

DOWN UNDER

This week, something extraordinary will happen in Charlottesville: Four exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal Australian art will open in four different venues across town, bringing the total number of such exhibitions currently on view to six. And a seventh will open in mid-February.

Having this many concurrent shows of contemporary Indigenous Australian art in one locale is an extremely rare occurrence outside of Australia, if it's even happened at all, says Henry Skeritt, curator of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of UVA—the only museum outside of Australia dedicated to Indigenous Australian art.

And it's some of "the best Australian contemporary art" at that, adds Skeritt. Many of these artists have won prestigious awards, and their work is collected by some of Australia's major museums (as well as some international celebrities, like comedian Steve Martin). We're talking "major, heavy-hitter artists," says Skeritt.

Taken together, these exhibitions give a broad view of contemporary Indigenous Australian art. Artists of many distinct language groups (of which there are more than 250 across Australia), cultures, ages, and experience are represented. Some live and work in remote communities, others in major cities. Some work with materials and methods that have been used for thousands of years, others work with digital cameras. Their art is often political, engaging topics of identity,



A wealth of Indigenous Australian art comes to Charlottesville this winter

By Erin O'Hare

heritage, race, colonization, sovereignty, globalization, climate change, and resilience. At the same time, these works express a reverence for the wonder and beauty of the natural world.

The shows arrive as catastrophic bush fires are still raging across the Australian continent. Bush fires are not uncommon in Australia, but the current out-of-control blazes, caused at least in part by climate change, have singed tens of millions of acres of land; at least 28 people and an estimated half a billion animals have perished.

Skeritt says that the artists exhibiting in these shows don't live in the areas affected by the fires, but there are plenty of Indigenous Australian artists (including some former Kluge-Ruhe artists-in-residence) who do.

With that in mind, these shows present an opportunity for viewers to ruminate on land, land that is important to the lives, traditions, and art practices of all of the artists here, land that has sustained their peoples for generations, even when it was violently stolen from them—and subsequently abused—by white European colonizers.

Land is spiritually, conceptually, and physically inseparable from these artists and their practices. It is the vital artery running through these bodies of work.

"The Inside World"
The Fralin Museum of Art at UVA

PHOTO: AMY AND JACKSON SMITH

UP ABOVE

Have a word

In discussing their work, many Indigenous Australian artists talk about “Country,” and “Dreaming,” two terms describing concepts that are vital to understanding all of the art in these exhibitions.

Country: A place or places that have deep significance for them and their ancestors over many thousands of years.

Dreaming: The English word “dreaming” is inadequate to explain this vast, complex concept. As described in the Kluge-Ruhe’s permanent installation, the Dreaming is a belief system, a worldview shared by many Indigenous peoples. It is “powerfully connected to individual and collective identity. Individuals are born with unbreakable ties to ancestral beings and particular places for which they are custodians.” It can “refer to the time when ancestral beings created the earth and everything in it, including people, animals, plants and features of the land.” Those beings established kin relationships, art practices, laws, ceremonies, and more. The Dreaming is not marked by Western concepts of chronological time, and these narratives “continue to be passed down through generations in painted designs, ceremonies, and songs. The continuation of these activities keeps culture strong. The Dreaming was there in the beginning, it underlies the present and shapes the future.”

“Munguyhmunguyh (Forever)”

The Rotunda Upper West Room, January 23 – April 5

Kunwinjku artist Gabriel Maralngurra was just a boy when his uncle, the artist Thompson Yulidjirri, took him over the hill to see the rock art paintings of their ancestors. For tens of thousands of years, the Kunwinjku people have painted their Dreamings on rock formations in what is now known as Western Arnhem Land, using the images to educate younger generations on their culture and history.

The sites include many, many paintings of Kunwinjku Dreamings, which go back some 40,000 years, and, as artist Joe Guymala points out, some of the paintings also include images of white people with wagons, which go back about 200 years, to the European colonization of Australia. “The old people thought, what’s this white man? They draw the rifles, shotguns, and knives that the white people brought with them,” Guymala explains.

In the early 1990s, Kunwinjku artists at the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association started painting some of these stories on paper, a more portable medium than rock, as part of a project commissioned by John W. Kluge, in partnership with the arts center.

