



*Dhuwarrwarr Marika collecting oysters near Yalangbara beach
Photo courtesy of Margie West*

YALANGBARA

art of the Djang'kawu

The *Yalangbara: art of the Djang'kawu* exhibition centres upon a very special place just south of Yirrkala in the Northern Territory's Miwatj or northeast Arnhem Land region. Yalangbara – or Port Bradshaw – is a classically beautiful coastal region of sweeping white sand beaches peppered with dramatic boulder formations, and surrounded by crystal turquoise waters abounding with sea life. It is often referred to as paradise by its traditional owners, the Marika family, who spend a lot of time there hunting and gathering as well as undertaking important land management programs to protect and maintain the region's biodiversity. After experiencing the detrimental impact of the Gove bauxite mining, the family are determined that the pristine environment of Yalangbara with its mineral rich sands will not be affected in the same way. It was really the protection of Yalangbara that Banduk Marika had in mind when she first conceived of the *Yalangbara* exhibition.

She also wanted to celebrate her talented Rirratjingu clan family, who have been actively painting for the market since the Yirrkala mission was established in 1935. The Marikas have been likened to the Boyd dynasty because of their sustained contribution to the visual arts and some of the better known practitioners include Mawalan 1 and his brothers Mathaman, Milirrpum, and Roy Marika; his son Wandjuk; and daughters Banduk and Dhuwarrwarr Marika. The exhibition charts the diversity of the art product by three

generations of this family with some of the earliest barks from the 1930s, large barks from the Art Gallery of New South Wales collected by Tony Tuckson, the rare crayon drawings commission by Professor Ron Berndt, through to the contemporary prints, barks and sculptures made by both established and emerging Rirratjingu artists. The Yalangbara digging stick usually displayed in Parliament House next to the famous Yirrkala bark petition has also been generously loaned for the tour.

All the works centre upon Yalangbara, which is the most culturally significant of the Marikas' three separate clan estates. It is regarded as the site of first human and cultural creation associated with the region's most important creation beings: the Djang'kawu Brother and his younger and older pregnant Sister. They bestowed the yaku bathala (big name) of Yalangbara upon the region that encompasses the Port Bradshaw peninsula, Lalawuy Bay and adjacent coastline. The name also has a number of different applications depending upon context. It can refer to a smaller beach site where the Djang'kawu first landed as well as to the entire eastern or miwiyul (sunrise) side of the peninsula that is separated from the western or gulngu (sheltered) side by a massive dune system. While the Yalangbara region belongs collectively to the Rirratjingu, two separate branches of the family have special custodial responsibilities for these respective sides of the peninsula.

*Yalangbara Suite, 2000, linoprints on paper, 6 prints each
approx 55.9 x 38 cm Northern Editions, Darwin Museum
and Art Gallery, Northern Territory, Darwin*



Yalangbara Suite, 2000, linoprints on paper, 6 prints each approx 55.9 x 38cm Northern Editions, Darwin Museum and Art Gallery, Northern Territory, Darwin

All the artworks shown in the exhibition are in effect maps of the Yalangbara area, tracing the activities and goyurr (journey) of the Djang'kawu beginning with their sea journey from a place in the east called Burralku. They paddled their canoe though the darkness, guided by the light of the Morning Star and the thundercloud that stood above Yalangbara in the distance as a symbol of the monsoon's fertility. They finally arrived at Yalangbara with the rising sun heralding the dawn of creation.

According to the Yolngu people here, the Djang'kawu women were the original owners of ceremonial law and travelled with their digging sticks, feathered regalia and sacred objects secreted in their conical basket and mats. These objects were powerful and transformed into different landforms along the way. At Yalangbara they plunged their digging sticks into the sand, creating freshwater wells before their digging sticks transformed into a variety of plant species. This story reflects the plentiful subsurface freshwater found on the eastern peninsula; when people camp on the beach today they simply dig into the sandy foreshore to obtain sweet drinking water. The water is believed to have special curative properties and symbolises the fountainhead of Yolngu knowledge.

