can see it white and a little bit red on the
Mavis Ngallametta in Aurukun, January 2010.
Photograph: Carl Warner
top part of the ground. When we dig it we have to look for that special yellow, then we bring it back to the art centre and lay it out to get dry. Then we use a sifter to take the lumps out then mix that soft part with water. After that it we make a fire so it can be cooked from yellow to red.

After I tried painting on paper then Gina said that I can probably try with canvas, so I did. So I made one or two with ochre and they went to the gallery, and they were sold quickly! So, it was nice doing both paintings. You have to think about which colours you want to use. Gina asked if I wanted to use the traditional colours or the other ones from the shop. I said to Gina I will probably use both ones, so we had to get the ochres. So we went out with Guy (Guy Allain, the art co-ordinator) digging that yellow part so we can bring it back to the art centre and that yellow is this, it's the best. Each time I have to go and check, each morning when I always come to the art centre it's starting to get dry. Then each time I have to smash it, just lay it, spread it out a little bit so it can be dried quick. I was taught from my uncle. Carl's dad and Dan's father, I used to watch when they used to do it. Even myself, I used to work with my husband cooking ochres so I know what to do. It's hard going out, collecting, bringing it back, making fire. It's not easy. In those days I used to go out with my husband getting these same paints from that same place and bringing it to our house. It's amazing, we've been using these ones for so many years. Our elders used to tell us how. These two colours you see (points to painting) this means white is the sand and red is the sunset.

After we bought back the ochres to the art centre, it was my own idea to do paintings of where we collect that yellow. You can see it in my painting, that place where we collect that yellow. It's across from a little river, swampy area. I wanted to do a painting of that place Ikalath and about collecting the ochres. So now I am always painting and weaving. I have to support myself because I haven't got a partner, my husband ceased way back in 1993. So I look after myself and I don't depend on other families. I think that if I can do something weaving or painting, then they can be sold to the gallery.

These are the things we have to see and look after. Dancing traditional culture is still strong for us, for Aboriginal people in Aurukun. We five clans have to be strong teaching our young ones; we do this. Keeping our ones when we nearly lost our culture. I don’t know how the others feel when they lose their culture, their language, but we five clans in Aurukun we are still strong.
MAVIS NGALLAMETTA

Ik (Basket) 2010
synthetic fishing net, raffia and rope
38.0 x 48.0 x 48.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Mick Richards

MAVIS NGALLAMETTA

Mat 2008
cabbage palm fibre with natural dyes and emu feathers
63.0 cm diameter
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

Following pages: Mavis Ngallametta crushing cooked ochre at Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun, January 2010. Photograph: Carl Warner
Aerial view of wetlands to the north of Aurukun township, January 2010.
Photograph: Carl Warner
MAVIS NGALLAMETTA
*Nghoom (After the bush fire the green shoots sprout)* 2007
synthetic polymer paint on linen
80.0 x 106.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009
Photograph: Carl Warner
MAVIS NGALLANGETTA

Lindawu 2009
synthetic polymer paint on
Belgian linen
90.0 x 153.5 cm

Collection of The University of
Queensland, purchased 2010

Photograph: Carl Warner
MAVIS NGALLAMETTA

Shells and twigs washed with the tide along the beach 2008
synthetic polymer paint on linen
86.0 x 128.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009.
Photograph: Carl Warner
Discarded fishing nets ready for use in weaving ghost net baskets at Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun, January 2010.
Photograph: Carl Warner
Tony Albert

The following commentary is an excerpt from an interview between the artist Tony Albert and Sally Brand, a Beijing-based curator who is working with Tony Albert and artist Albert Pambełen Jr on a collaborative project associated with a major international commission. Tony Albert is a Brisbane-based artist whose traditional homeland is Cardwell, in far north Queensland’s rainforest area. He has worked on exhibition projects and artistic collaborations with the Aurukun community since 2003.

Old man, young man

Arthur Pambełen arrived at my home in Brisbane the night before 13 February 2008. He was very tired and worn out from his day-long trip from Aurukun via Cairns, so went to bed quite early. Before he retired, I mentioned that ‘the apology’ would be happening tomorrow morning and asked if he wanted me to wake him for it. He nodded.

The next morning I didn’t want to wake Arthur. He’d just endured a long trip, which always takes a toll on his 70-year-old body and I wanted to let him sleep. But it was the morning of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Indigenous Australian people. Was this truly to be a significant moment in our history? I crept into Arthur’s bedroom and gently woke him and reminded him that the Prime Minister was giving an apology to Aboriginal people today and asked if he wanted to watch. He did. So we went down to the lounge room and turned on the television.

I was surprised at how the event stirred up a lot of emotions for me. I thought about my family, my old people, and my grandfather who was taken away from his mother and separated from his brothers and sisters. I turned and looked at Arthur. I was reminded of all the stories he had told me: stories of his home, stories of his life, stories from Aurukun. I knew that every piece of Aboriginal legislation had impacted on him directly. I looked at Arthur’s face. The scars across his cheeks read like time lines through his life, I turned all my thoughts to my dear old friend.

We sat quietly for some time. ‘What do you think?’ I asked.

Arthur replied, ‘I have had a lot of things happen to me in my lifetime, but I can accept that apology’.

I was left silent.

Photograph: Mick Richards

*Conversations with Artists*
Before Time Today

ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR
Untitled III (Walkan-aw and Kalben designs) 2007
ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder on linen
117.0 x 183.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR
Untitled V (Walikan-aw design)
2007
ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder on linen
102.0 x 91.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards

UNKNOWN ARTIST
Fish c.1954
ochres on wood and tin
4 parts: 58.0 x 17.0 x 9.0 cm; 61.0 x 19.5 x 9.0 cm; 62.5 x 80.0 x 90.0 cm; 59.0 x 19.0 x 9.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner
In 2003 I was successful in securing a traineeship at the Queensland Art Gallery, working on the *Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest* exhibition. Having family connections in far north Queensland, I was excited about being involved in this project. Three senior artists from Aurukun – Arthur Pambean Jr, Ron Yunkaporta and the late Joe Ngallametta – came to Brisbane to complete two sets of law poles and some sculptures for the exhibition. Arthur and Joe were accompanied by their sons Alair and Joel, while Ron was travelling alone. In conversation with Ron we worked out that an uncle of mine was an old friend of Ron’s and instantly I became Ron’s ‘son’ to accompany him in Brisbane and assist with the works.

It was a natural process of working together. The artists were in Brisbane to complete some sculptural work on site and I was able to sit with the men as they went through the meaning and process behind the work. Part of this work involved mixing the beautiful thick ochre which they had brought with them from Aurukun. I learnt what the different colours of ochre meant, where they came from and what they symbolise. It was important for them that I knew this before I started to work with them. It was not planned that I would be working with them but our relationship just grew.

This was the first time I had worked with senior artists and it was an incredible experience. Since that time I have also worked closely with other senior artists from Australia such as Richard Bell (Brisbane) and Rahel Kngwarria Ungwanaka (Hermannsburg), and also just late last year with the Black Panther artist from the United States of America, Emory Douglas. I really enjoy and learn a great deal working with other artists on their art. I believe one of the best ways to learn is to literally walk in another’s shoes, with permission, of course, and always with mutual respect.

In terms of the men from Aurukun, Arthur and I have enjoyed the longest and strongest relationship over time. You know in your heart when you have a special connection with someone. After *Story place*, when Arthur would come to Brisbane for exhibitions I would help him with his work. We developed a good working relationship but it wasn’t always easy. There was a point where Arthur had to return to Aurukun and leave some work for me to finish for him. He was very reluctant, but spent much time testing me on many aspects of the story and process so he felt confident in leaving me in custody of his work. I worked really hard as I wanted to do the best job that I could and, fortunately, he was happy. He trusts me and I trust him. We have a special relationship and when I get up to Aurukun, which is at least once a year, Arthur and his family look after me and I enjoy celebrating birthdays and family ceremonies with them.

Aurukun is a remarkable place and it has been really interesting to see it change over that last seven years. It is not a place that you travel through to get to another destination, so if you go to Aurukun it is the last stop. You don’t stumble upon it; you must be going for a reason. This is what makes it very isolated. On arrival, everyone knows who you are and why you are there. It is a tough community and
it is a shame that in most cases the media and TV only relate the bad stories. At first I was very intimidated by all the houses having huge wire fences but when I’m there I like to go fishing, swimming and catch up with friends. As someone from outside the community I don’t really want to talk about it too much, as the people of Aurukun have a voice that is more valid than mine.

