

Gathering:
Weaving the Collective in Yolŋu Art



The Cross Art Projects
16 November – 9 December 2023

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Weaving the Collective in Yolŋu Art

Yalmakany Marawili
Meŋa Munuŋgurr
Yimula Munuŋgurr
Muluymuluy Wirrpanda
Napurrawuy Wunuŋmurra

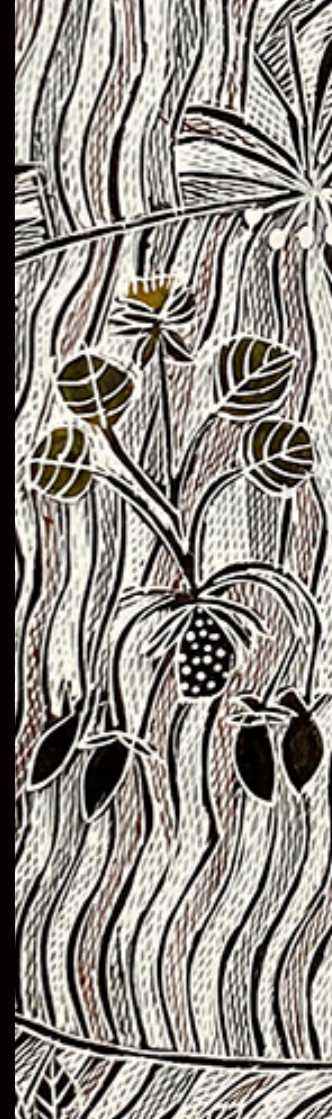
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In proud association with
Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre

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Cover + pp 3,4 & 7: Yalmakany Marawili, Gulun Nathamirri, 2023
ochre on stringybark, 133 x 67 cm, (# 2843-23) (detail)



The Yolŋu dictionary has almost twenty separate translations for the word ‘gathering’. They divide into versions of the verb relating to gathering food and the noun to describe people coming together.

<i>baymatthun</i> <i>birrinyguma</i> <i>biŋtharryun</i> <i>buma</i>	hit, beat, bash gather, get (shellfish, yams) affect gather together (e.g., people for death ceremony, flock of birds in a tree) set a fire gather a lot of wood and get it set for a fire hit (hard), beat kill gather, pick, collect (wild foods, honey, shellfish) prepare (tobacco) bite (of sandfly or mosquito) shoot (gun) make (basket) affect
<i>boyan</i> <i>dhiŋthun</i>	hit, kill collect, gather scoop up, gather in one’s hands, have one’s hands full (of) dip (for water), get or fetch water
<i>dhurr’thurryun</i> <i>djambayang</i> <i>djarrawurr</i> <i>djongum(a)</i> <i>djutthun</i> <i>galkaŋa</i> <i>guwatharam</i> <i>lukthun</i> <i>lung’thun</i> <i>mutpuma</i> <i>yarratjpunum(a)</i> <i>yurrum’thun</i>	gather together gathering (e.g. for sports) archaic prayer gathering collect, gather together, get take hold of beat, hit, make, gather gathering fight, hit, kill collect, gather (e.g. yams) roll (a cigarette) come together, gather, collect gather (together), collect, attract gather (up), pack up (clothing), drive, herd (cattle) collect, gather (people), scoop up (water) come together, gather

There are two different approaches in these paintings. A sacred one relying on dhulang or miny’tji—the sacred clan designs, and a secular one which is purely representational.

The fishtrap paintings in this show by Meŋa Munungurr, Napurrawuy Wunungmurra and Yimula Munungurr are in the first category. Meŋa and Yimula paint the fishtrap at Wapdawuy which joins the Djapu clan of the Dhuwa moiety togethern whilst Napurrawuy is painting the Buyku ceremony area of the Yirritja moiety from Gāngan.

These particular epic song cycles are meta. The patterns encode songs of people gathering together to gather fish as they conduct a ceremony memorialising the ancestors gathering together to sing of gathering fish—an infinitely repeating collective activity of collecting.

