Groundwork

The work of the late Janangoo Butcher Cherel and senior artists Mick Jawalji and Rammey Ramsey invites us to reappraise what we might expect from Indigenous painting practices, especially in relation to existing categories of art making. *Groundwork* emphasises that multiple readings are prompted by these works, each as viable as the next, each taking us some way towards an understanding of how these paintings circulate in the world. This approach does not deny the specific regionalism that through the lives and concerns of each artist informs the work and underlies any interpretation. However, these are paintings best described as embodying various identities which elsewhere might be read as contradictory or, at the very least, inconsistent. They are neither wholly products of the historical or geographic contexts that inform them or simply outcomes of their hybrid contexts of production, any more than they are solely abstract or figurative, traditional or contemporary.

Rammey Ramsey's painting, *Main Warlawoon*, 2010, provides a key historical framework for the practices of all three artists. It revisits the height of the Kimberley pastoral industry's interaction with local Indigenous populations and the attendant interplay between two worlds. Like many paintings of the East Kimberley tradition concerned with elements of personal or collective history, Ramsey's pictorial perspective reverses the usual gaze of historical record: a directional marker shows the way to Lansdowne and Tablelands stations from the viewpoint of a central meeting and camping place in the artist's traditional country of Warlawoon. Kimberley life in the early to mid-twentieth century is an important reference for all three men, artists who only began to practise art in their later years following considerable time spent as stockmen and pastoral workers across the region. When discussing *Groundwork* it was from this historical perspective that Ramsey and Jawalji recalled Cherel and each other, rather than through their more recent shared identity as artists.
Although each has cultural and family ties that extend across the Kimberley region, Cherel’s, Jawalji’s and Ramsey’s art practices developed in separate locations. The individual perspectives that this brings to *Groundwork*, in relation to one another as well as to broader notions of distinct regional ‘styles’ of art making, form one basis of the exhibition.

These paintings reveal common ground regardless of the artists’ different approaches to art making. For example, the staggered walking tracks in Rammey Ramsey’s *Tranie Gorge*, 2010, are echoed by the intersecting lines in a number of paintings by Mick Jawalji. Although these links may begin formally, they also shift and change against a number of readings, directing us towards the different ways these artists each approach content and form. In Jawalji’s *Gern.galiny—wind*, 2006, crossed lines trace paths between areas of country, converging at both the actual and conceptual centre of the work; the point where ‘the wind started his journey’ forms the central focus of the painting.

In the work of the late Janangoo Butcher Cherel a focus on closely observed elements of the natural world, or on themes of ceremony and its associated artefacts and designs, has informed sometimes striking shifts in approach. These are shifts that constantly relocate the formal parameters of Cherel’s practice against the baseline concerns of country and culture.

Brought together for this exhibition, the artists’ paintings chart their own narrative across a region, highlighting specific social and cultural histories as well as drawing on their own individual conditions and prompting connections entirely outside of themselves.

**Guest curator** Quentin Sprague

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A catalogue is available at the front desk on the ground floor.