A few months ago Arthur and I began our first collaborative project. Having worked closely with Arthur for a number of years it just seemed the right time to get together and create a major piece that incorporates both our work. The project actually grew out of discussions with Arthur and his family, particularly with his children Maxine and Alair, and his granddaughter Gina. The project involves each of us working on separate canvases, creating our own work, but with the intent that they sit together. Side by side the paintings will talk together, share a yarn, have a conversation. An old man from Wik country talks to a young man from the north Queensland rainforest and we mark a moment entwined by our histories together.

It’s now been two years since Arthur and I watched Rudd’s apology together. Since then I’ve made a great deal of work that directly references the event, such as the large wall-based text work Sorry which is now in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery’s Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane. But this new collaboration with Arthur is the first that considers the apology through the moment I shared with him. I haven’t seen a lot of change over the past two years. Sorry remains ‘just’ a word. What made that day special was sharing the moment with Arthur. It was his actions that really made a difference in my life.
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR AND ALAIR PAMBEGAN
Kalberi (A bonefish story place) and Wa/kan-aw
(A sacred site in the flying-fox story) 2008-2009
ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder
on milkwood, bush rope, and bush string
193.0 x 512.0 x 23.0 cm installed
Collection of The University of Queensland,
purchased 2009
Photograph: Mick Richards
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR

Untitled XXVI (Walkan-aw and Kalben designs) 2008
ochre with synthetic polymer binder and synthetic polymer paint on linen
76.0 x 66.0 cm
Collection of National Gallery of Australia
Photograph: Mick Richards
ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR

Untitled XXIX (Walkan-aw and Kalben designs) 2008
ochres with synthetic polymer binder and synthetic polymer paint on linen
61.0 x 46.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
ARThUR PAMBEGAN JR AND
ALAIR PAMBEGAN
 Untitled XVIII (Kalden design) 2007
 ochres with synthetic polymer
 binder on linen
 46.0 x 61.0 cm
 Private collection
 Photograph: Mick Richards
ARThUR PAMBEGAN JR

Untitled VI (Walikan-aw and Kalben designs) 2007
ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder on linen
91.0 x 102.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008
Photograph: Mick Richards
Chapter 4

The Art of Wik Politics and the Politics of Wik Art
n this essay, I examine the impacts of the High Court *Mabo* and *Wik* native title decisions on the Wik people of Aurukun, and sketch in how these decisions, along with the profound social changes which Aurukun people have experienced over the past few decades, are manifested in the politics of Wik art and sculpture. Here, I am not concerned so much with the internal politics and meanings of Wik art as with its potential political role in challenging contemporary representations of Aurukun in public and bureaucratic discourse.

Colonial Australia was founded on the myth of *terra nullius*; that is, the early settlers recognised no system of pre-existing law by which Aboriginal people held title to land, or rights in its resources. This foundation myth not only served to legitimate the actions of the early colonists in dispossessing Aboriginal groups of their lands, but also continued to inform the settler nation’s understandings and representations of itself. It underlay a collective denial, or at best amnesia, concerning the harsh historical realities for so many Aboriginal groups, of dispossession, exclusion, and systematic attempts to destroy beliefs and practices, what anthropologist WEH Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures famously called ‘the great Australian silence’. 
The High Court’s *Mabo* decision in June 1992 challenged the Australian legal system’s reflection of the great silence, albeit in a specific and partial fashion. It rejected the doctrine that Australia was *terra nullius* at the time of European settlement, and overturned the established view that the rights and interests of Indigenous people in their traditional lands, which derived from their own laws and customs, were automatically and instantaneously extinguished by the acquisition of sovereignty by the British monarch. The judgment held that the Australian common law could recognise a form of Indigenous title to country that had its origins in Indigenous laws and customs rather than in Australian law – although that title was fragile, and could be lost by the ‘tide of history’ such that the relevant Indigenous group no longer follows its laws and customs, or by valid acts of government that are inconsistent with the continued existence of native title (such as the grant of freehold title).

‘A wik is a long time in politics’

The *Mabo* decision incorporated the recognition of native title into the Australian common law. The Wik and Wik Way peoples’ lodged their common law native title claim in June 1993. Their original instructions to their legal advisers were to put ‘Wik law on top’, and claimants sought a determination by the Court of the continuing existence of their title over an extensive area on the west coast of Cape York from just south of Weipa to north of Pormpuraaw, and east almost to Coen. The claim also argued against the validity of a large number of dealings with their traditional lands which impacted on Wik and Wik Way peoples’ title, including the issuance of significant mining leases.

In response to the *Mabo* decision, and against the background of a national political controversy about native title fed in no small part by the politics of fear, the Keating Government developed the *Native Title Act*, passed by the Federal Parliament in December 1993. The Act *inter alia* established processes for claiming native title and having those claims determined through mediation or (if that failed) by litigation, and for its incorporation into Australia’s land title management regimes. It also sought, through its complex validation provisions, to reduce the impact of claims such as those advanced in the Wik and Wik Way peoples’ common law native title claim on pre-existing rights and interests held by miners, farmers and others.

In March 1994, lawyers for the Wik and Wik Way peoples lodged a claim on their behalf under the *Native Title Act*. However, mediation on this claim was initially delayed by litigation in the Federal Court on a range of legal matters arising from their ongoing common law claim and, ultimately, appeals from the judgment on these matters were taken before the High Court. It was the High Court’s judgment on
these appeals just before Christmas in 1996 that brought the Wik native title claim to national prominence. This decision made no findings about whether Wik people held native title, but centred on technical legal questions which concerned primarily the lands of those inland Wik groups under pastoral leases (for example *Wik Iiyeny*), as well as the lands of those Wik Way people lying between Aurukun and Weipa and subject to bauxite mining and exploration leases.

The High Court found that the Wik and Wik Way peoples had no legal basis on which to challenge the validity of the mining leases and agreements on lands between Aurukun and Weipa. However, a majority of the judges did allow part of the appeal, in determining that particular pastoral leases did not necessarily extinguish native title. A highly significant outcome of the *Wik* decision then, which continues to be one of the most important made by the courts since *Mabo* itself, is that certain types of interests in land granted by governments (such as the Cape York pastoral leases) do not confer exclusive possession, but may coexist with those of native title holders. This caused outrage amongst pastoralists, their representative organisations, and in the John Howard Government of this period, which in 1998 introduced legislative amendments to the *Native Title Act* to minimise the impact of the decision. As the cartoonist Leak put it in a set of cartoons entitled ‘The wikness of John Howard’ and published in *The Australian* after the court decision, ‘A wik is a long time in politics’.

At the time, Aurukun people interpreted the High Court decision as a great victory for them. One of the most compelling images on television and in the print media reporting of the decision was prominent Wik woman, the late Gladys Tybingoompa, exultantly dancing her people’s *malpa* in celebration outside the High Court after the judgment was handed down. Yet, while the decision has thus far allowed agreement to be reached that Wik people hold native title in several of the pastoral leases over which the original Wik claim was lodged, its significance lies far more beyond Wik people themselves, in its impact on native title law nationally. This significance has two countervailing currents; the decision certainly extended the area over which native title potentially could be recognised across Australia, but it also has a direct political lineage to the subsequent 1998 ‘Ten point plan’ amendments to the *Native Title Act* introduced by the Howard Government which, amongst a raft of measures to reform the Act and minimise the impact of the Wik decision, has enabled pastoralists to achieve a substantial increase in their tenurial interests.

The High Court’s 1996 *Wik* decision was far from the end of the Wik and Wik Way peoples’ native title claims, nor was it the first time Aurukun people had taken legal and political action in response to
government measures. The following section briefly outlines political and legal actions which Aurukun people have taken over the past three decades or so to defend their interests, of which the Wik claim was but one.

