Phyllis Thomas (Boaljunggall)
Born c. 1948 near the Tumer River
_The escape 2000_
_achras on linen_
_150 x 180 cm_
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
Purchased 20th National Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, 2000
Telstra Collection

Exhibition The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
14 December 2002 to 16 March 2003
Guest curator Tony Oliver, Arts Adviser, Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation
Blood on the spinifex

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Published December 2002
by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia
www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Editor Bala Starr
Assistant Editor Joanna Bosse
Design Kate Scott
Printed in Australia by GT Graphics Pty Ltd
Print quantity 500

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Oliver, Tony, 1958– .
Blood on the spinifex exhibition: The Ian Potter Museum of Art,
The University of Melbourne, 14 December 2002 to 16 March 2003.

ISBN 0 7340 2918 7


709.94
Argyle Diamonds is pleased to be sponsoring the Blood on the spinifex exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne.

Argyle Diamonds' relationship with Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation began in 1999, when Argyle saw the potential of the Fire, fire burning bright dance performance. In particular, the subject of the Bedford Downs massacre is a significant event in the history of East Kimberley communities close to the Argyle diamond mine. Argyle recognised that Fire, fire burning bright presented an opportunity for greater understanding of local Aboriginal history and culture.

Argyle is delighted to continue to work with Jirrawun Art to spread further understanding of these events through another medium.

Argyle and its diamonds are inextricably associated with the Kimberley – the spectacular region that is home to the Gija and Mirriuwung people and the company's operations. Local people are priority stakeholders of Argyle Diamonds, and respect for the land and its people is a core component of business practices.

An understanding of cultural issues and acknowledgment of history is fundamental to the development of positive and enriching relationships between Argyle and traditional owners.

Argyle seeks to continue to foster these relationships and enhance our understanding of local Aboriginal issues. We encourage Aboriginal people to share their history.

Argyle is pleased to support the exhibition of Blood on the spinifex and hopes the artwork will be viewed in the context of understanding the past to build a better future.

The work and co-operation of the artists, museum and curator is acknowledged and appreciated.

Argyle Diamonds extends its best wishes for the exhibition.

**sponsor's welcome**

Brendan Hammond

Managing Director, Argyle Diamonds
foreword

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director, the Ian Potter Museum of Art

‘If the Aborigines are to enter our history “on terms of most perfect equality”, as Thomas Mitchell termed it, they will bring their dead with them and expect an honoured burial’. So wrote Henry Reynolds in the conclusion to *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, a text which sought to present Aboriginal history to white Australians ‘in such a way that they can understand black motives and appreciate the complexities of their tragic story’.1 In the years since, the stories of violent encounters between Aboriginals and white settlers on the Australian frontier have become more well known. At the same time, the response to such stories has become more complex, with efforts to appreciate them matched by the determination of some to discredit them.

This exhibition of paintings, *Blood on the spinifex*, along with this catalogue, is part of an effort to communicate the experience of Indigenous Australians in the East Kimberley region. At the heart of the project lies the challenge of translation. The past must be translated into the present. Aboriginal experience must be communicated to an urban, non-Indigenous audience. Events, memories and cultural values must be articulated in paint. And regional languages – Gija, Miriwoong, Worla and Kimberley Kriol – must be translated into English.

Each act of translation – whether cultural, linguistic, historical or aesthetic – brings with it certain risks. The subtleties of voice, the inflections of emotion may be diminished or the intricacies of cultural experience may appear abstracted. But this risk arises in any process of translation; it is one we encounter almost daily as global events and history inundate us through the mass media. The risk is unavoidable, for there can be no pure, unmediated or compromise-free translation. However, the pitfalls of translation can be reduced when the speaker offers an invitation to encounter another’s experience; then the sense of distance, difference and resistance that plagues translation can begin to break down.

This is certainly the case with the artists exhibiting in *Blood on the spinifex*. As both Tony Oliver and Frances Kofod suggest, the stories told to them by the artists were recounted in a spirit of openness and generosity. The stories are harrowing, but their tone is not bitter or accusatory. Nor is it assumed that a non-Indigenous audience must immediately comprehend a story and all of its implications. Multiple points of entry are offered; oral history, paintings and, in the performance *Fire, fire burning bright*, a combination of western stagecraft and Aboriginal corroboree. As Henry Reynolds and others have remarked, one of the hallmarks of Aboriginal culture is its adaptation in response to European settlement. This exhibition, which presents paintings in a familiar art museum context, is part of a broader process that also engages with western language, historical consciousness and politics.

On behalf of the staff of the Potter, the community of the University of Melbourne, and the people of Melbourne, I would like to thank the artists – Goody Barrett, Paddy Bedford, Rameeka Nocketa, Lena Nyadbi, Peggy Patrick, Rusty Peters, Desma Sampi, Phyllis Thomas, Freddie Timms and Timmy Timms – for sharing their stories with us.

I would also like to thank guest curator, Tony Oliver, linguist, Frances Kofod, and guest writer, Professor Marcia Langton of the University of Melbourne, for their work on the project, which has benefited enormously from their professional expertise and commitment to the understanding of Indigenous cultures. A project of this complexity also requires significant financial support, and we are grateful to the principal sponsor, Argyle Diamonds, for their assistance. We also thank private and institutional lenders for sharing artworks with us.

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The Ian Potter Museum of Art respectfully advises Indigenous people that this publication includes references to names of the dead and cultural and intellectual property that may be of a sensitive nature. We advise all readers that artists’ accounts contained in this catalogue contain descriptions of horrific historical events.

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Beneath the Milky Way, the old people sat around the campfire. With each crackle of flame their faces appeared and retreated again into darkness. The old people sat on flour drums to tell their stories and teach a white man about a shared history. The white man said nothing and in the silences listened to the wind caressing grasses and gum leaves and to the beat and rhythm of the frogs.

Gamarlina (Timmy Timms) placed his hand on the white man's knee. Gamarlina's brother-in-law, Guwumji (Paddy Bedford), sat on the other side of the white man. Guwumji's presence was always nearby on such occasions, whether sitting on a flour drum or lying horizontal on a swag. Dirriji (Rusty Peters) and Booljoonngali (Phyllis Thomas) sat at the same fire but a little away from the two old men. With his hand on the white man's knee, Gamarlina proceeded with silence, a pause and then the moment when history was revealed. On such occasions, Gamarlina's initial words were, 'I have a hard story', or, 'a bad story'. Sometimes, Guwumji remarked, 'that's a true story'. Dirriji never uttered a word but just shook his head and sighed at intervals. Booljoonngali stared into the fire.
Each story was difficult to listen to. Similar stories, from all over the continent, had not been part of the Australian history lessons taught to the white man in his student days. Abstractions about human beings remain abstract if people’s stories are not heard and remain a secret history. Abstractions persist too when many storytellers have themselves disappeared along with their culture and land. It takes trust and courage to share with a white man stories about what his culture has inflicted upon your people. The oral historian suffers in a society that fails to provide the proper means to share his literary and cultural traditions. Who can the oral historian trust to tell of murder against his people other than his own people? Amongst Indigenous Australians, retribution from the white man is not an abstraction, it is part of our shared history.

The white man sat and listened. It’s impossible to abstract people who sit before you and speak of the stealing of ancestral lands and murder of families. The white man found it difficult to digest this reality. The Milky Way turned in the darkness and the white man felt alone forming images for the words given to him by the old people. The white man realised for the first time that he was a visitor in the old people’s country and how fortunate he was to learn of the country’s history first-hand. There were countless evenings over a number of years that the little mob of Jirrawun artists gathered around the campfire sharing their stories with the white man. Gamarliny and Guwumji had initiated the telling of the “bad stories” to the white man, leaving a track for others to follow in their own time as they wished.

One evening, while Dirrji and Booljoonnagall sat beside the white man and stared into the fire, Dirrji told the white man about his uncle’s escape from the Chinaman’s Garden massacre. Each word from Dirrji caused him pain. Each word clung together to form images similar in effect to Goya’s Disasters of war. Dirrji’s words stopped suddenly, his head dropped and he looked into the earth; his pain eventually found the final words, “They picked the kids up by the ankles and smashed their heads against the gum trees”.

Blood on the spinifex evolved from evenings of storytelling beneath the stars and represents the legacy of European occupation that has defaced these artists’ country. It was a natural progression for these oral historians to record their stories in paint. The paintings are a record for future generations – Indigenous and non-indigenous – about our shared past.

It took courage and time for the first paintings to be realised. Many of the stories had never been revealed to non-indigenous Australians. As Dirrmingali (Peggy Patrick) reveals about the massacre Joonba, “It was a very important thing which was kept hidden from white people. People who were still working on the stations were scared they might all be shot themselves if white people saw the Joonba or realised what it was about. The white people who killed Aboriginal people throughout the country never told anyone outside what they had done.”
Appropriately, it was Gamarlinyn who began proceedings to realise the first paintings for Blood on the spinifex. Gamarlinyn completed his first ever paintings just a few months before his death in December 2000.

His first efforts demonstrate vision in search of technique. His later works are masterpieces, mapping the land and law in the deceptively simple yet powerful style of the Turkey Creek painters. When asked why he had never painted before, he replied, ‘No one asked me! A more likely explanation is that, throughout his life, Timms [Gamarlinyn] channeled his creative energies into song and dance. He led Gija performances to venues throughout Australia and to enthusiastic reviews in Paris. He was at his happiest singing song cycles, playing the maluk (didgeridoo), or living up to his name as the Red Mob Wangka Man (after the red naga or loin cloth worn during dances).’

Gamarlinyn’s Bedford Downs massacre (2000, p. 19) and Mistake Creek massacre (2000, p. 31) paintings were composed in a burst of concentrated activity. The ninety-year-old man walked around the canvases, stopping only occasionally to re-load his brush with black paint. Red ochre followed, covering the remaining areas of exposed canvas. The two completed canvases not only reveal stories of mass murder but provide an insight into the artist’s relationship to place. Gamarlinyn was born at Bedford Downs and was a child when the Bedford Downs massacre occurred. The artist also had hereditary ties through his mother to Juwulinybany, in close proximity to the Mistake Creek massacre site.

The Bedford Downs massacre painting is dominated by Mount King – the place where the ‘emu got stuck’ in the dreamtime. The massacre site becomes part of the stories associated with this particular piece of country. The artist and the songman combine to orchestrate a painting where stories are connected by land and absorbed into the dreaming. Guwumji is the senior traditional owner of much of what is referred to in the present day as Bedford Downs. The dreaming about the ‘emu being stuck’ at Mount King is something that the artist paints regularly, finding original ways to recreate the same story. He has produced numerous versions of this story, some of which reveal the massacre site.

