

TAD3301

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Compare and contrast the formal and contextual logic in two traditions of Australian Aboriginal art: 'traditional style' art of Arnhem Land and urban Aboriginal art, specifically that of Lin Onus.

Introduction

For Aboriginal people living outside the so-called 'traditional' areas, the rediscovery of one's origins, country, language and customs has become a quest of absolute importance. It should be remembered that forced removal and banishment from traditional lands was almost a universal feature of the formation of colonial Australia. -*Lin Onus* (Sayers, p.ix)

This statement by Lin Onus (1948-1996) raises issues surrounding Australian Aboriginal art today. He says "so-called 'traditional' areas" because all art by Aboriginal people today is contemporary, that is, it has been influenced in varying degrees by the impact of colonisation more than 200 years ago. For some like Lin Onus whose ancestors of the Yorta Yorta clan inhabited the fertile land along the banks of the Murray River on the Victorian and New South Wales border, an area sought after by early settlers, very little remains. His people were either killed as white settlements spread from Sydney and Melbourne in the early 1800s and encroached upon their land, died from diseases that came with the settlers, or were dispersed to missions away from their land, leaving only a few fragmented pieces of his culture. In contrast tropical areas like Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory were settled much later¹ and the land, infested by mosquitoes and crocodiles and disrupted by monsoonal rains, attracted fewer settlers. Arnhem Land was 'declared a reserve for Aboriginal people in 1931' (Caruana, p.21), allowing Aboriginal settlements and missions to recover and maintain aspects of their traditional culture, attracting Indigenous people back to their clan lands.

These remote areas have now become a cultural epicentre for urban Aboriginal artists of southern States, allowing them to regain their sense of Aboriginality displaced by their own cultural loss, through the experience of ceremony, ritual and lifestyle.

Traditional people from the north felt a duty to share their culture with urban people from the south, whose culture and tradition had been fragmented by 200 years of white occupation. (Neale, p.122)

It was in this spirit that in 1988, the year of Australia's Bicentenary Lin Onus was offered initiation by Kunwinjku² Tribal Leader, Bobby Barrdjaray Nganjmira (1915-92) of Oenpelli, an experience that enlightened him of deeper aspects of his Aboriginality. He was also

¹ 'The first permanent settlement, Palmerston (later Darwin), was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century.' (Caruana, p.21)

² Language group.

adopted into the Wunuwun family of Garmedi, giving him the Dhuwa 'skin' or moiety of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land, a personal name 'Burrinja', and the use of some traditional designs in his painting.

This gave him a cultural experience of a kind he had not previously been exposed to. It was also, without a doubt, a different *spiritual* experience, one that was about belonging . . . "I've passed through some initiation business. . . . Having a skin name you know who else you're automatically related to, you know who your brothers, uncles, aunties, sisters are, and so on . . . You discover more about the other things you're related to. Because you have Dhuwa skin you get to know all the Dhuwa creatures, so these creatures then become your countrymen. They're part of me and I'm part of them now". . . going to Arnhem Land gave him back "all the stuff that colonialism has taken away – language and ceremony". . . (Neale, pp.14-15)

For Onus, what impacted on him was the feeling of belonging once again to the rich heritage that had flourished for more than 40,000 years in this country before colonisation just over 200 years ago.

Because of the relationship Lin Onus had with Arnhem Land culture midway through his artistic career an interesting comparison between the two traditions – urban Koori art and traditional style art of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land – can be made. Studying these two traditions of vastly different backgrounds we can identify that some common elements in the work have sustained the disruption to Aboriginal culture despite colonial attempts of decimation and assimilation. Initially the backgrounds and appearance of these two traditions appear completely diverse. Lin Onus's painting is about urban issues such as the Stolen Generation and fragmentation of culture; he draws information and imagery from any source in a post-modern manner; and his style is figurative, photorealist, painted in the western tradition in an upright position on an easel. In contrast, the bark paintings of Arnhem Land depict ancestral stories passed through generations; imagery is controlled by cultural traditions; figurative depictions appear diagrammatic or sometimes cartoon-like; and they are painted in the traditional method flat on the ground, rotating so that the image often has no set viewing point. But initial appearances often betray underlying meanings. The common philosophy shared by the two regarding community and land ultimately provides more similarities than differences. Both styles are multi-layered in visual content and meaning even though they address different issues concerning Aboriginal culture and society. They both share a deep commitment to community and a close relationship with the land.

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To make a meaningful comparison between 'traditional' Aboriginal art and urban Koori art it is first necessary to gain a better understanding of the cultures behind the two traditions.

Yolngu People

The remote Aboriginal settlements of Arnhem Land are considered to closely represent 'traditional' Aboriginal culture, consisting of a complex code of relationships based on various ancestral beings, creation myths and their interaction between the worlds of the living and the dead. These stories create an affiliation between neighbouring clans of differing language groups through complementary social and religious associations called moiety. Art and ceremony reflect and perpetuate this system of identification like a 'signature' that reinforces a sense of familiarity and belonging. The 'Yolngu' (meaning 'Aboriginal people'³) of the central to north-east region of Arnhem Land are divided into two moieties: the Dhuwa and the Yirritja, each with their own spirit ancestors. The 'typical' style of painting for this region, originally painted on bark and used for ceremonial purposes, is a cross-hatching style of fine lines called *rarrk*⁴ or *dhulang* (depending on language groups). They depict x-ray representations of ancestral beings, fish, animals, birds and sea creatures consistent with the artist's totems and stories particular to the moiety. The aim of using *rarrk* is to create an optical shimmering effect of brightness that embodies the design with the power of the ancestral beings. The more sacred and ritualistic stories are usually less figurative using abstract, symbolic imagery. The artist will often 'sing' the story as he paints.