The art of Wik politics

As attested by the records of the early missionaries in Aurukun, and evidenced in more recent ethnographies of Wik people by Martin, Sutton and von Sturmer, Wik political culture is robust, fractious, and permeates all aspects of life, including connections to country and the aesthetic and ritual realms. Wik society in Aurukun is characterised by a competitive egalitarianism in which people of all generations strongly assert autonomy, and watchfully monitor and appraise the flows of material and non-material items towards themselves in comparison with those to others around them. Whether conducted through verbal disputation or, ultimately, physical violence, conflict is not seen as aberrant but as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, and (as will be discussed later in this essay) is reflected in the society's foundation mythology. Individuals have a right, even an obligation, to take direct action, including the use of violence as part of a repertoire of graduated responses, to redress perceived wrongs done to them. This repertoire includes public declarations, harangues, and ritualised chants of provocation and abuse. More generally, and certainly up to the 1970s and 1980s, public oratory was a marked feature of Wik political culture.

Internally, Aurukun has been a highly complex and, in many ways, fractured community since its founding by Moravian missionaries early in the 20th century. Typical of hunter-gatherer societies and their descendants worldwide, but perhaps accentuated even more than many, the paramount political and ethical imperatives for Aurukun's Wik people lie at the individual and local group levels, rather than at, for example, that of the 'Aurukun community'. Aurukun after all, in terms of Wik and Wik Way people's ancient occupation of their lands as hunter-gatherers living primarily in small, flexible bands, is historically and culturally an unprecedented aggregation of nearly 1,000 sedentarised residents. Notwithstanding this fractured internal polity though, Aurukun people have often presented a remarkably united political face to the wider world, most particularly in response to attempts by governments over recent decades to curtail their rights and to impose measures on them without first seeking their agreement. In these political events, a series of prominent and often feisty individuals became the public faces for Aurukun and its people, and attracted widespread media and public attention. Such people were competent in an intercultural realm, with a powerful sense of their own cultural strength and uniqueness, distilled oratory, and bi- or multi-lingualism.
GARRY NAMPOGAN AND LEX NAMPOGAN

Apelech Brothers and female figure n.d.
wood, natural fibres, ochres and feathers
dimensions variable
Private collection
Photograph: Carl Warner
In 1975, a national controversy erupted over Queensland's Bjelke-Petersen government's decision, without consultation with Aurukun people or the Mission authorities, to grant bauxite mining leases over a substantial area of the northern part of the then Aurukun Reserve to an international consortium through special legislation, the *Aurukun Associates Act*. This lease lay immediately inland of a bauxite mining lease held by Comalco, which had been excised in 1957 from the Aurukun Aboriginal Reserve, also by special Queensland legislation, and without proper consultation with, or any agreement from, Wik and Wik Way people. A national campaign was organised, supported by the Presbyterian Church and involving key Wik people travelling throughout Australia and even overseas. A legal challenge was lodged by Wik and Wik Way people to provisions of the Act that meant no direct benefits would flow to Aurukun people. Their case was won in the Queensland Supreme Court, but ultimately lost on appeal by the state to the Privy Council in London (the *Peinkinna* case).

Also, in the early to mid-1970s, the move by a number of Wik groups to re-establish on or near traditional lands in the Aurukun reserve (mainly south of the Archer River) gained momentum, although the seeds of the outstation movement had been present throughout the mission era and Wik people had maintained close contact with their lands right through that period. This move to establish small, semi-permanent outstations on traditional lands aroused strong opposition from the Bjelke-Petersen government and from its powerful Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement, whose expressed policy at this stage was still one of assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream society. Departmental officers, the State's police and informants conducted both covert and overt surveillance of Aurukun outstations and supportive Mission staff during this period, part of general Bjelke-Petersen Government attempts to keep 'radicals' and their ideas out of Aboriginal communities, as Sutton has recorded.10

In 1976, the then Federal Aboriginal Land Fund Commission attempted to purchase the Archer Bend pastoral lease east of Aurukun for an aggregation of inland Wik people terming themselves the *Winchanam* clan, which included Aurukun resident, (the late) John Koowarta. The Bjelke-Petersen Government refused to allow the transfer of title. Mr Koowarta and the *Winchanam* people were successful in a 1982 High Court action which claimed that the state's refusal contravened the *Racial Discrimination Act*. However, the Queensland Government ultimately circumvented the decision by declaring the area the 'Archer Bend National Park'.

While John Koowarta himself (now deceased) and the *Winchanam* people have not as yet received justice,11 the *Koowarta* case nonetheless set a significant legal precedent regarding the Commonwealth Government's use of its 'external affairs' power, for example in the *Franklin River* case.

In 1978, because the Bjelke-Petersen Government claimed law and order were breaking down in
Aurukun but in reality because of its hostility to the outstation movement, and also anger at the very public campaign Aurukun people had waged against the Aurukun Associates bauxite mining agreement with the support of the church, the Queensland Government attempted a pre-emptive move to bring Aurukun under its direct control by unilaterally abolishing the Aurukun Aboriginal Reserve and church administration, and proposing to impose a form of local government there. A large-scale national campaign was mounted by Aurukun Wik people, again with the support of the church, which attracted considerable national attention.

After initial strong backing from the Fraser Coalition Government for Aurukun’s desire to be independent of state control, a final compromise outcome was negotiated between Queensland and Federal authorities, which established Aurukun and its sister mission, Mornington Island, as local government areas under special-purpose legislation. As with the previous Aurukun Associates mining lease controversy, this political struggle involved a significant number of key Aurukun Wik people travelling throughout Australia in a national campaign which attracted considerable attention, but also, as with the mining, final outcomes were negotiated between governments with no involvement by Aurukun’s Aboriginal people and with little reference to their expressed wishes, as poignantly documented in the film *Takeover* (1980).

In 1989, in response to a proposal by bauxite mining company Comalco (now Rio Tinto Aluminium) to explore for gas and petroleum on their lands south of the Archer river, Wik clan leaders signed a formal application to the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs requesting an emergency declaration under heritage protection legislation. In the event, exploration was not conducted south of the Archer River, but one outcome was the formal compilation of the extensive body of anthropological and historical work, documenting Wik and Wik Way peoples’ ownership of their traditional lands, which provided the substantive ethnographic evidence for the Wik native title claim.

The Wik claim therefore must be seen as just one in a series of actions taken by Wik people to assert their fundamental customary and legal rights and to demand recognition of their society and culture by the wider society. It was certainly seen and represented as such by Wik people themselves at the time. Travelling to Canberra to represent her people at the handing-down of the High Court decision, Gladys Tybingoompa was absolutely sure of the outcome. She felt strongly that the spirits of Wik ancestors who had fought for their lands and their culture were with her, carrying her on her journey, and that this signified the court would recognise the rights of Wik peoples, under their laws, to the pastoral lands. So confident was she of the decision that she borrowed a set of clap sticks from friends in Canberra that morning, hid them in her handbag, and planned her celebratory dance in the forecourt of the High Court.
UNKNOWN ARTIST

Freshwater shark's head c.1962 (Frederick McCarthy Collection)
29.0 x 60.0 x 34.0 cm
ochres on wood, shark's teeth and buttons
Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: Courtesy of National Museum of Australia
But the original clarity of intent and purpose manifested in Gladys Tybingoompa’s confidence in 1996 that the High Court’s decision of itself would recognise inland Wik people’s rights to pastoral country, and in the instructions of Wik people in 1993 to their legal team to have their Law placed ‘on top’, became increasingly overwhelmed by the complex legal and administrative processes of the *Native Title Act* in particular, and the bureaucratic state in general. As noted previously, the Wik and Wik Way peoples’ claim under the *Native Title Act* was launched in March 1994. In accordance with the Act, the claim went to mediation between the claimants and the multiple parties with interests in the extensive region over which the claim had been lodged. The claim encompassed a wide range of tenures including existing Aboriginal lands of various kinds, sections of a National Park, and pastoral and mining leases. The inherent difficulties of the native title system were exacerbated by the complexity and at times seeming intractability of legal and political issues raised in negotiations with the large numbers of respondents with their diverse positions and interests, not least of all the Queensland Government.