Guwumji has created two paintings for this exhibition, Emu dreaming and Bedford Downs massacre (2001, p. 23) and Two women looking at the Bedford Downs massacre burning place (2002, p. 25). These paintings, along with other works in the exhibition, clearly belong to the new century and present new ways of seeing that connect humanity to the past and present.

The Gija, along with other Indigenous Australians, maintain the oldest painting tradition in the world. Western audiences, while easily able to appreciate the apparent ease and sophistication of these paintings, can make comparisons with their own traditions, particularly in relation to Modernism’s distillation of form, structure and space. Western abstract painters often admire the work of Gija artists and ‘see in it’ a common visual language. It is also important to understand where ‘differences’ exist between painting traditions that make them unique. The underpinning reality of the paintings in this exhibition is country. Form, colour and line are not non-objective, but represent place and narrative.

The painting Two women looking at the Bedford Downs massacre burning place is a detail of the Bedford Downs massacre narrative and takes us to a close-up view of the site. The painting provides access to the scene of the crime and we become witnesses to murder alongside the women who are represented as two dotted circles hiding on a rocky escarpment. The red ochre fire is surrounded by several dotted circles that represent the cut trees that became fuel for the men’s funeral pyre. In allowing this crime to be witnessed, Guwumji allows the hideous murder to become part of a shared history that also exists within the present.

Booljoonngali and Dirrji began their paintings for the exhibition at the same time. Like the other artists in the exhibition, they recalled their stories on numerous occasions before they were transformed visually onto canvas. Booljoonngali began by mixing her favorite palette of pink, black and red while Dirrji sat in a chair deep in thought. Like the other artists, Booljoonngali had a particular story that belonged to her traditional country at Turner River. She painted the story of a relative who had escaped the pursuit of white men on horses and tricked them into thinking they had killed him.
1 Freddle Timms, Chairman of Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra
Photograph: Georges Petijean

2 Phylis Thomas, Kununurra
Photograph: Georges Petijean

3 Paddy Bedford at Kelly's Knob, Kununurra
Photograph: Georges Petijean

4 Tony Oliver with Ranneeka Nocketa (left) and Desma Sampi (right), Kununurra

5 Paddy Bedford, Kununurra
Photograph: Georges Petijean

6 Rusty Peters, Kununurra
Photograph: Georges Petijean

7 Lena Nyadbi (left) and Peggy Patrick (right) in the rock shelter outside the cave called Geminybarry on Lissadell Station, where Lena Nyadbi and Goody Barrett's family hid from white pastoralists
Photograph: Frances Kofod
The painting *The escape* (2000, p. 53 and cover) is a brilliant example of the artist's bold graphic skills combined with storytelling. It creates a dramatic moment that reflects the terror of an attempted murder. *The escape* chillingly represents the ruthless hunting down and murder of 'blacks', an activity commonly described by pastoralists as 'sport'. The painting speaks about survival against tremendous odds. The bare-footed running figure is equipped with traditional weaponry – the boomerang and the spear – against the invader's arsenal of horse and gun. The invader himself is featureless and cannot be distinguished from his over-sized saddle. The gun doubles as the invader's mouth.

Dirrji is a deep-thinking artist who is known to consider for days and sometimes years how best to translate a particular story to canvas. He has been known to sit on a chair from daybreak to sunset, occasionally glancing at an empty canvas. The artist's meditation period is the most intense part of his creative process and there is a feeling of relief when the internal world of his memory has finally been translated into the physical world. Painting is a serious and often painful activity for the artist who takes the law of his country seriously.

Like the other artists in the exhibition, Dirrji had a particular story to paint about a massacre that happened to his family at Chinaman's Garden, on Alice Downs. The painting appears balanced and uncomplicated. What is unusual is the literal inclusion of the murderers' homestead and the gum trees against which the family's children's heads were smashed. The two elements seem intrinsically linked as they stand as silent witnesses upon the landscape; it is as if the gums have always belonged, while the homestead remains isolated and imposed like a prop from a Hollywood western.

Liliway (Goody Barrett) and Nyadbi (Lena Nyadbi) are sisters, and in this exhibition they have created works that deal with similar subject matter. Both sisters' paintings reveal the cave in which they hid from pastoralists as children. Nyadbi's painting, *Hideout* (2002, p. 51), combines traditional symbolic women's body designs. These symbols, which are typical of her work, dominate the top half of the painting, forming an overall rhythm that engages ceremonially with the country in the lower half of the picture.

Liliway's painting, *Hiding place and man calling for his dogs* (2002, p. 47), consists of a singular design that appears in the top half of her sister's painting multiplied many times. This horseshoe shape regularly appears in Liliway's paintings, sometimes transformed and representing different places and stories: a head attired with traditional headband, or, with an additional shape, a woman carrying her baby in a *coolamon* (curved wooden dish). In *Hiding place and man calling for his dogs* it represents the hill on which the old man called out for his dingoes in the dreamtime. In other paintings, it has been the dreamtime cave in which Liliway and her family took refuge when white station owners were trying to kill them. In *Hiding place*, this cave is represented as an oval shape at the bottom of the painting.

Ngarrmaliny (Freddie Timms's) painting *Blackfella Creek* (2002, p. 41), like the majority of his work, depicts the country that he worked as a stockman mustering cattle and shows the topography of the land by way of hills and creeks. Paintings become a mapping of memory, and the artist often speaks nostalgically about friends and past events in the landscapes depicted. Ngarrmaliny's paintings exist in temporal dimensions. European time imprints its historical clock upon Gija land – roads, homesteads and murder sites – with the older time dimension and its subject matter remaining unseen.

Ngarrmaliny maps the rivers and hills in *Blackfella Creek* to recreate the landscape that involved his grandmother in an epic historical event. The large, six-panel painting does not reflect the artist's usual orchestration of the landscape where he uses the canvas to score surprising arrangements of line, form and colour. Small dotted red circles that represent murder are contained in a landscape of black and grey. The grey seems to speak about the combination of black and white events that transpired in the life of the artist's grandmother but also the artist's own history as a stockman on Lissadell Station.

Dirrimgali, like her brother, Gamarliny, has painted the Mistake Creek massacre, in *Mistake Creek* (2002, p. 37). The artist has chosen to represent a close-up of the boab tree, which remains standing beside the massacre site to this day. The menacing tree, with its twisted branches extending beyond the picture's edges, is the only living witness to the horrendous events that took place early last century.

Only a few weeks ago, Dirrimgali stood to her feet after completing the final verse in the stage production *Fire, fire burning bright*, part of the 2002 Melbourne Festival. The audience at the Victorian Arts Centre State Theatre clapped the tiny woman in her late seventies who with her family had acted, sang and danced. Dirrimgali spoke then of her late brother, Gamarliny, and how he had wanted the *joonba* to go on if something were to happen to him. Dirrimgali said to the audience, 'We want you to know what white people did to black people in the past'. The audience responded with silence. Dirrimgali continued, 'We hope there can be real peace and friendship between black and white'. The audience clapped again, and Dirrimgali and her family smiled and waved back to them. Everybody had shared a 'hard story'.
1 Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation was formally established in 1998 by Chairman and artist Freddie Timms and Gija elders with Arts Adviser Tony Oliver. Jirrawun's aim is to be self-funding, to implement policies that provide fair and professional conditions for its artists, and to create a framework in which Aboriginal artists have the opportunity to share the same rights and conditions as their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Jirrawun artists seek to take advantage of new resources and opportunities that enable the creation of exciting new visual art forms but do not compromise Gija law and tradition.

2 The stage production, *Fire, fire burning bright*, based on oral histories by Timmy Timms and Paddy Bedford, and including a *Joomba* (or corroboree), was developed during 2001 and shown at the Perth International Festival of the Arts and the Melbourne Festival in 2002. *Fire, fire burning bright* was written and directed in association with Andrish Saint-Clare and performed by the Neminuwarlin Performance Group, of which Peggy Patrick is Creative Director and lead singer.

... we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth.


**hungry ghosts: landscape and memory**

Professor Marcia Langton
The University of Melbourne

Guardians of beautiful landscapes, but carrying the burden of a terrible history, the Jirrawun artists continue the visual traditions and innovations of the Kimberley region in depicting places and events in their homelands. Many of the forebears of these painters were the victims of barbaric acts committed by frontiersmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the mission of capturing the territory of the Gija (also spelled Kija) and their neighbours and terrorising them into submission.

The artworks are cryptic and intriguing. Minimalist and seemingly abstract while embracing the traditional symbols of Kimberley Aboriginal religious life, they present us with the challenge of reading paintings that depict the landscapes of the Kimberley, so resonant with spiritual and historical narratives and meaning for their Aboriginal owners. The paintings refer to the ancestral beings whose existence remains poised in places throughout the country, and to the celebrated pathways of their travels that network the land. And, as well, the life histories of the artists and their forebears are memorialised in the well-worn tracks of their ancestors, so that the suffering and tragedy of their lives can be endured.

All of the painters are traditional owners of estates in this rich cultural territory and all have worked as stockmen and/or domestics on the cattle stations. Jirrawun artists were the primary oral historians (Timmy Timms, Paddy Bedford and Peggy Patrick) and producers of *Fire, fire burning bright*, a profoundly moving ceremony including a traditional *Joonsa* of a massacre story, performed by the Neminuwarlin Performance Group, at the Perth Festival and at the Victorian Arts Centre State Theatre in October 2002.

**Historians of their homeland**

These paintings, like the stage production of *Fire, fire burning bright*, show the resolve of the descendants of those who suffered the terrible ordeals of the frontier to depict their history and the power of their culture. The style of the paintings was first introduced to a wider audience by the late Rover Thomas (Joolama), who, although from the Canning Stock Route much farther to the south, spent his last thirty years living in the East Kimberley at Warmun (Turkey Creek). In the mid 1970s, he ‘found’ or was ‘given’, in religious events, the public ceremony of the *Gurrr Gurrr* (*Krill Krill*) song cycle which eventually provided a stimulus for the production of art in the East Kimberley for an audience beyond the local celebrants who produced the designs and objects for ceremonies. To complement specific verses of the song cycle, pieces of plywood were painted with ochre and carried by the dancers. Rover Thomas and his uncle Paddy Jaminji painted many of these works on board.
As Graham Cormall explains:

The Gururr Gururr ceremony took the form of a ‘palga’, a narrative dance cycle, a vehicle by which both current and historical events and traditional spirit stories can be revealed in public ... dancers carried, for each of the song-lines, painted boards or other constructions, most commonly crosses or similar simple geometric emblems made of light wooden frames and detailed with coloured woollen threads, and occasionally feathers and other materials, known as thread-crosses. The boards, which eventually escaped their ritual origins to become canvases created solely and intentionally as artworks, were originally little more than scraps of cardboard, or salvaged Masonite or three-ply off-cuts. As specific illustrations, the earliest Turkey Creek Gururr Gururr boards were usually relatively simple images illustrating a single site, spirit or event, raised on dark red ochre or black monochromatic grounds and rarely employing more than three ‘colours’. 3

The Jirrawun artists are historians of their homeland, telling in pictures the originary tropes of its creation and significance, and the fate of its people.

