

# HEALING FROM COUNTRY FOR COUNTRY THROUGH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ART - COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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INSTITUTE**  
People. Policy. Place.



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**HEAL**



**menzies**  
SCHOOL OF HEALTH  
RESEARCH

# Background

## Art as Foundation

Used for storytelling, knowledge-sharing, and recording "Country."

## Cultural Identity

Connection to Country is vital for Indigenous health, wellbeing, and belief systems.

## Disproportionate Impacts

Indigenous people in rural, remote and urban areas are being impacted disproportionately

## Indigenous-Led Solutions

ensuring Indigenous voices lead the conversation on climate change recovery.

## Holistic Research

Moving beyond traditional data to capture lived experiences across city, bush, and coast.

## Art as Evidence

Documenting strategies and reimagining representations of climate change.

# Framework

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**Wurrkama and Mirrwana Philosophy** (Ford 2005, 2010, 2014)

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**Mirrwana (Cycad):** Represents **Indigenous Knowledge**—inherently valuable but often misunderstood by Western institutions.

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**Wurrkama (Work):** The necessary preparation to respectfully integrate Indigenous Knowledge so it becomes nourishing.

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**Lawa:** Sweet-flat bread created by processing the poisonous cycad nuts. Lawa is shared during ceremonies.

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**Applied in this Project:** Blending two worldviews for a culturally relevant and applicable Co-designed Community Resilience Plan.

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**This framework is an analogy for the process of making space for Indigenous knowledge in Western Institutions.**

# Aim

**This project aims to understand Indigenous art world perspectives on climate change impacts on country by examining Indigenous artworks and observing the artistic processes.**

The project focuses on the three core HEAL aims:

**Protecting Community Health** (especially at-risk groups).

**Strengthening Health System Resilience**

**Reducing Inequities** (highlighted through Artwork).

# Research Methodology

**Design:** Participatory Action Research (PAR) qualitative project.

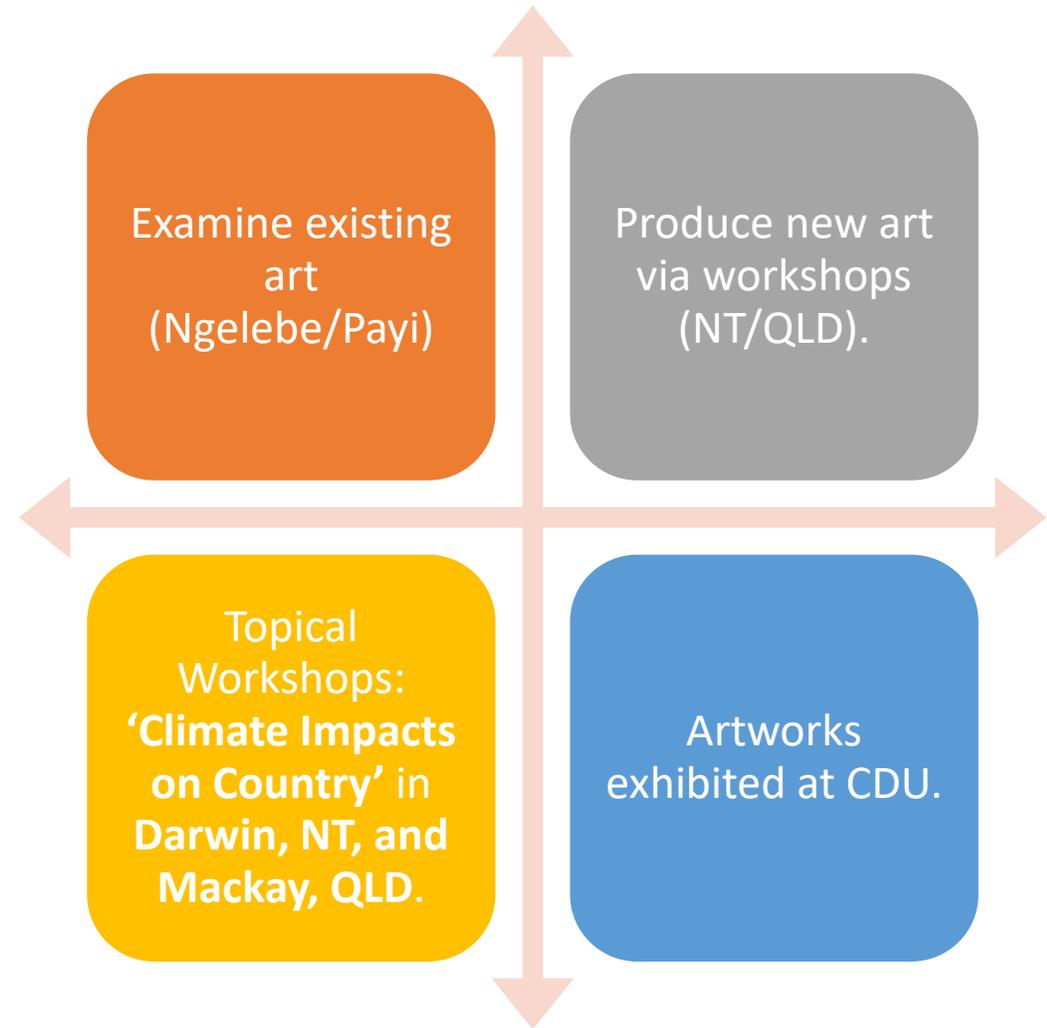
**Framework:** Grounded in **Wurrkama and Mirrwana Philosophy** to understand knowledge creation and community engagement.

