

# Colour Country

art from Roper River



Education Kit



City of  
Wagga Wagga

# Education Kit

## Colour Country: art from Roper River

### BACKGROUND

Ngukurr community lies at the south eastern edge of Arnhem Land, on the banks of the Roper River about 90kms from the Gulf of Carpentaria.



Most Aboriginal artists in Arnhem Land paint with ochres on bark, like their ancestors have for over 40,000 years. The artists from the Roper region are different. These artists started painting in acrylics on canvas at Ngukurr in 1987, when workshops were organised at the artists' request through Adult Education. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra, Amy Jirwulurr Johnson and Willie Gudabi were there when the first painting workshops took place and their work gained instant acclaim. Gertie Huddleston began painting a

few years later and quickly came to prominence. *Colour Country: art from Roper River* is primarily an exploration of these artists' work, however the exhibition also features work by other artists who came to prominence later and are still creating vibrant art in and around the Roper region.

The term 'colour country' was reportedly used by Ginger Riley in a discussion the artist had with Albert Namatjira. Riley is quoted as saying that Namatjira's painting inspired him to see his 'colour country' and the desire to illustrate the vivid colour of his country stayed with him. The dramatic use of colour is a major factor in the work of all the artists in this exhibition.

The people of the Roper region believe that during the creation period the features of the country were made by the actions of ancestral heroes, who imprinted their bodies, their tools and their actions onto the ground. When the ancestral beings awoke, they broke through the surface of the earth in places and travelled through certain sites which have great power and energy. These actions survive as distinct landforms, which Aboriginal people see as proof of the ancestors' existence. Their movement through country, creating it and laying down law followed certain tracks, which may pass through vast areas of country and numerous language groups' estates. Those groups share responsibility for that country.

Each of the artists in *Colour Country: art from Roper River* developed their own unique style to represent their traditional beliefs and country but also, in many cases, to illustrate their life experiences and history. Art from this region is diverse, dynamic and innovative, yet rooted firmly in traditional culture and representations of country. The paintings in *Colour Country: art from Roper River* are contemporary representations of personal histories as well as cultural and religious beliefs.

# HISTORY

When Europeans arrived in the Roper region in the 1870s they changed the lives of the Roper tribes forever. Before they came it was estimated that there were nine traditional language groups in the area: Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Manggarai, Ngandi, Ngalakan, Nunggubuyu, Rembarrnga and Ritharrngu, consisting of about 2,500 people. The Europeans arrived to establish cattle stations for the expanding pastoral industry in the 1880s. Soon the entire district was taken, as if owned by the new arrivals and the Aboriginal people were forced off the land they had inhabited for centuries.

Aboriginal people had to fight for their survival and their way of life. However resistance provoked a swift vengeance, resulting in massacres on most of the cattle stations, which led to a spiralling cycle of murder and revenge then anger and retaliation. There were many examples of massacres in Roper country and the population declined markedly during this period.

This situation led the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to set up a Mission on the Roper River as a refuge for Aboriginal people in 1907. Around 200 dispossessed Aborigines sought refuge at the newly established Mission in the first year. The Anglican Mission was run as an industrial and agricultural institution as well as an educational and spiritual one. Almost immediately a church, school, cook-house and dispensary were established. Extensive vegetable gardens and a stock-yard followed shortly after. The discipline of the Mission was hard for many Aboriginal people, however some, like Gertie Huddleston, look back on the Mission times with affection.



Roper river, Ngukurr  
Photo: Cath Bowdler

Between 1910 and 1920 the killings subsided and many Aboriginal people moved to the stock camps to gain work on the pastoral stations. Many, like Ginger Riley and Willie Gudabi, became great stock workers and spent years working on different cattle stations. Working on pastoral stations did not preclude ceremonies and other traditional practices as much as life on the Mission did. The wet season layoff allowed people to return to their traditional country, perform ceremonies and pass on the necessary knowledge to the younger generation. There were others however who refused to succumb and stayed living deep in the bush away from the white man's world.