The stories of the historical events performed in Fire, fire burning bright were told and re-told in the community before the Joonba was ‘woken up’. In a way, these narratives are told as a demand for a truce between the coloniser and the colonised.

The highly reductive and repetitive visual and performative language of the Gija people can be explained, not only by reference to classical religious and cultural principles of the Aboriginal economy of knowledge, but also by the reticence of the victims to reveal dangerous facts about recent history combined with their determination to remember the dead. In 1996, with support from the Argyle diamond mine that is sponsoring this exhibition, some Gija people established the Daiwul Gidja Culture Group as the vehicle for presenting a cross-cultural awareness program to the mineworkers. The official course notes provide chilling accounts of the eleven massacres remembered in the Gija area. The locations of the massacres are plotted on a map of the region and listed as follows: Jailhouse Creek, Mistake Creek, Wartageny, Bedford Downs, Koondooloo Gorge, Spring Creek, White Rock, Queensland Creek, Panton River, Horse Shoe Creek, and Linneker Gorge. 4

**Hungry ghosts**

These narratives have become integrated with ngarrangarni (dreaming stories) and their ritual performances. The religious accounts connect mundane events to the spiritual world, as happens in Neminuwari’s stage production Fire, fire burning bright. In the after-life, the dead men’s spirits journey to historical places, through the ranges to the coast at Kunnuny, the location of the first Christian mission in the Kimberley, long since abandoned:

*After they die and their bodies are burnt, the spirits of the dead climb up the mountain to the west. They walk along the side of a cliff and look back to the fire where they had died, but eventually continue on travelling west until they meet a clever man [a sorcerer] and give him the song for the Joonba. He tells the spirits that this is not their place and to go back to Gija country ... then on to the distant seashore where they see a settlement with soldiers marching in lines.*

**Being hungry in death as well as life, the spirits go to get fish from a man bringing them from the sea ...**

The white man does not realise that these ‘people’ are really spirits. 5

In one of her many efforts to protect the Argyle Diamonds workers who strode over dangerous spiritual places in the landscape for which Peggy Patrick, among a number of women, is responsible, she painted a work called Barramundi dreaming (daiwul ngarrangarni), depicting part of the story:

*a female Barramundi ... was being chased by a group of women from a waterhole near Kununurra all the way along the Blatchford Escarpment. As the Barramundi was being chased, she made frantic leaps to avoid her captors. These leaps covered gaps in the intervening ranges along the route and other marks showing her travels. The Barramundi went to a place known as Devil Devil Spring (located at the back of the ADM pit) which is where Peggy’s painting of this story begins. The Barramundi twisted around and left marks in the rocks there. At Devil Devil Spring the women were trying to entrap her by using a traditional fishing method known as ‘garigarin’ which rolls of Spinifex are used as a net to trap fish. The Barramundi leapt through the net and escaped. Where she leapt through the net she left her white scales on a rock. Her huge leap carried her some distance where she landed and still lies. She turned into a rock and is seen now as Mt Pitt in the Pitt Range (known locally as Gurndarri). 6*
And so it is repeatedly with each life and its journey to death, evading the traps so life can be reproduced, just as the barramundi leaps along the river, and through the net, to breed. As I have become more familiar with the culture of the Gija people, I have noticed that the tension in the stories, whether from the ngaranggarni or the frontier or both, is always partly resolved by an ending or closure and left partly unresolved by mythic narrative repetition, portrayed in ritual performances. This is expressed by various elements, and by stories told and re-told, in the Joonba, and in other ritual styles, such as the Manthe, or welcome to country, involving the singing and smoking of guests by the traditional owners and guardians of sites.

The landscape behind the landscape
With some knowledge of the religious and historical context of this artistic tradition, it is possible to sense the landscape behind the landscape, as we reflect on the lives of the painters and their world. We are made keenly aware that these painters have a sense of duty to the spiritual narratives of their homelands and the places and resonances of ancestors, and that they retain a keen sense of their own rights in, and responsibility for, the land transmitted to them by their forebears.

We can only wonder at the will of the artists to produce these ethereal works that leave an indelible mark in our minds. I find myself thinking about their ability to bring the vast landscapes of the East Kimberley into our imagination, extending the idea of their geography – rivers, waterholes, sweeping valleys, rocky outcrops, monoliths and ranges – to an architecture of the history of place. In these places, intensely personal memories of the course of being are united with ‘the spiritual’ in the pre-memory of the ngaranggarni, the stories already told about the fate of the powerful, fabulous ancestors that enliven each particular landscape with a special kind of intimacy and knowing.

It may be impossible to understand the inhumanity of those who committed criminal deeds against the Aboriginal people of the East Kimberley, or the theft of their homeland in the name of civilisation, but the history of the ‘killing times’ is tamed in these images. They convey both the heartbeat of the events alluded to and the peace which unity with the spiritual order, now and in the afterlife, brings to both the living and the dead.

Goody Barrett
Paddy Bedford
Rameeka Nocketa
Lena Nyadbi
Peggy Patrick
Rusty Peters
Desma Sampi
Phyllis Thomas
Freddie Timms
Timmy Timms
introduction

Frances Kofod

The paintings in this exhibition depict a range of tragedies suffered by the people of the East Kimberley in the fifty years after the arrival of European settlers in the mid 1880s. I first heard stories like these when undertaking fieldwork to learn and record Miriwoong language in Kununurra in the early 1970s. Since that time I have been involved in many projects connected with language and culture in the East Kimberley, including the production of written documentation for paintings sold through Waringarri Arts for some years from 1989, and for Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation since 1999.

To produce the stories for this catalogue, I recorded interviews with each artist, in most cases sitting with the artist in front of the painting soon after it was completed. The recordings consist of uninterrupted narrative, with some questions and answers where necessary to properly link the story with the image.

None of the painters in the East Kimberley speak standard English. While many speak a traditional language such as Gija, Miriwoong or Worla, the lingua franca for all is Kimberley Kriol. Kriol uses much English vocabulary – often with quite different meanings – as well as vocabulary from the traditional languages. Traditional languages influence the sound system and grammar of Kriol.

In interviewing each artist, I was concerned to allow each person to tell their story in whichever way they wished. This was sometimes in Gija, in several instances Gija interspersed with Kriol, and in Freddie Timms’s case, Kimberley Kriol. I then transcribed the narrative and interview recorded with each artist, wrote a translation and edited the stories to avoid repetition. In some cases I then read the transcription and translation back to the artist and included their subsequent comments. I also read published accounts where these exist of the events described and wrote an introduction to each story taking account of what the artist said, the images seen in each work and other available information.
Many people transcribe Kriol using a phonemic orthography. The orthography used to write Gija in these transcriptions is a compromise between two different orthographies used in the Kimberley for Gija (also spelled Kija) and the related language, Mirdiwoong. It uses b, d and g at the beginning of syllables and between vowels and p, t and k at the end of syllables. I was interested to encourage the correct pronunciation of Gija words by readers unfamiliar with linguists' conventions. In most instances, I have used the English spelling of words originating from English — even though they were not always pronounced as in English. I have also used some actual Kriol spelling, as in 'bin' (Kriol past tense marker) and 'la' (in, at, on, to). It is probably easier for someone who is literate in English but unfamiliar with Kriol to read and understand if I write in this way.

It is appropriate to provide an example of the differences between Kriol use of words and English. In Peggy Patrick's story, she says, 'old granny for melabat he bin find them'. Granny is the Kriol term for the Gija relationship term ganggay. This word is used to refer to a maternal grandmother and her siblings both male and female, and a woman's daughter's children, her sister's daughter's children, and a man's sister's daughter's children. People in this relationship call each other ganggay in Gija or granni in Kriol. In the context of Peggy's story, granni can best be translated as 'grandmother's brother'. Melabat in the same sentence is the Kriol pronoun meaning 'we/us not including you the listener'. It has its roots in English 'me all about' but now sounds nothing like this.

In talking about their work, the artists revealed several different levels of story based in knowledge of the country. In the first place, the ngarranggarni — commonly translated as 'dreamtime' — shaped the landscape. This was the distant past when the world became as it is today and the laws for living were laid down. Stories from this time include that of the emu and the turkey in Timmy Timms's and Paddy Bedford's work; the man calling out for his dogs in Goody Barrett's work; and the bat, seen in Lena Nyadbi's work, who taunted from the cave the people who were trying to kill him. These stories existed before the arrival of Europeans.

However, most of the stories in this catalogue come from the fifty years after the arrival of Europeans, during the 'killing time' or 'the time of fear', when a very large proportion of the Indigenous inhabitants died by poison, the gun or introduced disease. These events occurred in most instances before or soon after the storytellers were born. They are part of the group's remembrance of things past. There is an essential truth to these stories, but each person remembers stories differently and they change in the telling and re-telling.

All of the artists lived and travelled through the country they paint, on foot and in most cases on horseback (Lena Nyadbi and Peggy Patrick worked as stockwomen along with the men). This personal experience of the landscape informs their work along with oral history and knowledge of the dreaming.

Past events shaped today's problems for the survivors who are marginalised in their own land. Painting is one of the few meaningful and financially rewarding occupations available in the conquerors' world for these Aboriginal people. This moving exhibition will help all Australians to understand the present-day position of Aboriginal people in the light of their tragic past.

1 A phonemic orthography, or spelling system, uses a set of letters or symbols to represent the sounds that make a difference meaning in a particular language.

2 "Between 1887 and 1917 there were at least 20 occasions on which police and/or their native assistants shot at Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley which were recorded in the police patrol journals." C Choo, 'Miriwung and Gajerrong history report no. 2', Social impacts of pastoralism, 1885–1935, presented in the Miriwiung and Gajerrong Native Title Claim, 1996.
Timmy Timms (Gamarlina, Balmendarri)
Born c. 1916 Bedford Downs. Died 31 December 2000 Warmun (Turkey Creek)

Bedford Downs massacre 2000
ochres on linen
150 x 180 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
DG Wilson Bequest Fund 2000

This painting was completed about a week after the interview in which Timmy Timms and his brother-in-law Paddy Bedford revealed the existence of the song that goes with this story. The story and the song were among the main topics of conversation while painting. The Joonba (a form of song and dance or corroboree), which had not been performed for more than thirty years, was brought to life during 2000 by Timms and his family. The stage production Fire, fire burning bright, based on oral histories by Timms and Bedford and including this song and dance, was developed during 2001 and shown at the Perth International Festival of the Arts and the Melbourne Festival in 2002. The image of Bedford Downs massacre was chosen to represent the Neminuwarlin Performance Group who performed Fire, fire burning bright. Part of the following translation was used in the voice-over that described the traditional dances in the second half of the performance. Timmy Timms told the story in a mixture of Kimberley Kriol and Gija.

