Nyini parlingari purrupakuluwunyi, amintiya kiyi nyi ngani awarra Jilamara

Looking back, looking forward in our Art

Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery
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Jean Baptiste Apuatimi, Purrikuparri [Old Bark painting] 2005, natural ochres on linen, 150 x 100cm, gifted by the Charles Darwin University Foundation, 2010 to the Charles Darwin University Art Collection, CDU 1775

Above: John Patrick Kelantumama, Jurrukukuni [Boobook owl] 2007, natural ochres on ironwood, H37cm, Tiwi Design Collection AC-34
Front: John Patrick Kelantumama, Owl face 2007, natural ochres on ironwood, H28cm, Tiwi Design Collection AC-160

All images © the artists and courtesy Tiwi Design. Photography Chris Knight, DigiFilm Australia. Printed by Uniprint NT.
Too much information is an obstacle to seeing. My works are created to be seen.¹

In 2007, Tiwi Design Aboriginal Corporation, based at Nguiu on Bathurst Island, received Special Project Funding from the Australia Council to conduct a series of artist-run workshops that aim to pass on the skills, knowledge and traditions of art and crafts on the Tiwi Islands to the next generation of emerging artists at Tiwi Design and young people in the community. Beginning in mid 2007, male and female senior artists ran instructional workshops in the art centre and ‘out bush’, dependent on seasonal factors. Young and old examined sources and experimented with techniques of Tiwi art and craftsmanship as they related to ceremony and contemporary life: carving ironwood, making bark baskets and comb-work decoration, producing women and hand-made ceremonial adornments, and painting on bark and canvas. The ‘Keep Strong’ project, as it was known, became a template for individual creativity as much as a collective community endeavour. Its aim was to reflect and draw from the past, with a view to nurturing current art and preserving its future. The essence of the project and the Tiwi Design Collection that it fostered are captured in this exhibition’s title, chosen by Tiwi Design artists: ‘to sing is to dance is to paint’ – comment to Judith Ryan, Senior Curator, Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Tiwi Design may sing, dance and paint³

Workshop tuition included the sourcing of ironwood, mangrove wood and stringybark, its preparation and curing as the support for carved and painted sculptures, spears, fighting sticks, toe and other objects, sourcing and preparing pandanus and other plant fibres, collecting seeds (such as the blood red shrub, pyrrhopyraea), feathers and various natural materials for women’s hand-crafted items, as well as obtaining a range of ochres as the principal painting/decorative media. The project proved so successful that its activities extended beyond the nine month term of the Special Projects Grant, becoming a Tiwi Design Art Centre-sponsored activity. By late May 2008, the Tiwi Design Collection born of this project, already documented and catalogued by young Tiwi trainees at the art centre, extended its trainees and creative roles to the broader community, with senior artists running instructional workshops for Tiwi students from Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic Primary School (MCS) and Xavier Community Education Centre, Nguiu. The Collection and its related cultural development strategy were later incorporated into the Tiwi Design Curriculum, opening the art centre to the Nguiu community and beyond.

Both the initial project and formation of a Tiwi Design Collection were driven and supported by Tiwi Design artists. Charles Darwin University Art Gallery, illustrated and photographs reproduced in Charles P. Mountford’s 1998 publication The Tiwi: their Art, Myth and Ceremony were a source of inspiration for the project and its evolution. Historic images of facial decoration and body-painting for Edelma and Fasumakan ceremonies – a form of ceremonial disguise – prompted aesthetic experimentation. They evolved into flattened, ‘facial’-scale paintings on canvas by Tiwi women. Male artists began carving birds and parrots (Creation Time) figures of various dimensions, experimenting with chisels and hand tools, and the application of ochre pigments. The project gave the artists time: an opportunity to reflect and regroup, to consider art as a process rather than a means of production.

