Shining light on the dark side of the moon

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Leapin' and hoppin' on a moonshadow: Mabel Juli with her painting Moon Dreaming. Photo: Eddie Jim

A story of anger and taboo lies behind the prize-winning art work in this year's Kate Challis RAKA Award. Yet Mabel Juli's painting of the Dreamtime story is a work of stillness.

Juli draws on the tales her parents told her while growing up in the east Kimberley region. In Melbourne to accept her award, the 80-year-old artist tells the story of her Moon Dreaming, or Garnkeny Ngarranggarni, one more time: "The moon as a man went hunting kangaroo, and left his wife and mother-in-law at home in the camp. When he came back he saw a woman with her long hair hanging down. It was the mother-in-law and he wanted to marry her; he didn't want his wife any more."

The people of the camp told him to leave and to take his "right-way wife". As he walked, the moon turned and cursed them, telling them they would die, while he would return each month.
In Juli's painting, a white moon and star slice through the dark sky.

Juli's minimalist style is characteristic of the Warmun community near Turkey Creek, which counts among its renowned names Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie.

Her painting was chosen from a shortlist of nine indigenous artists whose works are on show at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne. The annual $25,000 award is offered in different art forms over a five-year cycle.

The gallery has tellingly included a map showing where each artist works and lives. Most are places many of us will never visit. They are remote communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory where indigenous people, usually in communal art centres, produce work deeply rooted in their culture that flows out to the cities and the collectors.

Their preoccupations and techniques vary as widely as the landscape between them.

Juli and the other artists of Warmun paint together every day.

*Under the Sun: the Kate Challis RAKA Award 2013* exhibition is at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, 800 Swanston Street, Carlton, until November 3.