Well I tell you this idea, jiyilem-burruru idea, what they bin do when they bin travelling. Ngurrum, garnanganyjel ngela, Mount King they call em, Bedford Downs, that big hill. Garnanganyjel mean emu. Mount King gardiya way. Dijan burning place They call em 'Boijijijina'. You know what that mean? Poison they call em. Poison. Mawiyam. They bin find'em this corroboree.

I'll tell you what this is about in the Aboriginal way, about what happened when they were travelling in dreamtime. That one in the middle is the emu place called Mount King by white people. This small circle in the lower right-hand side is the place where they were poisoned and burned. The spirits found the song about the poison after they died.

They bin say from here, 'Bawartbu yirrartji wayirran. Girli yirrinji wayirran. Like on the side of the hill we walking. Wayirranbangayi, walking side of the hill all the way, down. Jawumbalnginy bawartbu yirrartji wayirran. Wayirran girli yirrinji wiri-wirin'. That one now, that middle one. Ngurriny dek benamanyji girlirring Beranggulnginy.

They said [when they were still at the place where they died], 'Let's climb up here and go along the side of the hill. We'll walk along the side of the hill up high. We'll go along Jawumbalnginy - the place of the bittern [the third hill along in the picture] - then we will keep walking along the top'. They looked down from on top over at Beranggulnginy - the place of the tree sugar-bag [shown just above the burning circle].

He got a bit of a gap there, one big one. Ngelel, on the other side, Yingarrjini they call em, you come through, yawarta-paya. Yingarrjini when you come from Tableland, yidarr-ngarri gerlirrang from Yulumburr, that road, he come through Bedford Downs. That hill that'un, only that one there, that the gap, dumbo. And down here, ngenenggayana jiyilem bemberranybe from house, they bin tell em, 'We go get a wood'. That the hard one yilkawurrun manum.

There is a gap through there. The hill on the left-hand side is called Yingarrjini, the place of the sandpaper fig. They used to come down through there by horse from Tableland Station in the west to Bedford Downs. That is the hill there and there is the gap. And down here in the corner is the place where they brought the men from the house telling them, 'We'll go get wood'. This is a hard word, a bad story.

'Marne-giyi yarrurtja', wanemayi gardiyany. Rogue way you know. Wanemayi-birri marnem-burruru, they did, load em up and chuck em one place, stack em. Binarri-wurrum jiyilem what for that marne, they bin fill em up. They never have that idea, nguwa-ngarrran. Only bela that lot jiyile, that marne, binariwurrum marnemka dam, murndurr-ngarri bemberrayangbe.

'We'll go get wood', said the white man. He spoke in a deceitful way. He told them to get wood and they did. They loaded it up and heaped it in one place. They didn't know that the wood they were heaping up was for them.

When they got there they saw white men in the bush. ‘Oh there they are.’ One white man came with the men in the wagon. He took them there. The other white men were already lined up on their horses in the bush ready with the poison. And this one brought the men and the food from the house in the dray. They looked and there were white men coming out everywhere. ‘Why are they coming down from the hills?’ they asked themselves. The white men saw the wagon coming with the Aboriginal men and they met. Berrani-birri, ‘Gardji barru marnem, murndurr barrrij, jirrawu-muwan, jamburn barrrijtha marnyniy.’ Berrani, think about house-be-wanyiwa-burrwa, only bela alalbat cook’em-girrim. Stack’em wumberrama jamburn. Wumberraman-birri, ‘Alright, dinam-burrnu knock off yarrnu now, mayim, jang-girrim’. Jam, tin meat, bread, they bin butter’em now. I don’t know how many bottle strychnine they bin put em la every bread. Wumberrama, ‘Waranggan waranggan jang barru now, waranggan werkk yarrirm’, berrani-birri. That mean, they bin tell em got a English, ‘Hurry up, hurry up, you got to eat quick, finish’em dinner. We got to go work’, berrani-birri. Jang-jang wumberrama anyway now.

They told them, ‘Cut wood and heap it up, stack it in one spot’. They thought it was for the house but it was to burn themselves. They stacked it up. They said to them, ‘All right, let’s knock off for dinner now. They had jam, tinned meat and bread. I don’t know how many bottles of strychnine they put in the bread. They said, ‘Hurry up, hurry up, you must eat quickly. We have to go to work’. They ate then, just anyhow, quickly.


Two old men didn’t eat. They looked and saw someone shaking and thought, ‘There might be something in this bread’. They ran away as fast as possible up the hill. The white men on the horses couldn’t catch them. My father and uncle took off. They didn’t eat that food.

Yagengerram therrngan-ngarriya berrani, nawulm bumberrama now wunggarrigiyirrin. Djuut-bany bemberrayit. Thetji wumberrama nawulm-birri, warany, giriij. They bin kill em got a stick. Thetji wumberramande, alright, they bin start carry’em now chuck em la that stack a wood, la that big marnem stack’em-ngarri berrani. Wethet-garri wumberrama diyena jamburn. Alright they bin chuck em kerosene burn em, benawurranj.

When the others were all dying of poisoning, twitching on the ground, they hit them with sticks. They wacked them. They hit them with sticks until they were finished. Then they carried them to the wood heap and threw them on in a heap. Then they poured kerosene onto them to burn them.

Danyi wagon-bany gardiyany, biriuw nginyinyin got a wagon that’s all, no jiyile. All bin la that fire dead now dead already. And dampi wajbalum, ngurrubinya, ngurrubinya, they bin split up now, go back la station, they never come la Bedford Downs. From bush, they bin all split up. Nginyinyi gardiyany nginyinyin burap, mayarun Bedford Downs. Wanemayi ... Yangi ngurrayange, wulku-wulkumenbe, ‘Gawurra-nginji jiyllembi dam juyanynhya-ngarri?’ ‘Ngwawan yeewerr ngemberrawurrutbe, wiji berrayin marrarn,’ wanemayi ngulupa nginiin. Only marnena jililip berrawurranj, finish marnen. Ngwawana. Ngulupa ngerne, yuwurr berrayin, ngulupa nginiin.

That white man who had gone out with the wagon came back with just the wagon, no men. They were all dead already in the fire. And those white men who came from all over split up and went back to their own places. They never went into Bedford Downs. One white man came back to the house. When the old women asked him, ‘Where are all the men you took out?’ he said, ‘Oh they all ran away and left me’. But he was lying. They were burning in the fire.
Ngelel dimerrinyil, ngarranggarnil, girlip-garri
nyaninya, ngurruma girliwirring nyaninya,
tharrayimele. Tharrayimele la gorge he bin come
down. Gurlum-buru biya wananya. Biya wananya,
belegan dana, nguwan, mark'em-ngarri
nyilamangge, dert nyanuwartja. Ngiyi, couldn't get
through, la that valley there. Dana belegan, dert
januwartja, marrgewa waruwarr nyanengirriyi.
Gerliwirring nyaninya, gurlun ngurluk wanema, that
little bit of a soak there. Ngenengga gerluwurri
nyaninya-ngarri, ngurluk januwart. Ngurluk
januwart, Wujanin. Wanema, ‘Nguwan, nguwan
kiri ngiliyande menduwun, ngenengkayana
derrepbe ngenanke-nuruwa nyanin’.

This picture also shows the dreamtime place
where the emu was walking. She was walking down
the gorge when she became stuck. I didn't mark the
place in the picture, I just painted the gorge. She
was looking for water, trying to come down to drink
at the spring called Wujanin [shown at the bottom
of the gorge in the bottom left-hand corner of
the painting]. The turkey said, ‘I don't want to keep
on walking all night, I want to camp here’.

Thatun bin wanta walkin all the way you know.
He bin make em camp now. Ngallyana ngaji-kal
takil. Barntawarlawarla, derrepbe ngenanke-
nuruwa. Right ngeleli girliwanyju wumbemanyante
all the way, he bin have to derrep now he bin
believe'em that'un. Two fella bin camp. That's the
way we make a camp late time you know. Night
time, afternoon time we pull up and make a camp,
same way.

The emu wanted to keep walking. The turkey made
camp and the emu got stuck in the gorge. If this had
not happened and we had followed the emu's way,
there would be no night. We believed the turkey and
stopped in the afternoon to make camp.
Emu dreaming and Bedford Downs massacre 2001
ochres on linen
150 x 180 cm
Collection of Helen and Ben Korman, Perth

This painting shows the same country and story as the very different work, Bedford Downs massacre (p. 19) by the artist’s brother-in-law, Timmy Timms. The emu poised in the cleft at the top of the rock face is represented by the circle in the middle of the top half of the picture. The place where the people were killed and their bodies were burned is shown by the red circle in the lower part of the picture. The surrounding hills also shown in Timms’s picture are seen here in a dramatically different form.


The emu was walking along and she got stuck when she tried to come down the cliff [Mount King]. The turkey over there went to sleep and when she made camp, night fell. She ate bush tucker all around on the black soil country and in the middle of the night she went to sleep. Because she slept right through to daybreak, we copy her now. The turkey made the law for us to follow for life – not the emu, who was trying to come down the side of Mount King. The emu came along from the west and wanted us to keep going without sleep in a never-ending daytime.


That emu place is a dangerous dreaming place which people should not touch. When we die, the country speaks, the emu cries from up on top. She cries for people belonging to the country and the other dangerous place on Texas Downs answers. The two mountains call out to each other. Maybe when I die the dreaming will cry for me.

Berrem gurt-garri berraward-birri thetji now.
Nawanjinya diyena jumbali warrr wumberramanjende.

Here [at the bottom of the picture] is the place where all the people were killed. There is a cave up on the side of the hill where their spirits sang and danced Joonba.
Paddy Bedford (Gwumumji, Nyunkuny)
Born c. 1922 Bedford Downs

Two women looking at the Bedford Downs massacre burning place 2002
ochres on linen
180 x 150 cm
Private collection, Melbourne

During 2000 after Paddy Bedford and his brother-in-law Timmy Timms woke up the song about the Bedford Downs massacre, Bedford led a group to look at the site. The stumps of the cut-down trees and the bare ground where the bodies were burned are still there. Another visit was made in 2001 prior to the development of the stage production, Fire, fire burning bright. Two women looking at the Bedford Downs massacre burning place is an aerial view showing the massacre place, the stumps of the trees, the road leading out from the station house and the two women looking down from the hill.


Well this is the place where my old boss killed lots of people at one time, the killing place near the emu dreaming at Mount King. The wagon brought them along the road to this place. When they stopped here, the white man looked at them and said, 'You all cut wood now. Cut quickly, heap it up and then you'll have dinner'. They cut wood here, there and all around. Then they ate poisoned food and staggered around dying. Then the fire was lit.


