

# 6. Categories of 'Old' and 'New' in Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting

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## Introduction

This chapter compares two instances of development in the market for bark painting in western Arnhem Land at the towns of Oenpelli (Kunbarlanya) and Maningrida, east of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. The intention is to compare the impacts of the agency of art collectors with that of the artists on the developing market for bark paintings, including a consideration of the entanglements of art creation and its respective intellectual frames in intercultural circumstances. In particular, I examine the effects of western categories used to define the bark paintings and how this in turn shapes the translation of their meaning in different periods. In addition, western curatorial perspectives of the art have influenced the expectations of the market and thus the trajectory of market development in each locale.

Theoretical conversations of the western art world often play out with little regard for the non-western artist's perspective. Western concepts of 'fine art' obscure the fact that non-western artists have a strong understanding of the historical circumstances of their art production, of what the works mean in the context of their ever-increasing engagements with the market, while possessing local theories of aesthetic value. Art history and anthropology as western disciplines of thought are now required to be reflective of their own categories, and to acknowledge the existence of a multiplicity of alternate histories of arts in the world context.

## Spencer at Oenpelli

Baldwin Spencer travelled to Oenpelli in 1912 and his collection of bark paintings, made with the help of Paddy Cahill, brought this art to world prominence.<sup>1</sup> Spencer worked with Kakadu-speaking artists and with a group called the Kulunglutji from further east, who are most likely to have been

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1 Spencer 1914, 1928. See also Mulvaney 1985, 2004.

Kunwinjku-speaking people. After Spencer was in touch with them, they moved to settle in Oenpelli. A Professor of Biology at Melbourne University and Honorary Director of the National Museum of Victoria,<sup>2</sup> Spencer was supported by the Commonwealth Government to conduct fieldwork in the Northern Territory as Special Commissioner and Chief Protector of Aborigines and to report on their needs. To this end, he conducted fact-finding visits across the Northern Territory as well as extended visits to a number of communities to conduct ethnographic fieldwork and make collections of material culture. At the time of his visit, Oenpelli was a pastoral enterprise run by Paddy Cahill, whose relationships with local groups greatly facilitated Spencer's research. Spencer collected around 50 bark paintings at Oenpelli in 1912. Cahill worked as intermediary, sending another 110 artworks to Melbourne between 1912 and 1920. The bark paintings, along with a major collection of magnificent basketry, ceremonial objects and personal adornment, were eventually donated to the National Museum of Victoria.

Trained in England in social evolutionary theory, Spencer was a key field researcher in Australia who worked closely with mentors in England who assisted in the rapid publication of his work.<sup>3</sup> Social theorists such as EB Tylor and James George Fraser praised his work, undertaken in association with local compatriot, the postmaster, Frank Gillen. Spencer and Gillen's publication *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* was facilitated by Fraser and found an eager world audience.

In the social evolutionary models promulgated by these researchers, there were three stages to the ascent of man: 'savagery' to 'barbarism' to 'civilisation' (an intentional echo of the 'stone age', 'bronze age', 'iron age' stages of Europe discussed in the chapter by Harry Allen). In this schema, Australian Aborigines were at the lowest rung. The view was that by conducting field research in Australia, researchers were effectively 'stepping back in time' to research the origins of Europeans. Such theorists of human development considered Aborigines to be bereft of religion and viewed their material culture as only fractionally distinct from unworked natural materials.

Through his research in central Australia, Spencer developed a particular theory that Aborigines were people possessed of magic in a pre-religious state.<sup>4</sup> He concluded that the elaborate ceremonies that he witnessed in central Australia were directed at the magical increase of food animals. Similarly, when Spencer encountered the spectacular rock art and bark painting of the

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2 By proclamation of the *Museums Act 1983* (Vic), the National Museum of Victoria and the Industrial and Technological Museum of Victoria (later known as the Science Museum of Victoria) were amalgamated to form what is currently known as Museum Victoria.