Maralngurra was president of the Injalak center at the time, and in a letter included in the commission’s published catalog, he and Gunbalanya Community Council chairman Moses Mangiru wrote that one of the goals of the commission was to help viewers of these pieces “develop a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture, our relationship to the Dreaming, and the creation of our clan lands... it is our sincerest hope for the future.”

The commission was an important moment for these artists, says Margo Smith, the longtime director of the Kluge-Ruhe, because “with paper, the artists really had to adjust to painting on a flat surface, but it enabled them to increase their detail, and so you see the development of different styles in painting on paper that [also] included some of the standard [techniques] of rock art” painting, such as hand stencils. Artists would fill their mouths with paint, put their hands up against the rock (or in this case, paper), and blow the pigment around their hands, creating the effect of a sort of starry galaxy around the negative space hand outline.

Once the commission was over, Kunwinjku artists continued sharing their stories on paper, and to commemorate 30 years of the commission and the resulting art historical moment, five of those original 45 pieces will be on display in the West Oval Room of the Rotunda. Two brand new pieces from Maralngurra and Guymala, artists who have incorporated rock painting techniques and intentions into their own works on paper as a direct result of that initial commission, will also be on display.

With this exhibition, “we’re looking forwards and backwards simultaneously,” says Skerritt.

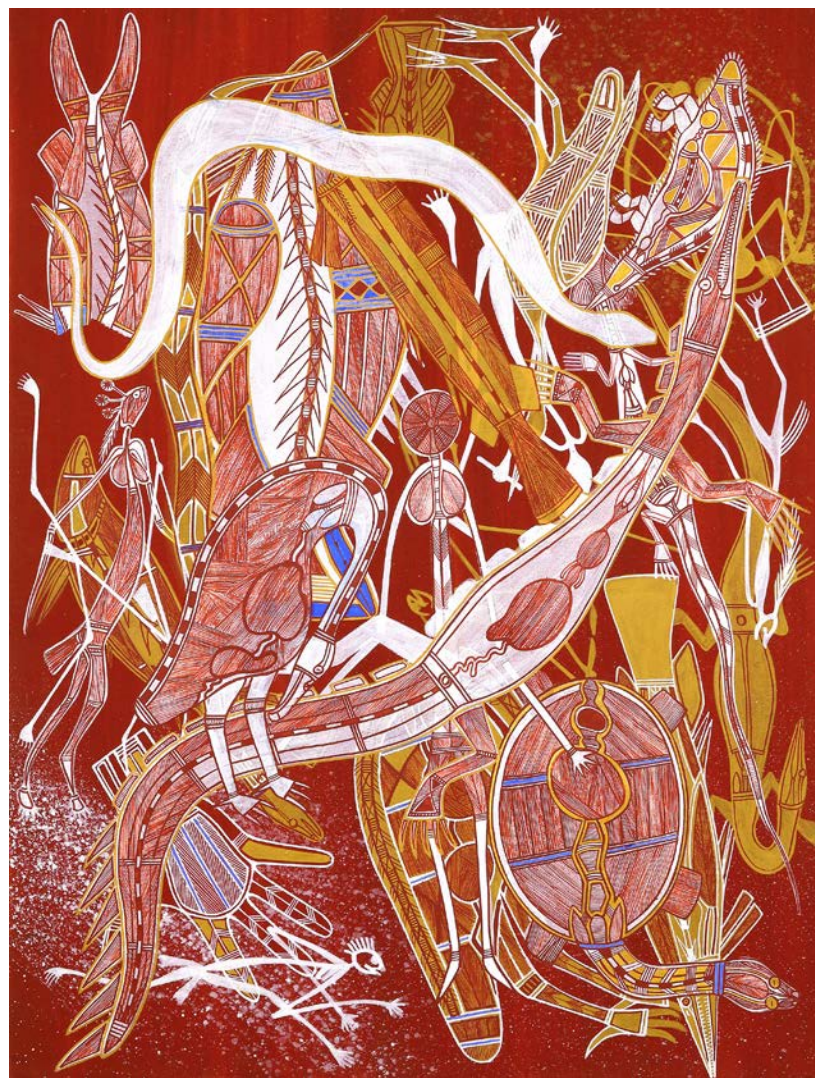
“I’ve got stories to tell the whole world.”

