I am a Garawa man. My country is in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria. It is cut in two by the Northern Territory/Queensland border.

I was born under a coolabah tree in one of the creek beds running out from the main creek at Soudan Station in the Northern Territory. The creek where I was born is in an old devil devil story for that country. We call the old devil devil Irinju. He lives under the ground and used to send his hand up out of the creek bed to pick wild oranges from a tree that grew on the hill, west of Soudan Station. When old devil devil was taking the oranges he was stealing them from another old fella from the area where the tree grew. He kept pinchin’ them. That old fella kept wondering why his wild oranges were going...
missing all the time. To find out what was going on he decided to watch the tree. He’d count the oranges and then go back and see that some more had gone. He figured that old devil devil was pinchin’ them. So he went to the wild orange tree and waited. It wasn’t long until he saw old devil devil’s hand come up out of the earth and take the wild oranges from the tree. Right away, that old fella, he got his stone axe out and cut the hand off the arm. The hand fell down and made a big hole, right there. When old devil devil pulled his arm back into the earth it was going everywhere, all over, waving back and forth. It was this action that made the creek bed and that’s right where I was born in the elbow of Irunju, right there, in Wakaya Country.

When I was young there was no whitefella schooling for us Aboriginal kids. My school was the bridle and the blanket, learning on the pastoral stations where my father worked. Our future was set as labourers on whitefella pastoral stations. This is the reason I don’t read and write. I’m not ashamed of this.

I was taught our law by my grandfathers, father, uncles and other senior kin from the southwest Gulf peoples; the Mara, Gudanji, Yanyuwa and Garawa. Knowledge came to me through our ceremonies, hunting, fishing and gathering and travelling through our country with the old people. We sing the country.

All my life I have fought hard for our land and culture. For the last thirty years I have been working with all the Aboriginal people of the southwest Gulf fighting to get our country back in our ownership and then to protect and care for it. There’s lots of important sacred sites and song-lines throughout our country. Many of them are powerful places that have to be cared for, looked after the proper way.

After my days as a stockman I worked for the Northern Land Council in the Northern Territory. I am currently a director of the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation in Queensland, where I represent Garawa people.

In 2005 I started the Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa Ranger groups in the southern Gulf region. I did this because many Waanyi and Garawa people living on their homelands were forced to move back to the old mission in Doombadgee and other places when service delivery failed on the homelands. When the people moved off the country it was suffering from late-season uncontrolled wildfires.

The Northern Territory and Queensland governments were trying to get on top of the wildfires but couldn’t do it. It was when we got
McArthur River Mine Site

McArthur River mine is on Gudanji country about 60 km southwest of Borroloola. It’s operated by Xstrata. The company expanded the mine from an underground operation to an open pit against our wishes. To do this they had to divert McArthur River along a 5 km diversion so they could get to the zinc deposit under the river.

The tree in the painting represents the sacred site where the Rainbow Serpent came up. This is a very powerful ancestral being. The diversion has destroyed the back of the Rainbow Serpent. The turtle represents a place where the Rainbow Serpent came up on his journey. The Aboriginal people under the boomerang represent the bosses for that Rainbow Serpent. They are just standing there watching because that’s all they can do. They feel powerless. They worry. The spear represents the force of the river coming down in the wet season. The mine, they reckon they got everything under control but they don’t have the spiritual stuff under control. We should have full control of our sacred sites.
involved and started to do things our way and working with a few whitefellas who were helpin’ us that we managed to stop the hot late-season wildfires and replace them with cooler early-season controlled fires.

The Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa Rangers won the Leighton Holdings Indigenous Award for our fire management, part of the Northern Territory Landcare Awards. This made us feel good. People could see what we are capable of when we have control over how things are done. No more of the top–down stuff.

Why I Paint
I started painting so I can get my voice out. I want to show people what is happening to our country and to Aboriginal people. No one is listening to us. What we want. How we want to live. What we want in the future for our children. It’s for these reasons that I started to paint. I want government to listen to Aboriginal people. I want people in the cities to know what’s happening to us and our country.

There’s a lot of mining going on in our country. The mining companies are coming into our country and they aren’t talking with us properly. They seem to just want us to agree to things their way. They might talk to one or two people but not to the Minggirringi (owners) and Junggayi (managers) for the places they want to explore or mine. Things are always rushed. It’s always about someone else’s plan for our country and not our own plans.

I’ve counted maybe six mining companies operating in our region. They are looking around for all kinds of stuff—gas, uranium, gold, diamonds, zinc. Some of them are destroying our country. You just have to look at the McArthur River mine. They are destroying an important sacred site that sits in that area. We are worried about the damage to the site and about leaks and pollution from run-off that might come down the river and go into the sea. These are places where we get food. There’s lots of people dying and getting sick. We aren’t saying that the mine is the cause of all this but it worries us that the sacred sites aren’t being protected. We can’t do what we are supposed to do and we feel there are consequences for this. It plays with our people’s minds. It’s not good for them. This is serious business. Why won’t anyone listen to us?

I want the government and mining companies to know that we are still here. We aren’t going anywhere. We aren’t dead yet. We are still here, feeling the country.

Flow of Voices You read this painting from the bottom to the top. On the lower right are groups of Aboriginal people involved in land council issues. The figures in white represent the four clans from the Borroloola region. They are trying to pass their concerns about country up to the Northern Land Council so they can talk with the Northern Territory government, represented by the three figures with hats.

At the bottom on the left the three figures represent the school and education department. The circle represents the Borroloola community. It is trying to work with the school and trying to get people to listen to our problems about grog and bad health. We’ve been tryin’ to get Aboriginal culture in the school. Then the school can talk to the school board that should be made up of whitefellas and Aboriginal people, represented by the square with two people in it.

The rectangle at the top is the Australian government. On the left an Aboriginal person is tryin’ to talk to parliament. On the right that figure represents the mining companies talking strong to government. The figure flanked by a wallaby and a bush turkey represents us Aboriginal people where we should be—at the top of things. This is our country.