An Aboriginal doctor, a clever man, told two old women, 'You two go over there just back this way from the emu place'. They went out and looked from the east from a little quartz-covered hill. The two women looked. Oh no! The fire was getting up. Here [in the painting] are all the trees the men cut. [When they realised they were going to die] the men said to each other, 'Never mind. Are we strangers in this place? They are going to kill us all here'. They felt sorry for themselves and their country as they gave themselves up to death.

And that two wulgumen bin go back tell'em berrem nawarrangem you know, stockman-baya, 'Marrarn, berdiija burrunbi-yarre gurt giniwart-birri'. Damba berrayin-ngarri, nginiyin-ngarri gardiyany, alright nginiyin now, gerrij-garri wumberrayidebe, birg nginiwartji earli falan, nginini-birri, 'Marra yuwwurr berrayi'. Yakurn nginini. But they bin know already finish.

The two old women went back and told the others at the station, 'He has killed all our relations'. The white man who went out with the men came back in the morning after they were all finished and told the other station workers, 'They all ran away'. He was lying. They knew they were all dead.
Rameeka Nocketa Born 1989 Kununurra
Desma Sampi Born 1989 Kununurra
Phyllis Thomas (Booljoonnagai) Born c. 1940 near the Turner River
Freddie Timms (Ngarmaliny) Born 1946 Bedford Downs Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)

In the traditional Joonba, stylised representations of the tickets are worn in the section or verse that shows the men staggering about dying of strychnine poisoning. The song words for this part, Wangendangendaa, wangledangendaa, wanglediiwa wanglediiwiwa, mean that the men appear to be drunk. The ‘original’ tickets used in the Joonba in 2000 and worn by the doomed men in Fire, fire burning bright were painted by Timmy Timms’s granddaughters Erica and Bernadette Gallagher at Bow River. The set of tickets painted by Rameeka Nocketa, Desma Sampi, Phyllis Thomas and Freddie Timms were completed especially for Blood on the spinifex and are a little larger than those worn in the dance.

After the arrival of the invaders, many Kimberley people were arrested on charges of stealing the cattle which were destroying the grasslands and waterholes in their country. They were made to walk in chains to Wyndham. From 1907 to 1909, 164 Aborigines were convicted of cattle spearing.1 Many were taken to Rottnest Island near Perth and never returned. People were still being led in chains in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Hector Jandany (born c. 1927), Warumun storyteller, painter and singer of the Joonba in Darwin and Perth remembers how he used to take food to the chained Aboriginal people when he was a little boy living at Turkey Creek police station. The rehearsals for Fire, fire burning bright reminded him of his childhood. The word used by Gija people for ‘policeman’ – mermertgaliny – means ‘one who is very good at tying up’.


When I was a kid I used to live with the policemen at the police station. It was here at Turkey Creek. I grew up at the police station. The police used to bring them down there to the paperbarks. When they brought them I used to stay with them. They would bring them to the tree and tie them up like dogs. They were left just anyhow, to sleep there. I used to take things to them. The police used to tell me to take food, water and everything to them. I was a good size, a young boy just coming up to adolescence – that’s why I had a good brain. I still have it in my ears [my mind].

Timmy Timms (Gamarliny, Balmendarri)
Born c. 1916 Bedford Downs. Died 31 December 2000 Warmun (Turkey Creek)

Mistake Creek massacre 2000
ochres on linen
150 x 180 cm
Courtesy Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra

Timmy Timms and his sister Peggy Patrick both painted this boab tree near Mistake Creek where many of their mother’s family were murdered. There is a fence around the tree and a memorial plaque. There must have been more than one massacre in the Mistake Creek area. Timms’s account is very similar to the story found in police records from 1915 but also contains elements of the story told by his sister.¹ The name Olwen Joe in this story is historically known as ‘Joe Winn’.

Deyena berraniyinde.
There was a place up from Mistake Creek that white people called Beattie’s Hole. There used to be a permanent deep water hole there but it dried up after all the Aboriginal people were killed there. There is still an old mud brick building there. White people stayed there. The white man [Bob Beattie] had one Aboriginal man living with him and some other Aboriginal workers. They stayed there too.


On holiday, some [Aboriginal] people went up into a gorge at a place they called Merntaban [place with paperbark trees]. They were camping there. What went wrong is that their dogs bit a cow and knocked it down. The people looked and said, ‘Oh, the dogs have knocked it down’. Then they killed it and cut it up to eat. They cut it up and carried it to their camp down there in the gorge.
Paddy Bedford, who was listening, comments: Danyka jiyilirinyi, Olwen Joe from Queensland. Ride about wananyji kenduwa wayini jada benem, ngarayi benamenji then.

That Aboriginal man from Queensland called Olwen Joe went riding up there and found them.


That Aboriginal man [Olwen Joe] heard the dogs barking. When the dogs were barking he said to the white man, ‘Oh! The dogs are barking. I'll go and have a look up here’. ‘Yes, you can ride over there’, he replied. The Aboriginal man got on the horse and went up to the people in the gorge. He looked and saw meat hanging up everywhere in the trees. He said to them, ‘I'm hungry. Give me some meat. I'll take it home to cook’. But he was lying to them. They gave him the meat and he took it down and showed it to the white man, ‘See what that mob of blackfella have done’, he said. ‘They killed this cow’. ‘Oh!’ said Bob Beattie the white man.

Jadel’emap wumberrama-yu genduwa berrayi-yu. Warnngemaj gurrayit nginyinyi, Turkey Creek-biny, Mick Rhatigan, jidi benayit-du. Genduwa berrayin derrgerne, guujin. ‘Diymawa now jiylengma yilak’, wanema-birri-yu. They couldn't get out that way, they couldn't get out this way. Gardiya bin this side, keep jam’em la hillside. Thelbawu wumberrama diyena, gerrij jyilemga.

They saddled up and went up there. They called up Mick Rhatigan from Turkey Creek. He joined them. They went up into the gorge. ‘All the people are there now’, he [Olwen Joe] said to those two [Bob Beattie and Mick Rhatigan]. They couldn't get out this way, they couldn't get out that way. The white men had them stuck in the gorge. They shot them there; they finished them up there.

Wulgumanel, I don't know which one, legjen wounded'em nyimberramangbe, judem (shoot'em) nyimberrayit. Gerarra wananyande rerrganyda yilu nyaniyi. Uncle-warriny yurduburr wumberrama-yu. He bin measure'em two fella behind way, he bin hit'em that behind one, nother uncle. Two fella bin tell'em meself, jarrak berrangirriyin-du. ‘Ngwuwan, jirrayam, muliwwrun-ngu benennha, nguwan berdj jimbiyajtha-ngu’, wanema, gulgurarr-gany. Old man bin drop, nother one bin keep going through, come out la Turkey Creek girliwirring. Behind la Turkey Creek they bin just come over.

One old woman, I don't know her name, was wounded in the leg when they shot her. She crawled along and pulled herself down the creek. Two of my uncles took off. He [one of the murderers] took aim and hit the uncle who was behind. They spoke to each other. ‘Oh no, never mind, you are not alive, you can't get up’, said the youngest one. The oldest one died, the other kept going and came down over the hill behind Turkey Creek near Mirrilingki.
Nginiyin, tell'em policeman, 'Ah! All right, you boys get a horse', wanemayi, 'Yawardam bamberrem-yuwa, some trouble'. Biya wumberrama-burrungawa, biya wumberrama-burrungu, police horse you know. Ngawan bilij bemberritbu, latebalan now. Sun bin just go down, they bin find 'em. Take em back. They bin saddle'em up now. Go sneak in la ... daylight in the morning they bin sneak in la Mistake Creek, la that house now. They bin round em up camp, that house ... Some jiyilem warrek-ngarrri berrani, berrani-birri, 'Ngawan, dana yulu jurra bemberrilyinbe, got a chain', wumberrama.

He kept going and told the policeman [at Turkey Creek]. 'Ah! All right, you boys get the horses', said the policeman, 'Get horses for us. There's some trouble'. They went looking for the police horses. The sun was just going down when they found them. They took them back and saddled them up. It was daybreak when they got to Mistake Creek. They came to the house and some people who were working here told them, 'Oh they have taken them down there in chains'.

Big mob bin get killed new time ... Nother lot. From there, get em that lot young girl, young boy, middle-aged, chain'em up take em down there old house-jen, Beatte's Hole they call'em. Mert bemberramangbe hous'en, marrke, mendoonjun. Rangarrwanybu-ngarrri wananany, might be three o'clock. 'All right we'll keep moving', wanema-birri.

One large group of people were killed first [in the gorge]. After that, they took a lot of young men and women and middle-aged people, chained them up and waited for the night at the house at Beatte's Hole. Just coming up to dawn, at about three in the morning he said [Bob Beattie], 'All right we'll keep moving'. Mernmertgaliny bin start from thatay now police station, he bin come la that house now. He bin barduk. Barduk nginiwartjii. He bin ask'em jiyilem jirrawum, 'Gawurra dambi?' 'Ngawan. Dana yulu jurra burren chain-bam.' Girlip berrayin girlingebebe. Might be little bit good while, girlip berrayin. Well he bin follow'em now all the way, yulu. Where he bin day break now, right la tank Mistake Creek, they bin hear'em last shot. That lot before he bin come down all bin get shot now, finish, young boy young girl.

The policeman had started from Turkey Creek at about the same time. He got to the house at Mistake Creek after they had gone. He asked one Aboriginal man left there, 'Where are they all? 'Ah they took them down there in chains.' He went along after them. He followed them down. Just on daybreak he came up to the tank at Mistake Creek in time to hear the last shot. All the others were shot before he got there, young men and women.

All right, one boy bin after em horse now from that bottle tree. They bin find em police horse tied up got a saddle. 'Right all you policeman, I know you here. Come in', wanemayi-birri that jiyljiny. Might be he bin get sorry you know. 'Come in I'll show you.' Berrayin-ni, mert gurrarmag, handcuff, take'em now.

One Aboriginal man [Olwen Joe] came out and saw the police horses tied up near the boab tree. 'Right all you policemen, I know you're here. Come in', he said to them. That man might have felt sorry about helping the murderers. 'Come on I'll show you.' They tied him up, put handcuffs on him. Before that, last shot. Policeman bin ... that boy one fella bin take em all the way, they bin gallop straight in now. Wajbaluny nginyinyi, nhunynhubungerrany, you know, chuck'em bat people you know. Police come up got a rifle poke em him there. 'Hey! You bin shoot'em all the dog eh? You made a good job', wanema-ni. 'That the dog?' wanema. 'Julumad thetji nanini berremga', wanema. Belt em got a rifle belonga him, belt em all round there. Thet ngini ni now warany, pull em out shirt pull em out trousers, leave em naked chain em up. Mm that the mawungarriny now, gardiya, Mick Rhatigan. Mm Policeman bin put a chain.