The contact history of both the pastoral industry and the CMS Mission had a great effect on cultural practices in the Roper region. The artists in *Colour Country: art from Roper River* have all been affected by this history in one way or another. Its influence can be seen in the subject matter and diversity of their work.

# Willie Gudabi & Moima Willie



**Willie Gudabi**

*My Grandfather's Whole Story* 1992

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 145 x 139 cm

Collection of A. and B. Knight, Melbourne

Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

# Willie Gudabi & Moima Willie



**Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie**  
c. 1916 – 1996 Alawa Language

Willie Gudabi was born on Nutwood Downs Station south of the Roper River, but lived in the bush until he was sixteen. Then he moved to one of the cattle stations where he was taught station work. Willie was a skilled stockman and much valued in the Northern Territory and Queensland. In his youth Willie was taught about Aboriginal ceremonies and Alawa law by his relative Gudang, who was an important ceremonial man and rock painter.

Willie met Moima at the Mission where they got married. Because of his work as a stockman they lived in a lot of different places. At the age of sixty Willie retired from stock work and decided to start painting. Moima watched Willie paint and soon she started painting along side him.

Willie and Moima paint pictures that are about preparation and enactment of ceremony. Gudang is often painted in these pictures because he taught Willie about Aboriginal law and ancestral beings.

Willie and Moima's canvases are very detailed and feature ants, birds, butterflies, mosquitoes, scorpions, crustaceans, wallabies and the goanna. Sometimes they show medicinal plants and spirit figures that play a role in the story. Their paintings also feature important dreamings showing the moon, the whirly-wind and rainbow serpent.

Willie and Moima use strong colours in various combinations and their paintings are very busy, full of movement, plants and creatures.

## DISCUSS

- Look at the paintings *My Grandfather's Whole Story* and *Old Gudang*. Can you find the figure of Gudang? Who do you think Gudang is?
- Discuss the art elements of line, colour and texture in *My Grandfather's Whole Story* and *Old Gudang*.
- Discuss how these art works differ from Ginger Riley's paintings.

## DISCOVER

- John Olsen paints the Australian landscape as though looking from above, creating a type of map. Compare John Olsen's paintings *Bush Walk* (Collection Bendigo Art Gallery) and *Entrance to the Sea Port of Desire* (The Art Gallery of NSW) with one of Willie Gudabi's paintings.

## DO

- Paint a picture that is inspired by where you live. Include your family and other important people in your life, your beliefs and events that have occurred. You can use colours to reflect your personality and symbols to suggest your feelings and moods.



(Above & Right)

Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie Gabal *Ritual* 1990 (details)

156 x 106 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Artbank Collection



**Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie**

*Old Gudang* c. 1996

synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 191.0 x 177.0cm

Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga

# Gertie Huddleston



**Gertie Huddleston**

*Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads* 1997

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 143 x 134 cm

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection

Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund



# Gertie Huddleston



**Gertie Huddleston**  
Born c. 1916  
Wandarang/Mara Language

Gertie was born at the Roper River Mission and lives a Christian way of life. Gertie was taught about her heritage through watching her mother make traditional objects as a young girl. She also walked with her family through the bush and learned about bush tucker and bush medicine.

Gertie went to school, got a good education and learnt to read and write at the Roper River Mission. She learnt to sew and was very good at fine detailed embroidery work. The missionaries planted large gardens and Gertie was taught to grow vegies, fruit and flowers in neat rows.

Gertie lived in Darwin for seven years and travelled a lot to see family living all over the Northern Territory and interstate. She finally came back to live in Ngukurr in the 1980's.

Gertie would go to Willie and Moima's house when they were painting. She loved what they were doing and soon she was painting her own canvases.

Garden flowers and sewing were the things Gertie loved the most and this is what she painted. Many of her paintings are made up of small individual paintings where she paints a lot of detail using very delicate brush stokes with lots of dotting and layering. This makes them look like embroidery on patch work quilting. Gertie's paintings reflect her traditional upbringing and her Christian beliefs.

## DISCUSS

- Look carefully at *Ngukurr Landscape with Cycads*. Describe the vegetation, animal and bird life that you see and the colours used. How has the artist's painting technique created an embroidered quality?
- What is the dominant shape repeated throughout the painting?