Gabriel Maralngurra

For “Munguyhmunguyh,” Guymala, who usually paints on eucalyptus bark surfaces that he collects and treats himself, has painted on paper Ngalkunburriyaymi (female Water Spirits who guard sacred water holes and Dreaming sites) encircled by Ngalyod (Rainbow Serpent, the most important ancestor spirit in



“Ngalyod dja Ngalkunburriyaymi (Rainbow Serpent and Water Spirit)” 2018 by Joe Guymala
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND INJALAK ARTS



“Kunwardde Bim Kakukyime (Rock Art Style)” 2019 by Gabriel Maralngurra
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND INJALAK ARTS

West Arnhem Land, who appears in a variety of animal forms in Kuwinjku mythology). He used ochre pigments, which he collected from the bush and mixed himself.

“I like to paint for myself, so kids can learn the stories. I want to pass down the stories to my sons, daughters, and grandchildren. Our grandfathers learnt from their fathers and gave this knowledge to us, and I want to share this with the younger generations,” says Guymala, who also wants to inspire young people to paint, so that they, too, can share these stories.

Maralngurra describes his work as “similar to the rock art but different; it comes out of my head.” What’s notable

about Maralngurra’s piece in this show is that it combines a variety of painting traditions in a single image: He uses an X-ray style to paint overlapping mimih spirits (a 50,000-year-old subject) and animals (a 7,000-year-old subject), in combination with ceremonial cross-hatching (made public only in the last 50 years), and colonial influence (European missionaries introduced the bright blue pigment that Maralngurra uses, but does not allow to take over the piece).

“I’ve got stories to tell the whole world,” says Maralngurra, who will be in Charlottesville, along with Guymala, to open the exhibition. “About how it’s done, the painting and the stories and our culture, bininj way.”

“By the Strength of Their Skin”

*Second Street Gallery,
January 24 – March 20*

If you had to pick three of the top artists in Australia at the moment, Nonggirnga, Regina, and Mabel would be pretty high on most people's lists,” says Kluge-Ruhe curator Henry Skerritt about the three artists exhibiting in “By the Strength of Their Skin” at Second Street Gallery.

Nonggirnga Marawili, Regina Pilawuk Wilson, and Mabel Juli are three of Australia's most revered artists (their works are collected in major Australian museums), and each has created new works specifically for this show.

“Each of these women artists approach their art practice through the prism of their Country, their Dreamings, and the everyday expression of living in a place where the spiritual and the quotidian are seamlessly connected,” writes Second Street Gallery curator Kristen Chiacchia in the show's press release.

“The animating tension of Aboriginal art has always been this tension between innovation and tradition,” says Skerritt, who opines that Marawili's works are some of the finest examples of that very thing. She learned to paint on bark in the 1980s, when she was in her 40s, assisting her late husband, Djapu statesman and artist Djutadjuta Mununggurr. After her husband's death, Marawili continued painting the Djapu themes approved by her husband, and, as the Second Street press releases notes, over time came to explore “intuitive subjects and mark making outside the realm of the sacred.” Now a multidisci-

plinary artist living and working at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art center in the Northern Territory, she's known for her bark paintings, larrakitj (memorial poles, including a few on view in “The Inside World”), and prints. Her works articulate how country comes alive, both physically and spiritually, by the movement of natural elements seen and unseen.

Charlottesville audiences may be familiar with Wilson's work—she had a solo show at Second Street in summer 2018. A painter and master weaver, Wilson is also known for her role in the Aboriginal land rights movement. As European whites colonized the land, they forced Indigenous peoples to live on reserves and missions, with strict rules that in many cases sought to slowly dissolve or outright eliminate Indigenous traditions, languages, and cultures. (It is not unlike what European whites did to Indigenous American peoples.) In the early 1970s, Wilson and her husband decided to move off the mission and back to their country (traditional land), starting a community for Ngangikurrungurr people in the Daly River region, with not much more than a tent. During her visit to Charlottesville in June 2018, Wilson explained that they had to leave the mission in order to practice their traditions, their art, their language. Many of her paintings are of weavings, preserving stitches in paint so that they can live on, visible and present for future generations.