Just before they got there, the last shot sounded. The Aboriginal man took the police in. The white man was bending over putting bodies on [the fire]. The police came up and poked him with a rifle. 'Oh you shot all the dogs did you? You made a good job of it? You killed all the dogs did you?' said the policeman and hit him with a rifle. He hit him, pulled off his shirt and trousers, leaving him naked, chained up. Yes, the police chained up that murderer, the white man called Mick Rhatigan.
Dany jiyliny, Olwen Joe, his name, he’s an educated blackfella, school boy you know, flash bugger too.
He bin make up la gardiya. From here, Darwin.
He got own one everything, rifle you know. He bin help’em that gardiya now, two fella. Da-biny, before
that, same way, marnembi murndurr-garri berrani wululgumen. Same way stack’em again.
Shoot’embewa wameyai now. Kill’em. Dany jiyliny he bin help em shoot’em that lot. Dijan la
allbat shoot’em cruel thing. That’s the story
properly. No good you can’t talk about cruel thing.
Wayini-ngarri nginini, all right take’em la that stack
of wood shoot’em, chuck’em all the way like that.

The Aboriginal man called Olwen Joe was an
educated person who could read and write. He was
a flash fellow. He was friends with the white man.
He came from Darwin. He had his own rifle and
everything. He helped the two white men with the
murders. After that they piled up all the bodies on
the fire in the same way [as at Bedford Downs].
The Aboriginal man helped them shoot. They all
shot them. It was such a cruel thing. They did it like
that; led them to the pile of firewood, shot them
and threw them on. They kept going like that.

Right oh, burap-garri ngininyin mernmertgaliny,
all the police boy, dawarr wanema-nu rifle-e-birri,
mert ginima la tree. Nginyjinyi jiyliny thuny
benayida, gerlirrigu now, straight for Bow River Hill,
that black hill you know, ngelmang. Two police boy
bin chase’em. Bernnungy and Wayanginy, two
thamany mine old people, two fella bin police boy
now. Bernnungy and Wayanginy, I forget their name
now gardiya now. And meyal, he bin ride em
chestnut mare. Too much gallop-karri nyanini,
he bin knock up now, finish he could go anymore.
Galapgan nguwan, warayiju waniyitja now. Hafta
thuthut giniwart danyi jiyliny. Gerluwurr wiji
nginini now, la that black hill. Merreba nguwartji.
Thamany-warriny bin sit down from bottom, hit’em
right there, get em and drag’em down. Cut’em dijan
(head), take em back to policeman, leave that body
there. Take’em la him, chuck’em la that policeman.
‘Very good you boys’, wanema.

When the policeman arrived with the police boys
[Aboriginal police], he belted him [Mick Rhatigan the
white man] with a rifle and tied him up to the tree.
The Aboriginal man [Olwen Joe] ran off to
the west heading for the black hill on Bow River.
The two police boys chased him from the east. They
were grandfathers of mine called Bernnungy and
Wayanginy; I have forgotten their European names.
The Aboriginal man was riding a chestnut mare.
When it couldn’t gallop any more he got off. He ran
up the hill and tried to hide. My two grandfathers
stayed at the bottom of the hill and shot him from
there. They got him and dragged him back. They
cut off his head and took it back to the policeman,
leaving his body there. ‘Very good you boys’,
said the policeman.
From there, already, marrarn, close up now, ashes charcoal close up. Policeman bin lookin at. He bin shake em head. No good. Rerrji nginany that mernmertgaliny, that gardiya. Pull em all the way right up to Turkey Creek. Him there footwalk, walkin. Policeman keep drag'em, ride'em horse and drag'em. And police boy there. And jiyiliny jirrawuny horse tailer, they bin chain'em up take 'em la Turkey Creek. He only horse tailer that'un, he never kill anybody. Nginiyin. He bin chain em up two of them I think, Bob Beattie and Mick Rhatigan, take'em la Turkey Creek ... That one bin thuny from there, murderer. That jiyiliny bin finish shoot'em, two thamany bin kill'em.

After that they [the bodies] were ashes and charcoal. The policeman looked at it and shook his head. He tied up the white men and dragged them in to Turkey Creek. There was one other Aboriginal man they chained up and took as well, but he was just a horse-tailer, not a murderer. He never killed anyone. He [the policeman] took Bob Beattie and Mick Rhatigan into Turkey Creek.

Well nyagany, half a ngabu, half a kuram, all there. Well that'un benawurrani you can see em ground, manbe burrunbu wayiniya. Everytime, they come from Turkey Creek say prayer there church everything. And I come gota boy, do a bit of culture down there, because they law people. That road now comin in. This one Turkey Creek road. That'un hill Bow River. Thunye-ngaari benayitji la that hill, but they bin catch'em up. Jumuluny he longside la that graveyard. He standin here close up. Well that's the story. Gardiya call'em Mistake Creek. Gurtbelayin. Well that story finish now there.

Well my uncles, lots of my father's brothers and mother's sisters are all there [in the killing place]. The place where they were burned is shown by the black mark in this picture. People come out from Turkey Creek to pray for them there and I go there with the men to perform ceremonies for them because they were law men. I have shown the road going into the grave and the highway to Turkey Creek. You can see the Bow River hill where they caught the man. The boab tree grows close to the grave site. That's the story. White people call it Mistake Creek. We call it Gurtbelayin – the place where many were killed at one time.

1 C Clement, 'Historical notes relevant to impact stories of the East Kimberley', East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project, East Kimberley working paper no. 29, Centre for Resources and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989, pp. 16–18.
Mistake Creek 2002
ochres on linen
150 x 180 cm
Collection of Giancarlo Mazzella
and Jillian Walker, Darlington

Peggy Patrick’s story is about a massacre that occurred much earlier than that which took place in 1915. After their family was killed, the artist’s mother and mother’s older sister were taken to Blackfella Creek by the white men who were later killed by an Aboriginal man called Major. Major then took them to live with his band of refugees in the hills as also described by Freddie Timms (Timmy Timms and Peggy Patrick’s nephew) when talking about his six-panel work, Blackfella Creek (p. 41), in this exhibition. Major was killed by police in 1908.

Mum. My mum, his family bin get shot there. Ganggay, nyaganybe, thamanybe, gural, gurawarriny, ngaga wanyagewarra-warriny, thetji bemberramangbe. Barengji bemberramangbe. Thetji berrani, gurt bemberramidbe. Might be gardiya couldn’t grow em up them kid, that the way he bin kill em allabat them little little one, last baby.

My mother’s family was shot there [near the boab tree]. My mother’s mother and her brothers and sisters, my mother’s father and his brothers and sisters, my mother’s older brothers’ sisters and baby brother and sister were all killed. They smashed the babies with a stick. They killed them, the whole lot died together. The white people did not want to rear the babies. That’s why they killed them.

My two mother ‘scape away, two big one. And two uncle bin get shot. One fella bin get shot la leg. They bin still la bush them two. One died in Fremantle. The other bin all day tell us now, uncle, for Lena for father. They tell us what bin happen like in that Mistake Creek.

My mother and her sister, the two bigger children, escaped. Two uncles were wounded, one in the leg. They got away into the bush. One died in Fremantle jail and the other, Lena Nyadbi’s father, used to tell us the story.
Well they bin la bush that two. They bin still la bush that two, long way. And they seen it. When they bin see fire, ‘We’ll go look’, mum bin say, nother one bin more bigger one. ‘Me and you go look. Might be somebody bin left.’ When they bin look, all burning everything, and two fella bin start cry for their mother and father. Blood everywhere they bin see where they bin dragging them in. They was still waiting la fire place cause they, supposing any one bin come back. And that the way that two white bloke bin find em two fella and they bin pick ‘em up and take ‘em la that place now, Blackfella Creek.

Those two were away from the camp in the bush. They saw the fire and said to each other, ‘We’ll go and look, maybe someone is left’. Then they saw everyone burning and started to cry for their mother and father. There was blood where the bodies had been dragged in. They were waiting at the fireplace when the two white men from Blackfella Creek found them and took them back.

They bin get shot by Major. Major bin pick them two up and take them up thatay and he bin get killed then. I think before that, that thing bin happening. Major bin get killed front of mum mob now. When Major bin get shot old granny for melabat he bin find them, he was a police boy too. Old Wumbalminy belong to that Bow River Station now. That man bin find em, ‘Oh my two garli I didn’t know you were still alive. I’ll take you two fella’. The two white men were later killed by Major. Major took the two girls to his camp and then later he was killed. I think that thing happened before that. Major was killed in front of my mother and her sister. When Major was killed, my grandmother’s brother was a police boy with the police group. He was called Wumbalminy, one of the traditional owners of Bow River Station country. He saw the two of them and said, ‘Oh my two nieces. I did not know that you were still alive. I’ll take you two’. He took them back to Turkey Creek.

That [the 1915 massacre described by Timmy Timms] was higher up way in that old station. Nother place la Mistake Creek, higher up la bore. That the big station bin there. That the blackfella that, that the blackfella from Queensland bin shoot them.

Another group of people was killed in 1915 upstream near the old Mistake Creek Station near the bore. There was a big camp there. A black man from Queensland shot them.¹

That’s the one all his mum bin get killed now, own father, own mother, own brother, own sister. That nother two young one for mum for brother and sister bin die. Only four bin left. Proper younger one, they bin kill em got a stick all abat. I think. They bin couldn’t keep em, nothing. Sometime mum bin all day cry for it when he bin tell us stories.

Yes. That’s the place [near the boab tree] where her mother was killed, her own father, own mother, own brother, own sister. Her baby brother and sister died. Only four survived. The really young ones they killed with a stick because they did not want to rear them. Sometimes my mother used to cry when she told us these stories.

¹ C Clement, ‘Historical notes relevant to impact stories of the East Kimberley’, East Kimberley impact assessment project, East Kimberley working paper no. 29, Centre for Resources and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1995, pp. 16–18.
Freddie Timms (Ngarmaliny)
Born 1946 Bedford Downs Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)

Blackfella Creek 2002
ochres on linen
6 panels: 180 x 900 cm; each: 180 x 150 cm
Courtesy the artist and Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra

This six-panel painting is about the journey of an Aboriginal man called Major in the last days of his life. Major, along with two other Aboriginal men, was shot by police near the Western Australian/Northern Territory border in 1908.1 Freddie Timms’s grandmother, mother of Peggy Patrick and the late Timmy Timms, and her older sister were with Major when he was killed. Said to be a Wardaman man, he had been ‘adopted’ and brought to the Kimberley by Jack Kelly, who started Texas Downs Station. He has been described variously as an ‘outlaw’, a ‘bushranger’ and a ‘rebel’.

