There was yet another aspect to how creativity was debated at the time, which certainly bothered Nolan and possibly played a part in how Boyd conceived these paintings. He alluded to it when he summed up: “The whole series of them is about a painter painting in the landscape, and exclusively an Australian landscape.” Expatriate Australians of Boyd’s generation had to cope with the nationalist idea that they owed their international success to Australia. Their reaction to this favourite theme of journalism was the same as creative women and indigenous artists have when their success is credited to their gender or race. If creativity is to be evaluated by factors outside the field of creativity, its very basis is called into question. In the columns of some 1960s newspapers the terms of the creative fellowships acquired a flavour of bringing them home, as if the university, with antipodean condescension, were repatriating Australia’s prodigal sons so that they could renew their creativity. Nolan reacted strenuously against this concept, spending most of the period of his fellowship in neighbouring countries, and explaining that Australia would be most clearly seen in the image refracted by its northern neighbours. The idea that the painter was merely a tool for the creative expression of nation, race or gender did not please Boyd either. In 1965, when asked by Hal Missingham, ‘what do you want for your art?’, he had finally replied that he would like to be free of the “Australian” (national) and “Expressionist” (art movement) labels. He did not deny personal responsibility; what he produced was ‘mine, if I can make it that way’, ‘but … I’d like it to be a much more universal sort of thing’ and ‘much less typed … just … good painting rather than … something that comes from somewhere.’

* * * * *

Narrajin Maymuru’s fellowship followed seven years later, in August 1978. Nearly seven years had intervened between Nolan’s fellowship and Boyd’s. The interval was sufficient for changes to take place that affected the way the three artists thought about their work. The trajectory of Boyd’s and Nolan’s careers followed a path between Australia and the art centres of the West. In 1965 Nolan bore the brunt of a backlash by young artists against the achievements of the postwar expatriates. Boyd, in 1972-73, addressed the issues that appeared to threaten the creativity of the
generation after that. For Narritjin the context was different again. He came to Canberra on the eve of a Renaissance in Australian Aboriginal art (a revolution that continues). By and large, Nolan and Boyd had the same career: born three years apart, they lived and worked in Melbourne where they had an early success. Moving to London in the 1950s they had a similar international success. They were friends. Narritjin, on the other hand, worked in the far north of Australia, outside the community of Western art, in an enclave of art production that was much better known outside Australia than inside. Canberra meant, for Boyd and Nolan, the inspired funding of research and education that had been Robert Menzies’ greatest achievement during his Prime Ministership. Canberra, to Narritjin, was the political ground of a diplomatic effort to bring about a change in his peoples’ status.

Narritjin Maymuru: “Artistfella”

When Narritjin Maymuru, together with his son Banapana, was awarded a Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University in 1978, it was the culmination of a lifetime’s achievement as an artist. It also provided another opportunity for him to engage with the wider Australian community in persuading them of the value of the Yolngu way of life to ensure that their rights were recognised. This essay provides a brief overview of Narritjin’s life and then enters into one of his paintings as a way of introducing readers to the ways in which meaning is created through his paintings and the complex representational processes involved.

Encountering others

Narritjin was born in Yolngu country to the north of Blue Mud Bay around the time of the First World War. Eastern Arnhem Land remained beyond the colonial frontier for more than another decade. Occasional clashes took place on the periphery, a few visitors came from outside, but on the whole Yolngu remained in reasonable control of their own world. The first European to stay for any length of time on the east Arnhem Land coast was Fred Gray, who set up a camp to collect and process trepang on Caledon Bay in 1932. He had previously been a bodyguard to the Malay captain of the pearling fleet at Broome, but always had the
demeanour of a quietly spoken English gentleman. Before leaving Darwin in his boat, Fred had been warned of the warlike nature of the Yolngu and in particular of the lethal nature of their iron bladed shovel nosed spears. Fred Gray told me that early on in his stay at Caledon Bay he heard the clink of metal behind him and his blood ran cold. Turning around anticipating warriors with shovel nosed spears, he instead saw Narritjin cleaning the dishes that they had just eaten from. While the story itself may have been modified to make it into a parable, it says much about Narritjin’s willingness to engage with visitors to his land from the very beginning. It may have been chance and his own curiosity that set him out on this path, but Yolngu also have another explanation. Wonggu, the great leader of the Djapu clan who for long resisted the occupation of his land by outsiders, recognised Narritjin’s ability and encouraged him to act almost as a liaison officer with the newcomers.