## DISCOVER

- Gertie loved to paint flowers and used a particular technique to transfer patterns called 'semco'. Research 'semco patterns' and find an example.

## DO

- Create a series of mixed media artworks using the techniques of drawing collage and stitching based on the theme of gardens - bush gardens, vegetable gardens or wild gardens.
- Cut out 8 squares of cardboard size 10cm x 10cm and create a garden image on each piece.
- Scan each of your completed artworks and arrange into different compositions.



**Gertie Huddleston**  
*Garden of Eden II* 1999 (detail)  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 132 x 120 cm  
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection  
Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund  
Winner Open Painting Award, 16th NATSIAA



**Gertie Huddleston**  
*Different Landscapes around Ngukurr* (detail)  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 199 cm  
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection  
Purchased through the Shell Development Australia Aboriginal Art Acquisition Fund



Gertie Huddleston  
*Painting The Country* 1998  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
164.0 x 126.0cm  
Karen Brown Collection

# Ginger Riley Munduwalawala



**Ginger Riley Munduwalawala**

*Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight* 1994

synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 190 x 191 cm

Private collection

Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley

Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

# Ginger Riley Munduwalawala



**Ginger Riley Munduwalawala**  
c. 1937 – 2002  
Mara Language

Ginger Riley was born near his home station Maria Lagoon, near the Limmen Bight River. This is coastal salt water country is different to the inland country where most of the other artists in the exhibition come from. Ginger Riley grew up in the bush and sometimes went to school at the Roper River Mission. Before Ginger took up painting he was a stockman and labourer on Nutwood Downs station and other places in the Northern Territory.

When Ginger was a young man he met the great Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira and saw his paintings. He loved Namatjira's use of colour and it was then that he knew one day he would paint.

In the 1970's when stock work declined Ginger returned to his own country and Ngukurr. He started painting when he retired in the 1980's. Ginger painted his mother's country, the area around the Four Archers, a geographical formation about 45 kilometres inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Limmen Bight River.

The Four Archers were formed by powerful supernatural beings known as Bandian and Garimala the creator snakes. Most of the time in Ginger's paintings Garimala appears as two snakes. He can travel both above and under ground and can also turn into the fierce snake Bandian when he is angry.

Ginger sees what he wants to paint as a series of pictures in his mind. One of the strongest images in Ginger Riley's work is Ngak Ngak, the white breasted sea eagle. Ngak Ngak's role is that of guardian and protector of the country and most of the time it is painted in profile.

Ginger Riley was called 'boss of colour' for his explosive use of colours. He was also one of Australian's best known Indigenous artists.

## DISCUSS

- Describe Ginger Riley's use of colour in the art work *Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight*.
- Looking at the work *Untitled*, what is your first impression of the work? What do you think it is about?