The bark painting, *Magpie-geese and waterlilies at the waterhole* (Illus.1) by John Bulun Bulun (Ganalbingu⁵, b.1946) of Maningrida "is characterised by excellent draughtsmanship, curved flowing lines and close intertwining forms. The motifs create an overall curvilinear pattern on a plain background, usually of red or yellow ochre." (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*. p.195). Bulun Bulun of the Yirritja moiety depicts magpie-geese, the major totem of the artist's Gurrumba Gurrumba clan, arranged with other totemic plants and animals around three waterholes. In addition to being important sources of freshwater and food, waterholes or 'freshwater lagoons are considered by the Yolngu to be the repositories of the souls of the unborn, and the places to which the souls of the dead will return' (Caruana, p.59).

Magpie-geese, long-necked turtle and python frequently appear in Bulun Bulun's paintings using his *rarrk* style of red, yellow and black stripes alternating with white that run parallel along the length of an animal's body. Another Ganalbingu artist, George Milpururru (b.1934) of the Yirritja moiety, uses a similar style but the *rarrk* is painted diagonally across the animal and different totemic creatures are painted (Illus.7).

³ Caruana, p.47. There are other similar interpretations eg. Isaacs' *Arts of the Dreaming*, p.200 definition is 'person' or 'we people'.

⁴ The meaning of 'rarrk' is simply 'to paint', (*Aboriginal Art Yesterday & Today*, videorecording) but it now refers to the style of layered finely painted parallel lines that form the typical 'crosshatching' used in the region.

⁵ Language group.



Illus.1: **John Bulun Bulun**, *Magpie-geese and waterlilies at the waterhole* , Bark painting.
No details available. (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*. p.198)

The content, style and compositional structure are a way of identifying each clan and act as a conceptualised map of the clan's land. (Caruana, p.59).

The moiety or skin group can be identified by the thickness of lines, the way they are applied, combination of ochre colours used and the imagery painted by the artist. In this way the painting style is like a 'signature'. (Internet: www.didjeridoohut.com.au⁶)

The complex relationships within Aboriginal society show how the culture in these areas has perpetuated and remains closely associated with traditional beliefs despite some changes. Although in traditional practice, painting of this kind was an integral part of ceremonial life and was generally destroyed when its ritual purpose ceased, it has been recognised now that paintings serve various important functions. Firstly as a means of

educating young about ancestral stories therefore sustaining what remains of traditional cultural heritage; secondly, some paintings can be considered maps of country and have been used in land rights claims; and thirdly as a source of income.

For the artistic systems to survive, for traditions to be passed from one generation to the next, for the reproduction of this cultural form, it is important that the commercial viability of the art and craft industry is assured now and in the future. (West, p.48)

Today artists in Arnhem Land generally use acrylic paint rather than natural pigments as it is more durable and canvas is often used rather than bark. Aboriginal people consider the imagery is more important than the material. (Internet: www.didgeridoohut.com.au.) Jennifer Isaacs recorded that a change in the painting of *rarrk* has occurred, placing more emphasis on its execution now that it has more permanent value.

Cross-hatching has developed to the point of extreme detail with symbolic linear patterns filling all spaces, both around the figures and on them. . . The ancient designs have altered little, though their execution, placement and composition have, with the result that the paintings now appear quite different. The designs or paintings are in Yulngu⁷ eyes independent of the surface on which they are painted. The same design appears as a bark painting, as decoration for sculpture, as a painting on the body of a dancer, the lid of a coffin or a memorial post. (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*, p.202)

There has also been a noticeable increase in the use of figurative elements which effectively 'de-sanctifies' the painting by reducing the layers of meaning. (Caruana, p.59). This is so that imagery and stories are more accessible to white people wishing to purchase works, but also in the hope that the stories will inform white people about Aboriginal culture encouraging greater understanding. The importance for Aboriginal people is that fathers, mothers and sometimes also maternal grandmothers continue to pass their stories onto family members in the traditional manner. Limited variations are permitted.

This system is determined by the complex kinship rules ... and mistakes or 'stealing' of another clan's designs are serious offences ... An artist ... must retain the important appropriate clan symbols and patterns exactly. However, in superimposed figures and animal shapes and in the overall composition... each artist tends to bring his own personal style into play. Thus bark paintings do not remain exactly the same from generation to generation. (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*, p.206)

⁶ The Didgeridoo Hut is owned and operated by Aboriginal people marketing authentic art and craft from the Kakadu and Arnhem Land region of Northern Territory, Australia.

⁷ Variations of spelling have been observed between the earlier publication *Arts of the Dreaming*, J. Isaacs, 1984 and the more recent *Aboriginal Art*, W. Caruana, 1993. There are also variations in spelling of artists names and language groups. I have used the more recent versions considering them to have received more direct input from Aboriginal communities.

