



REBECCA HOSSACK

ART GALLERY

PRESS RELEASE

We are everything all the time always

An exhibition of aboriginal sculpture reflecting the cycle of life and death, curated by Rebecca Hossack.



Hollow Log installation at the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery

This is an exhibition about a place, a space for spirits, and about objects that connect us with the spiritual dimensions of life.

The impetus for the creation of the aboriginal art works in this exhibition was to seek solace and confirmation through ceremony, and to acknowledge the importance of the spirit, not merely in human kind, but in all things.

The effect of these indigenous objects is testament to the universal desire of man to connect with the inexpressible and mysterious.



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Aboriginal Australia is a continent of many nations. Its peoples have different languages, different customs, and different ways of making art; and it would be almost impossible to encompass the full wealth and diversity of aboriginal art in a single exhibition. The focus of this exhibition is on work produced at four communities in – or off - Arnhem Land, in what is known colloquially as the 'Top End' of Australia's Northern Territory. It is an area almost six times larger than the United Kingdom.

All the works, in their different ways, were created to reflect our connection to the great cycle of Life and Death.

I: ELCHO ISLAND:

The Yolngu people of Elcho Island (Galiwin'ku), off the coast of northeast Arnhem Land, have a particular reverence for *Banumbirr*, the Morning Star as the bringer of life. At periods of the year when *Banumbirr* (the planet Venus in Western cosmology) appears in the sky before dawn the Yolgnu conduct their Morning Star Ceremony. As the 'star' becomes visible, the Yolgnu say that she draws behind her a rope that is connected to the island of Bralgu, the final resting place of the dead in their spiritual system. And in their ceremony, through dance and song, and the wielding of a richly painted and feather-bedecked 'Morning Star Pole,' the Yolgnu believe they are able to release the spirits of their dead and communicate with their ancestors.

II: YIRKALA:

The forest of intricately-painted tree trunks that fills the main body of the gallery is made up of *larrakitj*, or ceremonial log-coffins, created in Yolgnu communities in north east Arnhem Land, to return the bones of the dead to the earth.

The trees selected to be *larrakitj* have been naturally hollowed out by termites. Usually harvested after the fires of the dry season, the trunks are stripped of their bark, smoothed and shaped, and then painted, using natural ochres, with the clan-designs of the dead person to be honoured.



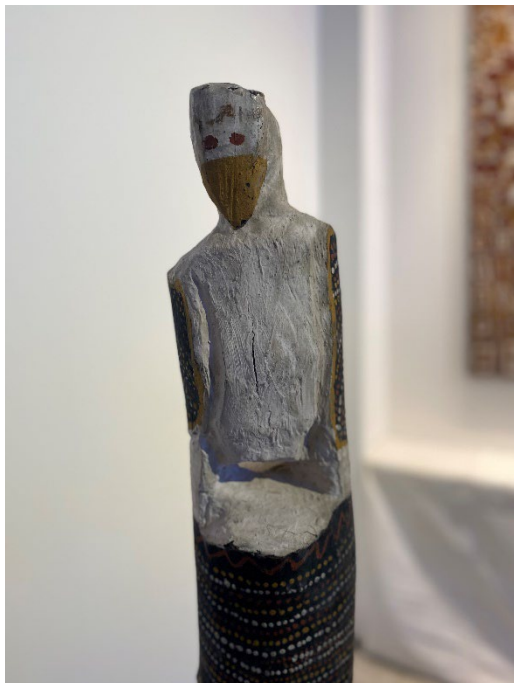
Yimula Mununggurr, *Djapu*, 2023
ochre and fixative on hollow log,
214 x 20 cm

The dry, and disassembled, bones of the deceased are placed into the decorated tree-trunk which – accompanied by dancers richly decorated in kapok down – is then set up at a significant site. And then, over the ensuing years, the *larrakitj* is washed by the wind and rain, and along with the bones of the deceased, returns to the earth from which it came.

III: THE TIWI ISLANDS:

The Pukamani ceremony of the Tiwi People who inhabit Bathurst and Melville Island off the north east coast of Arnhem Land, takes place two to six months after the death of a person: it ensures that the spirit of the deceased will find its way to the spirit world where it will dwell forever.

As part of the ceremony a carved and painted Pukamani pole, or *tutini*, fashioned from ironwood, is placed close to the mounded grave of the deceased. Dancers circle around the *tutini* and, to mark the end of the ceremony, a bark basket, or *tunga*, is placed on top of the pole. The *tutini* is then left to decay in the elements.



Unknown creator, *Tutini pole*, c.1960, carved wooden pole with ochre pigments



Artist Unknown, *Untitled - Tunga*, c.1970, natural earth pigments with binding on bark, 70 x 48 x 28 cm

IV: MANINGRIDA: BABBARRA

Babbarra is a big billabong, or waterhole, near the aboriginal settlement of Maningrida. A sacred women's site, it is the home of two mermaids – or *yawk yawks*. They are sisters, although one is a freshwater spirit the other a salt-water one. They are givers of life. Both sisters can cause people who drink from the waters of the billabong to become pregnant. Such is their power they can even make men pregnant!

The *yawk yawks* of Babbarra billabong inspired the delicately woven pandanus sculptures suspended around the walls of the gallery, the work of Anniebell Marrngamarrnga. These life-giving water spirits bring the eternal forces of creation into the specific present.

Although, as cultural artefacts, morning-star poles, *larrakiti*, *tutini*, and woven pandanus figures were all originally conceived as integrated elements of aboriginal ceremonial life, and have forms and iconographic tropes that date back millennia, the pieces in this exhibition have been created as art-works, for display.

They are works of art made to share culture, to show balanda (white people) a different way of looking at the world: a way that recognises the inter-connectedness, and spiritfulness, of all things, not only on earth, but in the seas and waters, and in the sky above them.

The works follow traditional forms, and use traditional materials. Their creation is time-consuming, and calls for peace, concentration and close co-ordination of hand and eye.



Lena Yarinkura, *Yawk Yawk*, n.d. woven pandanus fibres with ochre pigment, pvc pigment fixative and feathers, 193 x 36 x 20 cm

In the words of the Yolgnu artist Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, creating such works, requires 'deep listening and quiet, still awareness... the stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside. Quiet listening and stillness, dadirri, renews us and makes us whole. There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware. My people are not threatened by silence. They have lived for thousands of years with nature's quietness... We don't like to hurry. There is nothing more important than what we are attending to.'

It is hoped that some of this sensibility will permeate the spirit of visitors to the exhibition.



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