## DISCOVER

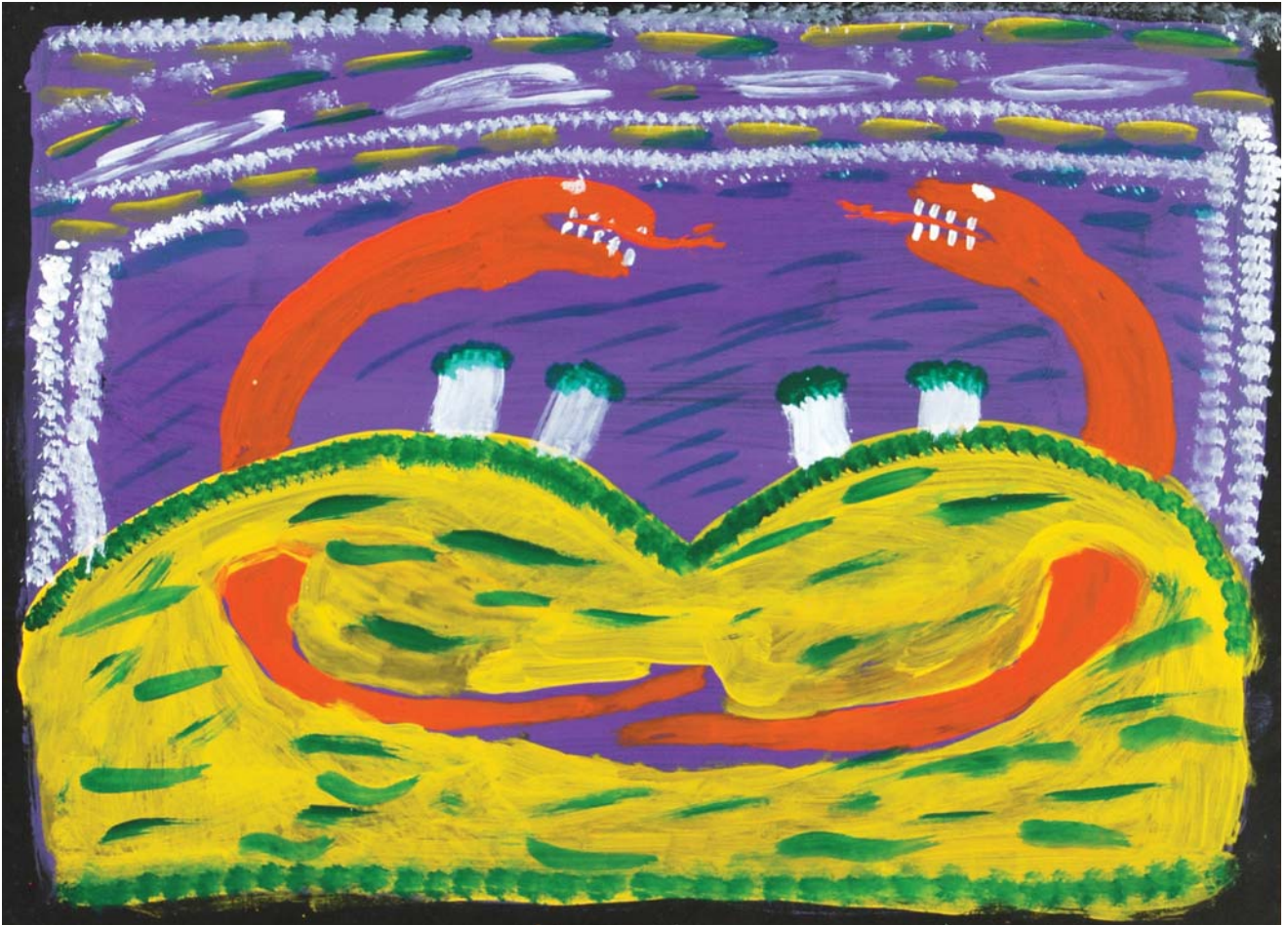
- How does Ginger Riley depict Garimala and Ngak Ngak in the painting *Ngak Ngak in Limmen Bight*?
- Ginger Riley was influenced by Albert Namatjira's water colour paintings. Look at some of Namatjira's paintings and note how Ginger Riley's paintings are similar and different from Namatjira's.

## DO

- Take inspiration from both these artists and create a 'grand panoramic landscape' OR make a diorama using the painting as a backdrop and placing animals and birds from your area into the scene.



**Ginger Riley Munduwalawala**  
*Ngak Ngak and the owl at night* 1997 (detail)  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 64.0 x 130.0cm  
Private collection  
Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley  
Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne



**Ginger Riley Munduwalawala**

*Untitled* 1991

synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 28 x 38 cm

Private collection

Image courtesy of Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

# Djambu Barra Barra



**Djambu Barra Barra**

*Two Kangaroos and Two Dogs* 2005

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 120 cm

Private collection, Sydney



# Djambu Barra Barra



**Djambu Barra Barra**  
c. 1946 – 2005  
Wagilak Language

Djambu's upbringing is quite different to the other artists of Ngukurr as he was brought up in the bush having no contact with white people. He was born near Nilipidgi on the Walker River and, when his family passed away, he travelled through Arnhem Land. Djambu learnt all about his country - the rituals, ceremonies and cultural knowledge. He knew about different painting styles and had been taught to paint on bodies and bark.