3 Mulvaney 1981: 62.

4 Mulvaney 1981: 62.

Oenpelli region, he interpreted them as an expression of this concern for food.<sup>5</sup> For example, he understood the x-ray detailing of the pictures as related to the hunter's knowledge of food cuts that are good to eat (see Figure 6.1).



**Figure 6.1: A kangaroo painted in x-ray style, Gaagudju people, western Arnhem Land, 1994.**

Source: Paddy Cahill Collection, reproduced courtesy Museum Victoria (x19917).

He interpreted the major Muraian (Mardayin) and Ober (Wubarr) ceremonies that he witnessed as primarily ensuring the supply of food species through magical means.<sup>6</sup>

In his 1914 publication *The Native Tribes of the Northern Territory*, there is very little information about the process Spencer used to collect the bark paintings. Rather, the rock art of Oenpelli is introduced in the chapter entitled 'decorative art', despite the fact that the chapter text refers to the stories for bark paintings without explanation of their connection to the rock art.<sup>7</sup> One might speculate that publication of the details of his collecting activity were not included in his work as they would have undermined the momentousness of his publication as a revelation of the most 'primitive' art in the world – supposedly untouched by the western world. Yet, Spencer provides illustrations and an interpretation for 15 bark paintings in this publication, concluding that these works represent the 'highest artistic level' among Australian Aborigines.<sup>8</sup>

5 Spencer 1928: 810.

6 Spencer 1914: 187–188.

7 Spencer 1914: 432–433.

8 Spencer 1914: 439.

In respect to the barks, Spencer's focus was their link backwards in time to the Stone Age tradition of rock art. In this scheme, there is no need to document names of artists. Historian and curator Philip Jones has speculated that this is because Spencer saw the paintings as reiterative, the product of a timeless tradition.<sup>9</sup> As Spencer was looking beyond the present to the past, his material culture collection was meant to be an exemplar of traditional life prior to the cultural loss or contamination that resulted from the cultural contact associated with settlement. He believed that the Kakadu were destined for inevitable cultural decline as the result of colonisation, and explicitly stated this was his reason for collecting some of the most sacred artefacts that the Kakadu possessed.<sup>10</sup> Ethnographer James Clifford has identified this point in respect to the 'primitive art' market that was developing at the same time in America and Europe. As tribal life was considered to be doomed in the face of contact with a superior modernism, researchers and western collectors positioned themselves as the experts who could identify and redeem the value of 'uncontaminated' pieces.<sup>11</sup> The unfortunate irony is that non-western groups were damned by the fact of their very engagement with this market, since making works for sale within the market economy implied a break from 'tradition' and thus a contamination.

In a later publication, *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928), Spencer is more revealing of his methods of collecting the bark paintings, and was able to publish an additional two illustrations. He noted that he first saw the art in the bark shelters at Oenpelli and he collected a number by cutting down these shelters.<sup>12</sup> Later he asked three of the best artists to produce works for him on portable pieces of bark of any subject they chose. He originally paid tobacco and later cash for these commissioned works.

In this publication, Spencer was more forthcoming about his personal response to the work and comments about its aesthetic excellence. He noted that his views echoed the considerations of the artist's group:

To-day I found a native who, apparently, had nothing better to do than sit quietly in camp, evidently enjoying himself, drawing a fish on a piece of stringy-bark about two feet long and a foot broad. His painting materials were white pipe clay and two shades of red ochre, the lighter made by mixing white pipe clay with the pure ochre, and a primitive but quite effective paint brush, made out of a short stick, six or eight inches long, frayed out with his teeth and then pressed out so as to form a little disc,

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9 Jones 2011: 32.