Gija artist Juli has been painting since the 1980s, when she settled in Warmun, East Kimberley Western Australia. She was



“Baratjala,” by Nonggirnga Marawili

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BUKU-LARRNGGAY MULKA ART CENTRE

“Shadow Sites”

New City Arts Welcome Gallery January 24 – 30



“Echoes #3: Tjalini” 2019, by Robert Fielding

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MIMILI MAKU ARTS.

On view for just one week at Welcome Gallery, the works of Steaphan Paton and Robert Fielding together demonstrate how modern media such as photography and video have become a vital part of some Indigenous artists' practice.

Through the works in this exhibition, both Paton (a member of the Gunai and Mondero nations) and Fielding (a Western Aranda and Yankunytjatjara artist from Mimili community on APY Lands, who also has Afghan heritage) inspect their cultural identity and history, along with notions of Country, belonging, race, colonialism, and more.

In his artist statement about the three “Echoes” works that will be on view at Welcome Gallery, Fielding writes:

“The objects in these photographs are echoes of the past. With them come the memories of past afflictions upon our land

and culture: the memories of rations, missions, mining, and farming.

“Like manta (earth) continually reclaiming the physical remnants of the past through rust and erosion, Anangu culture continually reclaims its place as part of our landscape. By reshaping echoes of the past into songs of our future, we create new memories, new ways of keeping culture strong.

“Where one sees an oil barrel, I see a fire pit, a place to share stories.

Where one sees a flour bucket, I see the many secrets we carry and hide.

Where one sees a water tank, I see shelter and protection.

Where one sees desecrated land, I see a resilient future.

“The words sandblasted into the rusted surfaces expose our radiant and unblemished truth that stands strong against the test of time and change. We have absorbed the past, and made it our future.”



"Marranyji & Jiyiriny," by Mabel Juli
COURTESY ARTIST AND WARMUN ART CENTRE



Regina Pilawuk Wilson
PHOTO BY CASSIE DE COLLING

about 50 years old at the time, and two of the community's celebrated elder artists encouraged her to make artwork. According to the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's website, Juli has effectively incorporated pinks, purples, and greens into the Gija color palette, which was previously traditionally comprised of ochres. Her large-scale works often feature a few icons or symbols (say, a crescent moon, a four-pointed star, or a bird) on a solid color surface; they may appear simple, but they tell rich stories. For many years, she painted Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) creation narratives of her country, Darrajayn, but more recently, she's broadened her practice to include works about language conservation and climate change.



Land of contrasts



John Kluge

But...how?

How did Charlottesville end up with the only museum outside of Australia dedicated to Indigenous Australian art? A billionaire was moved by an art show.

John W. Kluge—at the time one of the richest men in America, and also an Albemarle County resident—saw the landmark "Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia" exhibition at the Asia Society Galleries in New York City in 1988. Inspired by the show, Kluge made his first of several trips to Australia in 1989, and he began collecting and commissioning works from Aboriginal artists.

In 1993, Kluge purchased the collection of the late Ed Ruhe, a University of Kansas English professor who began collecting Aboriginal art during a professorship in Australia in 1965. Ruhe purchased work directly from artists, community art centers, and Aboriginal art dealers (a few of these pieces are currently on view in a small exhibition in the Brown Science and Engineering Library at UVA), and amassed a library of related books and articles.

In 1997, Kluge donated the bulk of these collections to UVA, and the museum opened in its current location—in an old mansion on Pantops—in 1999, where it serves as a global hub for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

