Masters revived in Art from Milingimbi —
Taking Memories Back

Small Clouds by Makani now at Art Gallery of NSW as part of Art from Milingimbi —
Taking Memories Back exhibition.

NICOLAS ROTHWELL  
The Australian  
12:00AM January 26, 2017

Land, sea and sky merge with each other on the hazy shores of Milingimbi Island, a place of encounters and interminglings, a frontier where beliefs and world views meet. Here, on the northern coastline of Arnhem Land, Macassan traders came face to face with Yolngu Aboriginal clan leaders and forged a bond that lasted for centuries. Here Methodist missionaries placed their remotest north Australian outpost. And here western outsiders first came to appreciate the full complexity and range of indigenous designs and emblems painted on bark.

Yet the first generation of artists at Milingimbi has been consigned to near oblivion in recent years as the contemporary spotlight shines on other well established Top End art communities, such as Maningrida, Yirrkala and Ramingining: even the names of the old masters from the island were half-forgotten, and their works almost unseen, until the opening in November of a landmark exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW.
Subtly conceived, carefully developed and beautifully displayed, *Art from Milingimbi — Taking Memories Back* is among the most significant shows of traditional indigenous artwork staged in recent years. It exemplifies the advance in understanding that detailed archival research and close contact between scholars and the holders of indigenous tradition can bring; it highlights long-established patterns in Yolngu art; it presents the histories and life stories of a range of artists of the first rank.

Curator Cara Pinchbeck sets the scene: “There are particular moments in the history of art when exceptional things happen: a certain alignment occurs, artists come together and their collaborative efforts and unique vision give rise to a distinct school of expression whose influence is keenly felt.” So it was in the Milingimbi camps in the 1950s. “Gathered in groups in the deep shade of the tamarind trees along the beach, artists of varying ages and experience worked alongside one another, their individual approaches and shared visual language resulting in a distinct style of painting of a quality and scale never seen before.”

The key figures in this upwelling art movement were the senior men of the settlement, figures like Dawidi, Djawa and Lipundja — all long dead but with extensive surviving families. As part of an ambitious research project, two of the most committed students of northern indigenous material culture, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby, conducted interviews across the Yolngu region with descendants of the original artists. This research has grown into a detailed history of the Milingimbi school of bark painting and its influence in the mid-20th century, when Aboriginal images were first being shown in the wider world.

“In the 1950s and 1960s,” as Pinchbeck writes, “these artists had their work included in significant exhibitions and publications that were pivotal in creating an awareness of bark painting, both in Australia and overseas. The quality of their work captured the attention of many who actively advocated for an appreciation of their work as art.” Their chief backer was the Reverend Edgar Wells, the superintendent at the Methodist Overseas Mission, who arrived at Milingimbi in 1949 and stayed for a decade. Wells placed a high value on the preservation of Yolngu traditions. He became swept up in his artistic enthusiasms: each Saturday morning he would make for the “dim coolness and sanctuary” of the mission store and sit there, notebook in hand, surrounded by the bark painters, deciphering and assessing the fine points of their latest designs.

His partner in this cross-cultural endeavour was the head of the Gupapuyngu Daygurrgurr clan, Djawa, who encouraged other clan leaders to come to Milingimbi and take their proper place in the fledgling movement. The connection between the two men grew into a friendship: they were brought together by a “shared love of visual expression” that underpinned the Milingimbi art enterprise. Djawa and Wells would spend long evenings in conversations at the mission house, poring over and discussing slides of artworks.

Unsurprisingly, Wells amassed a large personal collection, much of which he eventually sold to the state galleries of NSW and Victoria: it is these barks that form the heart of the exhibition now on view in Sydney. He even wrote a detailed paper on the “stimulation of Australian Aboriginal art forms at Milingimbi mission station”, unpublished until today, in which he recounts the story of the movement: “All the energies within the creative field of
enterprise resulted in a wave of enthusiasm amongst the gifted Aboriginal and the Australian market began to react favourably to the increasing quality of bark paintings.”

In due course, Milingimbi became the artwork collection hub for the whole of Arnhem Land: pioneers of the field, such as the Czech connoisseur Karel Kupka, the Sydney orthopedic surgeon Stuart Scougall and the American professor of literature Ed Ruhe all visited the island and bought multiple works from Milingimbi: barks, spears, feather arm bands, ceremonial pendants, carved model canoes. And several of those initial collections went on view around the world and became well known and were much admired — but for all their prominence they remained in a special subcategory, they were relegated to the ethnographic sections of art museums and galleries. When western desert acrylic art came into vogue in the 1970s and a new generation of artists began working in modern art centres across Arnhem Land, memories of the mid-century bark painters faded away. Only now, as the history of indigenous art over the past century comes to seem critical, is their work and its development being reassessed. What lessons do these objects teach?