10 Spencer 1914: 227; Spencer 1928: 839.

11 Clifford 1988: 189–214.

12 Spencer 1928: 792–794.

shaped like a minute, old-fashioned, chimney sweep's brush. This was most effective and he held it just like a civilised artist sometimes holds his brush or pencil, with the handle between the thumb, then crossing the palm and out below the little finger, so all four finger tips rested on it, or sometimes it passed out of the hand above the little finger. Held in this way he did line work, often very fine and regular, with very much the same freedom and precision as a Japanese or Chinese artist doing his more beautiful wash-work with his brush.<sup>13</sup>

Statements about the marvellous facility of the artists, the beauty of the work, and comparisons between local people's artistic judgement and Spencer's own are peppered throughout this publication, suggesting an interest in aesthetic universals. Yet, he concludes that the works were ultimately 'crude'.<sup>14</sup>

Although Spencer's own field records sowed the seeds for the demise of evolutionism, the historian John Mulvaney records that Spencer held to his theories of social evolution to the day he died.<sup>15</sup> The publications fuelled a fascination for this 'primitive art', and subsequent collectors were keen to obtain collections on the Spencer model. Even in the 1960s, researchers such as Mountford and Kupka were describing their similar collections as documenting the 'dawn' of art. At the same time, as Mulvaney notes, Spencer's theories of magical totemism were drawn into interpretations of European Palaeolithic cave art.<sup>16</sup> In writing about Spencer's theories and the impact of World War One on his scholarship, anthropologist Howard Morphy suggests that Spencer's ideas regarding a universal aesthetic, if developed, would have critiqued hierarchical views of Aboriginal art. Nonetheless, Spencer did not develop this critique in his lifetime.<sup>17</sup> It was left to others, such as Franz Boas in America in 1927, to develop the models of 'cultural relativism' that broke down the evolutionary scheme.<sup>18</sup>

The continued existence of this collection in Museum Victoria makes it possible to analyse these works to shed light on the agency of the artists. Spencer records that, through the assistance of Cahill, the Kakadu with whom he worked were keen to assist his research and in particular to promulgate the importance of their culture and beliefs.<sup>19</sup> On this basis, in 1912, he was able to access secret Mardayin ceremonies and negotiated the purchase of sacred carved wooden sculptures from these ceremonies, among many other items of material culture.

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13 Spencer 1928: 792–793.

14 Spencer 1928: 809.

15 Mulvaney 1981: 62.

16 Mountford 1956; May 2010: 104; Kupka 1965; Mulvaney 1981: 62.

17 Morphy 2013: 167.

18 Morphy 2008: 178.

19 Spencer 1928: 839.

Spencer was also told the ancestral precedent for these ceremonies and the key stories of creation concerning Imberombera, Wuraka, Numereji, and Jeru Ober, along with their creation journeys. When reviewing the full list of paintings held at Museum Victoria collected before 1920, a number of these very important subjects feature in the paintings, suggesting a systematic response by the artists over the 1912–1920 period to Spencer’s research.

The leader of the Wubarr, Nadulmi, or *Macropus Bernardus*, and of the Kunabibi, the Rainbow Serpent, Ngalyod, feature in the paintings. Turkey, broilga and yam are all mentioned as Mardayin ceremonial beings. Murnubbarr, or Magpie Goose, is a local Dreaming at Oenpelli and, while Spencer did not record the names of the artists in relation to each work, we know that one named artist that he commissioned, Nipper Kumutun, was the local landowner.<sup>20</sup>

Anthropologist Ronald Berndt recorded the desire of Aboriginal people in central Arnhem Land to share knowledge about ceremonial matters as a means of transforming their relationship with white administrators.<sup>21</sup> Where non-Aboriginal people have an interest, their induction to the meaning and value of ceremonial matters is an important avenue to the appreciation of the religious fabric of Aboriginal life. Writers such as Howard Morphy, Jenny Deger and Franca Tamisari in the Arnhem Land context have elaborated this argument, revealing how Aboriginal people are politically motivated and strategic in the way they bring whites to an understanding of their religious values.<sup>22</sup> Participation in the aesthetic experience of ceremony, and associated arts, binds non-Aboriginal people into a sacred contract and appreciation of the power that emanates from ancestral places and artefacts. Similarly, artists say that, beyond the generation of cash income, they participate in the market as a way of teaching audiences about the importance of their culture.<sup>23</sup> The beauty of the works, the aesthetic power of the works, make it possible to influence successive generations of Australians by virtue of their acquisition and use. The beautiful and important subjects in Spencer’s barks, combined with his recording of the ceremonies in which these ancestors are venerated, allows us to see the artists’ attempt to educate at least two influential white men, Spencer and Cahill, on topics of great import.