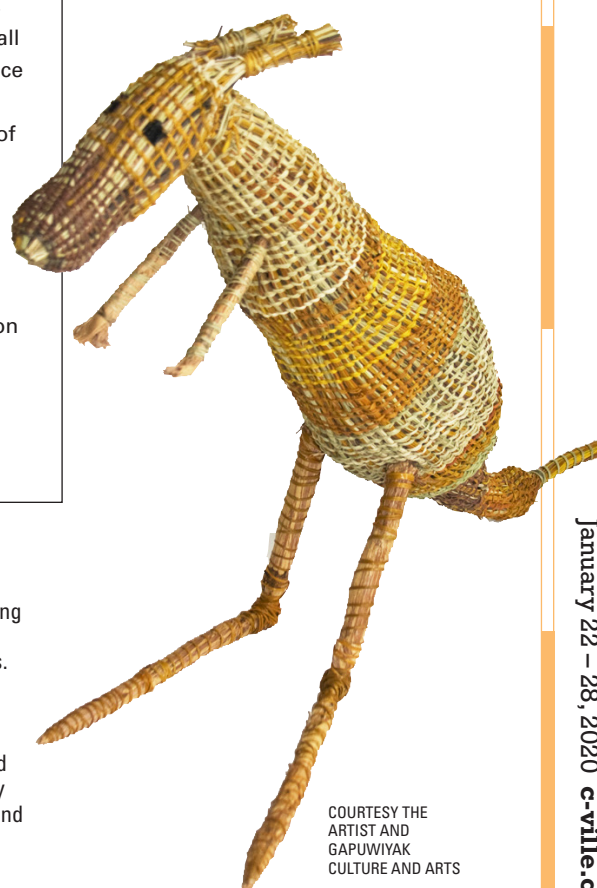
There's quite a bit of diversity among Australia's Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) peoples. Today, there are more than 250 distinct language groups across the continent, which is slightly smaller than the continental United States and has a varied geography comprised of deserts, temperate and tropical forests, and snow-capped mountain ranges.

"With Her Hands: Women's Fiber Art from Gapuwiyak"

Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, Through April 5

Fiber works made by women have "historically been regarded as craft and devalued in the art world," says the Kluge-Ruhe's Smith, who's also an anthropologist, and "With Her Hands" pushes back against that idea, with pieces that demonstrate the artistry that goes into such work. Twenty-five women from the community of Gapuwiyak, in Australia's Northern Territory, created these 100 diverse pieces, which include necklaces made from shells, seeds, and nuts; mats; a variety of baskets made from natural and dyed pandanus palm; ceremonial headbands and armbands; and a selection of sculpture. All of the works are part of the Kluge-Ruhe's collection, and the show was curated by six women of color working through the Mellon Indigenous Arts Initiative.

Together, the pieces in "With Her Hands" speak to the rich history of fiber work in Aboriginal cultures but also "to women's lives today in Aboriginal communities," says Smith. The works demonstrate each individual artist's reverence for tradition and inclination toward innovation. For example, artist Anna Ramata Malibirr discovered that she could boil emerald green crepe paper (not something her pre-colonial ancestors would have had access to) to dye her fibers.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAPUWIYAK CULTURE AND ARTS



Joe Guymala and Gabriel Maralngurra

PHOTO BY AMY AND JACKSON SMITH

“The Inside World”

The Fralin Museum of Art at UVA, January 24 – May 24

The largest of these shows, “The Inside World: Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Memorial Poles” presents the work of more than 50 artists from the remote Aboriginal communities of Kunbarrllanjja (or Gunbalanya), Maningrida, Milingimbi Island, and Yirrkala, all located in Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory. On view in the upstairs gallery at The Fralin Museum of Art, “The Inside World” is more than a large-scale installation. It’s a journey.

“There are some things that unite the peoples of Arnhem Land,” Henry Skerritt writes in the exhibition catalog. “One is their belief that everything in existence has an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside meaning,’” and that together they “[operate] as a continuum that structure the entire universe.”

“Traditionally, memorial poles like those in ‘The Inside World’ would have been used as ossuaries: the final resting place for the bones of the dead,” Skerritt says.

“The poles would be made from the trunk of a carefully selected eucalyptus tetradonta (stringybark tree) that had been naturally hollowed out by termites. The most perfectly cylindrical trunk would be selected and its bark stripped so that it could be painted with powerful clan designs that would identify and protect the spirit of the deceased.”

But in recent years, writes Wukun Wanambi, a Yolngu artist, “the elders have given us authority to use [memorial poles] in our art.”

Aesthetic use of memorial poles really began in 1988, with “The Aboriginal Memorial” exhibition at the Biennale of Sydney, says Margo Smith. Artist Djon Mundine organized the installation of 200 painted poles from 43 artists from the community of Ramingining in Arnhem Land, one pole for each year of European settlement, commemorating all of the Indigenous people who died defending their

lands and their cultures from colonizers. (The highly political installation is now a permanent exhibition in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.)