**Phase 1 Artworks:** Workshops in Darwin and Mackay producing new works for a pop-up exhibition at CDU.

**Phase 2 Community Resilience Plan:** Using Indigenous art as a baseline to co-design environmental preparedness and adaptation strategies.

**Leadership:** Guided by the **Indigenous Advisory Group (IAG)** and the Communities of Practice (COP)

# Phase 1: Art Works Overview

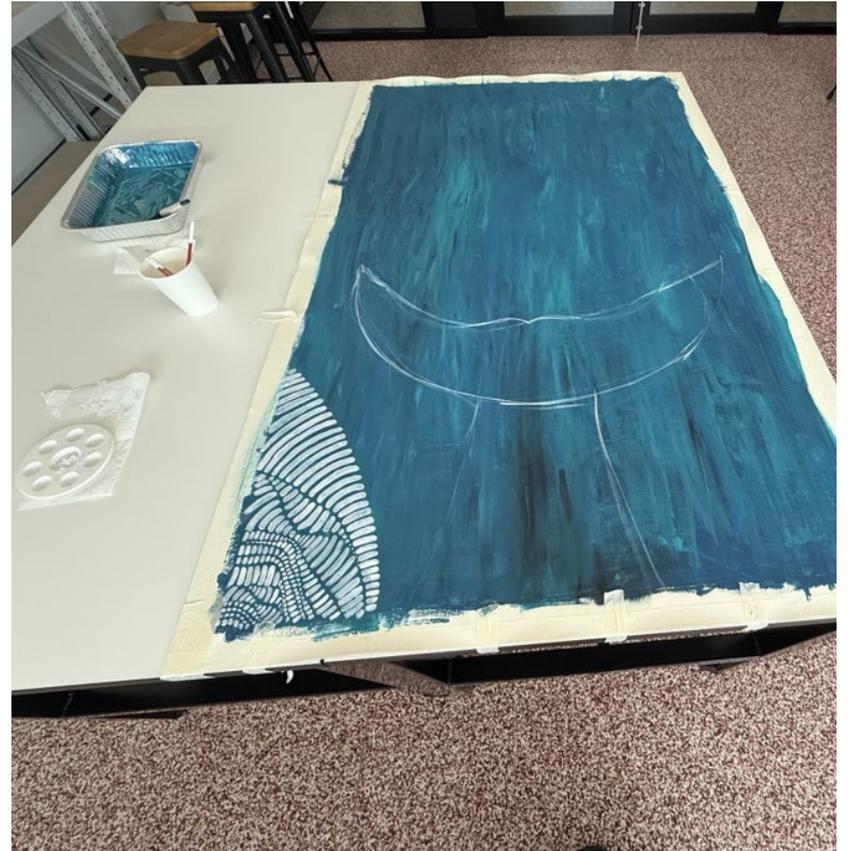


# Phase 1: Artworks

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- **Workshops:** Conducted 12 sessions (expanded from 2) with 7 Indigenous artists across Darwin and Mackay.
- **Data Collection:** Captured rich qualitative data through organic discussions, artist descriptions, and original artworks.
- **Intergenerational Collaboration:** Includes two mother-daughter artist dyads, incorporating cultural knowledge and health service expertise.
- **Engagement:** Demonstrates how art effectively connects people, researchers, and health providers on climate and health issues.