Both male and female artists also renewed their acquaintance with traditional Tiwi ceremonial culture at Nguiu, responding to the familiar and unfamiliar: by copying, but through interaction and reinvention. By late 2007, the project had matured into a distinct Art Centre collection of the artists’ own making. Several of these artists, expressing a desire to ‘re-connect’ with their past and their ancestors, then visited the National Museum in Canberra (during the Cultural Writers Triennial at the National Gallery of Australia), specifically to see ethnographic collections of Tiwi material culture items. They were able to identify objects made by their fathers or other family members, and returned home to Nguiu galvanised by the experience. Additionally, images of historic work by Tiwi ancestors in the collections of the Art Gallery of South Australia reinvigorated contemporary practice. The Tiwi Design Collection had itself become the impetus for seeing institutional collections in a rather new light: a focalised relics pathway between the past and present, sign-posting a way into the future. This exhibition comprises four interconnected parts.

First, it displays for the first time in a public institution a selection of carvings, sculptures, paintings, fighting sticks, spears, clubs, ceremonial objects and adornments, and painted/decorated hangs, all drawn from the Tiwi Design Collection.

Secondly, it comprises other contemporary works by Tiwi Design artists represented in the Charles Darwin University Art Collection: recent limited edition prints, carvings and painted hangs, created during the same period of reinvigorated practice as the Tiwi Design Collection and as a consequence of the Keep Strong Culture Project¹³.

Thirdly, its taking from the exhibition’s title Looking back, looking forward in our Art, a selection of older material culture items and carvings from the University Art Collection is also displayed in a new light and in a specific Tiwi context. Part of a ‘micro-collection’ within our permanent holdings, these works pre-date the existence of a university art collection. Assembled in about 1986 by the former Warden of the University College of the NT, the late Professor Jim Thomson, they were originally displayed at the former Mjolby Point campus in glass display cabinets, much like disembodied ethnographic artefacts rather than as works of line or applied art.

In the context of this exhibition, they offer an opportunity to reflect on the University Art Collection’s development and growth, and its function as a living collection within our region, with an important role to play in community engagement.

Fourthly, the University Art Collection is able to draw on its significant collection of limited edition prints by Tiwi Design artists dating to the early 1990s, when the then NTU Print Workshop (known today as Northern Editions) was in its infancy within the School of Art.

Purpose-built printmaking facilities were opened at the University in 1991. In the second half of that year, a number of Charles Darwin University artists became the third group of Indigenous Northern Territory artists to take part in printmaking workshops on campus. Under the tutelage of NTU Lecturer in Remote Arts Printmaking, Leon Stainton (artist), including Marjorie Stainton, Maria Dhu Liya, Annette Puautjimi, Jennifer Centi, and Maria Dhu Liya, the workshop proved so successful that it was marked in 2009 with the creation of its first dedicated and purpose-built exhibition space: the Charles Darwin University Art Gallery. It is both a privilege and a pleasure and a duty that the official opening of the Collection’s new Gallery coincides with this exhibition, opened by Tiwi Design artists.

The Tiwi Design Collection was created to be seen: given its history and mission, it is only fitting that its first curated exhibition take place in a University Art Gallery. Through Nyoni parlungu parpurahdahuem, some kyi nyong time awarra Jilamara, the University Art Collection and Tiwi Design may sing, dance and paint together: looking back, looking forward in our Art.

Anita Angel
Curator, Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery

April 2010

² On 1 May 1970, a partnership was formed between Giovanni Tippungwuti and Bede Tungatalum under the name Tiwi Designs (‘Aboriginal body (Tiwi Design Corporation) in 1980). 3 James Bennett described the Tiwi notion of creativity as holistic: ‘to sing is to dance is to paint’ – comment to Judith Ryan, Senior Curator, Charles Darwin University Art Gallery of Victoria, 1994.

Top: Maria Josette Orsto, Edelma 2006, natural ochres on Escalopima teretiana, 54 x 22cm [tang]. Tiwi Design Collection AC-579.
Centre: A Tipiloura, Untitled 2007, natural ochres on canvas, 39 x 24cm, Tiwi Design Collection AC-208.

Left: John Martin Tipungwuti, Kynthia (Forgotten fighting spear – female) 2007, natural ochres on Escalopima teretiana, 131cm x 15cm (detail), Tiwi Design Collection AC-181.
Right: Cyril James Kerinauie, Jilamara (Ceremonial fighting spear – male) 2007, natural ochres on Escalopima teretiana, 131cm x 15cm (detail), Tiwi Design Collection AC-183.