X-ray detailing is common in these works, and so too is a variant where the internal decoration is more highly stylised and geometric (see Figure 6.2).

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20 May 2010: 170.

21 Berndt 1962.

22 Morphy 1983; Deger 2006; Tamisari 2005.

23 Taylor 1996, 2008.



**Figure 6.2: A yam painted with diamond patterns, Oenpelli, western Arnhem Land, 1994.**

Source: Paddy Cahill Collection, reproduced courtesy Museum Victoria (x26345).

Spencer might well have commented on the similarity of such designs to paintings used in the Mardayin ceremony, and indeed to be found on the objects he collected from that ceremony, but he did not. His focus upon the magical involvement of art in the food quest obscured his understanding of other levels of meaning.<sup>24</sup>

One bark in Spencer's collection that he did not publish represents a buffalo (see Figure 6.3).



**Figure 6.3: A buffalo painted in x-ray style, Gaagudju people, western Arnhem Land, 1994.**

Source: Paddy Cahill Collection, reproduced courtesy Museum Victoria (x20034).

<sup>24</sup> Taylor 1996.

The buffalo was hugely important in the Aboriginal and settler economy of this region at the turn of the nineteenth century. Cahill had originally come to the area as a buffalo shooter, and many local Aboriginal people worked in hunting, processing and the selling of hides and buffalo meat, all of which were extremely important in the kin-based economy. Similarly, there is a lively record of contact history represented in the rock art that Spencer does not mention. Presumably, the publication of such evidence of contact history would have contaminated the 'primitive' status of the artists and the glimpse of the 'Stone Age' that he aims to provide in the collection. Spencer was looking past these historical people to imagine their past, and further, the primeval European past.

Yet, to this day, the barks reveal an infectious enthusiasm for present-day subjects, with brilliant patterning and complex compositions often quite unlike the rock painting genres. Rather than a baseline of traditional Aboriginal practice before contact, it is more appropriate to interpret these works as revealing excitement at the prospect of intercultural communication in a new mode of interaction. Thousands of tourists now travel to Kakadu in part to see the art that Spencer identified. Unfortunately, the unproductive trope of this art being a window to the Stone Age recurs in the region to this day.

## Post-modernism at Maningrida?

The second example I wish to address is the reception of the bark paintings of John Mawurndjui, a Kuninjku-speaking artist from the Maningrida region, who rose to critical acclaim in the 1980s. Mawurndjui now has an established international reputation as a 'contemporary' artist. Increasing use of the term contemporary is explicitly intended to counter the primitive/modern binary that attached to the appreciation of Aboriginal art as 'primitive fine art' in Australia's galleries and museums until the early 1980s. Ian McClean has examined the history behind the introduction of the term and noted that Aboriginal activism was central in its insertion into Australian art marketing.<sup>25</sup> While the term was originally used to refer to central desert artists working in acrylic paint on canvas, it required specific activism from individuals based in Arnhem Land to ensure that bark painters using ochres and tree bark were included in the contemporary category.

McClean shows that discussions about whether the term contemporary artist could be used in respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists were intense in the early years of the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Curator Bernice Murphy's inclusion

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<sup>25</sup> McLean 2011.