In Fred Gray’s words, Narritjin immediately ‘put himself on’ and for many years worked in turn for him or for the missionaries who subsequently established the settlement of Yirrkala on what became the Gove peninsula. Narritjin led an exciting life in these early years of European colonisation. He spent some time in Darwin as a witness in the trial of the Yolngu who were convicted of killing the crew of a Japanese fishing lugger in Caledon Bay in 1932. Fred Gray remembers walking the streets of Darwin with him, and in particular that Narritjin took every opportunity to teach him to speak the Yolngu language. During the war he worked for the mission and on one occasion hitched a ride on a naval patrol vessel the Patricia Cam from Elcho Island back to Yirrkala. The boat was sunk by Japanese bombers off the Wessel Islands in January 1943. Narritjin went down with the boat but managed to free himself and played a major role in rescuing the survivors. Sadly, the Reverend Leonard Kentish was taken away in a Japanese sea plane and beheaded on Dobu in the Aru Islands. A report on the sinking notes that at the time of the bombing Kentish was being taught to speak Yolngu by Narritjin. Teaching other people about the Yolngu way of life and Yolngu culture was to be one of the continuing themes of Narritjin’s life.

Becoming an artist

After the war Narritjin’s career as an artist developed both within Yolngu society as a ceremonial leader, and outside as a performer, bark painter and sculptor. The earliest known paintings of his were collected
by the anthropologist Ronald Berndt in 1946. He was one of the main artists who worked for Charles Mountford in 1948 and 1952. These early works are now nearly all in national collections. He made very few paintings for sale from the mid 1950s until 1960. According to the missionary Doug Tuffin, Narritjin was dissatisfied with the returns from bark painting and worked at other jobs on the mission. As a consequence he did not form part of the group of artists led by Mawalan Marika and Mungurrawuy Yunupingu who, in the late 1950s, produced the superb series of large bark paintings commissioned by Tony Tuckson and Stuart Scougall for the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Indeed Tuffin in this case reports that Narritjin at the time disapproved of the large scale of the paintings, arguing that they were out of proportion with the human body that had previously been the measure for the size of sacred paintings. However by the time of Tuckson's last visit Narritjin had begun painting again and he too began to produce works of considerable size.

The early 1960s was the time when Yolngu art works began to have an impact on the outside world, and Narritjin himself became fully engaged in the process. The Reverend Edgar Wells built a new church at Yirrkala in 1962, and on Narritjin's suggestion two panels representing the sacred paintings of the Yolngu clans from the region were made to stand on either side of the altar. Yolngu at this time had also become aware of the threat to their land from mining exploration. Yirrkala was situated at the heart of one of the world's great bauxite deposits. Following a visit in 1963 from two labour Members of Parliament, Kim Beazley senior and Gordon Bryant, two copies of a petition mounted on separate sheets of painted bark were sent by Yolngu to the Commonwealth Parliament. The designs on the final petition were painted by Narritjin. In that same year Narritjin led a group of Yolngu dancers on a tour of Melbourne and Sydney organised by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust. It was on this visit that Narritjin went to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and saw the Yolngu paintings exhibited in an institution devoted to art. The experience had a great impact on him since it revealed the high value that was given to art by Europeans, and he felt a sense of achievement from the fact that Yolngu art works were exhibited in the same institution. There has been much controversy as to whether Indigenous artists have a similar concept of art to European artists. As far as Yolngu artists are concerned there is no evidence that this has ever been a problem.

From the 1960s until his death in 1982 Narritjin saw himself as a practicing artist. The award of a Creative Arts Fellowship at the
Australian National University in 1978 jointly with his son Banapana was one of the highlights of his career. He referred to himself as an ‘artistfella’, a word that conveys to me the idea of a person whose life revolved around his art. He was always at work, and one particular image of him is indelibly fixed in my mind. Late at night, when others had gone to sleep, Narritjin would be there on his concrete veranda, sitting on a blanket, bent over a sheet of ‘bark, resting on one elbow, systematically infilling a painting with cross hatching, eyes straining in the glow of a bare light-bulb suspended above his head.