The bark paintings of Yalamakany and Muluymuluy are different. They are figurative and literal.

In Yolŋu life there is no state of being alone. There is the choice of being with one person, a few people or many—but not one to be in solitude. And so the ancient practices of feeding oneself from what can be gathered is always done in company.

Muluymuluy’s vessels are made to contain what has been gathered and metaphorically show the weave that binds the people together in kinship.

One of Yalmakany’s paintings of women gathering ganguri (yams) shows thirteen women. This is not just the ancestral past but also the current contemporary reality. This is the norm. The troopy loads up and then disgorges up to twenty people and they head off in different directions depending on taste and talent. Some for oysters, some to spear fish, some to gather firewood or pandanus, some to go through the mangroves to get crabs. And in this case a group of women following the tiny thread of vine which leads underground to the rich tuber. But some sit by the fire and tend it and cook and chat and sleep and mind kids. At the end of the day all will reconvene to eat the yams, stingray pate, mudcrabs, smoked oysters, magpie goose, cow, wallaby, brolga, tuna or crayfish and drink cups of tea, eat the damper cooked on the coals with lashings of bush honey or condensed milk. These are the precious times of family contentment and happy joking and teasing. Satisfied and securely comfortable in company.

—
Will Stubbs
Coordinator, Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre



1.
A collaborative national touring exhibition *Mulkun Wirrpanďa & John Wolseley: Midawarr! Harvest*, opened at National Museum of Australia in 2017, then toured to MAGNT Darwin and Melbourne. Ms Wirrpanďa's solo work was presented posthumously in Sydney at *The National* in 2022. The artist's high cultural significance was revealed in *Dhakiyarr and the King*, at The Cross Art Projects in 2007. See also the concurrent exhibition *Miwatj Yolŋu: Sunrise People* in 2023 at Bundanon—Shoalhaven, NSW. Sunrise People explores storytelling, ecology and materiality in the works of Yolŋu artists from the Yirrkala Community.

In *Gathering*, a dazzling series of contemporary ŋuwayak (bark painting) and larrakitj (memorial poles) by five emerging and mid-career artists, set out some of the many registers of the significance of Yolŋu weaving and gathering.

The exhibition is an exquisite window onto some of the associated systems of knowledge, law and practices that comprise Yolŋu heritage.

As Will Stubbs, coordinator at Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, writes: 'There are two different approaches in these paintings. A sacred one relying on dhulang or miny'tji—the sacred clan designs, and a secular one which is purely representational.'

In the north-eastern part of Arnhem Land and most of the Top End, fibre is used to create apparel and body attire, baskets and string bags, fishing nets and other food tools, mats, sculpture, toys and games. Plaited, twined and woven objects are, these days, often designed to take the breath away in art exhibitions or fashion parades. But some are sacred and rarely seen outside ceremony.

The installation is balanced by Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties—a worldview that sees every plant, animal, fish, bird or any place or person as belonging to one of these two balancing halves of the world. Art continues the spiritual forces behind the ongoing

Creation and continuing identity. Using materials from local lands is an important part of this practice.

The overarching knowledge of the ancient art of weaving is a science of colour and form, underpinned by the knowledge of plants and their properties. In a revolutionary education project begun by the late Mulkun Wirrpanďa in 2012 and continued for a decade, the artist made paintings and prints that document the lesser-known plant species that she grew up eating, and their intricate natural systems and cycles.¹

Her younger sister Muluyumuluy Wirrpanďa, who painted at her side, has emerged as a major artist, resuming her eminent sister's arc of investigation as an elder of the Dhudi-Djapu clan moiety. Muluyumuluy's richly detailed paintings were presented last year in *Mangrove Thinking* at The Cross Art Projects. In *Gathering* her equally startling paintings are of bol'pu/bathi or baskets made by painting natural ochre onto stringybark with a marwat—a traditional stick brush made with strands of human hair secured with vegetable fibre. The brush-marks are a simulacrum of the labour intensive and difficult process of weaving pandanus (pandanus spirals); the ochre colours recall the dyes made from bulbs, roots or bark of plants.