<sup>26</sup> McLean 2011: 50–55.

in 1981 of large Papunya canvases in the *Perspecta 81* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales prompted strong reactions, particularly from post-modernists who argued that this represented a return to incorporation of Aboriginal art in Australian exhibitions as an exotic primitivism. Arguments against the inclusion of Aboriginal art on this basis ran particularly in the *Art and Text* magazine.<sup>27</sup> Authors such as Imants Tillers argued against the proclaimed links between Aboriginal and other Australian contemporary art on the basis of very thin conceptions of shared interest in abstraction and connections to land.<sup>28</sup> In post-modernist theory, a key wellspring of art is the appropriation of imagery that circulates through time and across the globe by means of mass media. This was considered just as true for Aboriginal artists living in settler society, who must now be acknowledged as having moved beyond their 'tradition'. It was no longer possible to have Aboriginal art displayed as a separate, and somehow more authentic, Australian art. Anthropologists were accused of promoting Aboriginal art on the basis of essentialisms that belied the intercultural circumstance of contemporary Aboriginal life.<sup>29</sup>

However, with greater understanding of the creativity involved in Aboriginal artists modifying ceremonial imagery in order to develop art for the market, the position of some post-modern theorists began to soften.<sup>30</sup> Some theorised that Aboriginal arts shared something of the irony and conceptualism of other contemporary western artists, especially given their erasure of traditional sacred symbolism deemed too secret for public consumption.<sup>31</sup> Eric Michaels who had worked with Warlpiri artists suggested that the use of new materials and motifs represented sophisticated appropriations by Aboriginal artists from the ubiquitous media of western art.<sup>32</sup> Thus central desert art, which so obviously borrowed the new media of acrylic paint on canvas, and was being exploited by artists in ways that diverged from ceremonial forms, was eventually elevated to contemporary status. These new forms were interpreted as representing a post-modern rupture with tradition. In the lead up to the Australian Bicentenary of British settlement in 1988, central desert acrylics were increasingly included in major surveys of Aboriginal and Australian contemporary art, as well as travelling international exhibitions, with commercial success secured from this point.<sup>33</sup>

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27 McLean 2011: 51.

28 Tillers 1982.

29 Michaels 1994.

30 McLean 2011: 52–53.

31 McLean 2011: 52; Tillers 1983.

32 Michaels 1989: 29.

33 Myers 2002.

At Maningrida, there was a strong belief that bark painters should not be left out of the contemporary art market simply because of the materials used in the construction of the works. While not using canvas and acrylic paint, many bark painters worked at painting full time and were keen to access exhibitions in fine art locales. They insisted that their art was at least as good as other Australian artists. Local arts advisers promoted the inventiveness of such painters.

From the early 1980s at Maningrida, the arts advisers Djon Mundine and Diane Moon were very keen that John Mawurndjul received recognition for his extraordinary works. Significantly, Mundine advised the Art Gallery of New South Wales on an exhibition of bark paintings in 1981, the same year that Murphy included desert works in the *Perspecta* exhibition.<sup>34</sup> Mundine later became a 'curator at large' for that organisation. Diane Moon, Mundine's partner, became the arts adviser at Maningrida in 1985.<sup>35</sup> Both advisers had close relations with Maningrida, Ramingining and Milingimbi-based artists, and with commercial galleries and curators at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Australia and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia newly established in Sydney. All these institutions began collecting Mawurndjul's art in the latter half of the 1980s. Mawurndjul was able to travel to the opening of the new National Gallery of Australia in 1983 and to visit the major collections held in their stores.<sup>36</sup> Later a 1988 work 'Nawarramulmul, shooting star spirit' by Mawurndjul from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia was chosen for the Aratjara exhibition catalogue, which was specifically designed to introduce the contemporary nature of Aboriginal art in Europe in 1993.<sup>37</sup> Moon and Mawurndjul travelled to visit the European venues of this exhibition and visited a number of other major European cities to view their collections.

By 2000, Mawurndjul was included in the program of the Sydney Biennale and met with other artists from around the world, including Yoko Ono. He made public statements about the equivalence of his art with Ono's.<sup>38</sup> In 2003, Mawurndjul won the Clemenger Contemporary Art prize in Melbourne (see Figure 6.4). This was an award that included both Aboriginal and other Australian artists. Mawurndjul looked back on that award and his other successes as evidence that Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal art were now considered 'level'.<sup>39</sup>

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34 Mundine 2001.