For instance Jack Wunuwun (Djinang⁸, 1930-90), a tribal elder of Garmedi near Maningrida was considered quite an adventurous painter incorporating more illustrative elements into his designs. He also mixed ochres together to form tertiary colours for underpainting, rather than using colours only in their traditional pure form. His painting *Banumbirr the Morning Star*, 1987 (Illus. 2) translates an important story from the Dhuwa moiety about life-cycles, changing seasons and procreation. Each panel and animal and even the composition with its three panels plays a part in completing the story, ensuring it is recorded accurately to preserve culture even though the artist instils his own individual style into the work. The imagery works on various levels. Aboriginal culture is sometimes likened to an iceberg – the part you can see hides a much larger entity – “only a portion is revealed and various disguising devices are employed to protect sacred content.”⁹ (Perkins, *Art & Aust*, p.101).

On one level the Morning Star story relates the transition from night to day. Wally Caruana in his book *Aboriginal Art* describes other levels of significance:

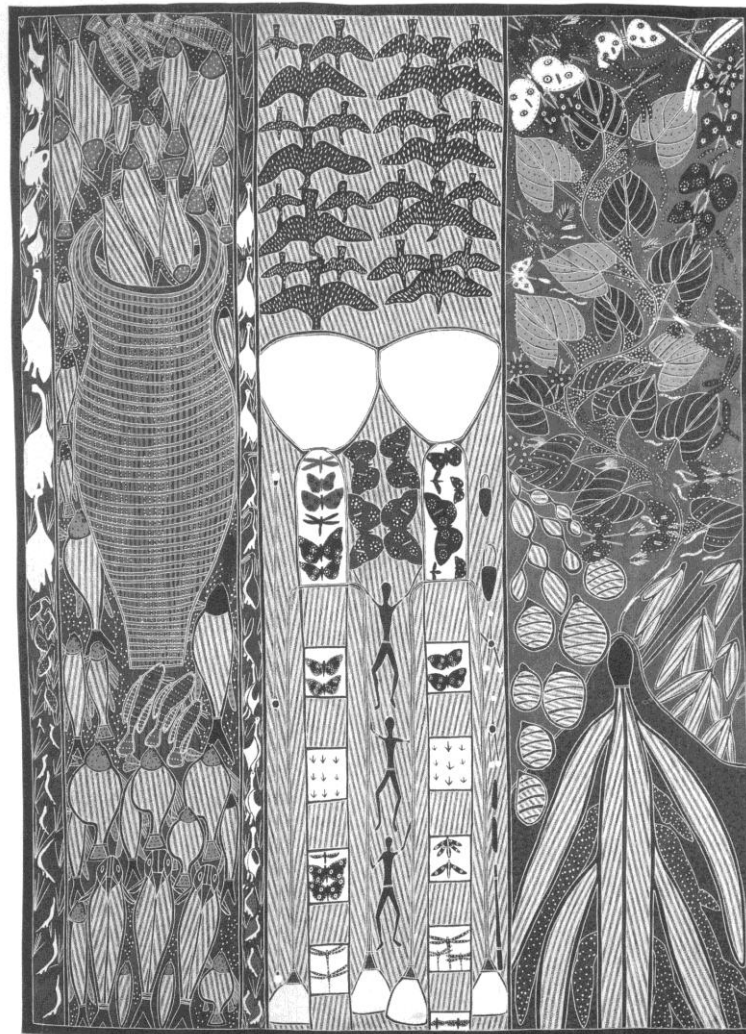
The religious stories and ritual associated with the morning star are. . . symbolic of the passage of the soul from one state of being to another – in this case, from the inner spirit world prior to birth, through the physical phase of life, and at death to the land of dead. . . The spirits of the dead keep the Banumbirr, the Morning Star, in a dilly bag and send it out into the night sky... attached to a long string, by which it is retrieved and returned to its bag as the sun rises. *Banumbirr the Morning Star* by Jack Wunuwun is layered with metaphorical allusions to the cycle of life and symbolic references to the natural world. . . The complex relationships between different realms of experience are succinctly expressed. . . (Caruana, p.54)

Wunuwun symbolises the passage of the soul on the left panel represented by a fish trap as a container of souls appearing as transparent fish forms. This imagery may have been adapted from stories told by Christian missionaries in the early years of colonisation referring to themselves as ‘fishers of men’ converting primitive souls and may be evidence of cross-cultural translation.¹⁰ The willingness of Aboriginal people to adapt and modify their culture to engage with contemporary life, such as use of modern materials and even adaptation of ceremonial items such as bark paintings into saleable commodities would suggest that their ‘traditional’ culture is constantly evolving.

⁸ Djinang is the language group of this artist. Djinang, Ganalbingu and Kunwinjku are three language groups that may share the Dhuwa moiety providing a common means of communication between localities. (Caruana, pp.210-214)

⁹ Comment by Lin Onus.

¹⁰ Bark paintings showing crucifixion can be seen on *Aboriginal Art Yesterday & Today*, videorecording, but I cannot supply details of these works, or whether they were voluntarily undertaken. They do however show that Aboriginal people may adapt their imagery according to other influences outside their culture.



Illus.2: **Jack Wunuwun**, *Banumbirr the Morning Star*, 1987. Natural pigments on bark, 178 x 125 cm.
(Caruana,Frontispiece)

The flock of ibis in the central panel are painted quite differently to the cross-hatched depiction of birds in the Bulun Bulun painting (Illus. 1) adopting a more naturalistic sense of Western narrative, while retaining the map-like quality of tradition. They are speckled like falling raindrops to symbolise the monsoonal rains that come to fertilise the land, as does the *rarrk* patterned background. The poles they fly towards with strings hanging downwards depict the Morning Star symbolic of procreation. The right panel shows the flowering yam plant that occurs late in the monsoonal season, the period of growth. Thus the three panels from left to right depict death, rebirth and growth. The essential elements of the Dhuwa story are present in this work but a colour representation of this painting¹¹ would show the range of colour mixtures Wunuwun employed to gain a greater range of

¹¹ A colour representation can be seen on the videorecording *Talking About Aboriginal Art, Part 4*, University of Sydney Television Division, 1992.

tones. Combined with his naturalistic sense of narrative he creates a work of symbolic power and beauty.

