

Lena Yarinkura and the Maningrida innovators

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In 1987, six months after I arrived in the Northern Territory, an exhibition of the Maningrida weaving collection (shown briefly in Darwin during Naidox Week before going to Sydney's Power Institute) opened my eyes to Aboriginal art and culture. I especially admired a 'Bok'narru, or ceremonial dancing belt, by Lena Yarinkura. Although at that time her name meant nothing to me, over the past decade I have watched her work develop and come to recognise her distinctive style.

Yarinkura was one of the first women painters to emerge at Maningrida and, in 1994, she was awarded an Aboriginal Arts Board Professional Development Grant in recognition of her innovative practice. She is a Rembarrnga woman who lives at Bolkdjam, a small outstation from Maningrida in Central Arnhemland. Her brother is the well-known bark painter, Les Midikarra, and her husband, Bob Burruwal, is a bark painter, carver and weaver.

Her extensive repertoire includes paintings on bark and hollow log coffins (Lorrkon); woven fish traps, baskets and dilly bags; woven and decorated ceremonial dancing belts; and carvings of Mimih spirit figures. She is especially renowned for the inventive way she combines different media. For example, one bark she exhibited at Hogarth Gallery in 1989 had grasses glued onto it, and she once made a huge yam sculpture installation from sticks, dry branches and feathers, which was so fragile that it was never publicly shown.

Nevertheless, it is weaving and fibre craft that have always formed the core of her art practice. Since 1994, Yarinkura has been making beautiful sculptural installations which, although they use an established vocabulary of forms, traditional media and subjects drawn from her own culture and environment, are virtually without precedent.

Brian Nyiniwanga, a fellow Rembarrnga artist, who is well-known for his depictions on bark of contemporary Aboriginal life and for his urban subjects in acrylics, has also been making innovative sculptures since the mid seventies, which Djon Mundine has described as 'a new form of idiosyncratic wooden sculptural practice'.¹

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Yarinkura's and Nyiniwanga's works is that they combine seemingly quite disparate

things - traditional ceremonial objects, for example, with children's toys - to create evocative cultural narratives.

Yarinkura's *Family diorama* (also known as *Family drama* or *Two brothers and Modjarrkki the Crocodile* ²), which won the Wandjuk Marika memorial award at the 1994 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art award*, comprises six almost life size figures made from paperbark, kurrajong fibre, ochre and wood: a crocodile, a dog, two tall, thin, Mimih-like male figures (who are brothers) and two female figures, which represent the same woman at different times of her life.

The story being related here is of a man who was killed while hunting with his dog, and whose widow later married his brother. Yarinkura focusses not so much on the death of the man but rather on the woman's role, first as widow then as wife, although the highly stylised crocodile, which looks like a long paperbark parcel, might be read as a mortuary symbol. The figures, made from bound paperbark, have flat-topped, paper bag-shaped heads and are painted with ochres; the widow figure being almost completely white. The two brothers wear grass skirts and carry woven pandanus dilly bags and wooden spears.

Another work, *Ngayang spirits*, depicts three figures. Two of them have bodies woven from pandanus fibre, bush string and ochres. Their heads are carved from wood and the hands of one of them have strikingly detailed fingers, splayed like chicken feet. The third Ngayang is depicted two-dimensionally, in the form of a woven mat, fringed at one end, ochred all over in red, with a white fish painted in the middle, recalling the traditional practice of painting fish on rocks to entice them near.

Last year, Yarinkura again won the Wandjuk Marika Award for her *Family of Yawkyawks*. Yawkyawks (also known as Ngalkunburriyaymi) are female water spirits. They are sometimes called 'the women with tails like fish', and they have long hair, suggesting trailing water plants. Yawkyawks live in freshwater streams in the stone country and around Maningrida, which they usually share with the rainbow serpent, Ngalyod, who is also frequently depicted with a fish-like tail. Although we might associate Yawkyawks with mermaids, they never live

in the sea.