Muluyumuluy paints the positive and negative space of bol'pu as if simultaneously weaving and untwining. The twining and untwining recalls the living tradition of Milkarri—women's song cycles.² The hand-spun string handles and rounded bottoms come from an era when the skill and the time expended was a normal part of daily life. They are now largely seen in museum collections.

In Yalmakany Marawili's signature 'gathering' works, you can guess what is being collected as different weaving sizes determine what can be safely carried, from dripping shellfish to yams. Yalmakany's mother was Mulkun Wirrpanda and the two artists share a fine hand and vision.

Her joyous work is a window onto the collective pleasure of being on country.

Yalmakany's work was first seen in Sydney in *Mother to Daughter: On Art and Caring for Homelands* (2015)—a celebration of leading Yolŋu women painters and their daughters framed by the cultural importance of homelands.

As artist and Yolŋu cultural leader Djambawa Marawilli beautifully expresses: 'We are the archaeologists and nthropologists. Our Elders are passing on traditional knowledge in Yolŋu and ancient Indigenous languages and university systems, which are still strong and real and rolling on ... our traditionally grounded contemporary art is not principally about beautiful objects, but, with ancient patterns and designs, shares our living ancestral understanding and specific connection to Country.'³

Mega Mununggurr, Yimula Mununggurr and Napurrawuy Wunŋmurra paint sacred fish-traps. Mega and Yimula paint the fish-trap at Wapdawuy (an outstation about 150 kilometres south of Yirrkala and inland from Blue Mud Bay), which joins the Djapu clan of the Dhuwa moiety

together. Miny'tji is effectively a language which provides a mnemonic code to a defined text which are the words of the epic song cycle of the place depicted.

This Djapu clan outstation (and spiritual residence for Ancestral Beings Mäna the Shark and Bol'ŋu the Thunderman) is surrounded by permanent freshwater. The larrakitj by Yimula witness the strength of Mäna and his actions: thrashing his tail in the muddy or black water. The grid lines having reference to the trap, the cross hatched squares referring to differing states of the freshwater – the source of Djapu soul. Napurrawuy is painting the Buyku ceremony area of the Yirritja moiety from Gäŋgan.

So how long is this piece of string? Writing on deep time paintings of the material culture of Aboriginal groups living in eastern Arnhem Land, rock art expert George Chaloupka begins by saying artworks depicting material culture are at least 50,000 years old. They depict creator beings and their bol'pu, and move on to people (artist and kin). Chaloupka notes that dramatic environmental changes caused by rising sea levels, commencing some 8,000 years ago created an environment for mangrove swamps and saline plains. By 1,500 years ago sediment accumulation created extensive freshwater habitats and new types of baskets, perhaps made from newly introduced plant species.⁴

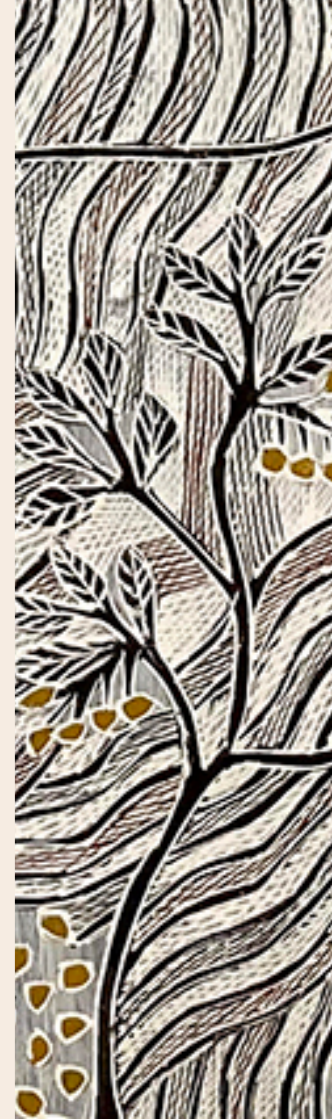
Change keeps happening. It is speculated that the practice of dyeing rather than painting fibrework with ochres is a practice that spread from the centuries of contact between seafarers and traders of the great Indonesian archipelago and saltwater peoples of northern Aboriginal nations