Jack Wunuwun became the mentor of artist, Lin Onus following his initial and subsequent frequent visits to Arnhem Land from 1986 on.

Lin Onus – urban dingo¹²

Melbourne born artist Lin Onus (1948-1996) was one of many city born artists of Aboriginal heritage whose art and life was profoundly influenced by what he called his 'spiritual pilgrimages' to Arnhem Land. Onus, known in the art world as an 'urban' Koori artist disliked being labelled or categorised, but this is probably one of the less offensive labels he had been given in his lifetime. Like all people of Aboriginal heritage he received his fair share of racial discrimination from white Australian society. 'Urban Aboriginal artist' is a term given to people of mixed ancestry, the 'yella fellas'¹³ - individuals without a 'traditional' upbringing reconciling their own personal identity between black and white culture in Australia.

. . .he struggled with his 'yella fella' status: 'Titles like half-caste were used and you didn't fit anywhere at all and this gave me a lot of problems, because I couldn't quite resolve the extent of my Koori-ness and I couldn't quite resolve the extent of my whiteness.' (Neale, pp.17 & 18)

Recognition of the differences between Indigenous Australian culture and Post-colonial cultures has largely come about due to the artistic expression of urban Aboriginal artists of mixed parentage.

Lin Onus's father was of Aboriginal origin from the Yorta Yorta clan of the Murray River region near Barmah on the Victorian border and his mother was Scottish. Both parents had strong political views, meeting at a Communist Party rally, and his father was a founding member of the Aboriginal Advancement League in Melbourne.

As president of the Australian Aborigines League in 1946 and the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in 1967, Bill Onus. . . campaigned tirelessly for citizenship and land rights, working nationally for 'the nomad as well as the fringe dweller'. (Neale, p.26)

These strong values were passed onto Lin who spent his life following in his fathers' footsteps working for equality and the rights of Aboriginal people. His father's shop, Aboriginal Enterprises, established at Belgrave in the outskirts of Melbourne in 1952, promoted Aboriginal art and craft and became a popular meeting place for artists and

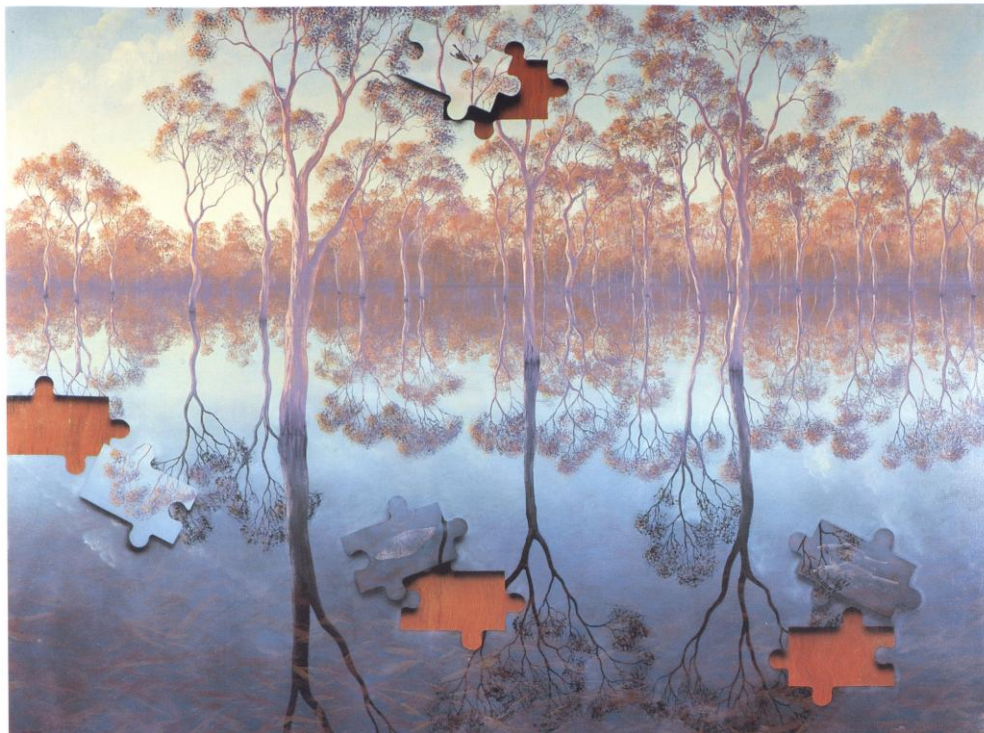
¹² *Urban dingo* is the title of a tribute exhibition and catalogue compiled by the Queensland Art Gallery, 2000. Lin Onus felt an affinity for the dingo and saw it's plight as similar to that of Aboriginal people.