35 Altman 2004: 179–181.

36 Altman 2005; Taylor 2005, 2008.

37 Luthi 1993.

38 Perkins 2003: 58–59.

39 Mawurndjul 2005: 137.



**Figure 6.4: John Mawurndjul *Mardayin at Kudjarnngal*, 2003.**

Source: © John Mawurndjul/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

In earlier years, Mawurndjul's inclusion in the contemporary art arena was based upon application of a formalist aesthetic rather than strong understanding of his trajectory as a Kuninjku artist. Morphy has noted that the entry of Aboriginal art into the fine art realm of Australian art galleries has, to a large extent, been theorised on the basis of a putative 'disinterested aesthetic' that emphasised a response to 'pure' form as against a more culturally informed aesthetic.<sup>40</sup> Mawurndjul's bark paintings in the 1980s were highly inventive, with figurative forms. Ultimately, he settled for painting more geometric works that he said derived from the Mardayin ceremony. In these latter works, in like manner to the desert artists, part of Mawurndjul's experimentation derives from trying to find a means of producing works for the market that avoid the release of sacred ceremonial designs.<sup>41</sup> Mawurndjul spoke readily of this experimentation, which could be too easily interpreted as a desire to create a rupture with notions of 'tradition'. Galleries received Mawurndjul's art as a contemporary and individual production, not purely as culturally or communally framed. Rather than attempting to understand his cultural background – which transformed interpretation into anthropology – his work was treated as 'contemporary fine art' and as such the pure visual experimentation and energy of his work was discerned and his individualistic genius subsequently lauded.

Nonetheless, the themes of figure transformation and use of geometric designs that Mawurndjul explores have a long history in western Arnhem Land, and indeed can be discerned in works collected by Spencer 100 years ago.

Reflecting upon his art practice, Mawurndjul explained:

When I was a teenager I saw Yirawala and other old people [deceased artists]. I am familiar with their work and learned from them. I have put their knowledge and images in my mind. I also know their paintings on rock too, like the ones by my uncle [Peter Marralwanga] who also taught me to paint rarrk. We have a lot of bim [rock art] in my country. I often visit these places. Later on in my life, when I have been travelling I saw their paintings in museums; paintings from artists like Midjawmidjaw, Yirawala and Paddy Compass. I have placed this knowledge into my head. They only used solid patterns of colours and lines of black, yellow and red. We young people [new generation] have changed to using rarrk. White, yellow, red, black, that's what we use in the crosshatching.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Morphy 2008.

41 Taylor 2008.

42 Mawurndjul 2005: 25.

This is not an ironic commentary on being rootless in a post-modern world. Rather, Mawurndjul speaks of his connection to the past and the changes to art that he engineers in the present. In fact, he is speaking to his own local art history and beyond this, to his understanding of the original ancestral creativity which made his world. He touches on his own innovative role only within this broader context.

The risk in using the term 'contemporary' in the post-modern theoretical sense is that tradition is forgotten in a focus upon the new. What becomes blinkered from view is the explicit link with the historical and ancestral past and with core spiritual ideas regarding Kuninjku attachments to country. The focus on innovation, the influence or borrowing from external sources, on individualism, and the formal qualities of the paintings, divorces Mawurndjul's art from its grounding in his belief in the primacy of the ancestral realm.

We need to understand how Mawurndjul himself learnt to paint and his knowledge of the art of his kin. Indeed he can now access the works of earlier generations of Kuninjku in institutions throughout the world. In turn, it is important to understand Mawurndjul's own role in respect to others that he now teaches – his wife Kaye Lindjuwanga, sons and daughters, and many others of his extended family.