Into the paintings

Narritjin was deeply schooled in the traditions of Yolngu art but, as with his contemporaries, his paintings developed in interaction with the growing market for Aboriginal art. He painted to earn money and gain recognition for his work, but he also painted as a means of teaching people about Yolngu beliefs and persuading them of the value of his way of life. Yolngu art is an expressive medium and a means of knowing about the world that can be used for many different purposes, from transporting the souls of the dead, to asserting the rights of a clan, to teaching about history, to marking any special event. At the centre of Yolngu art is the creation of meaning. Narritjin developed his art in two different but complementary directions, representing Yolngu myth and ceremony in figurative narrative paintings and condensing meanings into highly complex dense imagery, sometimes apparently entirely geometric in form. The processes of abstraction can be seen working their way across his entire oeuvre rather than being expressed in a particular individual painting.

Narritjin was one of the pioneers of the episodic genre of Yolngu paintings in which the details of a myth were developed in figurative form with a series of episodes of the myth being integrated into the structure of the paintings as a whole. Precursors of these paintings can be seen in some of the earliest paintings he produced for Ronald Berndt. While Yolngu sacred paintings — paintings that are made on the bodies of initiates — are predominantly geometric in form, they are in fact condensed forms of narratives that are sung in accompanying song cycles, danced out in ceremonial performances and experienced through following ancestral journeys while travelling through the landscape that they created. The narrative paintings combine elements of the sacred
paintings with a figurative tradition of Yolngu art — used sparingly in the sacred paintings but which predominated in the more secular art of the bark huts — in order to produce narrative accounts of the journeys of ancestral beings, mythological events and associated ceremonial performances.5

In Narritjin's case the narrative paintings reached their most developed form in representing a series of semi-sacred stories, moral tales centred on Djet the sea eagle and Bamabama, a trickster spirit being. The central theme of his 1967 painting *Djet, the Sea Eagle at Ngärrir in Baniyala* [Plate 26, and illus. this page] is the story of the transformation of a greedy boy into a sea eagle. The boy Djet was camping at Ngärrirwuy on Blue Mud Bay with his father and grandfather. While the latter prepared for a fishing trip, Djet collected sandcrabs and, using them as bait, caught some fish for himself. He cooked the fish and began to eat them. His father asked for a share but the boy refused to give any up and consumed the lot. The men then went out to sea in their canoe to the reefs off shore and came back with a catch of parrotfish (*yambirrkul*). The boy asked for his share, but to teach him a lesson they refused to give him any. The boy then began to cry and lose his temper. He became apoplectic with rage. He jumped up and down and his skin began to feel itchy. He scratched his skin, and where he scratched feathers grew. Gradually he transformed into the form of a bird. His father and maternal grandfather too changed into birds in order to join him, and when his mother and grandmother returned they too changed, becoming an emu and a crow respectively.

The painting *Djet at Ngärrir* can be read as a representation of the events that took place. The bottom panel shows the men preparing to go out fishing. We can see a spear thrower and fish-spear, paddles and the boat. The man on the left is making a length of rope from tree bark. In the panel above to the left the women are shown with their dilly bag and digging stick out collecting yams. Other panels include images of fish and sand crabs, a reef heron that the men saw fishing on a rock off shore, different kinds of spears, the emu and crow. The central ellipse represents the fire in which the men cooked the fish and the anvil shapes at either end the smoke that is rising from the fire. The central story of the transformation of Djet into a sea eagle is represented in a vertical sequence on the left of the fire and surmounting all are images of the eagles with their talons extended.

The complexity of the imagery, however, suggests that we have only begun to interpret and appreciate the painting. Although it can be read as
a linear narrative its structure suggests quite otherwise. The painting is centred around the elliptical image of the fire and different components seem almost to circle around it and recur in different positions. The painting conveys the sense of movement and chaos as the world is turned upside down, as spears are thrown, as boats are tossed about in the waves, as tempers rise and as shapes change. But there is also a stability to the painting. The painting is about a place, Ngārriwuy, where it is possible today to see the casuarina trees on the shore under which the spirit men prepared to go fishing (top panel), the boat is marked by a depression in the dunes and the boy Djet can be seen transformed into a rock on the shore where the reef herons fish to this day. The painting moves between these places.

However the painting also alludes to the connected mythology of the *yingapungapu* sand sculpture and a set of practices associated with Yolngu mortuary rituals. The central ellipse is the shape of the *yingapungapu*. *Yingapungapu* sand sculptures are used in burial ceremonies to contain the pollution associated with death. They are made to contain the temporary shelter in which a dead body is placed or they may be constructed after the burial to perform a series of purificatory rites — smoking the participants and ceremonially washing them so that they can resume ordinary life. The original sand sculpture was made by ancestral women, the Wuradilagu, who interacted with spirit people such as Djet and his parents and grandparents. The Wuradilagu used to bury the remains of the fish that they had eaten in a scooped out elliptical hollow in the sand. When one of their spirit brothers was drowned out at sea, his boat was overwhelmed in the storm, they laid his body out in a sand sculpture of a similar shape. In burial ceremonies the events of the past are acted out in imagery appropriate to death, the fate of the soul and the purification of the living. The storm at sea, for example, provides the context for washing the participants, and cooking the fish they caught in the fire introduces the smoking ceremony.

