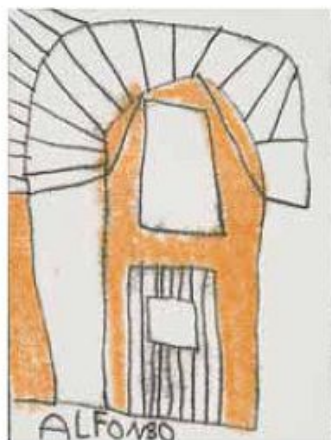


Ngaruwanajirri: helping one another

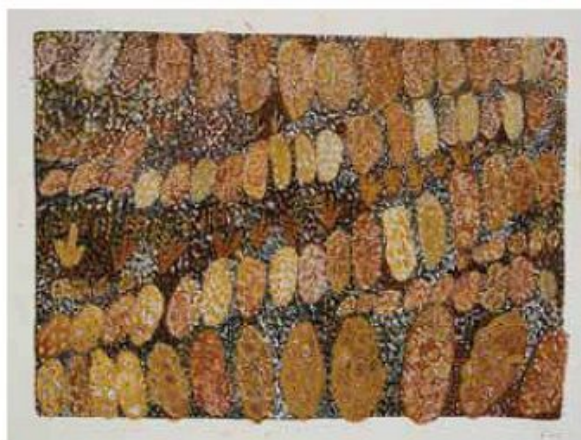




Top: Alfonso Puaatjimi, *The Keeping House* 2010 [detail], monotype on BFK Rives paper, edn 1/1, 40.5 x 28cm [image], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU2063.

Above: Estelle Munkanome, *Untitled* [Portrait of Lorna Kantilla] 2009, natural ochres on Arches paper, 37.5 x 28.5cm [image & paper], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2009 – CDU1645.

Below: Lorna Kantilla, *Untitled* [mud mussels and arrows] 1998, natural ochres on Arches paper, 47 x 66cm [image], CDU Art Collection – CDU1361, acquired 2007.



I don't think there are any secrets in art – I think everything should be shared and, if there are any secrets, it's high time to shout them from the roof-tops. I'm referring, of course, to all methods of technique and new discoveries ... I feel very strongly that everything a painter learns ought to be shared with others. After all, the only appreciation worth having is that of one's fellow artists – one's fellow practitioners – and since the appreciation is theirs (and a help to one if they do give it generously) then they ought to be given anything one has got in return.¹

[He] painted, he said, 'for company'.²

Located at Wurrumiyanga (formerly Nguuu, meaning 'this place') on Bathurst Island, **Ngaruwanajirri** was founded in August 1994 as an art-focused skills development and supported employment program³ for Tiwi adults with special needs. Its overarching philosophy and defining spirit as an artistic cooperative are encapsulated in its Tiwi name, translated into English as *helping one another*. The program's distinctive logo was designed in the late 1990s by Samson Poantumului.⁴ It depicts two hands, gently clasped as one undulating link within an encircled tablet of Tiwi *jilamara* (designs). As a symbolic gesture and revealing graphic emblem, it stands for a collective of creative individuals whose work is intimately related to, and nurtured by, both the environment and the building within which Ngaruwanajirri has quietly flourished for 17 years: **The Keeping House**.

The Keeping House is more than a place to make art: it is a shared home for artists, where no one is an 'outsider'. It is also an adult learning centre fostering skill, innovation and imagination as a social practice. In equal measure, individuality, experimentation and freedom of expression – rather than market forces – govern its daily operations. The very fabric of the building, most notably its painted panel ceiling, inspires contemplation. At Ngaruwanajirri, artists look up as well as to the surface of their chosen medium: art is a continuous activity, with no separation between the past and the present.

The history of The Keeping House unfolds as a series of complex exchanges and evolving ideas embracing collections, museums, missionaries, government officials, art centres and art advisers, as well as traditional owners and artists. An idea for a 'material culture museum' was first conceived in the late 1950s by Father John Fallon, a Catholic priest on Bathurst Island for many years and Superintendent at Nguuu between 1959-60 and 1965-71. Fallon's aim had been to preserve and display what were at the time regarded as the last objects of their kind and quality, produced for either ceremony or sale, by an older generation of Tiwi. Throughout the 1960s, he collected and commissioned spears, ceremonial adornments, sculptures, woven items and other objects of 'the highest quality', intended for display in the proposed museum. He sought advice from the then Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, John Bailey, and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory's rock art specialist, George Chaloupka, as to the design and construction of a building. A structure resembling a Tiwi bark shelter, with a curved, high pitched roof, was favoured but never eventuated during his time.⁵