¹³ Terminology used by Lin Onus (Neale, p.17).

political activists for the Aboriginal cause, providing Lin with an exceptional education about the issues concerning Koori culture. He was fortunate that although he had been displaced from his ancestral Aboriginal culture, the activities of his father had ensured that he grew up surrounded by Koori culture. In some ways his childhood was not dissimilar to that of a child growing up in a more traditional Aboriginal culture such as the one in Arnhem Land he was later initiated into. At Aboriginal Enterprises he could watch and learn the skills of the Kooris who worked producing souvenirs – making boomerangs and painting.

Among the artists Lin met during his youth at Aboriginal Enterprises were Guy Boyd, Revel Cooper, Ronald Bull, William Ricketts and even Albert Namatjira. Yet he didn't start painting till much later, in 1974, after his attempts to maintain Aboriginal Enterprises following his father's death, failed in 1971. His early work was entirely influenced by the Western tradition of painting in a photorealist style, intent on capturing the glow of the Australian bush influenced by Hans Heysen and Eugene von Guerard.

Barmah Forest, 1994 (Illus.3) is typical of Onus's favourite landscape, capturing the soft, warmth of the landscape, reflected in water, although the earlier works did not include the *rarrk* imagery of this later work. It was only in 1992, four years before his death, that Onus discovered his Yorta Yorta origins from the Barmah Forest region. He had previously believed he was Wiradjuri, of the ancestral land surrounding Melbourne, but Barmah had always been his favourite place to paint.



Illus.3: **Lin Onus**, *Barmah Forest*, 1994. Synthetic polymer on linen 183 x 244 cm. (Neale, p.76)

Like the bark painters of the north, Onus believed his painting of the land gave it strength.

Onus says: 'In Aboriginal terms, when you paint a place you revitalise it. It is one of the many ways Aboriginal people strengthen their bonds with the land. Sometimes they dance or perform ceremonies, at others they sing or tell stories about it. I paint it, even though it doesn't belong to me. It helps give it strength.' (Geissler, Craft Arts International, p.91)

This painting uses pieces of jigsaw puzzle to symbolise the pieces of his story that are missing. None of these pieces quite fits back correctly showing that the damage to Aboriginal people and culture can never fully recover even if the pieces are all found. This predominantly Western style persists throughout his career partly because of his love of the environment and admiration for its beauty, but possibly also to acknowledge his mother's Scottish heritage.

Onus began combining the elements of traditional style *rarrk* painting with his own visions of sublime photorealist landscape following his visits to Arnhem Land in 1986. These would sometimes appear on pieces of puzzle as in *Barmah Forest* (Illus.3) or as a patchwork of *rarrk* scattered over the surface of a landscape but more often they were subtle details. A flash of *rarrk* would define the scales of a fish or turtle shell caught by the sun as it darts beneath reflective water or as patterning of frogs and lizards to symbolise the ever-present Aboriginal spirit in the landscape. The combination of styles reconciles the two parts of his ancestry – black and white, Aboriginal and Scottish.

At last Lin, by using both black and white elements in his art, was painting what he was: a 'yella fella', and making it something beautiful – something to be proud of. (Neale, p.122).

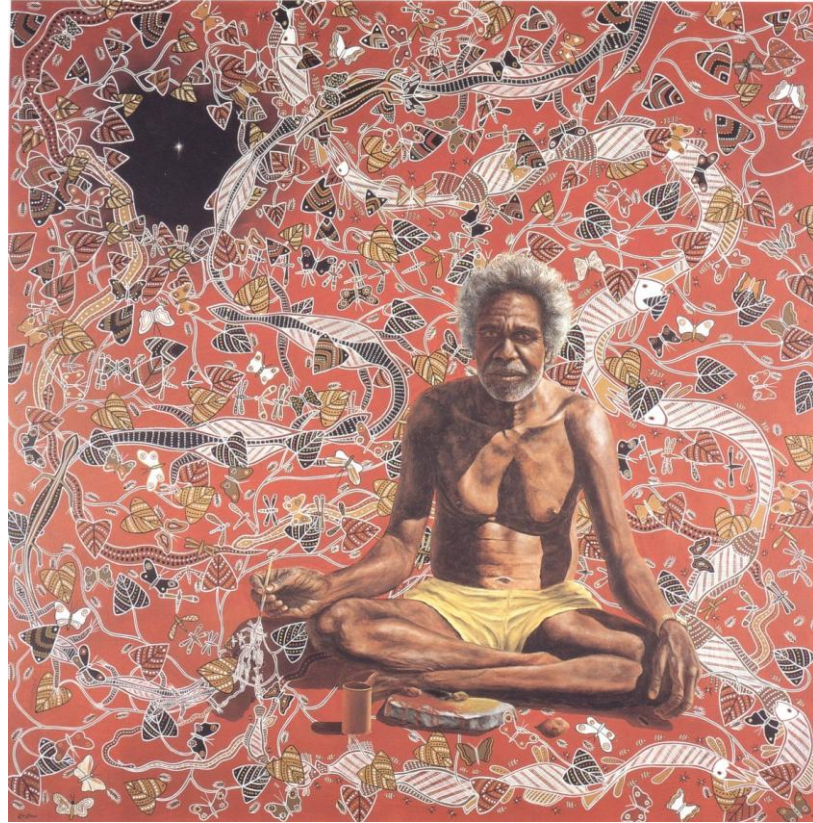
Arnhem Land Experience

In 1986 as a representative of the Aboriginal Arts Board, Lin Onus travelled to Maningrida where he met Jack Wunuwun or Big Wamut, with whom he developed a close relationship. He was taught a new relationship with the land described as 'seeing below the surface'. This was a turning point not only artistically but for his entire being.