One of the seminal events that occurred at Yalangbara was not only the shaping of the environment but the birth of the first children. This occurred high in the central dune complex at a place name Balma. Today this is a designated restricted site. After giving birth to the Pirratjingu clan and



*Mawalan 1 Marika
Djang'kawu Creation Story 1959 Natural pigments on bark
188 x 64.8 cm Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney*

bestowing upon them their language and ownership of Yalangbara, the Djang'kawu performed the first Ngarra ceremony, one of the major regional rituals performed in northeast Arnhem Land. They then passed out of Rirratjingu territory and continued westward, shaping the land and giving birth to other clans and laying down their way of life. Everything the Djang'kawu created – the people, the land, plants, animals and so on – belong to the Dhuwa moiety. The term, which literally means half, reflects the way in which everything in the Yolngu cosmos here belongs to either Dhuwa or Yirritja moieties. Because their relationship is reciprocal the two moiety groups intermarry and share ceremonial responsibilities. Clan affiliation is passed down via the father, so if a Dhuwa Rirratjingu woman marries a Yirritja Gumatj clansman, for example, their children will be Gumatj. Marrying into the Rirratjingu entitles a Yirritja person to have managerial rights to participate in Ngarra ceremonies and also to paint Yalangbara stories.

The Rirratjingu artworks can refer to just one or a complex of the 50 or more named sites across the peninsula visited by the Djang'kawu. The gridded background pattern is a classic Rirratjingu clan design which can vary according to the site being depicted, but commonly refers to the dazzling white sand dunes at Yalangbara, sometimes bisected by the tracks of the sand goanna, one of the important animals first seen and named by the Djang'kawu. Each of the Dhuwa clans associated with the Djang'kawu has variations of this design to emphasise both its individual identity as well as its collective ownership of the Djang'kawu narrative. Feathered decorations also reflect the Dhuwa clan identities through the common use of orange rainbow lorikeet feathers; however the configuration of these feather tassels adorning their ceremonial baskets and digging sticks also varies from clan to clan. The way that people's art and material culture encapsulates individual clan identities in such a specific manner is unique to this region.

LEFT: Minirikki Marika

Feathered Ceremonial Bag 1974 Natural fibres, wax rainbow lorikeet and seagull feathers 48 x 24 x 11.4cm Gift of Mawalan 1 Marika FM and CH Berndt collection, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, Perth



Another subject that occurs in some of the Yalangbara paintings concerns the mythical Bayini, who the Djang'kawu encountered at Wapilina Island. They are said to be very much like the Macassan trepang fishermen who regularly visited this region up until the turn of the twentieth century, and had a considerable impact on Yolngu life and ceremony. They were part of the region's recent history for men like Mawalan 1 Marika, who regularly depicted the Macassans as well as the Bayini in his work. The largest and most significant Macassan site is at Wapilina Island; its existence along with some rare example of rock paintings add to the overall archaeological importance of the Yalangbara region. Because of its environmental, historic and cultural significance, the Marikas first worked with the Northern Territory government's Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority to have Yalangbara listed as a sacred site in 1983. Following this, Banduk and Mawalan 2 worked with anthropologist Geoffrey Bagshaw to have it successfully listed on the federal government's Register of the National Estate in 2003. As part of their research for the listing, they viewed the family's artworks in various state collections around Australia, so according to Banduk an exhibition was the next logical step.

She initially approached the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) who subsequently worked with a range of Marika family members to develop the scope and content of the exhibition and associated catalogue. This work was undertaken over a number of years with generous assistance from The Christensen Fund. An important partnership was then established with the National Museum of Australia (NMA) to tour the exhibition, scheduled to open at the National Museum on 7 December 2010. MAGNT is extremely grateful to the former and present National Museum Directors, Craddock Morton and Andrew Sayers

BELOW: Mawalan 1 Marika
Map of Yalangbara, Port Bradshaw 1947 Crayon on paper 61 x 153.5 cm RM
and CH Berndt collection, Yirrkala, Berndt Museum of Anthropology Perth

respectively, along with many of their dedicated personnel who have helped bring the exhibit to fruition including Suzy Nethercott-Watson, Mathew Trinca, Mike Pickering, Denise Mackenzie, Andy Greenslade, Rebecca Coronel and Alison Spence. Assistance from Leighton Holdings will ensure that representatives of the Marika family will be able to attend this auspicious occasion.

For Banduk Marika *Yalangbara: art of the Djang'kawu* is the realisation of a long held dream:

... It's time to show the public that Yalangbara is important. This story is important and this is why our fathers painted all these artworks, to show how these paintings relate to particular sites and what they mean ... we want to tell their stories properly now and hopefully ... Yalangbara will get the recognition that it deserves.

Margie West
Curator, *Yalangbara: art of the Djang'kawu*, MAGNT



Beach near Yalangbara.
Photo courtesy of Margie West