The first and most obvious consequence of this legal and procedural complexity is that 16 years after negotiations first started to achieve a determination of native title by consent, rather than having to litigate it in the courts, there are still areas of the Wik claim where native title has not been recognised. The first stage of negotiations was over those areas of the claim which had never been subject to pastoral or mining interests, and were in the heartland of Wik country with extensive ethnographic documentation on people’s traditional and continuing connections to these lands. Even so, it still took over five years to conclude these negotiations, which were largely with the Queensland Government, and obtain a consent determination in the Federal Court in October 2000.

Almost exactly four years later, further negotiations culminated in a consent determination of native title over a large proportion of the remaining Wik claim area including a number of pastoral leases. The most politically and legally difficult areas of the claim were those over the Rio Tinto bauxite mining leases between Aurukun and Weipa, where Wik Way people had only limited procedural rights because of the nature of the mining leases issued. Five years of highly technical negotiations led to the signing of the Western Cape Communities Coexistence Agreement (WCCCA) in March 2001, which *inter alia* established a framework for the resolution of native title claims over Rio Tinto’s bauxite leases and the surrender of particular areas to Aboriginal control following mining and rehabilitation, as well as establishing a range of financial and other benefits for Wik and Wik Way people. A determination of native title over these sections of the claim was finally made by the Federal Court in July 2009 following more than four years of, once again, highly technical negotiations. More recently, in a paradoxical historical twist, Wik and Wik Way people have also entered into an agreement with the Aluminium Corporation of China (Chalco), the Queensland Government and the Aurukun Shire Council for the
conduct of a two-year feasibility study into a large bauxite mine potentially to be established on lands north of Aurukun which had been the subject of the original Aurukun Associates agreement in 1975, and which, as previously discussed, had aroused such opposition from Aurukun people at that time.

A second consequence of the complexity of the Wik claim and of the native title consent determination process generally is that despite best endeavours by their lawyers and other advisers, Wik and Wik Way people themselves have become progressively disengaged from the actual conduct of negotiations, perforce undertaken largely by specialists. This is notwithstanding the adoption of a range of measures over the years to involve them in progressing the native title claim and their negotiations with the mining companies, and to maximise accountability in the conduct of negotiations. These included the establishment of a steering committee, the use of communication strategies such as regular newsletters and feedback from the lawyers and other specialists, consultations and reporting back at family and sub-regional group levels, and meetings on country to develop strategies and in some cases to negotiate directly with respondent parties.

This progressive disengagement of Wik and Wik Way people from significant direct involvement in the progress of their own claims did not however arise solely because of the alienating technical requirements of negotiations. The period discussed in this essay from the mid 1970s until the present has also been one of quite profound social, political and economic changes in Aurukun. These recent decades have seen a progressive escalation of social problems in Aurukun, such as very high levels of interpersonal violence, virtual epidemics of alcohol and other substance abuse, increasingly troubled and often angry and alienated younger generations, and major health issues, such as high rates of diabetes and alcohol-related morbidity.

Where Aurukun people had come to national attention through the 1970s and into the 1990s through their feisty spokesmen and women, and their willingness to take collective political and legal action to defend their collective rights, in contrast, through the 1990s and into the present, Aurukun received unwanted (and resented) national prominence through its reputation for high levels of internal violence, alcohol abuse, destructive behaviour by young people, and other manifestations of a deep social malaise. The worsening circumstances of everyday life and its increasing atomism as social problems escalated – and as institutions of the state have established an ever greater presence in Aurukun, both required and legitimated by these very problems – have been paralleled by an increasing disengagement by many from working to address the circumstances of their lives, whether at the individual, family, or broader collective levels. The disengagement of many Wik and Wik Way people from active involvement in their native title claims is arguably just one aspect of this broader phenomenon, one which Aboriginal lawyer and activist Noel Pearson has labelled ‘passive welfare’.
The politics of Wik art

Wik carved and painted *maany*, images of totemic beings, are not only imbued with spiritual significance and power; they are also, as Sutton observes more generally of Aboriginal sculptures, political as well as religious statements, and objects of strategic as well as aesthetic importance. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this essay, conflict and competition are seen as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, and is reflected in Wik foundation mythology. The two *Pungk-Apalech Brothers* (see page 65) who travelled south together, down the central western coast of Cape York peninsula singing, dancing, creating the totemic centres and apportioning the country between the different Wik clan groups and languages of that region, also fought bitterly over disputed meat. After separating, the younger brother travelled south, leaving *wanam* ritual for those clans from the south-west coastal region of Wik country, while the elder returned north, creating *Apelech* for the clans around the Cape Keerweer region. Conflict and competition in Wik epistemology flow from the same deep cultural wellsprings as creativity and aesthetics.

However, in this essay I am not concerned so much with the internal politics and meanings of Wik art and sculpture as with its potential political place in challenging contemporary representations of Aurukun in public and bureaucratic discourse. Here, overwhelmingly, Aurukun is represented essentially in *deficit* terms, as lacking social order, capacity and vision, and as requiring a range of (government) interventions to address these deficits. There is no doubt that the kinds of social problems outlined previously are part of the realities of all too many Aboriginal lives there. However, these features of Aurukun (and many other remote Aboriginal communities) do not comprise the full extent of social reality, but one (albeit often dominant) component of it. Passion, humour, vitality, knowledge, abilities, creativity and aspirations are not only to be found in mainstream and ‘functional’ Australia, but also within ‘dysfunctional’ Aboriginal communities. These features *coexist*, a fact which is not understood or is ignored by both the problem deflaters and those who would characterise Aboriginal Australia solely in terms of its inherent dysfunction. And, crucially, it is precisely such attributes as passion, creativity and knowledge which have to be built on in any process of sustainable change.

Thus, in their continuing creation of works of art and crafts, whether directly for sale in the market, or for use in ceremonies and then ultimately for other purposes such as exchange or sale, Aurukun people are demonstrating that, within a community which now has a national image as one of the most dysfunctional in the country, there is also a reservoir of aesthetic sensibilities, talent, creativity and innovation. Such attributes can flourish, given support (like that provided by the Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun), even in the most difficult of circumstances. For example, the limited edition...
aluminium casting of a crocodile carving by Craig Koomeeta (see page 13) draws on Wik traditions in carving but is innovative in a number of ways, not least its technology, and in its mischievous use of a material produced from bauxite, which has played such an important role in Aurukun’s recent political history. The delightful helicopter and plane models by Hans Welsh Poonkamelya (below), a teenager when he made them in 1987 but of the same generation as Craig Koomeeta, are innovative in a different way. They draw on acutely keen observation of technology used in the Aurukun region during this period for mining exploration, cattle mustering and outstation logistic support, are constructed from discarded building and consumer materials found around the Aurukun rubbish dump, and are entirely secular, with no direct reference to country, to the transcendent realm, or to clan or ritual group affiliations. The models then exemplify an arena of interest and meaning to younger generations of Wik people which has its origins firmly in the dominant western society, but which coexists with those arenas of a more specifically Wik origin.

The sculptures and crafts produced by Aurukun people cannot of themselves produce the economic independence and social transformation for Aurukun that the policymakers seek, nor (given the matrix of obligations to kin in which Wik artists are embedded) can they necessarily produce economic independence for the individual artists. But they do point a way to an alternative model of social and cultural transformation, one which builds on people’s creativity, skills and passions to generate change, rather than imposing it from outside.

David F Martin
JUBILEE WOLMBY

Black cockatoo n.d.
synthetic polymer paint on wood
50.0 x 15.0 x 15.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Carl Warner

UNKNOWN ARTIST

Black crow c.1955
ochres on wood
32.5 x 25.0 x 15.5 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner
UNKNOWN ARTIST
Female dingo c.1955
ochres and resin on wood and glass
36.0 x 103.0 x 20.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum
Photograph: Carl Warner

CRAIG KOOMEETA
Ku’ (Camp dog) 2008
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
31.0 x 41.0 x 13.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
Chapter 5

Aurukun Art in the Netherlands: Law Poles Reciprocating
The story of Aurukun artists donating a significant collection of law poles to the Netherlands in 2007 has its origins in an event in 1606. This is when Dutch sailors from the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC) vessel *Duyfken* (little dove) set foot on the shores of the area that is today known as ‘Cape Keerweer’, 70 kilometres south of present-day Aurukun in western Cape York Peninsula, in the far north-east of Australia.