The circumstances of Major’s ‘adoption’ could well have been abduction or as a survivor of tragedy further east. He was badly mistreated in the name of ‘child rearing’ and ‘quietening the savage’.2 As Major grew older and stronger he fought back. This resulted in an incident described by Jack Sullivan in which Kelly pretended to Major that a police officer called Jack Miller from Wyndham had flogged him while blindfolded when it was in fact Kelly. Miller took Major to Wyndham then released him, providing him with a rifle and telling him the truth about who had flogged him. On the way back from Wyndham, Major travelled via Clifton Hole south of Crocodile Hole demanding bullets from the white man, Dick Garden, who lived there. He then took refuge in the hills and spent time as a ‘bushranger’ in a hideout in country on Lissadell Station north of Turkey Creek holding up travellers on the road from Wyndham.

Freddie Timms’s grandmother and her older sister had been picked up from the bush by white men when only children after the rest of their family had been killed near Mistake Creek. (See Peggy Patrick’s Mistake Creek painting, p. 37). They were taken to the station at Blackfella Creek. Major killed the white men there and took the two girls to join other refugees who were living with him in his hideout. Freddie Timms spent a lot of his childhood with his grandmother and was fascinated by her stories of her time with Major. Timms lived on Lissadell Station from the age of about twelve, becoming head stockman when an adult. Older workers added to the stories heard from his grandmother. His intimate knowledge of the country reflected in the picture stems from his life there. He must have re-lived Major’s journey in his imagination many times.
This painting, like most of Timms's work, provides an aerial view or map of the significant features of the country. The journey portrayed starts on the right-hand side with Major’s hideout in the hills shown by the red spot in the black hill in the top right-hand corner. This is near no. 4 and no. 3 bores on Lissadell not far to the north of Warmun (Turkey Creek). The black spot on the lower part of the right-hand edge marks the place where, according to Timms, Major killed three white men. (Historical accounts say he killed two men here and another man elsewhere.) Above that, a red spot in the centre of the edge of the panel marks the place where three white men killed two black men.

That’s where he bin hiding out. I think where he bin come from Clifton Hole, from Dick Garden. One old white man there, he bin ask him for bullets. He bin come up, hide there. This one where that Major he bin hide la that hill and he bin go down there, see where that black spot there? He bin going to that place and kill that three white bloke. That three white bloke they bin kill that two black fella up the river. I had to put a red there. They bin kill that two blackfella one side the river, burn em up you know. You can still see it there today where they bin burn em up.

Timms’s grandmother told him about the killings and he was shown the places by older stockmen when working on Lissadell himself. When asked why the white men had killed the black men, Timms said, ‘jealous you know. You know what kind white people, mad. They wanted a woman’.

Major left his hideout to travel east accompanied by a small group of men and women including the artist’s grandmother and her sister. They followed Emu Creek, shown stretching from right to left in the middle of the first two and a half panels. They travelled upstream to the source, Emu Spring, dragging leafy branches with their feet to hide the tracks. Major had a last drink at this spring before leaving it forever.

That Emu Creek this one here. He bin follow em up, that’s his last drink there, water, in that spring there, Emu Spring.

Emu Spring is in open country ‘right in the middle of the plain’ as shown in the picture. Part of the line of hills known as Waterfall is seen along the bottom of the three right-hand panels.

The group left Emu Spring and crossed over the creek coming from Waterfall Head shown running from the top to bottom in the centre of the work. They went on to camp at Nginyberrany, a rock hole, a place of permanent ‘living water’ on Lolly Creek. This ‘living water’ is shown by the wider black section in the creek going from the top left-hand corner of the third panel from the left and down the right-hand side of the next panel.

The black areas along the top of the picture in the three left-hand panels are part of hilly country called Gawurrungarntin, the place of the female hill kangaroo. Along the lower part of the two left-hand panels is part of another long line of hills called Wuluny that leads to a spiritually dangerous blowfly dreaming place. A creek runs through Jackie Gorge seen at the bottom of the left-most panel down to a junction with Lolly Creek and on to Cattle Creek Bore. The little hill known as Sandy Camp where the artist stayed when a stockman in the mustering camp is shown by the black oval shape in the lower part of the second panel from the left.

The painting is about the Major’s last journey, but only part of the journey is shown in the painting.

Freddie Timms continues the narrative of what happened to Major after passing through the country shown in the picture. The artist spoke in Kimberley Kriol, which I have partly adapted to language closer to standard English.

From Old Texas he went down, followed Horse Creek down and came out at Horse Creek water hole. Then he went on to Horseshoe Creek where another lot of blackfella were killed earlier. He was with Jack Kelly and the other white men who killed them. From Horseshoe Creek he climbed up that hill you know, to Growler Gully, and Tabletop. He went up there, camped a couple of nights. From there he went down to Red Butte, had a night there. Then he went across, to a place called Dalu-Dalu, Nine Mile. He camped there, now. That was his last night.
He went hunting. He told them, 'I'll go hunting, looking for porcupine'. He got six porcupine. From there they had a feed. That morning he moved on up to Nine Mile. He was talking to his brother or relation there. He told him, 'I might get through. I'll just go'. He went up to that hill on from Nine Mile, one round hill there.

He went east but he couldn't make it. Policemen were already there. He was having a good go, but my old grandmother, she was there, she kept filling all the bullets in the rifle you know. Fill em up all the bullet and keep throw em in to him. He kept grabbing them and chucking the empty rifle back. She kept filling em up. Till one old man, Aboriginal bloke from Halls Creek, he the one shot him.

That old man shot him in the arm I think. He bin shooting he bin throw the rifle away then.

He said, 'Come and get me. Kill me'. They shot him then. White policemen, they shot him, kill em stone dead. They chopped his head off and burned his body. That's what happen now.

They reckon he come from Darwin. He was two kind, you know. He was really with white people. Jack Kelly that's what start him off. Jack Kelly was killing all the blackfella. He was helping white people to kill em. Major was helping him and he [Kelly] was going against white people too, same time. Jack Kelly used to tell Major to go other stations and rob you know. Well he was working for Jack Kelly. They had no relation. They had no relationship with anybody white or black.

Freddie Timms's knowledge of the story, the country and the narrative informs the journey shown in the picture, but the place where Major died is not shown. The bones of the country, hills, creeks and plains are depicted, but this is not a literal representation; instead, aesthetic considerations prevail. When talking about the open country seen in the two left-hand panels, the artist said, 'Some red ground. I should put red but I thought, I'll make it all black soil [represented by grey]'. The painting creates a journey of the imagination beginning with death, travelling in fear to death, a sense of floating through space and time after death, and in life, Major's last journey alive and the artist's own journeys as a stockman and on foot in the same country.

This is the story of a man born in tragic times who was 'two kinds'. He was a hero to Aboriginal people because he did end up fighting the white man and losing his life, but he had also assisted Jack Kelly in killing Aboriginal people and robbing other white people. This happened to many young Aboriginal men 'adopted' in one place and taken to another country as the invaders' offside and placed in circumstances where it was kill or be killed in 'the time of fear'.


Hiding place and man calling for his dogs 2002
ochres on linen
150 x 180 cm
Courtesy the artist and Jirrawun Aboriginal Art
Corporation, Kununurra

This painting combines two of the artist’s favourite subjects: ‘The man calling out for his dogs’ and the cave in limestone country on Lissadell Station called Gemybany where the artist hid with her family when she was a little girl. The family were justified in their fear of white people. In 1885 Lissadell Station was the first area close to Warmun community (Turkey Creek) to be invaded by cattlemen seeking pasture for their stock. It is reported that ‘the “most serious clash” of the Duracks’ entire overland drive from Queensland to the Kimberley occurred when Aborigines challenged the passage of drovers as they moved cattle down the Ord River from Red Butte’1 There is no doubt of what happened to these resistance fighters. Later, as well as suffering reprisal killings for stealing cattle, people who did not want to work for rations, tobacco and clothes on Argyle and Lissadell were shot as described by Jack Sullivan.2


We bin walkin la that hill now, where man bin singing out for kangaroo. I bin that size like a that little jawujil, Daama. Girlir yirranyjende, ngagenyji ngabuny jilba wanemayinde wajbalum-burr, binarrri-wurruny wajbalumga. Jilba wumberramande warnawarnarramga. Wayinikana yimberranybyarre, berdiij. We were walking on that hill when I was a young girl like my little relation Desma Sampi. We were walking and my father was afraid of white people, he did not know white people. They were all frightened in those days, that’s why they took us up into the hills.

Here at the bottom [shown in the mouth of the hideout cave] is the flat rock where they used to grind up the bush tobacco they collected. They used to grind it in the old days with that stone that I put there. That little stone there in the middle is the round grinding stone that they used for bush tobacco. They would dry it out in the sun and then chew it mixed with ash. They also used to get black plum and dry it out in the sun. They used to grind up the dried ones and then eat them.


The cave where they used to hide is at a place called Geminybany. When we were children we used to hide there. When white people came we used to go inside to hide. We would peep out from the cave. They used to say to us, ‘There are the white people coming. Don't go out. Hide. Don't make a noise or they will take you away’. They used to take the mixed-race children and hide them there. They hid my sister [and others] but in the end they were all taken to 'school' [away].


They used to spread out paperbark on spinifex grass for us to sleep on. We used to cover ourselves with paperbark as well. There were no blankets in those days. Blankets are just today's things.


Lena Nyadbi (Nyadbi)
Born c. 1936 Greenvale Station (now part of Bow River Station)

Dijan here, that the binyjirrminy, binyjirrminy thet-garri, bin that longa crocodile and turtle bin take em and all the people bin chase'em him walig in la this nawan now. Yilgin now nginininyinde merreb. Nhen-nhen now ngurrangbe garlumbum-birri. You know what he bin do? He bin get cunning cut his tongue now. Giyawule benanyji la that garlumbu now. 'A theta yarrayit now', berrani dambi jiyilem. Biru now yilag. Buruburub giniyitji ngenengga that giniyin berrema manben.


This one here in the middle is the place the bat hid after he killed the crocodile. The turtle took the crocodile's body away and all the people chased the bat up to this cave. He went inside and hid. They poked the hole with their spears. He tricked them by cutting his tongue and rubbing blood on the spears. 'Ah! We've got him now', they said. Then they went down the hill. Then he appeared and stood up in the part shown by the black oval shape in the middle and said, 'Who can spear me? Who can kill me?' That is the place where the bat used to stand up. Then he would go back inside and hide.

Berrembi dambi minyjiwarram-burr, dalum, jumulum they bin all day gadugudu la that ngarrgaliny now. And that wanyanginy, that the little ngarrgaleny for grind em up all the mayiny mak e em galugebm. Wayiniwa wumbarramande warnawarrarm.