trade routes. The Yolŋu/Macassan Project at the *10th Asia Pacific Triennale* (ATP10) and *Dhomala Dhäwu/Makassan Sail Story* at The Cross Art Projects in 2021,⁵ drew attention to the richness of the cultural, social, and spiritual connections between the sojourners from southern Sulawesi and other Indonesian islands and Yolŋu people.

Gathering highlights the centrality of ecological systems within Yolŋu culture that are themselves a source of inspiration to artists and viewers—offering a pause to regather and renew.

5. *Dhomala Dhäwu/Makassan Sail Story* (2021), featured the work of Indonesian artist Ipeh Nur and senior Yolŋu artist Margaret Rarru.

—
Jo Holder
Director, The Cross Art Projects



2. *Song Spirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country Through Songlines*, Gay'wu Group of Women, Allen and Unwin, 2019.

3. See full text: Djambawa Marawilli, 'On Art and Caring for Indigenous Knowledge', *ANKAA Arts Backbone*, V14: Issue 2, January 2015. At <https://www.crossart.com.au/exhibition-archive/mother-to-daughter-on-art-and-caring-for-homelands-30-april-to-6-june-2015/>

4. George Chaloupka and Pina Giuliani, 'Strands of time', *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, Injalak Arts and Crafts, ed., Louise Hamby, 2005.



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Yalmakany Marawili
Bengitj & Nāpayitj, 2023
(# 2493-23)
(detail)



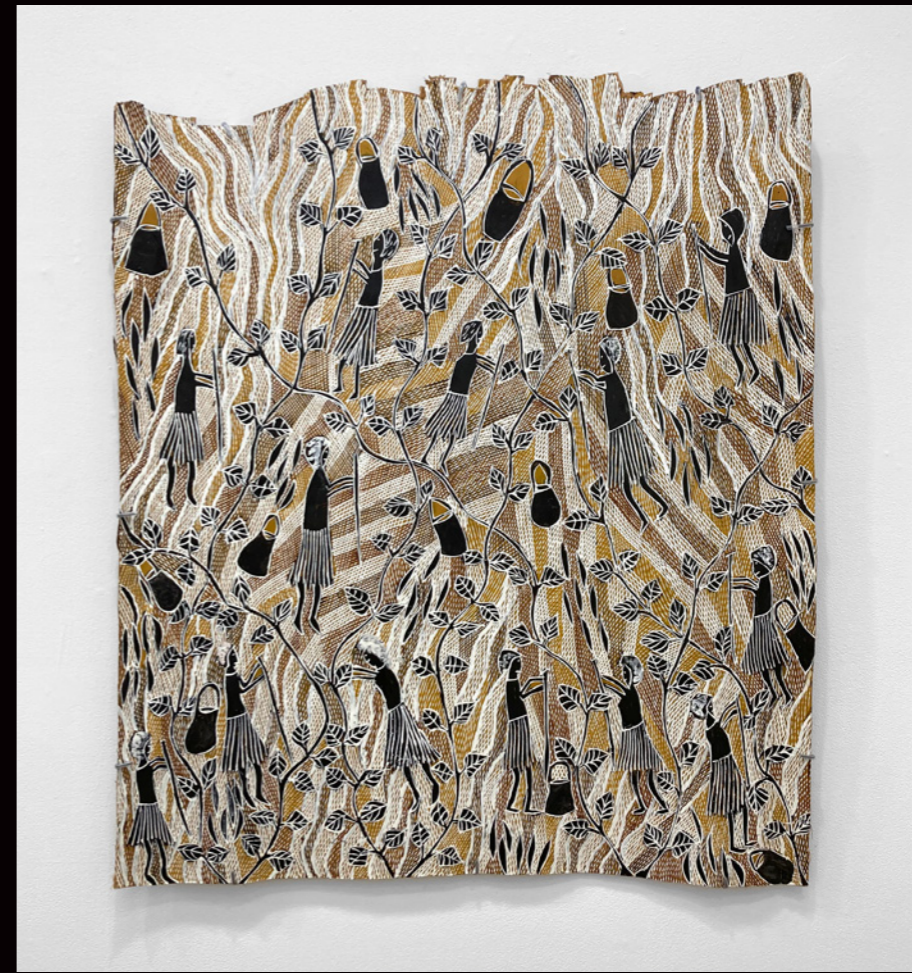
Yalmakany Marawili
Bengitj & Nāpayitj, 2023
Ochre on stringybark
98.5 x 79.5 cm
(# 2493-23)