The *Duyfken*, commanded by Captain Willem Janszoon (or Jansz), left Banda on Java with instructions to explore the south coast of New Guinea (Nova Guinea) and to seek gold, other precious metals and spices. Furthermore, the expedition would investigate whether the southern part of New Guinea was attached to the unknown southland.¹
Janszoon never discovered the small straits, presently known as the Torres Straits, which separate New Guinea from northern Australia. He decided to turn back to Banda at 13° 58'S and named that point 'Cape Keerweer' or Cape 'turn back'. At this location Dutch sailors went ashore in search of fresh water.

While the journal of Janszoon was not preserved, a number of secondary sources dating from the first half of the 17th century give accounts of the voyage of the *Duyfken*. In one of these sources a short but lively description is given of the first encounter between Dutch mariners and Aboriginal people. According to a passage in Captain Saris' journal, which itself is based on an oral communication to him, nine Dutchmen were killed in fights with Aboriginal people.

Some 17 years later, the VOC, not yet discouraged from the unpromising prospects encountered by Willem Janszoon, sent a second expedition to extend the exploration of the south coast of New Guinea. On 21 January 1623, two ships, the *Pera* and the *Arnhem*, under the command of Jan Carstenszoon (or Carstensz) left Amboyna (present-day Ambon) for New Guinea.

Carstensz initially followed the south coast of New Guinea and pursued his voyage following the west coast of Cape York Peninsula. The most southerly point achieved by the *Duyfken*, Cape Keerweer, was reached on 14 April 1623. Ten days later, coming across adverse winds, Carstensz decided to turn back just short of discovering the passage separating Australia from New Guinea. For some unknown reason, the ships were separated two days later. Carstensz on the *Pera* kept following the Cape York coast southwards and charted the Gulf of Carpentaria, named by Carstensz after Pieter de Carpentier, the then governor-general of the Dutch East Indies, before returning to Amboyna. The master of the *Arnhem*, Willem Joosten van Colster (or Coolsteerd) sailed towards the north west, crossed the Gulf of Carpentaria, and reached the shores of present-day Arnhem Land. Van Colster mapped the region of Arnhem Land and the Wessel Islands before returning to the Banda Islands.

Carstensz wrote a report on the country and its inhabitants, which has been preserved. In it, he describes several encounters with Aboriginal people, which almost all degenerated into fights. On 8 May 1623, Carstensz went ashore with the intention of investigating the coast and penetrating some distance inward. To that effect he brought pieces of iron, strings of beads and pieces of cloth with him to negotiate a safe passage with the local population.

During a brief but violent encounter, however, Carstensz' men took a man prisoner. On 12 May 1623, in search of fresh water and to explore the terrain, a bark was sent ashore near Cape Duyfken. At the mouth of a small river, where in 1606 one Dutch sailor had been killed, Carstensz and his crew fought a battle with a large group of Wik people in which at least one Aboriginal man was shot and killed. Carstensz makes mention of finding a piece of metal in the huts on the beach. Apparently, exchanges had taken place with the crew of the *Duyfken*. 
During his second voyage to Australia in 1644, Abel Tasman also explored the coast of western Cape York Peninsula, turning back just before crossing the Torres Strait, and charted the entire northern coastline to the west. He made observations of the land and the people, but also this voyage was unjustly deemed unsuccessful by the VOC, as no region suitable for trade, no precious materials or valuable spices, and no new sea route were discovered.

The last VOC ships to explore the coastline of Cape York Peninsula were the Rijder and the Buys in 1756. Soon after they left the port of Banda the ships were separated in a storm. Jean Etienne Gonzal, the lieutenant of the Rijder and Lavienne Lodewijk van Asschens, first mate of the Buys, sailed independently to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Cape Keerweer was sighted by van Asschens and a boat with eight mariners, sent to investigate the inland near Point Duyfken, was lost. While judging the country fertile, contrary to his predecessors, Gonzal recorded extensive contact with Aboriginal people and took one man to Batavia.4

Describing the Aboriginal people he came across, Carstensz noted in his journal that they had twisted nets around their necks and were armed with shields, assegai (spears) and throwing weapons. Carstensz took several of these objects with him to show his superiors.

Curiosities from Nova Guinea

It is unknown where exactly the objects that the crew of the VOC ships collected ended up. Some artefacts may have stayed in Batavia, in the headquarters of the VOC, but undoubtedly an unknown number ended up in the Republic of the Seven United Provinces, as the Netherlands were then called. Such objects in the 17th century were likely to end up in the ‘curiosity cabinets’ and collections of exotica of the well-to-do citizens of the Dutch Republic. Even successful artists, such as Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, had collections of exotica which they sometimes used as source materials for their work. For instance, an inventory of Rembrandt’s household effects, compiled in 1659, mentions ‘rarities’, weapons, including spears and shields, and other artefacts from the East-Indies.5

A survey of artefacts and art from the Aurukun region and the wider Cape York Peninsula in Dutch collections reveals that there is relatively limited fully documented material culture from that area present in the Netherlands. Moreover, all objects seem to be from more recent date. Out of the more than 200,000 objects in the collection of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, one of the largest repositories of non-European material culture in the Netherlands, and noting that there may be more material from the region present in the collection, only four objects are specifically described as originating from Cape York Peninsula. These are a pubic hair string, a vegetal fibre woven carrying bag, an armband
and a spear thrower. These objects found their way into the collection of the Leiden museum through exchange, donation and purchase from three different sources between 1912 and 1940.

The Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam also holds a number of pieces from the Cape York Peninsula in its collection. Although often imprecisely described, about 25 items may have northern Queensland as a provenance. The objects were acquired through a variety of sources, mainly donations, between 1884 and 1986. They include one set of fire sticks, vegetal fibre woven bags, spear throwers and a mother of pearl necklace.

Other Cape York material, although also limited in quantity and from more recent date, is to be found in the collection of the Tropenmuseum (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen) in Amsterdam. This institution holds 20 objects, ranging from spears, spear throwers, fire sticks, woven carrying bags, necklaces with mother of pearl pieces, a spatula and a bark coolamon, described as being from Cape York Peninsula. Seven of these were donated by the Mitchell River Mission and 13 by the Aurukun Mission in 1957 through the agency of the Dutch embassy. The history of how these objects came to be in Europe reflects the further history of contacts between the Wik and Europeans, with the founding of the Presbyterian Mission of Aurukun in 1904.

Contemporary Aurukun art in Dutch public institutions, however, is limited to the collection of the former Gerardus van der Leeuw Museum of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. This collection, now on long-term loan to AAMU, the Aboriginal Art Museum of Utrecht, was donated by the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1978 after touring the Netherlands. It includes seven ceramics of the internationally renowned Napranum-born potter Thancoupie, and three spears of the Cape York region.

The group of 12 Wik ceremonial law poles that was donated by the Wik to the Netherlands in 2007, and is now in the collection of AAMU, is consequently the single most important piece of contemporary art from western Cape York and the Aurukun region held in collections in the Netherlands and perhaps in European collections.

**Ghosts from the future**

Cape Keerweer, the name Janszoon gave to the point where his ship returned, is remarkably similar to the name of the story in which the Wik people remember the first encounters with Europeans. This story, which has been passed on from generation to generation, is known as the ‘turn back’ story.

Silas Wolmby, who is a Wik Ngathan senior elder from the Apelech clan, traditional owner of Cape Keerweer and custodian of the ‘turn back’ story, was told this story by his father and his grandfather.
McNAUGHT NGALLAMETTA
Ceremonial shields n.d.
ochres on wood
60.0 x 15.0 x 10.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Carl Warner

JOE NGALLAMETTA
Thap Yong (Law poles) 2004
natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on Belgian linen
61.0 x 91.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, gift of an anonymous donor 2008
Photograph: Carl Warner
WESLEY AMPEBEYGAN
Apalech brothers 2009
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood, grass
2 parts: 87.0 x 21.0 x 29.0 cm;
85.0 x 21.0 x 28.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
WESLEY AMPEBEYGAN
Apalech sisters 2009
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood, grass
2 parts: 89.0 x 34.0 x 21.0 cm; 88.0 x 36.0 x 21.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Mick Richards
In this account, Dutch sailors took a young woman, after which a fight developed. An Aboriginal man was shot, and then several Dutchmen were killed.