There is a strong local understanding of the trajectory of Kuninjku art that should inform broader world appreciation. This was the intention behind the <<rarrk>> retrospective exhibition of Mawurndjul's art held at the Tinguely Museum of Contemporary Art in Basel in 2005.<sup>43</sup> The European curator who initiated the concept, Bernhard Luthi, was concerned with developing an exhibition that would stimulate thinking about the issue of world arts in a locale where barriers between ethnographic arts and western fine arts were still firmly set.<sup>44</sup> The exhibition comprised a retrospective of Mawurndjul's work, film screenings, a major publication and a two-day curatorial symposium. Luthi explained that he was inspired by seeing Mawurndjul's 1988 work 'Nawarrumulmul, shooting star spirit' displayed next to that of a Jean Tinguely sculpture in Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art collection catalogue. It was vitally important that the exhibition was held in this contemporary art gallery and not the ethnographic museum in the same city. To date, no major Australian gallery has attempted a similar exercise with Mawurndjul's work. Demonstrating the contemporary aspects of bark painting is a relatively more complex exercise in respect to Australian audiences that currently focus upon central Australian Aboriginal artists' experiments in colour and form in the acrylic medium. Bark painters are burdened by shallow perceptions linking the

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43 Kaufmann 2005: 22.

44 Kaufmann 2005: 22.

contemporary with the use of new materials, whilst new uses of old materials and the more subtle intricacies of development within local art histories do not yet register strongly within art institutions and among the broader public.

This art would be more usefully considered contemporary in the sense that there are a multitude of developments around the world that are running in parallel that may or may not contribute to some notion of a western avant garde. Morphy has written on the need to acknowledge the multiplicity of local artistic trajectories and not to simply assimilate various examples into the category of 'fine art' as institutionally defined.<sup>45</sup> Local art histories are required to be contextualised appropriately in time and space. This requires anthropologists to address the issue of form and style of the art in terms of both the artist's intention regarding aesthetic effect and the production of meaning. In order to produce more nuanced histories that address local conceptions, art historians will be required to conduct fieldwork with the artists, as well as work with collections and personnel in galleries.

## Conclusion

The examples in this chapter demonstrate the effects of theoretical frames in the reception of Aboriginal art and how the activity of the artists has ultimately subverted those frames. Ideas regarding the importance of bark painting as primitive art persisted in academia into the 1960s, and these ideas live on in the marketing and audience reaction to such paintings to this day. In Oenpelli, an expression of this was the introduction of pre-prepared paper backgrounds as a new medium for works in 1990. This was expected to stimulate art production that more closely resembled rock painting.<sup>46</sup> In an interesting response, senior artists used the medium to produce highly elaborate figurative depictions of ceremonial scenes that are more detailed than anything in the later phases of the rock art. In Maningrida, on the other hand, there are strong views expressed by the market and by the artists that geometric art is more important than figurative work. In response to such views, Kuninjku artists rarely produce bark paintings other than in the 'mardayin' style instituted by Mawurndjil.

In part, this situation has been created by the Australian market interest in more abstract work based on aesthetic responses to the formal properties. However, for Kuninjku, such abstract works are considered to have power deriving from the ancestral realm, and there has been a long history of artists working to gain audience acceptance of these more culturally important forms. Through growing

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<sup>45</sup> Morphy 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor 2000: 109–118.

political awareness, Kuninjku artists consider that the most appropriate way of engaging with the broader world is to reveal such elements of the ancestral realm, in particular the way that ancestral powers are invested in the land.

These two communities are adjacent in Arnhem Land and the artists share extensive cultural continuities. Yet, the history of the development of the art appears divergent. The examples provide a snapshot of how interactions between the artists and researchers and collectors in each locale has been somewhat different, contributing to the stylistic distinctions between the works that are now produced. As the cross-cultural intellectual engagements involved are place and time-specific, investigating their detail provides an explanation for the differing heritage of each community. What emerges from the detail is the creative excitement of the artists for the opportunities provided by marketing this work and their inventiveness in the way they negotiate the intercultural relations involved.

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