After years of travelling, Djambu settled at Ngukurr, where he met Amy Johnson, whom he married.

Djambu Barra Barra painted 'big corroboree stories' to do with ceremonies. His works show the plains kangaroo and crocodile, the sandridge goanna and the devil devil. The plains kangaroo is the major dreaming associated with the Ngukurr township. Djambu often painted the kangaroo with a dog and sometimes included wattle trees or the Cyprus pine.

The devil devil, also called Nakaran, is an important ritual figure. Djambu paints him as a 'giant man' and 'sorcery' figure with a wide range of powers.

Colour is an important element in Djambu's work. He used complementary colours which make his canvases vibrant. Djambu used rarrk (crosshatching) and dotting or dashing for background and figures. Another feature of Djambu's work is the placing of a large x-ray figure or figures in the centre of the work.

## DISCUSS

- *Medicine Man* is a painting of a devil devil. What do you think a devil devil might be/do? Discuss how the artist represents the figure as being dangerous.
- Describe the colours and techniques the artist has employed in *Medicine Man*.

## DISCOVER

- Research bark painting from Arnhem Land. Find another example of an artist who uses rarrk (crosshatching) using ochres on bark.

## DO

- Create two pictures depicting at least two of your favourite animals, using pen and line only. Include the internal organs of the animal in at least one picture.



Above & Right  
**Djambu Barra Barra**  
*Dead Ones* 2005 (details)  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 295 x 130 cm  
Courtesy of Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation and Total E&P Australia



**Djambu Barra Barra**

*Medicine Man* 1998

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 120 cm

Hans Sip collection, Melbourne

# Amy Jirwulurr Johnson



Amy Jirwulurr Johnson  
*Costello Country* 2004  
silkscreen on paper, 51 x 65 cm  
Wagga Wagga Art Gallery Collection

# Amy Jirwulurr Johnson



**Amy Jirwulurr Johnson**  
Born 1953  
Ngalakan Language

Amy was born on Roper River station and went to school at the Roper River Mission. She also studied at the Open College in Darwin. Amy's mother taught her about Aboriginal culture.

Amy married Djambu Barra Barra and they lived between Ngukurr and Costello outstation. They sometimes worked on the same paintings together. The subject matter of these paintings often shows wading birds hunting for fish. This can refer to ceremony.

Over time Amy began to find her own style of painting where she uses strong, bold contrasting colours. She paints creatures from her mother's country and dreamings. These are painted in various ways but on the same set of themes. Amy paints animals, reptiles, birds and plants with complexity and detail. This, together with her use of large flat areas of primary colours, makes her canvases appear vibrant and bright.

## DISCUSS

- Look at Amy Jirwulurr Johnson's paintings *Untitled* and *Costello Country*. Discuss how Amy has painted the background in each work.
- What mark-making has Amy used to fill in the sections of the background in *Untitled*?

## DISCOVER

- List the bird life and animals you can see in both artworks. What traditional Aboriginal symbols can you see in Amy's work that you might find in other artists' work from Arnhem Land?

## DO

- Create a mono print or collage using primary colours that features images of birds and animals as simple cut out shapes.



Amy Jirwulurr Johnson  
*Untitled* 1998 (detail)  
synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 97 x 182 cm  
Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga



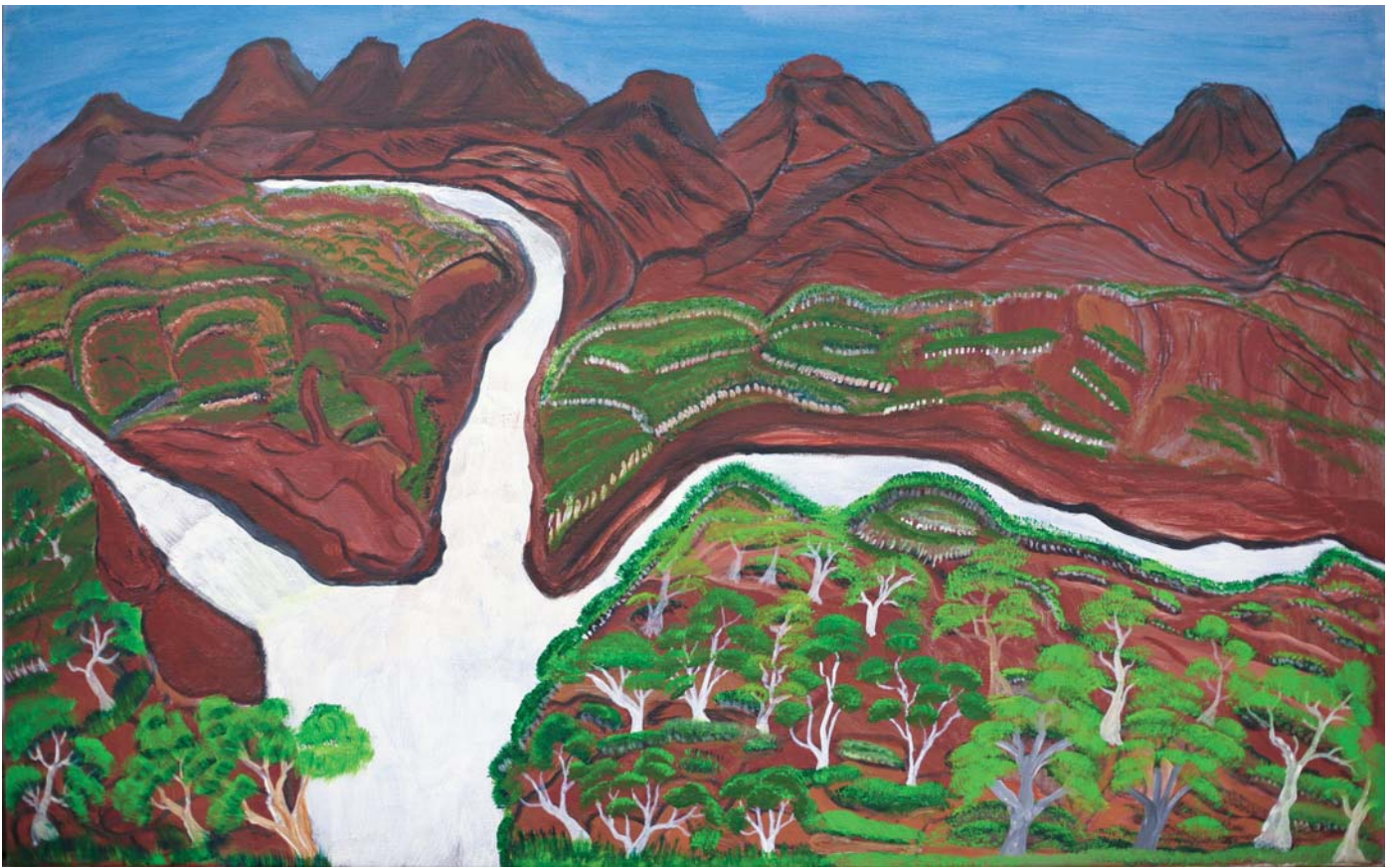
**Amy Jirwulurr Johnson**

*Untitled* 1998

synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 97 x 182 cm

Collection of C. and T. Knight, Wodonga

# Angelina George



**Angelina George**

*Three Rivers* 2004

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 60 x 120 cm

Karen Brown Collection



# Angelina George



**Angelina George**  
Born c. 1937  
Wandarang/Mara Language

Angelina is Gertie Huddleston's sister and her early years were spent at the Roper River Mission where she had a Christian upbringing. Her father was the first indigenous pastor at Ngukurr.

Growing up she worked in pastoral station camps and at one stage spent time with her relative Ginger Riley, who went on to dominate the Roper River movement in the 1990's.

Angelina and her sisters took up painting, each with their own style. Angelina paints the landscape of the Roper River region. The country she paints has no human beings in it, but sometimes she includes birds such as hawks or cockatoos in the distance. The colours Angelina uses are earthy and strong as are her paintings.

## DISCUSS

- Discuss the visual power of the work *Part of the Ruined City Area* and *Three Rivers*. Describe how the artist has used texture, colour and other techniques to create a sense of space.