A number of stories circulate in oral tradition in which the Dutch revisited several times and were on each occasion chased away. People at Cape Keerweer believed that the white strangers from overseas were ghosts. In Wolmby’s account, the Wik hit them on the back of their necks with sticks and killed them.

It is not entirely clear whether the Wik ‘turn back’ story specifically refers to the 1606 arrival of the VOC yacht *Duyfken* or applies also to later visits, but the account relates how these early encounters with Europeans are perceived today by those whose land was visited. In an interview for the Wik Media documentary video production *Turn back. The untold story of the first European contact in Australia*, Silas Wolmby, obviously emotionally touched by the events, expressed great sadness about the killing of the Dutch sailors.

Commemorations

As the ambassador of the Netherlands to Australia between 2001 and 2005, Dr Hans Sondaal was to maintain and expand connections with Australia on political, economical and cultural levels. The four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the *Duyfken* and of the first contacts between the Dutch and the first Australians proved a welcome opportunity to strengthen Dutch–Australian relationships and opened up a range of possibilities for events between both countries. The celebrations in 2006 in the Netherlands would focus on a number of highlights celebrating Australian Indigenous art and culture.

Different events took place in a number of institutions in the Netherlands. In the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden an important and large exhibition (*Australia, the land and the people*) was set up in conjunction with Philip Jones of the South Australian Museum in Adelaide. Another initiative for these celebrations was the creation of a portfolio of etchings, the so-called *Duyfken* portfolio. This consisted of ten prints by artists from all regions of Australia. Artists, including Garry Namponan and Leonie Pootchemunka from Aurukun, gave their own interpretation of this event. However, perhaps the most relevant and proactive event was initiated by the Wik people themselves. To commemorate this important historical occurrence and to reconcile with the Dutch, the question of whether ceremonial law poles could be gifted to the Netherlands as a gesture of reconciliation was forwarded to Hans Sondaal. Sondaal had been invited in 2005 by Matt Foley, Queensland Minister for the Arts, to visit Aurukun and was surprised by this query, as it was the Dutch who penetrated the lands of the Wik, and not the opposite. This shared past was one of irreversible consequences for the Wik. The initiative proved tremendously important, as it had the potential to build a bridge from the past to the future in raising cultural awareness.
UNKNOWN ARTIST

Dove on stand c.1962 (Frederick McCarthy Collection)
ochres on wood, abrus and seed
32.5 x 26.0 x 7.0 cm
Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: Courtesy of National Museum of Australia
Law poles

From a traditional point of view, law poles were produced for ceremony and left behind to the elements in the tropical rainforest. These sculptures often represented characters that featured in the Dreaming stories belonging to the community of the maker of the poles.\textsuperscript{12}

The \textit{Thapa yongk} law poles were produced by the Aurukun community and were used for special occasions. These milkwood sculptures represent inverted trees; the branches and leaves are hidden under the earth, while the roots stick out of the ground. The \textit{Thapa yongk} enable the spirit to return to the earth. The hidden tree branches symbolise the many Dreaming stories and laws that connect people to the land and to each other. Usually these law poles can be seen only by men, but the artist, Joe Ngallametta, gave his personal permission to display the poles in a public context.

The \textit{Thuuth thaa'munth} (meaning literally ‘blunt-ended fan palm’) law poles, produced by Ron Yunkaporta of the Apelech community, were used in old times in funerary ceremonies. Nowadays they are used in house opening ceremonies, in which the spirit of a deceased person is guided back to his place of birth. The production of these carvings is of great ceremonial significance. The wood originates from the wild kapok tree and the ochre pigments are delved from the earth and subsequently dried and cooked to make the colours more vivid. Ibis feathers and bush string complete the poles. The motif of the Apelech community consists of white dots on a red background. While this red background represents the reflection of the setting sun on the water, red ochre also bears a connotation to the blood and thus to a vital life force. The white dots represent the gleam of the salt water on the shores.

The journey towards

The long journey of a Wik delegation from Aurukun to the Netherlands finally took place in October 2007. The delegation consisted of eight men and women, including Neville Poochemunka, the Mayor of Aurukun, and the artists of the law poles, Ron Yunkaporta and Joel Ngallametta.\textsuperscript{13} During their week-long stay in the Netherlands, the delegation had the opportunity to visit Utrecht and Amsterdam. This visit of the Aurukun people to the Netherlands and the ceremony held to inaugurate the law poles reciprocated the Dutch visit to their country 400 years earlier.

There have been precedents in donations of the Wik people to museums. In 1987, for instance, the sculptural ensemble \textit{Two young women of Cape Keerweer} were gifted to the South Australian Museum. This sculpture was published in the catalogue of the \textit{Dreamings} exhibition that toured several cities in
the United States. Furthermore, as John von Sturmer points out in his commentary on *Thapa yongk* for the publication accompanying the donation, the Aboriginal memorial of 1988 that is on permanent display at the National Gallery of Australia can be regarded as a precursor to the law poles memorial. In Europe, contemporary Aurukun art was introduced to an international audience during the touring *Aratjara* exhibition. Four wooden sculptures by Arthur Pambegan Jr and Jackson Woolla (Porelembin), among others, from the collection of the National Museum of Australia, were shown in an explicit art context in major institutions of contemporary art in London, Düsseldorf and Copenhagen.

**Keeping the culture strong – ceremony**

On 19 October 2007, the law poles were solemnly accepted on behalf of the people of the Netherlands by Yvonne Timmerman-Buck, the president of the chamber of people's representatives in the name of the Dutch people. Timmerman-Buck had visited Weipa on the west coast of Cape York as the head of a Dutch parliamentary delegation one year earlier. The delegation flew over the area where the crew of the *Duyfken* set foot on land, and visited the mining town of Weipa where Timmerman-Buck met with Indigenous elders and traditional owners.

This gift ceremony, during which clan-totemic dances were performed, was not the first, nor the last in regard to these specific law poles. At their consecration at the museum the law poles were sung by the representatives of both communities, enabling the spirits of the makers to return safely to their ancestral lands and ensuring that the visitor is protected against the power of these carvings. The two makers of the poles, Ron Yunkaporta and Joel Ngallametta, took leave of the poles by hugging them. Also, an informal exchange ceremony with the museum staff took place just before leaving.

‘Aborigines reconcile with the Netherlands’

The Dutch press took up the presentation of the law poles and the visit of the Aurukun people as an item of significance. The giving ceremony featured on the evening news on national television. Even the widely distributed free *Metro* newspaper devoted a small article on the visit with a photograph of the visiting party. The title of this piece ‘*Aboriginals verzoenen zich met Nederland*’ (‘Aborigines reconcile with the Netherlands’) however, presents a hint of uncertainty about how to approach the subject and reflects on an intercultural level, arguably, some insensitivity. ‘Aborigines’ is a very broad term to
designate the Indigenous peoples from Australia without distinction between the different language
groups and local histories. In these celebrations of 400 years of Dutch-Australian contact, the delegation
of Wik people was perceived as representing the Indigenous people from Australia as a whole. It was a
designated role that perhaps was fully understood by the Aurukun delegation. Silas Wolmby, after all,
explicitly speaks about ‘Aboriginal’ people when he refers to the contact with Dutch sailors at Cape
Keerweer and not so much about the Wik. In other words, this elder had come to see these encounters
in a much broader context.

Indeed, the first visit of the Dutch cannot be seen separately from later developments in Australian
history, as this first recorded visit effectively formed the pattern of later visits, first by other Dutch sailors
and finally in a more permanent form by the British. While the Dutch did not settle and ‘turned back’,
the British came to Australia with the intention of colonising the country.

The topic of reconciliation was also taken up in other newspaper articles. In the Dutch daily newspaper
Trouw, for example, two articles appeared. The first article covered specifically the visit of the Wik to
the Netherlands and briefly sketched out the political context in which this visit occurred.