\$ 5500



Yalmakany Marawili
Gulun Nyathamirri, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 133 x 67 cm
 (# 2843-23)

\$ 6800



Yalmakany Marawili
*Miyalk getting
 Ganguri*, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 , 107 x 91 cm
 (# 4357-23)

\$ 6800



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Gathering: Weaving the Collective in Yolŋu Art
The Cross Art Projects, 2023
(installation view)



Muluymuluy Wirrpanda
Bol'pu, 2023
Ochre on stringybark
105.5 x 90 cm
(# 4043-23)

—
\$ 5800



Muluymuluy Wirrpanda
Bol'pu, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 87 x 51 cm
 (# 4295-23)

\$ 2600



Muluymuluy Wirrpanda
Bol'pu, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 135 x 50 cm
 (# 4488-23)

\$ 3700



Muluymuluy Wirrpanda
Bol'pu, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 104 x 51 cm
 (# 4981-23)

\$ 4200



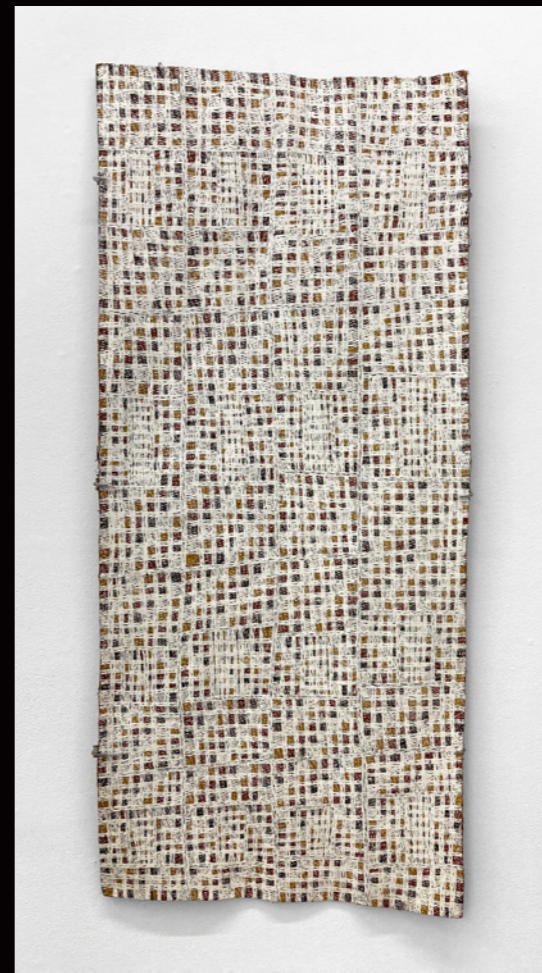
Muluymuluy Wirrpanda
Bol'pu, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 95.5 x 42 cm
 (# 4917-23)