My relationship with the Wunuwun family and my visits to Gamerdi are the most important influence on my painting now. For the first time I feel I am truly painting for my people, not for money, not for the influential "Gubbah" but for my community. –Lin Onus (Isaacs, *Aboriginality*, p.28)

Onus wanted to honour his friend and mentor by painting his portrait and produced one of his most powerfully personal works. *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988, (Illus.4) features the combination of *rarrk* and realism that became his signature but more significantly it is an emotional celebration of his new-found identity. The portrait shows the rich imagery shared with Onus by Jack Wunuwun to tell the ancestral stories of his Dhuwa moiety. Onus's painting of his mentor not only shows the exuberance he feels for his newfound insight into Aboriginal culture and spirituality, with its swirling abundance of creatures and

plants, but in Wunuwun's facial expression Onus reflects his own sadness about the loss of his own potentially rich culture. The Morning Star, symbolic of the transition from night to day, an important element for the Dhuwa moiety, is used by Onus as a reminder of Aboriginal people who have made the journey to the land of the dead, while optimistically reflecting on a possible transition for a brighter future.



Illus.4: **Lin Onus**, *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 182x182cm.
(Neale, p.70)

Like Jack Wunuwun's painting, *Banumbirr The Morning Star*, 1987 (Illus. 2) there are three levels to the Onus portrait shown as layers rather than structural composition. The first layer shows the living form of the great artist, poised with brush and ochres. The second layer is the world of spiritual beings depicted in the x-ray style flowing effortlessly from the brush – the artist's 'Dreaming'. The third layer, the dark abyss with the glimmering light of the morning star is the land of the dead – the transitional spiritual world.

Much of Onus's work has a playfulness which can especially be seen in his repeated use of transparent fish forms which evolve into playful fish spirits in later work. They are not only symbolic of Aboriginal spirits present in the landscape but also a metaphor for a message supporting the transition from dominance over the land (the prominent attitude since white occupation) towards respect and celebration of the land. Onus always

expressed a deep concern for the environment perceiving destruction to the plants and animals as tantamount to the destruction of Aboriginal culture.

The people belong to the land rather than the land belongs to the people.
This duty of care is felt equally in the bush and in the cities. – *Lin Onus*
(Perkins, *Art & Aust.* p.101).

Lin Onus believed art should be part of everyday life, just as fun and humour are part of everyday life and a very strong aspect of urban Koori culture. The ability to 'laugh in the face of adversity', he said, goes a long way in ensuring the survival of an oppressed people (Neale, p.125). His popular sculptural installation, *Fruit Bats*, 1991, (Illus.5) comments on suburban life by using an icon of the backyard, the Hills hoist invaded by masses of rarrk-painted flying foxes complete with masses of droppings beneath.

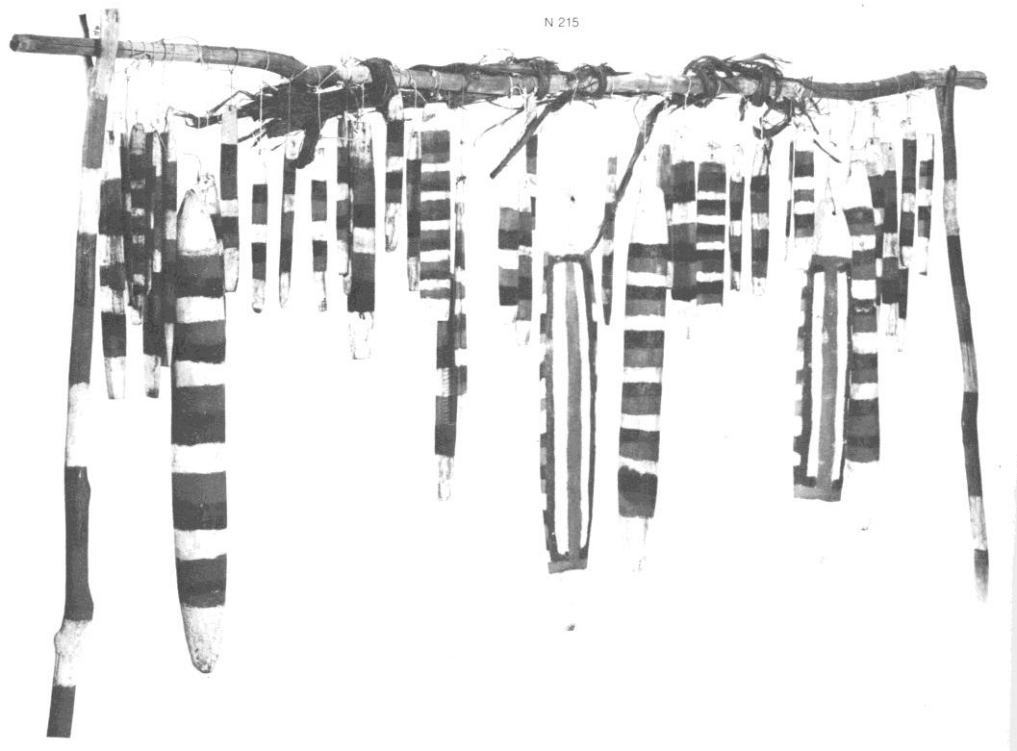


Illus.5: **Lin Onus**, *Fruit bats*, 1991. Installation: 95 fibreglass polychromed bats, polychromed wooden disks, Hills hoist, 250 x 250 x 250 cm. (Neale, p.40)

He humorously attacks the suburban sensibility of the clean and neat backyard, contrasting the idea of clean washing with bat droppings, while forcefully bringing nature into this controlled environment. Chris McAuliffe comments in *Art & Suburbia*:

This contrast between nature and culture appears frequently in Onus's work, usually signifying a contrast between an Aboriginal engagement with nature and an Anglo-Celtic determination to control or exploit it. . . The work is humorous. . . and proves that there is still new life to be found in that most cliched artistic symbol of suburbia, the Hill's Hoist. But there is an undercurrent of anger in the sculpture. . . (McAuliffe, p.112-113).