Washed trees

The second article in Trouw focused on the exhibition in which the law poles were presented. This
exhibition was entitled Brilliance (or Schittering in Dutch) and explored the presence of ‘shimmer’ in
Indigenous Australian art. The exhibition included work by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, John Mawurndjul,
Christian Thompson, Brenda L Croft, Doreen Reid Nakamarra and the Dutch artist Maria Roosen.
The inclusion of the work of Maria Roosen, who represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale
in 1995, is illustrative of the new direction that the exhibition program at AAMU has taken since 2006,
in which Indigenous Australian art is often shown alongside contemporary art from other areas such as
western Europe. AAMU, which was from the outset created as a museum that would show Indigenous
Australian art as contemporary art, is particularly well-suited to accommodate the law poles in its
collection and exhibition spaces. The law poles find their place in an intercultural or cross-cultural
dialogue in which they are presented in an explicitly contemporary context. Moreover, the inclusion of
Maria Roosen’s work had the effect of attracting a more specialised art press.

In her work, Roosen often uses diverse materials such as wood and glass. Gewassen Bomen (Washed
trees), the work that was included in Brilliance, consisted of tree trunks and hand-blown coloured glass
fungi. The nature of the work, in visual terms as well as content, reciprocated the law poles in an artistic
dialogue between two cultures. This exchange was timely and particularly fitted to this place. It had the effect of reinforcing the significance of the law poles.

Henny de Lange, in Trouw, expands on this dialogue between western and non-western art, ‘Already for the eye alone the decorated tree trunks of Roosen constitute a beautiful unity with the traditional law poles’. Maria Roosen, quoted in the same article, says about this display:
At first I did have my reservations, but it is striking how much common ground there is, such as the use of real tree trunks, the simplicity and directness of materials and shapes, and the enchanting and the magical. What I find equally fascinating is that, through this exhibition, I will look with different eyes at my own work. I will see it in a much broader context.

More than an exhibition about the phenomenal ‘brilliance’ in the art, it tackled issues such as whether the differentiation and segregation between western and non-western is still valid when it comes to contemporary art. The law poles, after all, are contemporary not only in that they were recently produced by living artists. They also possess a relevant potency in a much broader political, cultural and social reality.

Full circle – A future for the law poles

According to Hans Sondaal, however, there has not yet been an adequate political response to the law poles gift. An appropriate reconciliatory signal from the Netherlands to the Wik people is still due. As Sondaal stresses, it is important to show the poles outside the museum context to stress and disseminate the political aspect. One possibility, in which AAMU can play an important mediating role, is that every six months the group could travel to another location.

With the presentation of the law poles, the circle is complete. The story of the ‘turn back’ of the first European intruders of Australia connects with this journey of the poles.

The ceremonial law poles, in accordance with the wishes of the Wik people, will remain in the Netherlands. Here, they will be a permanent commemoration of these important encounters between Europeans and the traditional custodians of the Wik region.

The law poles, finally, are a strong statement of a reciprocation of law. As Silas Wolmby put it, ‘These law poles are very sacred and go with other totems, we make them so that people can know us better, the five groups of the Wik. They’ve got law.’

Georges Petiejean
JOEL NGALLAMETTA
Thapa Yongk (Law poles) 2007
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on wood, feathers and grass
sizes variable
Collection of Aboriginal Art Museum of Utrecht, The Netherlands
Photograph: Mick Richards

RON YUNKAPORTA
Thuth Thashmuth (Law poles) 2007
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on wood, feathers and grass
sizes variable
Collection of Aboriginal Art Museum of Utrecht, The Netherlands
Photograph: Mick Richards
CRAIG KOOMEETA
Apele: Older brother and younger brother 2004
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on
Belgian linen
2 parts 92.0 x 61.0 cm (each)
Private collection, courtesy Andrew Baker
Art Dealer
Photograph: Mick Richards
ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

1 This chapter was written with funding by the Australian Research Council, the University of Adelaide, the South Australian Museum, the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency and the University of Queensland Art Museum.

2 On the Wik native title case, see chapter 4 of this volume, by David Martin.


4 For more detail, see Sutton 2003.


6 Island dance had arrived at Aurukun by 1927 (Ursula McConnel, field notes, South Australian Museum Archives AA191). It was certainly used in ritual house openings by the 1970s, probably earlier. Hula was added to the mortuary repertoire some time in the 1980s. In 2009 I witnessed a mortuary ceremony at Aurukun where one phase combined hula dancers and Island-style dancers simultaneously in a symmetrical arrangement. I also saw, for the first time, one house opened with the order of dance genres reversed. Performance innovation at Aurukun continues.

7 In classical terms, the Wik languages and cultural region extend from south of Archer River to the Edward, while the area north of the Archer to the Embly is part of what Wik people call the Wik Way ('difficult languages') area. The native title claim has been by a combined Wik and Wik Way group of people resident at Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Napranum and several other centres. It has also been a combined Wik and Wik Way population, originating in both cultural areas but mainly resident at Aurukun, which has developed the sculptural tradition discussed here.

8 JPM Long 1970, Aboriginal settlements: A survey of institutional communities in eastern Australia, Canberra: Australian National University. The Weipa Mission, founded on the middle Embly in 1898, was relocated to the Weipa Peninsula in 1932 and its new secularised descendant is the community of Naqarar, Weipa. Edward River Mission was founded near the mouth of the Edward River in 1938 and its likewise secularised community descendant is Pormpuraaw. From the early 1970s outstations gradually enabled the resettlement of a number of outlying areas in the region, but by the mid to late 2000s most of these had been abandoned.

9 Letter from Peter Hinton to Frederick McCarthy, 8 April 1963, Weipa. McCarthy papers, AIATSIS Library, Canberra. Contact between the two communities did continue through this period, as is evident from, for example, marriages contracted between individuals resident at the two centres.

10 From my own field data, beginning in 1976.


12 JB McCarthy was acting superintendent in 1949 while MacKenzie was serving as moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland. He should not be confused with Frederick D McCarthy (see below). MacKenzie left Aurukun on furlough in December 1948 then took up his role as moderator in May 1949. From December 1948 to August 1949 the acting superintendent was CD (Doug) Sydney. JB McCarthy had been on furlough from Mornington Island and then was sent to Aurukun from September 1949 to July 1950. MacKenzie returned to Aurukun on 7 August 1950 (Geoff Wharton pers. comm.).


14 'Dreaming(s)' has also recently become used in Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal English for this category (cf. Sutton (ed.) 1988).

15 Terms for narrative stories in Wik languages literally mean 'old word' (wik al, Wik-Ngathan; wik kath, Wik-Mungkan).

16 First two examples in Wik-Ngathan, third in Wik-Mungkan. The word 'story' seems to have been among those earliest taken on by early contact people in Cape York Peninsula and may have spread from a source area rather than being 'discovered' independently by each group. Pronounced [iθorril], story has once or twice in the past been mistaken by anthropologists for an Indigenous word (McConnel MSS A191). In the 1970s I found that even elderly people with very little English vocabulary made use of this term. My interpretation is that its foreignness offered an avoidance register so that the emotion-charged Indigenous words that it translated could be sidestepped.
I concluded this in regard to names for principal totems as well; for example, old people, when referring to spears in the hearing of Jack Spear (one of whose totems was Spear), often referred to them as *Itjipiiyl* (English 'spear').


18 The sea is the resting place of inner souls in several parts of Australia. In other parts of the country the sky appears to serve the same purpose as the sea, as a location without political geography.

19 Peter Sutton, field book 20: 95.


29 South Australian Museum A42077.


Chapter 2

1 Personal interview with Stanley Kalkeeyorta conducted in Aurukun, 17 January 2010.


3 ibid.


5 ibid., interview with Stanley Kalkeeyorta.


11 Personal communication with the artist at the Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun, January 2010.

Chapter 4


2 'Wik' is a term in many of the languages of this region which means 'talk' or 'language', and those languages south and east of Aurukun are typically prefixed by this term, as in 'Wik Mungkan', 'Wik Nyathan', etc. It has been used by anthropologists since the 1930s as a label to refer to the cultural bloc comprising groups whose country lies roughly between the Archer River and just north of Pormpuraaw, and inland almost to Coen. 'Wik Way' is the label used in *Wik Mungkan*, for generations now the lingua franca in Aurukun, of the people and ancestral languages of those groups whose country lies in the coastal region between Aurukun and Weipa.