\$ 3400



Yimula Mununggurr
Djapu, 2023
Ochre on stringybark
124 x 65 cm
(# 2777-23)

\$ 4400



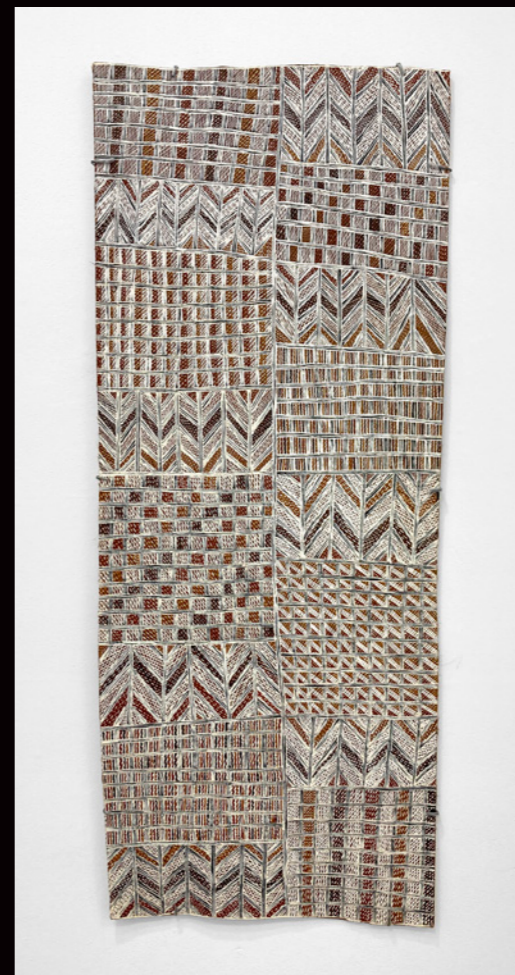
Yimula Mununggurr
Djapu, 2023
Ochre on stringybark
137 x 61 cm
(# 1979-23)

\$ 4700



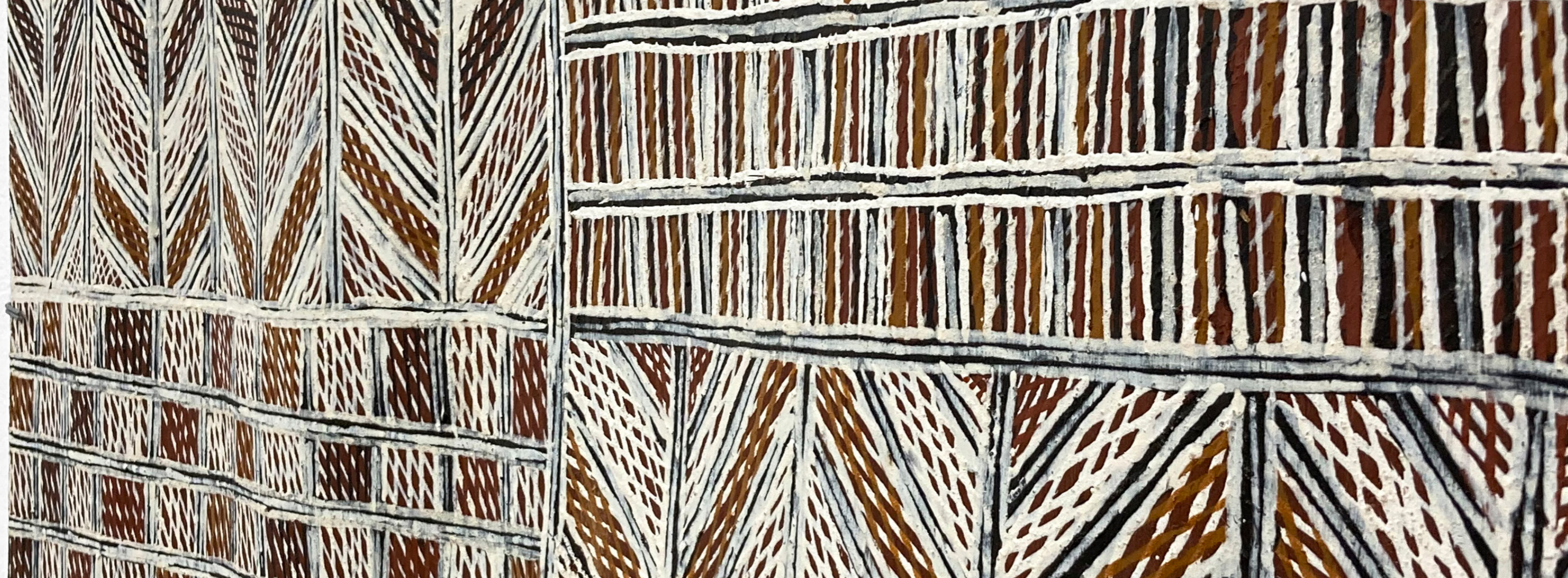
Meja Mununggurr
Djapu ga Dhudi-Djapu, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 104 x 52 cm
 (# 341-23)