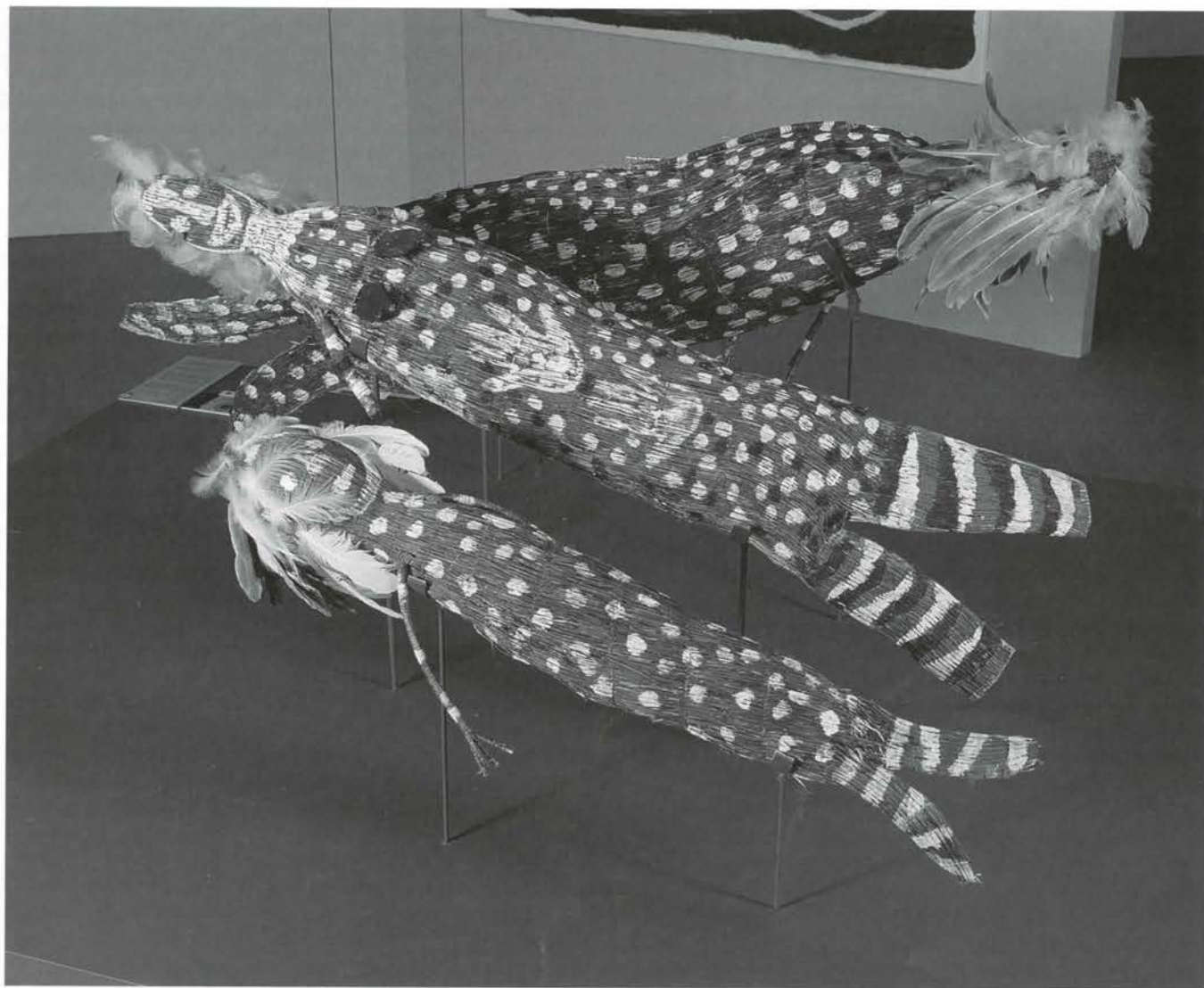
It is interesting to see that many Maningrida artists have been making Yawkyawk figures recently, which might have something to do with the proposal by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory to mount an exhibition on this theme. In 1996, the *Spirits of the dreaming* exhibition at Raintree Gallery in Darwin included a superb Yawkyawk sculpture by Owen Yalandja as well as bark paintings of them by Yalandja and Stephen Kawurlkku. Yarinkura was also represented in this show by two small spirit dolls made of bound paperbark with white ochre.

In *Metamorphosis*, an exhibition prepared for last year's Venice Biennale by Gabrielle Pizzi, there were Yawkyawk figures by Yalandja, John Mawandjul and Crusoe Kurddal. Like those in the Darwin show, they were accompanied by the more familiar Mimih spirits and other male and female Mokoy spirit figures. According to Gabrielle Pizzi, 'increasing opportunities ... have stimulated a more interpretive and unique approach to the representation of the heroic Ancestral Spirits, encouraging the artists to both retain yet at the same time re-invent and re-explore their artistic traditions.'³

Yarinkura's Yawkyawks are quite different from those made by the men, which are all shown upright as if standing on their tails and are long and thin like Mimihs. The men's figures are usually shown without arms and with no hair on their heads and tend to be quite masculine looking. Only one, by Mawandjul, has breasts. Were it not for their fishy tails, in fact, these figures might easily be mistaken for Mimihs.

Yarinkura's, on the other hand, are depicted floating or swimming on their backs and they are round, plump and decidedly female, with hair and arms and, occasionally, carved breasts. They don't look like fish so much as dugongs, the marine mammals that are thought to be the source of the mermaid myths.

Her *Family of Yawkyawks* shows four figures made from woven basket bundles stuffed with paperbark. In form and technique, they might remind us of the basket-bodied Ngayang spirit figures, which were shown in the exhibition *Contemporary Territory* at MAGNT in 1996. However, the fact that there are four of them, and that they



Lena Yarinkura, Family of yawkyawks. Winner of the Telstra Wandjuk Marika memorial award at the 14th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander award, 1997. Photograph courtesy Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

are elevated in a horizontal position as if swimming in a stream, suggests a narrative in a way that the isolated Ngayangs did not.

Yarinkura has used loose, open-weave basketry for the heads and bodies: a spaced weft caught with pandanus warp threads in an open weaving and twining technique. They are ochred red all over, with painted black and white spots. The facial features are outlined in white ochre, and white feathers are used for the luxuriant hair and headresses.

These Yawkyawks have skinny arms painted with horizontal bands of black, white and red ochre. The arm bones are canes, attached by woven hinges like those you might find on the handle of a cane basket, which have been split at the ends and bent back to form the five elongated fingers. The fish tails are formed by dividing the canes at the end of the body basket into two and joining them together in the opposite plane.

They are ochred, with stripes on top and spots underneath.

The largest figure looks like the old grandmother. The slimmer one beside her, which might be her daughter, has small, carved, wooden breasts, painted black. They remind me of a photograph⁴ by Donald Thompson, taken in 1935 at nearby Millingimbi, showing young girls playing with modelled clay babies which have little bell-shaped clay breasts on strings around their necks. The two large Yawkyawks in Lena Yarinkura's tableau are accompanied by two smaller ones - their daughters or granddaughters or younger sisters - and, together, they create a joyous celebration of female fecundity.

The human scale, the wit and the inventiveness of Lena Yarinkura's work invites us to enter into the stories she depicts and informs and extends our understanding of the Maningrida traditions. Her continuing

quest for innovation suggests that she has many more surprises in store.

1. *Djon Mundine, Brian Nyinawanga, The eye of the storm: eight contemporary indigenous Australian artists, NGA, 1997. Brian Nyinawanga's sculptures were first seen in the 1982 exhibition, Aboriginal art at the Top End.*

2. *It is called Family drama in the 1994, NATIAA catalogue, and Two brothers and Modjarrkki the Crocodile in the Contemporary Territory catalogue, 1996. Andrew Hughes, Art adviser at Maningrida, assures me that Family diorama is the real title.*

3. *Gabrielle Pizzi, Metamorphosis: contemporary Australian Aboriginal photography and sculpture, La Biennale di Venezia, 1997.*

4. *Reproduced in Womens work - Aboriginal women's artifacts in the Museum of Victoria, MOV, 1992, p40.*