Endnotes
4 ibid.
8 Martin 1993.
11 The Archer Bend National Park was eventually incorporated into the extensive Mungkan Kaanju National Park in central Cape York, and in 1994 inland Wik people together with neighbouring groups brought a claim to the Park under Queensland's Aboriginal Land Act. The Land Tribunal determined that the claim had been established, but concerns by the Aboriginal parties about the terms of the mandatory lease of the Park in perpetuity back to the State have meant that title has never been granted over it. As this essay is being prepared, there are negotiations between the Queensland Government and Aboriginal people with traditional interests in the Archer Bend sector of this National Park, with a view to redressing this historic injustice.
12 See Ritter (2009) for an insightful account of the native title system and the roles in its development of the range of interest groups such as pastoralists, miners and governments.
13 Hunter 2009.
14 The author was one of the anthropologists working on the Wik claim.
15 Martin 1993; Sutton 2009.
18 Martin (1993, pp. 291–92) provides a case study of a failed attempt by a prominent Wik man to convert his standing in the secular arena of political engagement with the wider society into status within the Wik Apelich ritual cult, by carving and painting a totemic image for use in a mortuary ceremony.

Chapter 5

2 Such as the journals of Captain John Saris, an agent for the English East India Company posted at Bantam.
5 This inventory and an English transcript can be viewed on the website of the archives of the city of Amsterdam: http://stadsarchief.amsterdam.nl/presentaties/uitgelichte/Rembrandt_Prive/Rembrandt_van_Rijn/Rembrandts_inboedel/index.nl.html. Accessed 21 March 2010.
6 See for Aboriginal artefacts in overseas collections, Carol Cooper 1989, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections in overseas museums*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press. I am indebted to Philip Jones for sharing his research information of Dutch collections and especially that of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde with me.

7 *Turn back: The untold story of the first European contact in Australia*, 15 minutes, DVD, Dan Bracegirdle (director) – Wik Media (Production), 2006.

8 Silas Wolmyh's comments are: 'I'm sorry for the Dutchmen who died ... They were the first Europeans to set foot in Australia. It is the first recorded contact with Aboriginal people.'

9 Dr Hans Sondaal was posted in Australia from August 2001 to the end of 2005, when he took up his current position as chairman of the board of directors of AAMU.

10 The *Duyfken* portfolio was commissioned through Wally Caruana and included work by Karen Casey and Alan Mansell from Tasmania, Dulamari (Djalinda Yunupingu) and Dhugkwarrwarn Marika from north-east Arnhem Land, Janice Murray and Pedro Wonaemirri from Melville Island, Garry Namponan and Leonie Pootchemunka from Aurukun, western Cape York Peninsula, and Laurel Nannup and Chris Pease from southern Western Australia. It was officially accepted by H.H. Crown Prince Willem-Alexander and Prince Máxima of the Netherlands during their visit to Australia in 2006, and was consequently presented to AAMU.

11 Hans Sondaal, personal communication, Utrecht, 7 January 2010.

12 These law poles are very similar to the group of law poles in the Queensland Art Gallery (GOMA). The *tshaw-tsau'muuth* poles were equally made by Ron Yunkaporta (born c. 1956) in the period 2002–2003. The *Thapa yongk* law poles, produced in the same period, were made by Joe Ngallametta (born c. 1945), the father of Joel Ngallametta. See Queensland Art Gallery 2003. *Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

13 The delegation consisted of Mr Neville Poochemunka as the delegation leader, Mr Daniel Bracegirdle, Mr Leslie Walmbeng, Mr Peter Peemuggina, Mr Ronald Yunkaporta, Ms Cynthia Yunkaporta, Ms Sharon Ngallametta and Mr Joel Ngallametta. The gift of the law poles and the journey of the delegation were supported by the Queensland Government through the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA).


17 These songs were recorded and a copy of the recording is kept at the museum.

18 The broadcast of the ceremony was planned for the eight o'clock journal. However, that day the famous Dutch artist Jan Wolkers passed away, which eventuated in the ceremony being broadcast on the ten o'clock journal.

19 *Turn back*, 15 minutes, DVD, Dan Bracegirdle (director) – Wik Media (Production), 2006.


22 This exhibition ran until 23 March 2008.

23 Other articles that were published on the occasion of this exhibition were Karen Duking, *Een wereld vol glitter*, in LucasX, October–November–December 2007, p. 4; Machteld Lei, *Aboriginal kunst met boodschap*, in NRC Handelsblad, Tuesday, 11 December 2007; Paola van de Velde, *Schitterende Schilderijen in plof-plof-stijl*, in De Telegraaf, 31 December 2007.

24 This looking with different eyes to European/Dutch art is an effect that has been heard before. Similar comments were expressed at the time of the *Nomads in Art* exhibition which succeeded the *Shimmering* exhibition. In *Nomads in Art* the work of Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) was shown alongside that of four artists from central Australia.


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*Freshwater crocodile 2008* 
ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood 
12.0 x 102.0 x 25.0 cm
Collection of Ipswich Art Gallery
Photograph: Mick Richards


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Bibliography
CONTRIBUTORS

Tony Albert is a Brisbane-based artist. Over the past decade he has forged strong connections with the Aurukun community, working closely with a number of significant artists, including Arthur and Alair Pambegan, Joe and Joel Ngallametta, Ron Yunkaporta and Craig Koomeeta. Recently, Tony has worked collaboratively with Arthur Pambegan Jr on a major painting project.

Sally Butler is Senior Lecturer in Art History at the University of Queensland, and curator and editor of the *Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art* exhibition and book. Her previous publications and curated exhibitions include *Our Way: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from Lockhart River* (2007), which toured Asia and the United States in 2007 and 2008.

Stanley Kalkeeyorta is an artist and cultural adviser from Aurukun. Since 2007 he has worked with Wik Media as cultural adviser, script writer, translator and presenter for numerous video productions. He is the presenter of the *Bush food: End of the wet* television documentary (still airing on NITV, 2010). Stanley also presented cultural awareness productions for the Aurukun Bauxite project in 2008 and 2009.

David F Martin is consultant anthropologist and Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Policy Research at the Australian National University. His research and applied interests include welfare reform, Aboriginal economic and community development, native title and governance. He worked in Aurukun as a community adviser with the outstation movement between 1976 and 1983, returned there for a further two years in 1985 to conduct research for his doctoral thesis, and continues to visit to work there on a range of projects.

Mavis Ngallametta is an artist and traditional elder of country surrounding the Kendle River region near Aurukun. Mavis was granted the Community Arts Achievement Award in 2004 for her contribution to the school and the community, teaching the children traditional crafts. She also worked as a host for the Aurukun Wetland Charters and is currently the president of the Wik and Kugu Art Centre committee. Her weavings and canvas paintings are held in major public and private Australian and international art collections.

Georges Petitjean is a Belgian art historian who completed a PhD on western desert art at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His research interest is the transition of Indigenous Australian painting from sites of origin to the wider art world. He lived and worked in Australia for many years and, since 1992, has studied the work of a number of Indigenous Australian artists. He was appointed curator at AAMU, the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal art at Utrecht in the Netherlands in 2005.

Peter Sutton is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide and the South Australian Museum. He is an anthropologist and linguist who has lived and worked with Aboriginal people in remote, urban and rural Australia since 1969. He has assisted with over 50 Indigenous land claim cases. Peter is an author or editor of 13 books and has published many papers, mainly in the fields of Aboriginal languages, land tenure, art, history and Indigenous policy. His most recent book is *The politics of suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus* (2009).

John von Sturmer is an independent writer, artist and critic based in Sydney. Most recently, he was appointed Senior Fellow of the Institute of Postcolonial Studies in Melbourne. In 1970 he was appointed Foundation Lecturer in Aboriginal Studies at the University of Queensland, in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. Over many years John has been active in negotiating the nexus between government, big business and traditional owner groups, and has contributed to many major achievements in Aboriginal affairs since the 1970s. He first worked with the Kugu-nganhtyarra in western Cape York Peninsula in 1969 and was indelibly influenced by their rich and ceremonial life.
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THOMAS TOIKALKIN
Tortoise 2002
bronze, edition of 12
34.0 x 14.0 x 13.0 cm
Courtesy Urban Art Projects
Photograph: Courtesy of Urban Art Projects
DUNCAN KORKATAIN
Apalech bay 2006
ochres and charcoal with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood
80.0 x 24.0 x 26.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, gift of an anonymous donor 2009
Photograph: Mick Richards