\$ 4400

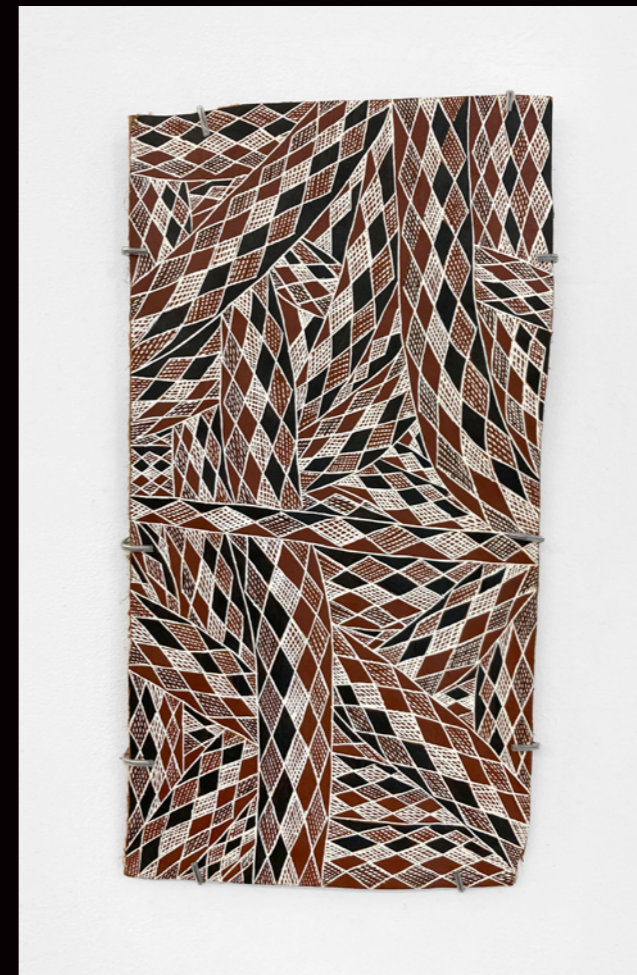


Meja Mununggurr
Djapu ga Dhudi-Djapu, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 135 x 56 cm
 (# 814-23)

\$ 4700



[Previous page ↑](#)
Meṇa Munuṅgurr
Djapu ga Dhudi-Djapu, 2023
(# 814-23)
(detail)