Undoubtedly the most striking aspect of Taking Memories Back is the finesse and visual sophistication of the artworks on view, and their wide stylistic range. For many visitors, this will come as a surprise. The strong tendency among collectors, commentators and critics has been to skate over Aboriginal art made on remote religious missions during the mid decades of the past century.

There is a standard version of events, which records the successive chapters of the indigenous art movement as a tale of rapid progress. In this account, the small-scale barks made for sale by mission craft shops in earlier times barely figure; the time of innovation and great breakthrough for the Top End is very clearly seen as the mid-1990s, when state and private gallery retrospectives of Arnhem Land bark painters became common and the marketing of remote community work as contemporary art began. Thus the giant barks that emerged from Yirrkala’s Buku Larrnggay art centre two decades ago, the elaborately finished morning star poles from the ceremonial leaders of Elcho Island and the minimalist carvings and finely crosshatched barks that stem from Maningrida have all been viewed and publicised through the prism of contemporary art world discourse. Painters such as Gunybi Ganambarr from Gangan homeland and Djambawa Marawili from Blue Mud Bay now show their works at international contemporary art biennales rather than in the exhibit rooms of specialist indigenous galleries.

Such has been the evolution of Top End indigenous art over the past generation: there has been a transformation in its prestige. This transformation is linked to the increased political prominence of the Yolngu world, the increased accessibility of the remote north and the general intensification of interest in distinctive forms of Aboriginal culture. But there has been no fundamental change in the art itself: the bark paintings and carvings being produced in art centres such as Buku Larrnggay, or even the studio that operates today at Milingimbi, may be conceived on a grander scale than those made half a century ago, and executed by career artists with national profiles, but the central themes and the visual language are almost identical.

Hence the familiarity of many of the most vivid images and design patterns on view in Taking Memories Back.
The lovely 1950s rendition of *Gurrpulu, flood plain at sunrise* by the Djambarrpuyngu artist Buranday, with its lozenge mark chains in varied ochre pigments, could have been painted by a Yolngu artist in our day. The work is poised, and delicate. It captures the moment of daybreak, the gleam of the sun’s rays on small pools of water left on mud flats at low tide — and, beyond this, it marks the ending of a ceremonial cycle and the return of the morning star, together with the souls of the dead, to the far-off island of Buralkuy.

The same balance exists in a panel by the prolific Mildjingi artist Makani, whose works have the look of contemporary abstracts. His *Small Clouds* depicts triangle forms within crosshatching, all doubled, the entire upper register reflected back in more complex chevrons below: wet season clouds, yes, but emblems, also, of ancestral travels along the river regions of the inland. Surface geometry; inner depths.

So it is with the jewel-like works painted by Djawa, among them a small, beautiful bark of diamond symbols in symmetry, a work laden with layers of meaning but complete in itself. No wonder, as Ann Wells relates in her memoir of her years at Milingimbi, that Djawa’s face would alter when he saw one of his paintings on the walls of the mission house. “It was as if a light began to glow in a dark and sorrowful place. An expression of almost incredulous joy shone in his eyes,” she wrote.

The most majestic bark in the exhibition is Djawa’s finely crosshatched *Manpiri* design — the catfish — given purely as crosshatching against exiguous dotted ground. The work is buttressed by two pairs of objects bearing a similar patterning, and used in final burial rites. All more recent finely crosshatched barks, with their minute variations and optical shimmer effects, are prefigured in this work: it stems from the same template as all its successors.

A revelation — but a revelation of continuities that have long been clear to those who know the through-lines of tradition and history in North Arnhem Land. Much of the detail explored in this exhibition and its exemplary catalogue are due to the co-operative engagement of the Yolngu collaborator with the researchers, Joe Gumbula, one of the most prominent of Djawa’s 31 sons.

Gumbula believed that study of Western museum and archival holdings of materials from the Yolngu past could help strengthen and preserve his culture. A ceremony to mark a new beginning in joint endeavour between locals and outside researchers was held this past August on Milingimbi, in memory of Gumbula and in the spirit of his desire for “justice to be heard in obligation to the people who have passed”. The exhibition now on view in Sydney serves as an expression of that hope.

*Art from Milingimbi — Taking Memories Back is on show at the AGNSW until Sunday.*