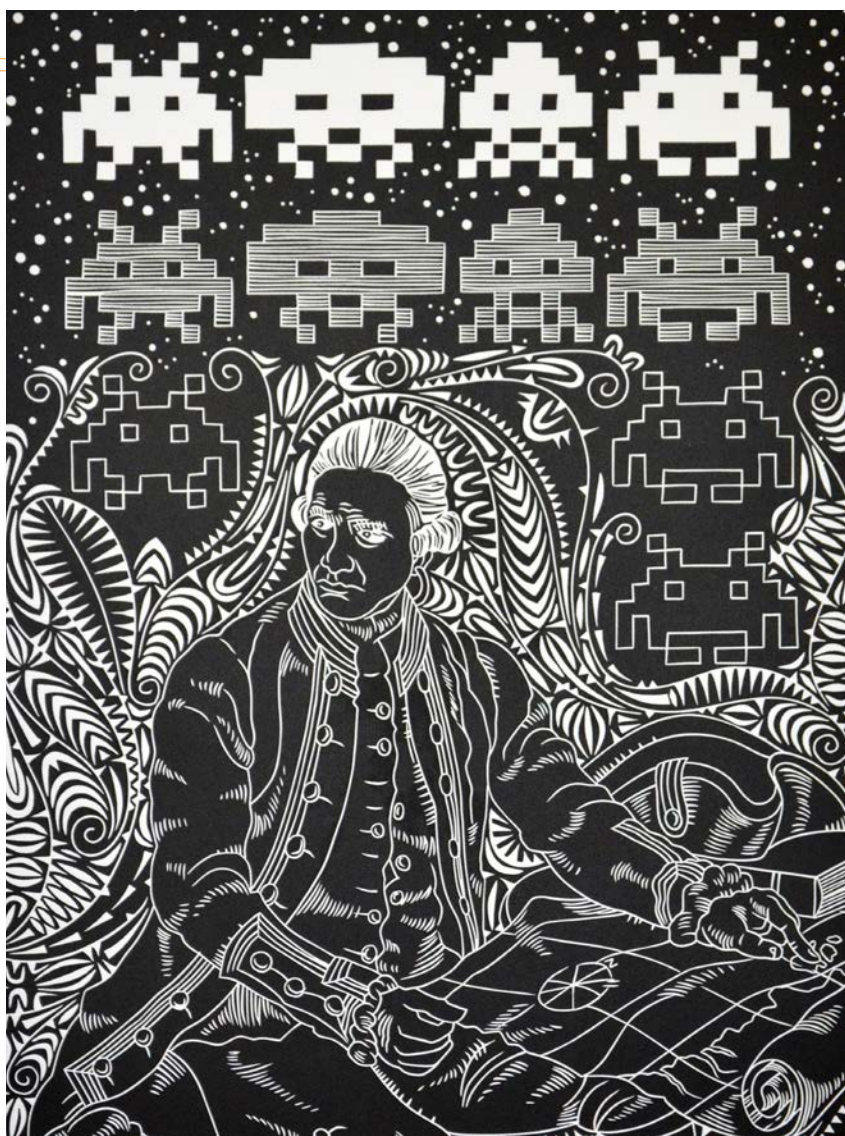
Since then, memorial poles—called larrakitj, lorrkkon, or dupun—that have been painted as art and not used as ossuaries, have been regular fixtures in Aboriginal art shows around the globe.

“The reason why the old people have given this authority is so that we—the Yolngu people—can maintain our culture and pass it on to the generations that come after us, to build up their strength and wisdom,” adds Wanambi. “But larrakitj can’t stand by himself: larrakitj’s identity comes from its family, and this attaches it to our culture and Law. Balanda (non-Aboriginal people) need to understand the whole structure—not just the art part—or they will never understand.”

And so, the 112 poles in “The Inside World” (at other venues, the traveling

exhibition has shown 99 poles from the Debra and Dennis Scholl collection; this iteration also includes 13 from the Kluge-Ruhe’s collection) are grouped by artist, and then by location, throughout the gallery space. With the walls painted black, the objects spotlighted and anchored in glittering black coal slag, eco-acoustics recorded in the bush floating through the air, viewers (the vast majority of us Balanda) will symbolically traverse time and the Australian landscape in a motion to begin to understand the stories contained within, and projected by, these groups of poles.