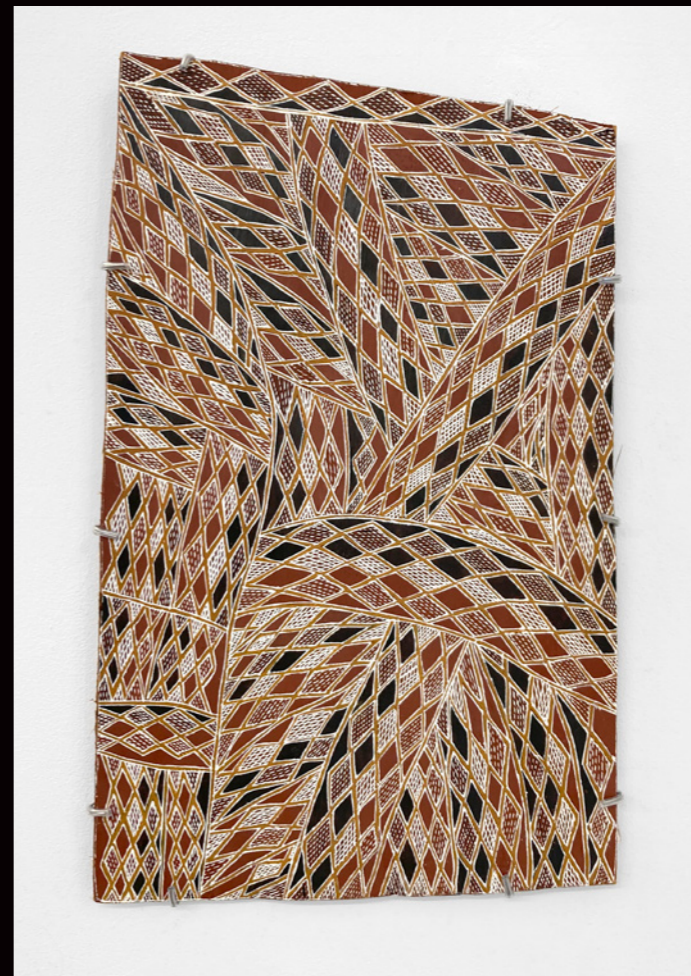
Napurrawuy Wunuṅmurra
Guluṭji, 2023
Ochre on stringybark
59 x 37 cm
(1016-23)

—
\$ 900



Napurrawuy Wunupmurra
Guluji, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 62 x 39 cm
 (1017-23)

—
 \$ 900



Napurrawuy Wunupmurra
Guluji, 2023
 Ochre on stringybark
 66 x 34 cm
 (1683-23)

—
 \$ 900



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Yimula Mununggurr
Djapu Design, 2018
L to R: (# 252-19)
(# 6718-18) (# 2202-19)
(detail)



Yimula Mununggurr
Djapu Design, 2018
Ochre on stringybark
240 cm (H)
(# 6718-18)

—
\$ 4500



Yimula Mununggurr
Djapu Design, 2019
 Ochre on stringybark
 247 cm (H)
 (# 252-19)

\$ 4700



Yimula Mununggurr
Djapu Design, 2019
 Ochre on stringybark
 233 cm (H)
 (# 2202-19)

\$ 4400



Opposite page ←
Yalmakany Marawili
*Miyalk getting
Ganguri*, 2023
(# 4357-23)
(detail)

Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre

The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre is the Indigenous community controlled art centre of Northeast Arnhem Land. Located in Yirrkala, a small Aboriginal community on the northeastern tip of the Top End of the Northern Territory, approximately 700km east of Darwin. The primarily Yolŋu (Aboriginal) staff of around twenty services Yirrkala and the approximately twenty-five homeland centres in the radius of 200km.

Buku-Larrnggay— '*the feeling on your face as it is struck by the first rays of the sun (i.e. facing East)*'

Mulka— '*a sacred but public ceremony*'

With Thanks

Thank you to the artists at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, and coordinators Will Stubbs and Dave Wickens. At The Cross Art Projects: Belle Blau, Simon Blau, Phillip Boulton, Susan Gilligan.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Cross Art Projects acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and recognise the land was never ceded. Always was, always will be.

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BUKU X