A multiplicity of sub themes is played out. A key image is that of the daily cleansing of the beach from all signs of activities of the day. The fish remains that are left on the sand are eaten by maggots and scavenging sand crabs. Birds of the foreshore then eat the maggots, and at the end of the cycle the tide comes in and washes the beach clean. To Yolngu these images are signs of renewal but also signify the process of washing away painful memories of the dead. Sorrow abates just as the tide sweeps away the footprints in the sand.
The mythology of the *yingapungapu* provides a different interpretative perspective on the painting. The anvil shapes represent the clouds out at sea, a harbinger of death, a sign of the gathering storm. The boat is on its side, the paddles are floating free, the sand crabs are stretching out their limbs, and the dashed pattern represents the maggots and food debris. It can be seen now that the central figure of the *yingapungapu* accumulates a multiplicity of references: it is the hearth where the fish are cooked, it is the scooped out hollow where the fish remains are placed, it has the shape of the boat that the spirit men used and that was overturned in the storm and it is the shape of the sand sculpture used in burial ceremonies. It has many other meanings too. We can see how, in this painting, Narritjin develops elements of stories in a narrative fashion while simultaneously condensing meanings in particular symbols or representations. His paintings often include a series of visual puns or extremely condensed images which, when unpacked, reveal a series of symbolic interconnections that lead to the metaphysical heart of the Yolngu world view.

The Djet paintings belong to the most public level of Yolngu art. They are illustrations of cautionary tales — instructional yet entertaining. Yet as is the case with all Yolngu art, the sacred is always continuous with the profane, the outside always leads inwards. Many of Narritjin’s paintings were variations on the sacred paintings of his Manggali clan country of Djarrakpi, centred on a lagoon set behind the steep coastal dunes of Cape Shield. The paintings are maps of the mythological topography of the landscape and its origins in the actions of the ancestral beings who made it the spiritual inheritance of the Manggali clan. The land was created by the *marrngu* (possum) and *malwiya* (emu) ancestors, led by the *guwak* (koel cuckoo). The structure of the landscape can be represented entirely in geometric form [see Plates 15, 16 and detail Plate 17], but Narritjin usually marked particular places with figurative representations associated with them. The lake is where the *malwiya* scratched about looking for water, the native cashew tree at the head of the lake is where the *guwak* rested. Yet it is the conceptualisations underlying the geometric elements that generate the diversity of Yolngu art. Narritjin would always stress the importance of the *marwat* — the brush of human hair — that creates the final effect, emphasising the role of the mind in art. The background patterns that lie between the figurative representations are the designs set by the ancestral beings. Each is unique to a place — they are the bones of clan, the centre of its identity. And it is the cross hatched infill, painted as
the final act with the marwat, that creates the effect of bir'yun (shimmering brilliantly), endowing the paintings with power.

Yolngu art involves a continual dialogue between the expressive and the representational. While guided by an ancestral template that connects it to particular places, the artwork is always relevant to the present moment and provides a surface for reflection. Towards the end of my first long stay at Yirrkala Narritjin produced a beautiful painting of the Marawili sacred object. The designs on it represented the waters of the lake at Djarrakpi. The lake is a source of conception spirits of the Manggalili clan. Times were difficult. The mining town of Nhulunbuy had been established and alcohol was beginning to affect the community. His oldest son had recently died and he was deeply troubled by the direction in which the Yolngu world was going. He spent hours infilling the lake, creating an intricate pattern within the overall effect of the design. The pattern was irregular and black lines, rarely used in cross hatching, intruded at intervals. Looking at the effect he had produced he said: ‘you can see in the lake, the good and the bad mixed together, you never can be sure how things will turn out.’

When Narritjin took up his creative art fellowship at the ANU he saw it as an opportunity to teach people about his culture in the political heart of Australia. He loved teaching as he loved painting, whether he was teaching students at the ANU about the significance of his art or teaching his own children and those of related clans about the principles of Yolngu art.