“Llarrakitj need their family because it gives them strength and power,” says Wanambi. “One larrakitj on its own is like nothing—it doesn’t mean anything—but if you put three or four together in one group it is like a family: they have the strength of the family ties from that area.”



"By virtue of this act I hereby take possession of this land" 2017 by Brian Robinson
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MOSSENSON GALLERIES

"Tithuyil: Moving With the Rhythm of the Stars"

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, February 11 – May 31

Brian Robinson often says that he was born with a pencil in his hand. "No surface was sacred for me...I drew on pretty much everything from the kitchen table to household walls, to windows to the back fence...pretty much everywhere, and so that creativity continued to grow and flourish."

Robinson is of the Maluyligal and Wuthani tribal groups of the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula, and a descendant of the Dayak people of Malaysia.

"The artworks presented in 'Tithuyil' look at life in the Torres Strait with a bit of a twist," Robinson says. He writes in his artist statement that these etchings and linocut prints "present an intoxicating worldview, one where iconic works of classical art and popular sources from global culture are co-opted into the spirit world of the Islander imagination. Wise-eyed sea creatures, muscular warriors, stars in the heavens, broad-petaled flowering plants, and hollow-eyed skulls sweep through his works. Interwoven amongst this realm of references to his island home and the surrounding sea waters and islands of the Torres Strait, are the tokens and talismans of

a parallel life within a global culture of superheroes, comic characters, and ancient Classical mythologies."

In juxtaposing these seemingly disparate visual icons with a delicately struck balance of humor and seriousness, Robinson captures the viewer's curiosity, requiring a close look to parse out the relationships among these icons.

About a dozen of Robinson's works will be on view in this show. One of them, "By Virtue of This Act," is rendered in white line on a black surface that stylistically recalls ancient Greek vase painting. At its center is James Cook, the British Royal Navy captain whose ship brought the first Europeans to the coast of the continent now known as Australia in 1770. Cook's arrival precipitated extraordinary violence, and eventual colonization, committed by European Whites against the land's native peoples.

Scrolling Torres Strait aquatic flora designs surround Cook as he charts a course on the map, navigating by the stars in the sky above him—pixelated alien creatures from the 1978 arcade game "Space Invaders"—as he plans to invade the space of Indigenous Australian peoples.

"Ngayulu Nguraku Ninti (The Country I Know)"

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, Through February 2

Country is the subject of this series of paintings by Barbara Moore and Sharon Adamson, two artists who live in the Amata community in the APY Lands in northwestern South Australia, a geographically vast but sparsely populated area made up of numerous unique Aboriginal communities. Both women paint very personal expressions of the natural world that has nourished them and sustained their peoples for tens of thousands of years.

Moore, an Anmatyerre artist who started painting later in her life, in 2003, maintains a devoted art practice while also working full-time as a senior health worker at an Amata clinic. She paints large-scale, colorful works that convey the great variety and vivacity of the landscape and her relationship to it. The circles in her works represent water holes in the desert rock formations—vital sources of drinking water for the people who live among and travel desert lands.

Two of her paintings in the show are rendered in grayscale. During an artist talk at the Kluge-Ruhe in November 2019, Moore, who was in town for a residency along with Adamson, explained why she departed from her usual palette for these particular works: They're of the nighttime.

Like Moore, Adamson paints at Tjala Arts center in Amata, where she's also employed. And though the two artists' works share a certain fluid dynamism, they are distinct.

Adamson, a young, emerging artist, grew up watching her great-grandfather paint Rainbow Serpent stories, and she's chosen to carry on not just his methods of mixing pigments, but his preferred subject. In many Aboriginal cultures, the Rainbow Serpent is a creating deity regarded as protector of the land, its people, and sources of life (such as rivers and water holes); if enraged, the Rainbow Serpent can also be a destructive force. Adamson usually paints these momentous stories on rather large canvases, but here she shows three smaller—but still considerable—works that better fit the Kluge-Ruhe's limited wall space.



Sharon Adamson
PHOTO BY TOM COGILL



Barbara Moore
PHOTO BY TOM COGILL