This other one is the stone in the rock shelter where they used to grind black plum, green plum and boab seeds. The small white circle is the round grinding stone used to make the food soft. They used to do that kind of thing in the old days.

When you look up here, that's the jimbirldj. That lot now. That un dayiwl irnkurrel-ngiyi. Other side from Crocodile Hole up, that jimbirldj. Only that dayiwl right la mine.

At the top of the picture are the stone spear heads from country north of Crocodile Hole, and the scales of the barramundi whose place is right at the diamond mine.

Hideout 2002
ochres on linen
150 x 180 cm
Courtesy the artist, Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra and Warmun Art Centre

Lena Nyadbi is Goody Barrett's youngest sister. She grew up hearing the stories of her family hiding from white people in the cave called Geminbyany before she was born. This place is a 'hideout' in the recent past for people afraid of the whites. The same limestone ridge holds the dreamtime 'hideout' of binyjirrminy (the bat). Lena Nyadbi spoke about the picture in a mixture of Gija, Kriol and English.

Berrembi jiyilem dam, thedanyja bemberruwanbe, warrilig berrayin, berrembi yilag, nawanbe, warugu-binyu nawan. Walig berruwardbe dan, gerlurruguri berdij wumberramawunde. Jiyilem wiji berrayin warrilig berrayin, thurrbul berrayin laarnejiriny. Dangembi berrayin yagengembi ngarrgaliny nyuwl. I was not born yet. Only Goody, got his fingerprint there and for that half caste one sister for us.

This is the cave where Aboriginal people used to hide when they were trying to kill them, this cave here on the left. They used to go in and climb right up inside. The Aboriginal people would run and go in, then go out through the top. Then they would go to another place to the south. I was not born at that time. Only Goody and my other mixed-race sister left their hand-prints on the wall of the cave there.
Phyllis Thomas (Booljoonngali)
Born c. 1940 near the Turner River

The escape 2000
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
Purchased 17th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, 2000. Telstra Collection

This painting is set in country called Riya in the area near the Turner River south-east of Purnululu (the Bungle-Bungles). It is on the edge of the Kimberley straddling the border between the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Two stories are told in this painting. The top part of the painting shows a white man chasing the artist's uncle across the plains. The country in this area is flat, open country with red soil and few trees. This story is from a time near the turn of the twentieth century. When asked why the white man wanted to kill her uncle, Phyllis Thomas replied, 'Gugan like a where they bin all day shoot'em bat alla abat'. [just for nothing in the way that they were always killing people.]

In this painting, Thomas also remembers another family member who passed away in more recent times. The black line in the picture is the little creek near an airstrip that is now in the area where her uncle was chased through the bush. One of her mother's uncles was being taken to Wyndham by the flying doctor but died in the plane on the way. The plane took off over the Bungle-Bungle Range and Mount Glass heading for Wyndham. The plane and these hills are shown in the lower part of the picture.


An old man was chased by white men on horseback across the red open plains in my country. It was a very long way. He ran and he ran and he ran and he ran. He got to the water and jumped in. He hid among the roots of the trees growing at the edge of the water.


A white man shot at him from up on his horse. The old man thought quickly and cut himself so that he bled into the water. The white man looked at it and said, 'All right, I hit him,' and went back to the house.


The old man waited. He came out late in the afternoon when the white man was gone. He came out alive. He ran back to his own place. It was an old man from Ord River Station, an old man of Jungurra skin called Mick. He was my uncle.
Chinaman’s Garden massacre 2000
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Purchased with funds provided by JS Watkins
Memorial Fund 2001

Chinaman’s Garden is a small outstation community north-east of Halls Creek. It is near the junction of the Panton River and a smaller creek. The massacre site shown in this painting is on one side of the creek between two white gum trees. The community houses are on the other side, represented by the single house in the picture. This house also represents the dwelling place of the white people who came to kill Rusty Peters’ relations. I visited Chinaman’s Garden with the artist in the dry season of 1988. We walked across the sandy riverbed and looked at the area where the people were killed. I climbed up to the cave where his uncle hid. The mouth of the cave seen in the top right-hand corner of the picture is still blackened by fire.

It is difficult to date this story. Gold was discovered near Halls Creek in 1886 and a huge influx of fortune hunters arrived soon after. Rusty Peters tells how the Chinaman told people to kill dingo pups so that he could exchange them for food. Payments were made for dingo scalps from about 1920 to the 1950s. Prior to that, payments were made for dingo tails.1 The artist recorded the story in Gija last year. I transcribed it and read it back to him in September this year. He then re-told the story. The text below combines parts of both interviews. This story has also been told by the artist’s relation, Biddy Malingal.2


This place called Yarangkan belongs to my uncle, my mother, her sisters, their father and his brothers. It is where lots of people were killed long ago. A Chinaman used to live just upstream from there, growing vegetables in a big garden. My uncle told me about it when I was a child.


Lots of Aboriginal people were living there. The Chinaman told them, ‘Kill lots of dingo pups. I will take them south and get food’. They killed lots of dingo pups and he took them down. He used to take his vegetables and the skins from the dogs the Aboriginal people killed down to Halls Creek to sell. He would get food in return for the dog skins. He would bring it back and say, ‘Here is your food – tobacco, flour, sugar and tea’. He used to keep doing this sort of thing.

1 C Clement, pers. comm., 2002.


Then one time he went south and stayed three nights. He was coming back with his wagon and the donkeys that he used to take the vegetables and everything to the south. He looked around. The donkeys took fright. They had a sense of something bad and were frightened. ‘What’s wrong? What’s wrong?’ He kept going. Oh no! Crows and kites were gathered in a large group downstream. He kept going downstream and looked. Oh dear! There were crows everywhere.


The violent aggressors [white men who arrived after the Chinaman left] had killed everyone there at Yaranggan. They heaped them up on the fire between the two white gums shown in the picture. They killed them all with rifles. Uncle was still alive. They poked him in the eye [with the rifle] and he held his breath, not daring to move.


When they lit the fire, my uncle took off as fast as possible upstream, crossing the river and going up the hill. They chased and chased him. They chased him across the river. He went up into the cave in the hill [seen in the picture]. They lit a fire at the mouth of the cave to try to kill him. He crawled up into the cave and got out through the back. They said to each other, ‘Yes! It’s all right, he’s burned up’. They told each other, ‘He’s in there’. But he was not burned. I don’t know how my uncle managed to escape.


He went down afterwards to look for them. ‘Where are my people? Where are my people? Where?’ The white men had killed them all poor things. He went north to Billy Mac Spring on Springvale and he told everyone there, ‘They shot all our relations’.


White people came from somewhere else. The people didn’t know where they came from. These white people didn’t like black people, that’s why they were killing them to the west, the south, the north and the east. Only one person liked them, the Chinaman.
Rusty Peters (Dirjii)
Born 1935 Springvale Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)

Blackfella murdered in Australia 2002
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Collection of GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney

This painting is Rusty Peters’ tribute or lament for all the Aboriginal people who have been murdered since the arrival of Europeans in Australia. He has produced two previous map pictures about the languages spoken or once spoken in Australia. In 1988 he drove from the Kimberley through outback Queensland to New South Wales. He saw for himself, often nearly crying, the devastation the land had suffered both from the loss of its people and from an environmental perspective.


They came to this place from far away. Aboriginal people lived here a long time ago. Those who came did not like black people. That is why they killed the people here to the south, the north, the west and the east. When we look around here we see only the country they left, poor things.


When they came here they did not like Aboriginal people. They said, ‘What sort of people are these? They don’t belong here’. Then they killed them here to the south, to the west, to the north and to the east. When they had killed the men, they took away the women. Then they had light coloured children with the black mothers. These children are sometimes just like white people. They do not like us. They keep to themselves.
List of works in the exhibition
1 Timmy Timms (Gamarliny, Balmendarri)
Born c. 1916 Bedford Downs. Died 31 December 2000 Warmun (Turkey Creek)
*Bedford Downs massacre* 2000 p. 19
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
DG Wilson Bequest Fund 2000

2 Paddy Bedford (Guuwumji, Nyunkuny)
Born c. 1922 Bedford Downs
*Emu dreaming and Bedford Downs massacre* 2001 p. 23
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Collection of Helen and Ben Korman, Perth

3 Paddy Bedford (Guuwumji, Nyunkuny)
Born c. 1922 Bedford Downs
*Two women looking at the Bedford Downs massacre burning place* 2002 p. 25
ochres on linen
180 x 150
Private collection, Melbourne

4 Rameeka Nocketa
Born 1989 Kununurra
Desma Sampi
Born 1989 Kununurra
Phyllis Thomas (Booljoonggali) Born c. 1940 near the Turner River
Freddie Timms (Ngarmaliny) Born 1946 Bedford Downs Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)
*Tickets* 2002 p. 27
ochres on cardboard
18 panels: 50 x 50 each
Collection of David Larwill

5 Timmy Timms (Gamarliny, Balmendarri)
Born c. 1916 Bedford Downs. Died 31 December 2000 Warmun (Turkey Creek)
*Mistake Creek massacre* 2000 p. 31
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Courtesy Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra

6 Peggy Patrick (Dirrimgali)
Born c. 1930 near present-day Kununurra
*Mistake Creek* 2002 p. 37
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Collection of Giancarlo Mazzella and Jillian Walker, Darlington

7 Freddie Timms (Ngarmaliny)
Born 1946 Bedford Downs Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)
*Blackfella Creek* 2002 p. 41
ochres on linen
6 panels: 180 x 900; each: 180 x 150
Courtesy the artist and Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra

8 Goody Barrett (Lilway)
Born c. 1930 Lissadell Station
*Hiding place and man calling for his dogs* 2002 p. 47
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Courtesy the artist and Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra

9 Lena Nyadbi (Nyadbi)
Born c. 1936 Greenvale Station (now part of Bow River Station)
*Hideout* 2002 p. 51
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Courtesy the artist, Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Kununurra and Warmun Art Centre

10 Phyllis Thomas (Booljoonggali)
Born c. 1940 near the Turner River
*The escape* 2000 p. 53 and cover
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
Purchased 17th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, 2000
Telstra Collection

11 Rusty Peters (Dirriji)
Born 1935 Springvale Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)
*Chinaman's Garden massacre* 2000 p. 55
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Purchased with funds provided by JS Watkins Memorial Fund 2001

12 Rusty Peters (Dirriji)
Born 1935 Springvale Station, south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek)
*Blackfella murdered in Australia* 2002 p. 59
ochres on linen
150 x 180
Collection of GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney
The Ian Potter Museum of Art Board
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Professor Jaynie Anderson Herald Chair of Fine Arts
Dr Robert Edwards AO
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Professor Thomas W Healy
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