During the 1970s, the establishment of Aboriginal owned and managed 'cultural keeping places' gained currency, both as Government policy and in terms of funding priorities, in line with the land rights movement and principles of self-determination. The concept for a 'Nguuu museum' was in turn adopted and transformed by Tiwi elders. In 1975, they agreed to develop a multi-purpose facility that symbolised resilience rather than cultural extinction. Its aim would be to house and display culturally significant items, arts and crafts of the highest standard, an archival repository for oral history, photographs and films. In addition, it aspired to act as a 'ceremonial meeting place' and become 'a focal point to help maintain Tiwi culture and keep it strong for future generations'.⁶

The site for the building's construction was selected by Tiwi elder Raphael Apuatimi and the then Nguuu Council in an area known as 'Forestry'. The project was originally administered by the Nguuu Museum Society, superseded in 1978 by the Ngaripaluwamigi Aboriginal Corporation (trading as Tiwi Pima Art in 1980). Robert Parker, Traditional Art/Crafts Coordinator at Tiwi Pima between

1977-81, had carriage of the project's implementation – one that encompassed both the notion of a 'keeping place' and a mandate 'to give education or to teach'.⁷

A design for the building's construction was conceived by eminent Sydney architect Peter Myers. His design drew inspiration from the traditional Tiwi Wet Season shelter, distinguished by its arched covering of stringy bark sheeting above a simple sapling framework. Construction on the building began in 1979 but ceased six months later due to insufficient funds, leaving a skeleton of two external walls, a concrete floor and a high vaulted ceiling. The project lay fallow for the next five years, although modest grants enabled the purchase of carvings, documentation of historic photographs and the commissioning of extended concept plans.⁸ The collection that had been assembled was stored until the Patakijiyali Museum, initiated by the Catholic Mission as the Nguui Museum Society in the mid 1970s, assumed the role originally intended for a 'keeping place', restoring many of the assembled works and subsuming them within its holdings.⁹

In 1985, the building received a new lease of life. Steve Anderson, then art adviser at Tiwi Design (1984-89), obtained funding to convert the open-ended, unfinished 'tunnel' construction into a functioning display space, building two rooms to enclose it, purchasing equipment and significantly, commissioning its acclaimed ceiling murals.¹⁰ Ten Tiwi artists were chosen to produce eight painted panels, measuring ten metres by two metres. Each semi-circular segment took approximately two months to complete, with work beginning in October 1985 and ending in December 1986. The panels were painted *in situ* on scaffolds using acrylic sign writer's paint on marine ply, and executed consecutively from west to east with the support of Tiwi assistants.¹¹

The project 'resurrected' the building, although the impetus for it to reopen as either a 'museum' or 'keeping place' had by then been superseded by the Patakijiyali Museum. Instead, it operated as a trading point for Tiwi Pima from late 1987 until 1992 – storing, displaying and selling 'traditional' Tiwi art and representing artists from Nguui, Milikapiti and Pularumpi. Dubbed by *Vogue Italia* as 'the Australian Sistine Chapel' in 1987, the ceiling itself became a well-known and admired attraction: a collaborative art work and cooperative commission in its own right.¹²

In the early 1990s, a restructuring of community-based art enterprises at Nguui and a shortage of funds for the building's maintenance and management brought the Tiwi Pima chapter of its history to a close. The contents of the building were transferred to Tiwi Design and its ownership resumed by Council.¹³ For two years it remained disused.

With the arrival of Joy and John Naden, both gifted teachers experienced in living and working with Indigenous peoples, a pilot program for what would become Ngaruwanajirri was initially trialled and the building offered to them as a workshop complex, with accommodation and a retail gallery space.¹⁴ In time, the museum-cum-'keeping place' became known as The Keeping House, its emphasis on living Tiwi artists – their health, well-being and their art. Today, a core group of 14 Tiwi artists and 12 freelance wood carvers draw, paint and sculpt beneath its painted canopy and in its garden surrounds, inspired by what they see and feel above and around them. The art they create – unique in its 'Tiwi-ness' but of a sensibility and vitality all its own – has given them a special place within their community and in the art world, far beyond their island home.

Joy's background as a trained artist and studio practice instructor, John's skills in vocational and technological training, no less than their considered guidance and responsible management of the overall Ngaruwanajirri enterprise – all of which continue to this day – have secured its success and stability. The cooperative is a quintessential example of the community-based art centre model in spirit and in action. It is also a testament to the historical significance of Aboriginal adult education programs as the originating impulse and principal driver for many art centres and early art movements across Australia, including the Tiwi Islands.¹⁵ Historically, an economic or cultural imperative to trade, exchange or 'engage with the market place' were not the only precipitating factors in the evolution of the now thriving community-based art centre movement.¹⁶ Ten works on loan in this exhibition are from the Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education's Art Collection. They emanate from its successful residency and exhibition programs, or were the subject of special commissions, and attest to the importance of adult education in sponsoring the production of contemporary Indigenous art and fostering its wider appreciation.

This exhibition features more than 190 works in a range of media by 21 Ngaruwanajirri artists, past and present. A number of artists – still active today – have been members of the cooperative since inception. Amongst the earliest works are lino block prints, works in natural ochres on paper, small carvings and a painting on canvas. Paintings on paper remain the principal contemporary medium. The exhibition is installed so that works may be appreciated both in terms of individual artists' development over a period of time, and as part of the cooperative as a whole.

Printmaking on paper and fabric, as well as batik silk production, have been an integral component of the artists' *oeuvre* since Ngaruwanajirri's beginnings. Typically, designs for prints are chosen by the artists after several days of drawing

Left: Francis Kerinaia, *Bird [curlew]* 2007, natural ochres on ironwood, H108cm, CDU Art Collection – CDU1382, acquired 2007.



and reflection, then transferred to blocks, the reduction method allowing more than one colour to be applied. Individual hand-colouring and shared tasks in the final process make it a truly collaborative exercise, where each artist's contribution is prized and acknowledged.

The fluidity and gestural qualities of batik silk painting in wax reflect yet another aesthetic dimension, one in which both male and female artists have excelled. Works on paper in watercolour, pen, ink and gouache have strengthened and extended technical skills and captured new subject matter. Portraiture, a genre still relatively rare in Australian Aboriginal art, was initially executed in the traditional Tiwi palette of ochres – red, yellow and white, with black for definition. The recent introduction of a range of mixed ochres in grey, green and peach has revitalised and reinvented the medium: the new within the old, in the spirit that guides Tiwi creativity in all aspects of life and art, both secular and ceremonial.

A major component of this exhibition is the launch of 48 monotypes, created under the tutelage of collaborating printer Marilyn Gibson, with Joy Naden assisting. Gibson delivered two workshops, each of one month's duration, in 2010. The artists' strong background in drawing and painting evinced an immediate and positive response to the directness of the monotype technique, artists comprehending at once the 'image reversal' that this process entails. Sketching comprised an important preliminary step towards the execution of each work, with ongoing experimentation in ink types and colours, tools, stencils, rubbing techniques and paper stock.¹⁷

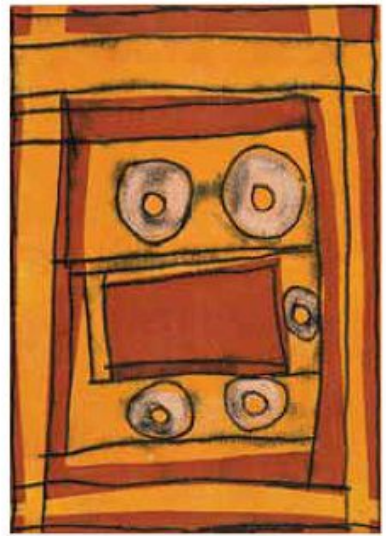
Attempting to classify or categorise Tiwi art, including that of Ngaruwanajirri artists, is a fruitless exercise that fails to recognise its resistance to 'stories' or verbalised narratives. *Storytelling* is the well-spring of a distinct Tiwi oral tradition and belief system: its dynamic quality, not its content, is the key to appreciating a visual aesthetic that gives equal weight to *jilamara* motifs as both decoration and disguise. In this context, invention and creative imagination are paramount – not encrypted symbolism. In form and composition, Tiwi art draws on everyday experience as much as 'olden time' iconography and subject matter, collapsing linear time scales. 'Meaning' more often exists not within a picture, but in the relationship of art to Tiwi society as a whole, one in which individual innovation is both an aesthetic and a cultural imperative.¹⁸

Seen in this light, the work of Ngaruwanajirri artists is anything but 'outsider' in its imaginative spirit, truth to materials, inventive realisation and often unpredictable subject matter: it is resolutely Tiwi. 'Raw not cooked', it is never in danger of falling into self-conscious mannerisms or decadent stylisation due to repetition. It is an art that may once have been described as 'primitive', in the original sense of the word, before it became heavily freighted with negative associations. As English sculptor Henry Moore said, the 'most striking quality [of art in this category] is its intense vitality. It is something made by people with a direct and immediate response to life'. It is not 'an activity of calculation or academism, but a channel for expressing powerful beliefs, hopes and fears ... and shows art to be a universal activity with no separation between the past and present'.¹⁹ In this, Ngaruwanajirri's first major retrospective exhibition, drawn in large part from the University's permanent collection, the role of The Keeping House and the work of its resident artists are acknowledged as related phenomena in the distinguished history of Tiwi art, in which Ngaruwanajirri artists have made a significant and enduring contribution. This art has, in the words of Marius Puruntatameri, former Chairman of the Tiwi Land Council, brought:

*happiness to our people, because it belongs to us. We hope, also, that it will bring pleasure to other peoples as part of the heritage of the world.*²⁰

Anita Angel
Curator
Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery

July 2011



Top: Estelle Munkanome, *Untitled* 2010 [detail], monotype on BFK Rives paper, edn 1/1, 41 x 28.7cm [image], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU2057.