*Through these sessions, the project documented specific environmental and cultural losses as seen through the eyes of artists in Darwin and Mackay.*



# Mackay – Artist 1

## Painting title: 10 Mile

### Key Story:

- **10 Mile:** A cherished family spot for camping, fishing, and knowledge exchange.
- **Climate Impact:** Rising sea levels and coastal erosion are cutting into the land.
- **Loss:** Threatens family memories, cultural practices, and access for future generations.

*“10 Mile and our important piece of paradise is slowly being covered by rising sea levels.”*



# Mackay – Artist 1

## Painting title: Billy Goat Plum

### Visual Contrast:

- **Healthy Side:** Tree standing tall, full of fruit, showing strong connection and resource.
- **Impacted Side:** Desolate and decay, dry land, representing loss of vitality.

### Message:

- Changing weather (heat, fire, rain) alters the fruit's nutritional value and availability.
- This threatens **food security** and essential **cultural health practices**.

*“When we felt sick our parents would tell us to eat up them plums to make you feel strong again”*



# Mackay – Artist 2

## Painting title: Slady Sea

**Focus:** Impact of pollution and climate change on beaches and saltwater.

**The Sea:**

- Foundation of family life, fishing, collecting, and spiritual peace.

**•Art Contrast:**

- Healthy saltwater vs. Polluted saltwater (bleached coral, red skeleton fish).
- Footprints on the sand slowly turns dirty, leaving marks on the beach.

**Core Message:**

The saltwater brings **healing to mind, body, and spirit.**

“The footprints represents us walking along clean sand that slowly turns dirty, leaving its mark on the places we love and where we belong living by our beautiful beach. We take care of the places that take care of us.”



## Mackay – Artist 3

Painting title: Bright to White

### Focus:

- Rising ocean temperatures results in **mass bleaching events**—turning vibrant reefs stark white.