## DISCOVER

- Look at Margaret Preston's art work *Flying over the Shoalhaven* (Collection National Gallery Australia). Compare and contrast the subject matter and styles of *Flying over the Shoalhaven* with *Three Rivers*.

## DO

- Indigenous people often tell stories in their artworks. Find an image that shows the earth from above (use Google Earth). Capture this image and compare the aerial view with Angelina George's work *Part of the Ruined City Area*.
- Write a story with you as the mythical creature flying over the land. Illustrate your story.



**Angelina George**

*Far Away Places* 2008

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 160.0 x 199.0cm

Karen Brown Collection



**Angelina George**

*Part of the Ruined City Area* 2004

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 80 x 120 cm

Karen Brown Collection

# Other Artists



**Maureen Thompson**

*Our Culture* 2005

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 199 x 109 cm

Private collection, Canberra

# Maureen Thompson



**Maureen Thompson**  
*Our Culture* 2005  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 199 x 109 cm  
Private collection, Canberra

Maureen Thompson was born on Nutwood Downs Station. At the age of five her father died and Maureen's family had to leave the station. Maureen had a traditional Aboriginal upbringing as her family hunted and gathered food, travelling by canoe down the Roper River, living in many places. Maureen's family moved to the mission at Ngukurr after a big flood in 1940. At the mission Maureen became a Christian and was also taught English and other subjects.

Maureen used to visit Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie and watch them paint and she decided to take up painting herself. Many of her paintings use the segmented canvas technique learnt from Willie Gudabi. Maureen's paintings show the traditional way of life and the implements that are used in ceremonies and daily life. There are coolamons made from paper bark, grass skirts for dancing, dilly bags, boomerangs, nulla nullas, bush plants, medicine and many more.

Maureen's work is intricate. She uses a light feathery touch to apply paint and builds up layers overlaying one detail with another. Maureen is now the most senior member of the Ngukurr Art Aboriginal Corporation.

## DISCOVER

- Compare and contrast Maureen Thompson's work *Our Culture* with Gertie Huddleston's work *Painting the Country*. Discuss how both artists have used the idea of the segmented canvases.
- Describe some images and objects you can find in *Our Culture*.

# Faith Thompson Nelson



**Faith Thompson Nelson**  
*Four Sisters* 2003  
synthetic polymer paint on linen, 123 x 175 cm  
Hans Sip Collection, Melbourne

Faith is Maureen Thompson's youngest child and she was born in Darwin. Her father was from Utopia in the central desert. Faith paints the country around Utopia and her mother's country in Limmen Bight. Faith is allowed to paint the same country as Ginger Riley. Like Ginger Riley and Angelina George, Faith uses bold colours. She paints country as seen from above, depicting minutely detailed trees, flourishing waterways and rock formations

## DISCOVER

- Discuss your immediate response to the work *Four Sisters* by Faith Thompson Nelson. How does Faith's depiction of the Four Sisters differ from Ginger Riley's painting of the Four Archers?
- Discuss the artists' different approaches to the same landscape through their technique and use of colour.

# Alan Joshua Junior



Alan Joshua Junior  
Born 1965  
Wandarang Language

Alan was born in Ngukurr and began painting and carving when he was in his early thirties. He learnt to paint from the older men using traditional ochre colours. Alan has mixed the traditional style with his own diverse styles. The subject matter he paints includes his totems, creatures like Mimis and contemporary issues facing Aboriginal people today. Alan also carves and creates finely crafted spirit figures painted with rarrk (crosshatching).

## DISCOVER

- What technique has Alan used to paint the surface of the figures?
- Research the role of *Mimi* spirit figures in Arnhem Land art.

# SPONSORS



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This exhibition is supported by Visions of Australia, an Australian Government program supporting touring exhibitions by providing funding assistance for the development and touring of Australian cultural material across Australia.

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**City of  
Wagga Wagga**

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**FRONT**  
**Ginger Riley Munduwalawala**  
*Ngak Ngak and the owl at night* 1997 (detail)  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 64.0 x 130.0cm  
Private collection  
Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley  
Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne