

EXPLORING PIGMENTS – WAAL-WAAL NGALLAMETTA THE MOUTH OF KENDALL RIVER

Waal-Waal Ngallametta was an Aurukun elder from the region of Western Cape York, Northern Queensland. Practicing first as an accomplished weaver, she turned to painting in 2008 and rapidly established a local and national reputation for her works that depict the complex maze of river systems, wetlands and coastlines of her Country. She developed her own innovative style, using traditional clays, ochres and charcoal to create images based on community life and Country.



image: Waal-Waal Ngallametta, Kugu-Uwanh people, Queensland, born 1944, Around the Kendall River, south of Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, died 2019, Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, *The mouth of Kendall River*, 2015, Aurukun, Queensland, natural ochres and charcoal with acrylic binder on linen, 267.0 x 200.0 cm; Acquisition through TARNANTHI: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art supported by BHP 2015, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © estate of the artist.

THE MOUTH OF KENDALL RIVER

The Mouth of Kendall River depicts the pristine region around the mouth of the Kendall River south of Aurukun, of which the artist was the traditional owner. It has been created using materials sourced from this very site. Ngallametta captured the region's distinctive cliff formations, and the geological points of intersection between the deep red hues of the bauxite-rich soil (sandy rock with a high aluminium content) and the

bands of contrasting white clay. The artist combined multiple perspectives, weaving together macro and micro views of the coastal wetlands developed from her intimate knowledge of the area. Among the dense scattering of rivers, swamps and flora, the artist included herself in the painting as a record of her visit to Kendall River in 2013.

THE MOUTH OF KENDALL RIVER BY WAAL-WAAL NGALLAMETTA

PRIMARY

RESPONDING

Look closely at *The Mouth of Kendall River*. Identify the areas which have been painted with synthetic paint and the areas painted with natural ochres. What qualities do each of these materials have?

Some historical rock paintings created by Aboriginal people thousands of years ago have faded and are possibly not as vivid as they once were. Suggest reasons why they are fragile and what can be done to preserve these historical records from further deterioration.

SECONDARY

EARTH SCIENCES: YEAR 8

Investigate the Kendall River south of Aurukun. Identify the rock types (sedimentary, metamorphic or igneous) located in this area. What forces or energy are required in the formation of these types of rocks or minerals? What characteristics of this rock formation has Ngallametta captured in her painting *The Mouth of the Kendall River*.

Using *The Mouth of the Kendall River* and photographs of the Kendall River region, identify the rock cycle (the stages in the formation of, igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rocks). Include indications of the timescales involved in these changes in the rock formations.

RESPONDING

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using synthetic versus natural materials?

Investigate the history of pigments. What surprising or unusual stories can you discover? Write a narrative poem about the life of your favourite colour.

What are some things a Gallery may need to consider when conserving a work of art made from natural fibres or pigments?

Conduct a class investigation into other natural materials used by Aboriginal artists throughout Australia. Use a map of Australia to plot where different materials are located. What are the environmental conditions that enable these natural minerals, ochres and fibres to flourish in these regions? Research another artist who uses natural fibres. How are these materials sourced and utilised? **TIP:** Look at the work by Yvonne Koolmatrie in the Gallery's collection

CHEMICAL SCIENCES: YEAR 10

Some chemicals can change colour if their surrounding environment alters. One example of this would be cobalt chloride, turning pink from blue when introduced to water. Experiment with a range of (safe!) chemicals to create a colour abstract work of art. Research what chemicals change colour when introduced to water, a change of pH, different temperatures and so on.

Research thermochromic materials that change colours with different temperatures – used in mood rings, colour-changing mugs and hyper-colour t-shirts (If you were born after 1995 you may need to research what a hyper-colour t-shirt is!!). If they change colour when exposed to water or a change in pH this is normally because they have actually chemically changed to a new substance. In fact a change in colour is usually one of the indications that a chemical reaction has occurred.

PRIMARY & SECONDARY

MAKING

Take a series of macro photographs of the natural environment that illustrate bands of contrasting colours or textures, such as geological formations, bark, trees or leaves. Using these images as reference, create a textural painting that captures the essence of your discovery using a mixture of natural and synthetic materials

Collect a variety of natural materials that you could crush or grind to make a pigment to create your own selection of paints. Try grinding some of the materials listed below as a starting point.

- **White chalk** painted onto a dark surface
- **Frozen berries** (also known as *Stil de Grain* which is a plant based pigment made from berries)
- **Bark** chipped away from logs. This process was often used in the nineteenth century to create sepia drawing effects
- **Walnut shells** with water to create walnut ink. Soak the shells for two months, the longer they soak, the darker the ink becomes.
- **Willow charcoal** mixed with egg to create vine black.

Continue your experiment with different binders and watch paint dry! Document your observations.

Binders:

- **Watercolor:** Pigments are dispersed in water or a water-soluble chemical.
- **Oil:** Pigments are dispersed in an oil-based (organic) chemical such as linseed oil.



image: Waal-Waal Ngallametta, Kugu-Uwanh people, Queensland, born 1944, Around the Kendall River, south of Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, died 2019, Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, *The beach at Iklet*, 2010, Aurukun, Queensland, synthetic polymer paint and ochre on linen; South Australian Government Grant 2010, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © Waal-Waal Ngallametta.

- **Acrylic:** Paint in which the binder is made from a plastic polymer emulsion.
- **Tempera:** Traditional paint that uses egg as a binder.

What things did you notice that were similar and different? Speculate as to why they are similar and different.

Consider how you might separate the pigments from a range of paints (modern and natural). How would you plan this experiment – what equipment would you need? How would you set it up? How would you stay safe?