### Core Message:

- Sea Country is being impacted by climate change



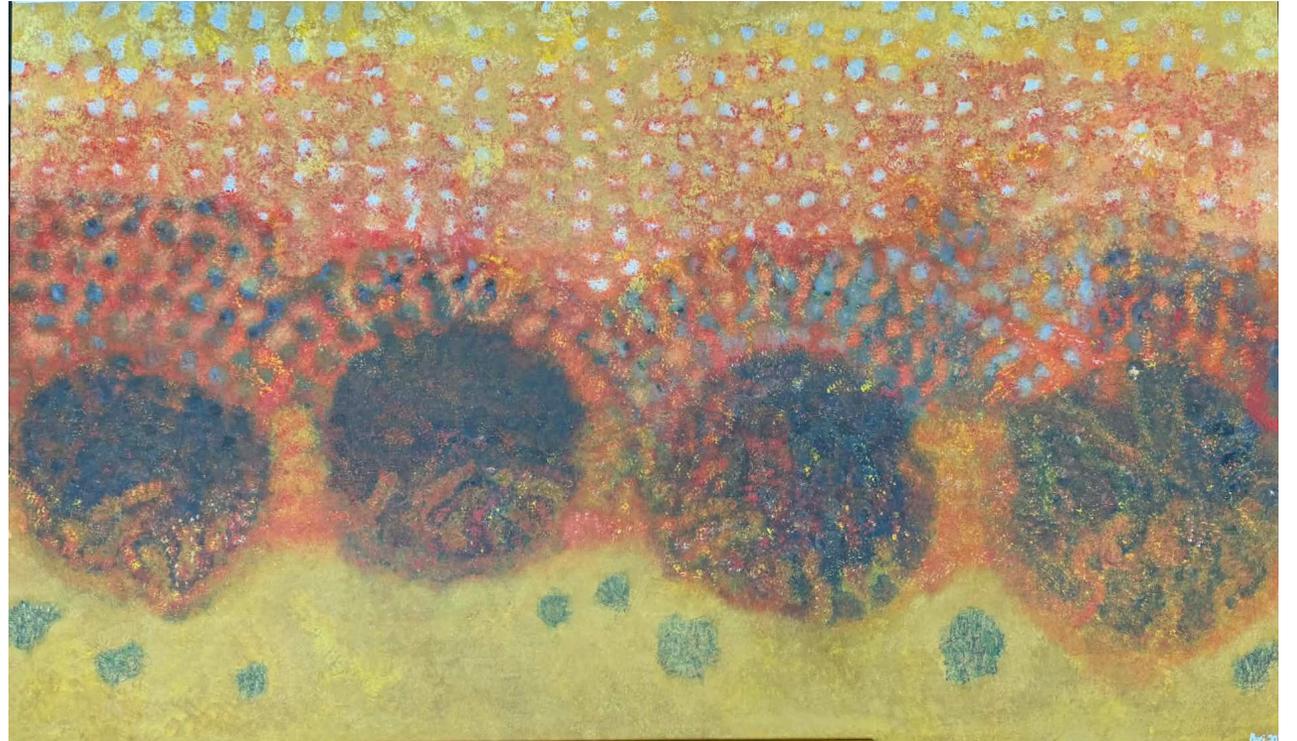
# Darwin – Artist 1

## Painting title: Pilu Fire Painting

### Visual Meaning:

- **Pilu (Men):** Represented at multiple levels (both living and ancestral) to show a continuous connection to the heritage of Country.
- **Dark Circles:** Represent **scorched earth, smoke columns, and the immediate devastation** of the fire.
- **Red/Orange Dotting:** Captures the intensity of the flames and lingering embers.
- **Yellow/Gold:** Signifies the harsh, dry heat that enables intense, destructive fires.

*Within the fire painting, the pilu 'men' perform songs and dance at multiple levels that point to the contextual heritage of Country*



# Darwin – Artist 2

## Painting Title: Migloo

### Visual Meaning:

**The Central Whale Tail:** Represents a regular whale (average person)

•**The Lines:** Represent the **disruption** caused by climate change (e.g., erratic weather, changed seasons).

•**The white lines:** bleached coral and changing environment.

•**The gold streaks:** represent sunlight that sustains life

*“Climate change is affecting all of us, big and small”*



# Art Exhibition

**Event:** Pop-up Exhibition at Charles Darwin University (CDU)

**Purpose:**

•**Culmination of Phase 1:** Showcasing existing and newly created artworks.

•**Community Engagement:** Inviting dialogue and interaction around the art and its messages.

**New Event:**

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> April

9:00am – 4:00pm

Room 1.11 CDU Danala Campus

**POP UP ART EXHIBITION**  
**CLIMATE IMPACTS ON**  
**COUNTRY**

**FEATURING ALL INDIGENOUS ARTISTS**

**DATE:** FRI 10TH APRIL 2026  
**TIME:** 9:00AM - 4:00PM  
**LOCATION:** ROOM 1.11  
 CDU DANALA CAMPUS  
 54 CAVENAGH ST  
 DARWIN CITY

**JOIN US FOR MORNING TEA & PANEL FROM 10:30AM**

**PANEL SPEAKERS: INDIGENOUS ARTISTS AND RESEARCHERS**  
**CONTACT:**  
 SHARNA MOTLAP  
 SHARNA.MOTLAP@CDU.EDU.AU

**ABOUT THE PROJECT**

This exhibition is sponsored by NHMRC Healthy Environments and Lives (HEAL) Network Innovation Fund as part of the project: 'Healing for Country from Country through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art - Communities of Practice'

This project uses Indigenous art as a powerful tool for healing and communication about climate change. The exhibition will highlight Indigenous art and perspectives on climate change.

[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HEAL NETWORK](#)



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# Phase 2: Co-Designed Community Resilience Plan



# Phase 2: Co-Designed Community Resilience Plan **In Progress**

**Objective:** Apply Indigenous artworks and Indigenous art world perspectives as the **baseline** for a Community Resilience Plan.

## Key Aims:

- Co-design community resilience plan
- Design mitigation and adaptation strategies.
- Embed plan in a monitoring and evaluation framework



# Preliminary Results

- **Localized Disruption:** Art reveals specific, immediate threats to local Country (e.g., erosion at 10 Mile, Coral Bleaching).
- **Food System Vulnerability:** Climate chaos (heat, rain change) directly impacts traditional medicine and food security (e.g., Billy Goat Plums)
- **Health and Spirituality:** The illness of Country is directly linked to the illness of the people, impacting spiritual and community well-being (e.g., Slady Sea).
- **Cultural Loss:** Rising seas and species threats lead to the loss of traditional knowledge and inability to share Country with the next generation.

# Conclusion

- **Key Takeaways:**
- **Art as Evidence:** Indigenous Art is a vital tool for healing, communication, and *data* on climate impacts.
- **Wurkama in Practice:** Our PAR process respectfully translates this evidence into a **Co-designed Community Resilience Plan** (Phase 2).
- **Holistic Impact:** This Indigenous-led project strengthens health system resilience by linking the health of Country to the health of the community.