Middle: Marcia Kantilla, *Jajingarti [man]* 2010, monotype on mixed media art paper, edn 1/1, 40.5 x 28.2cm [image], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU2052.

Bottom: Aquin Pilakui, *Untitled [Tutini]* 2010 [detail], monotype on Saunders Waterford paper, edn 1/1, 34.7 x 25.1cm [image], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU2051.



Alfonso Puautjimi, *The Keeping House* 2010, natural ochres on Arches paper, 76 x 56cm [image & paper], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 - CDU1990.



Above: Jane M. Tipuamantumirri, *Untitled* 2009, natural ochres on Arches paper, 56 x 76cm [image & paper], purchased through the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU1991.

Front, left to right: David Tipuamantumirri, *Purukuparli* 2006, natural ochres on ironwood, H59cm, CDU Art Collection – CDU1345, acquired 2006; Barry Kantilla, *Purukuparli* 2006, natural ochres on ironwood, H53cm, CDU Art Collection – CDU1344, acquired 2006.

- 1 English artist John Piper in: Noel Barber, *Conversations with Painters*, Collins, St James's Place, London, 1964, pp.57-68 at 66.
- 2 Matthew Gale quoting Cornish artist Alfred Wallis (1855-1942) in: M. Gale, *Alfred Wallis*, Tate Publishing by order of the Tate Trustees, London, 2004, p.6.
- 3 Ngaruwanajirri Inc is funded by the Northern Territory Government's Department of Family & Community Services. It is also assisted by the Commonwealth Department of Township Leasing and the Tiwi Islands Shire Council.
- 4 Samson Poantumului worked for Ngaruwanajirri assisting in the workshop with lino block printing and other tasks prior to 2000: Interview with Joy Naden, 26 July 2011.
- 5 K. Barnes, *Kiripapurajuwi: Skills of our hands – Good Craftsmen and Tiwi Art*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra, 1999, p.75.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.75-6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp.76 & 101; Letter from Jennifer Isaacs AM to John Naden, 20 July 2007.
- 8 K. Barnes, *Kiripapurajuwi*, pp.76-7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.79; Letter from Jennifer Isaacs AM to John Naden, 20 July 2007.
- 10 Letter from Jennifer Isaacs AM to John Naden, 20 July 2007.
- 11 K. Barnes, *Kiripapurajuwi*, p.77. Barnes lists the artists and assistants who originally worked on the building's painted ceiling.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Letter from Jennifer Isaacs AM to John Naden, 20 July 2007.
- 14 In 1998, a NT Government Heritage Grant enabled the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT to undertake restoration work on The Keeping House's structure and painted panel ceilings, as an extension of its Regional Museums Assistance Program: Glenn Cole, "Tiwi Ngaripuluwamigi Keeping Place - Nguiu" in: MAGNT *Regional Museums Newsletter*, Issue No.5, Darwin, December 1998, pp.10-11.
- 15 Both Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association (Milikapiti) and Munupi Arts and Crafts Association (Pirlangimpi) on Melville Island trace their origins to adult education programs delivered during the 1980s, as well as earlier initiatives.
- 16 See: "Cultural Currency: Community Art Centres & Representative Bodies" in: *Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Program*, 12-14 August 2011, p.14, but also: Jack Frawley, "An Immediate and Crying Need: Adult Education and Aboriginal Art in a Remote Northern Territory Community", Australian Catholic University, Sydney, conference paper delivered at the 44th Annual National Conference of Adult Learning Australia, 18-20 November, 2004, Adelaide: <https://ala.asn.au/conf/2004/> Accessed 27 July 2011.
- 17 Interview with Marilyn Gibson, 20 July 2011.
- 18 James Bennett, "Narrative and Decoration in Tiwi Painting: Tiwi Representations of the Purukuparli Story" in: Sonia Dean (ed), *Art Bulletin of Victoria* No. 33, Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1993, pp.39-47 at 45.
- 19 Henry Moore, "Primitive Art" 1941 in: Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch (eds), *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art: A Documentary History*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, California, 2003, pp.267-71 at 267.
- 20 Quoted in: K. Barnes, *Kiripapurajuwi*, Preface, p.6.



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