

Dhambit Mununggurr: *Djapu ceremony ground*

Nici Cumpston, OAM

Dhambit Mununggurr is one of the most creative and highly sought-after artists working at the Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala, in northeast Arnhem Land. Her Djapu clan homeland of Wandawuy, 150 kilometres south of Yirrkala, is a place of ancient freshwater river systems, but she lives on her mother’s country at Gunyujara. Her bark painting *Djapu ceremony ground*, which the Gallery recently acquired at the 2022 Collector’s Club dinner, celebrates the *wukidi* (burial ground) and its ceremony at Wandawuy.

Mununggurr was born into a family renowned for their artistic excellence. Her maternal grandfather Mungurrawuy Yunupingu (c.1904–1979) was one of the artists who painted the Yirrkala Church Panels in 1962–63 as a statement of Yolngu land and cultural rights. Her father, Mutitjpu Mununggurr, and mother, Gulumbu Yunupingu, were also widely celebrated artists.

Mununggurr won the bark painting award at the prestigious National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 2021 and was a finalist in the Wynne Prize in 2022. Her major installation *Can We All Have a Happy Life* featured in the National Gallery of Victoria’s Triennial in 2020.

Mununggurr’s paintings are created using a mixture of vibrant-blue synthetic paints. Because of an accident in 2007, she cannot crush the earth pigments that other Yolngu artists use for bark paintings, so she is exempt from the Yolngu law that artists use only material from Country.

For *Djapu ceremony ground*, Mununggurr applied a layer of colour to the entire surface of the bark and then speared a long fine *marwat* (traditional hair brush) onto the surface of the paint to methodically make her marks. Her bold geometric shapes relate stories and ceremonial practices that span generations.

The Buku-Larrngay Mulka’s art centre manager, Will Stubbs, explained that the painting references an ancestral creation story involving Mäna the shark and the original burial ground for ancestors from the Djapu clan and three other clans of the Dhuwa moiety:

The field of blue in the centre of this painting is representative of the *wukidi* and the ceremonial ground at Wandawuy, while the arched waters above the ground show the levels of water which cover Mäna’s watery home in the depths of the ocean. They also speak of another Djapu ancestral force, Bol’ngu – Thunderman, the wet season manifest, his spear pulled tight over his head and curved, pointing in the direction the spirit must travel to achieve regeneration with the whole. The artist [is] expressing that this reminds her of her own father with his spear bent over his head (*wuywuy’un*) enacting the dances associated with Bol’ngu on the sacred ground at Wandawuy.¹

According to Stubbs, the *wukidi* at Wandawuy is a manifestation of the ancestral Dhuwa burial ground, a rock formation eighty kilometres away, in a corner of Blue Mud Bay. There the ancestors were drowned by a tsunami that washed twenty kilometres inland.

‘In the days before the first morning, Mäna the Ancestral shark came this way and ancestors tried to trap Mäna by building traps in the waterways. They failed. The powers and physical strength of the Shark were no match for mere mortals’, Stubbs said. He continued:

At the ceremony still practised today, the unsuccessful trap is woven together with the deceased lying in state within it. Sacred spears stand up alongside the shelter with stingray barb tips manifesting Mäna’s teeth. The sacred song cycles of Mäna in the water at Wandawuy are intoned with the music of the *yidaki* (didgeridoo) and the *bilma* (clapsticks). At the prescribed time, the dancers crash through the deceased’s shelter, imitating the actions of Mäna at the trap. This action has reference to the release of the deceased’s soul going back to the sacred waters of Wandawuy to be reunited with the ancestors awaiting rebirth.

Nici is Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Artistic Director, Tarnanthi, at AGSA

1 All quotes are from Will Stubbs, email correspondence, 28 October 2022.

Dhambit Mununggurr, Djapu clan, Yolngu people, Northern Territory, born Wandawuy, northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory 1968, *Djapu ceremony ground*, 2022, Yirrkala, northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, earth pigments and synthetic polymer paint on stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*), 208.0 × 91.0 cm; Gift of Dr William J.S. Boyle, CM, Mary Choate, the Hon. Justice Mark Livesey through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation Collectors Club 2022
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