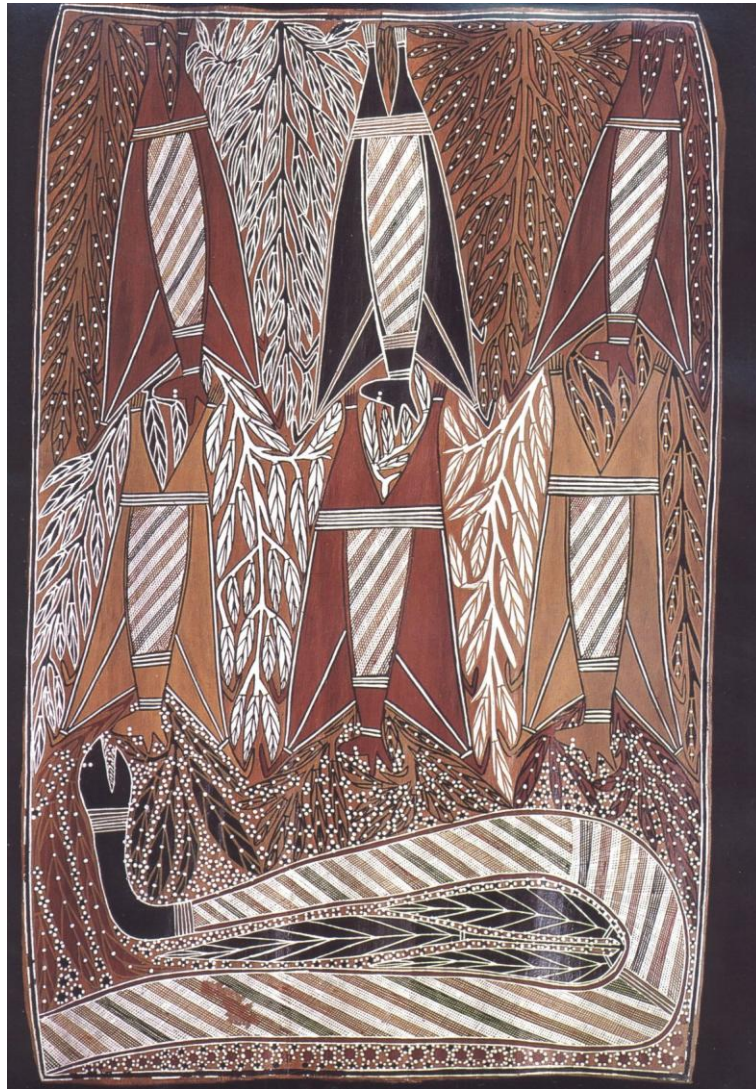
Onus was a confirmed practitioner of the 'Bower Bird School', meaning he collected his own material, "bits and pieces, here and there. . ." (Neale, p.12), from various sources and used any tools suited to the job at hand. He possibly got the idea for *Fruit bats* from an Aboriginal sculpture from Aurukun, north Queensland, '*Flying Foxes on Poles*', 1962, (Illus.6). Used in ceremonial dance this sculpture consisted of short and long sticks painted in ochre hanging on string between poles, to depict red and black flying foxes carried back to camp after a hunt. The style of the *rarrk* painting of the fruit bats and the droppings is similar to that made by George Milpururru in his bark painting *Black-headed python and fruit bats at Ngalyindi*, (Illus.7) although Onus's are more naturalistic in their form.



Illus.6: **Aurukun, north QLD**, *Flying Foxes on Poles*, Collected F.D McCarthy, 1962. Paint on wood, 129 x 201.5 (Institute of Aboriginal Studies)

Similar to the dual meaning in Onus's installation, Milpurrrurr's also has a sweet and a sinister story:

During the *dhuludur* or flowering season in September, flying foxes are attracted to the blossoms on certain trees. When they roost, their droppings fall to the ground and smell as sweet as the blossoms they feed on. The black-headed python waits nearby to eat the old and sick if they fall. (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*, p.178)



Illus.7: **George Milpurrrurr**, *Black-headed Python and Fruit Bats at Ngalyindi* , Bark painting, No details (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*. p.178)

Onus was always respectful of the traditional restrictions surrounding the use of imagery and “if he was ever unsure he would always contact his mentor Jack (Wunuwun) and ask him for his advice and permission.” (Neale, p.123). Copyright is a serious issue for Aboriginal people. John Bulun Bulun with the assistance of Lin Onus in 1988 was possibly the first Aboriginal artist to win a court case regarding copyright infringement by

a T-shirt company who used his imagery without his authorisation. Lin Onus's portrait, *John Bulun Bulun*, 1989 (Illus.8) depicts the bark painting of Bulun Bulun, *Magpie-geese and waterlilies at the waterhole* (Illus. 1) fractured like a broken mirror, a device he used in earlier work to symbolise the fragmentation of Aboriginal culture. Here it is used to symbolise yet another infringement of Aboriginal rights by white society. Bulun Bulun is shown coolly in front of his image as if to say "no-one dares touch it now", confident over his ownership and a battle won in white man's law.



Illus.8: **Lin Onus**, *John Bulun Bulun*, 1989. Synthetic polymer on canvas 182 x 182 cm.
(Neale, p.71)

It was in ways such as this that Lin Onus reciprocated the generosity of the Arnhem Land people. He could use his knowledge and experience of white law and attitudes to assist those of remote communities to deal with legal and social issues - acting as a 'bridge' between the two cultures.

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Conclusion

This study has shown that in Aboriginal cultures of diverse backgrounds in Australia today - urban and traditional - art plays a crucial role in communication. Both backgrounds share a deep concern for, and strong relationship with, the land as the essential basis for culture and community welfare, but expressed in different ways. Lin Onus showed that urban Kooris can channel their association with land towards environmental concerns relevant to the entire community. The Yolngu people of Arnhem Land use art to sustain their culture, spiritually and practically. This study has shown the importance of land, in particular retaining clan lands in remote areas, to ensure the continuation of culture. The art of a clan speaks directly about the mythical creation and characteristic features of a particular piece of land. Therefore the idea of receiving unwanted land or being relocated to areas irrelevant to their clan 'stories', creates the same fragmentation of culture as having no land, as is the case for urban Kooris. Ignorance of the complex system of relationships between Aboriginal people and their clan lands has contributed to misunderstanding and communication breakdown between white and black Australia, in the past and present.

The sadness is that white society seems determined to remain ignorant about the rich complexity of Aboriginal culture, something that could enrich the lives of all Australians. A recent article in the The Age Magazine, Good Weekend, 'Mad about the buoy' by David Marr looks at the stagnation of respect for rights of Aboriginal people:

"Fundamentally, white Australia still treats native title as an anomaly to be contained. Politics, law and business continue to grind away at these rights, little by little. Far more has changed in our imaginations than on the ground. ... we are not approaching native title with the sort of generosity that offers much hope that these ancient yet newly discovered rights are going to provide a real economic base for black Australia." (Marr, The Age Good Weekend, Aug.18, 2001,p.19).

However, Aboriginal art is one form of communication between black and white cultures that has had some positive outcomes. Art can be used to preserve culture, to educate, to prove association between people and land, to provide financial independence, and to reflect changing attitudes. It is important that exchanges of experience between urban and traditional cultures continue so that both can grow stronger to overcome the inequality that still exists since colonisation.

The experience of people like Lin Onus is invaluable as their knowledge of both cultures provides a possible link between white and black cultures. Onus shares the same concern as traditional Aboriginal society does for the land and environment as an extension of concern for community and people. These qualities were present before his initiation into Yolngu society, but what was achieved by his connection with Arnhem Land was a sense of belonging that eased the pain of dislocation, giving him greater belief in

himself. The undesirable stereotypes of Aboriginal people as drunk, violent, destructive, are all symptoms of dislocation.

Onus wanted to change the many misconstrued perceptions and portrayals of Aboriginal people throughout Australian history. His '*Musquito*' series, 1979-82, depicting the life of an Aboriginal resistance fighter of the early 1800s, addressed the myth that the local Indigenous population passively gave up their land to the colonisers. Onus wanted to give Musquito the same iconic status as Ned Kelly.

Storytelling, narrative, Onus' own myths are explored on the canvas 'to explain his own origins and journeys and relationships between people and animals: the matter of all myth'. (Neale, p.19)

Lin Onus is an important representative for Aboriginal people in the context of Australian art *and* history. His attempts at reconciling the two sides of his family history – black and white, Aboriginal and Scottish – have resulted in artworks that reflect the contrasting qualities of Western and Indigenous cultures. In doing so he alerts us to the complex range of issues that need to be addressed for Reconciliation between black and white Australians to become reality.

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Details of Works

- Illus.1 **John Bulun Bulun**, *Magpie-geese and waterlilies at the waterhole*. Bark painting, No details available (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*. p.198)
- Illus.2 **Jack Wunuwun**, *Banumbirr the Morning Star*, 1987. Natural pigments on bark, 178 x 125cm. National Gallery of Australia. (Caruana, Frontispiece)
- Illus.3 **Lin Onus** *Barmah Forest*, 1994. Synthetic polymer on linen 183 x 244cm. Australian Heritage Commission (Neale, p.76)
- Illus.4 **Lin Onus**, *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988. Synthetic polymer on canvas, 182 x 182cm. Holmes a Court Collection, Heytesbury. (Neale, p.70)
- Illus.5 **Lin Onus**, *Fruit bats*, 1991. Installation: 95 fibreglass polychromed bats, polychromed disks, Hills hoist, 250 x 250 x 250 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. (Neale, p.40)
- Illus.6 **Aurukun north QLD**, *'Flying Foxes on Poles'*, Collected F.D McCarthy, 1962. Paint on wood, 129 x 201.5 cm. (AGDC, *Aboriginal Australia*)
- Illus.7 **George Milpururru**, *Black-headed python and fruit bats at Ngalyindi*. Bark painting, No details available (Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming*. p.179)
- Illus.8 **Lin Onus** *John Bulun Bulun*, 1989. Synthetic polymer on canvas 182 x 182cm. Art Gallery of Western Australia (Neale, p.71)