

The continuity of Tiwi art

Kitty Kantilla, Pedro Wonaeamirri and
Maria Josette Orsto

When I paint I think of myself and who I am. Sometimes when I paint I sing to myself too. The songs help me to find a way of getting my own design . . .¹

The paintings are my body design. Tiwi people know my design — they say 'that is Pedro' . . .²

I think it is important for a young person my age to know the old customs and the traditional Tiwi ways so I can teach the younger ones what our grandfathers left behind.³

Bathurst and Melville Islands, which lie off the north-west Darwin coast, are home to the Tiwi people, referred to collectively as Aragidawununi. Their art-making tradition stems back thousands of years.⁴ The treacherous seas surrounding the islands meant that, for many years, interaction with other cultures was limited and cultural practices remained largely unchanged. A rich contact history with Murantawi (Europeans) nevertheless developed, beginning in 1644 with the arrival of Abel Tasman.⁵

The current generation of artists is committed to maintaining Tiwi culture and continually invigorating art traditions: they now work on a wide range of techniques and materials, including cloth, batik, ceramics, printmaking and painting on paper and canvas. The founding of Tiwi Design on Bathurst Island in 1971 and the establishment of two other art centres on Melville Island — Jilamara Arts and Crafts, set up in the isolated community of Milikapiti in the mid 1980s; and Munupi Arts and Crafts, which is located at Pirlingimpi — have helped to foster an appreciation of the unique qualities of Tiwi art both within Australia and overseas. Community leaders and artists Bede Tungatalum, the late Kitty Kantilla (Kutuwalumi Purawarrumpatu), and Jean Baptist Apuatimi and her late husband Declan Apuatimi have been instrumental in the development of these centres, and in the transfer of ceremonial knowledge to younger artists, including Pedro Wonaeamirri (Gurrumaiyuwa) and Maria Josette Orsto, whose work has become well known outside their community.

Tiwi art is derived from ceremonial body painting and decoration applied to tutini (funerary poles), yimawilini/tunga (bark baskets) and other ritual objects made for the pukumani (burial ceremony). Tutini — large poles of ironwood, carved and painted with ochre that mark the burial site — are the most prominent feature of pukumani. They are set into the ground to represent the human body and stand for the deceased. Tunga, or ochred bark baskets, made from folding over a sheet of bark and stitching the sides with bush string, are traditionally used to carry food and gifts for the deceased's family, and are subsequently placed upended on top of the tutini. The tutini are left in the ground to weather and return to the earth after the pukumani is completed. In 1958 Tony Tuckson commissioned, through Dr Stuart Scougall, a set of 17 pukumani poles from the artists at Milikapiti for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which constituted the Gallery's first significant acquisition of Aboriginal art. Subsequently, tutini were made and marketed as sculptural objects.

Traditionally, the participants in the pukumani paint their bodies with a rich variety of ochre designs in order to conceal their true identity from harm by malevolent mapurtiti (spirits of the dead). As a consequence, Tiwi art generally avoids specific references to totems, dreamings or stories connected with the Creation period. The use of a black ground indicating a link with ceremonial body painting is typical of much Tiwi art and the decorative lines and dots form the basis of many abstract designs. These patterns may sometimes be used in combination with images of ritual objects such as pamijini (armbands), arawinikir (ceremonial spears) or favourite bush foods still hunted on the islands. While Tiwi art is distinctive, the culture has also permitted a degree of individual expression which has resulted in a great variation in styles.

Pwoja (body painting) and minga (body scarification) provide the repertoire of mulypinyini (lines), pwanga (dots) and kurluwukari (circles) that make up the jilamara (designs) found in Tiwi art. One of the very earliest European accounts of Tiwi body designs from the 1850s noted: 'Some of [the Islanders] had marks on their bodies, apparently cut or carved which were looked upon by them as a kind of ornament'.⁶ Ritual scarring is no longer practised, and some pwoja actually mimic minga, the distinctive chevrons of parallel lines on the chest and arms; today the word minga is often used to refer to body decoration in general. Ritual scarification variously symbolised barbed spear heads, the fronds of the cycad, crocodile skin and woven bangles.⁷ Bark paintings collected at Snake Bay (Milikapiti) in 1954 by anthropologist Charles Mountford record these designs, including the chevron body marks.⁸ These feature distinctively in the paintings of elder Freda Warlapinni and her son, Linus, who work on bark, canvas and paper. Other artists have used designs from traditional tunga and tutini to great effect in their paintings. The thickness of ochre yields like skin and lends itself to marks within the colour field. As Pedro Wonaeamirri says:

The ochres are being left by our ancestors, so still following their footsteps. Ochres were here used by our elders and today we are still using it. We have never forgotten our colour. Same colour as bark painting, pukumani poles, bark baskets as well as ceremonial ornaments, armbands, spears, sticks and all that. Also decoration of body when attending funeral, kulama and pukumani ceremonies.⁹

Tiwi artists generally use hand-ground, locally found ochres in their paintings on bark, paper and canvas, and usually replicate this palette or use black in their prints; however, some printmakers who use fabric and paper prefer to use the full range of commercially available colours. The local ochres are yaringa (red), tuniwini/tuniwinni (black), arikuningah/arigeninga (yellow) and tutiyangini/tuteiguni (white). Yellow and white ochres are sourced from Tarracumbie Falls near Milikapiti, as well as from other places on Melville Island, the yellow being much prized for its intensity. Black is made by crushing charcoal, and red by baking yellow ochre in a fire until it changes colour. Where previously either the albumen of turtles' eggs, wild honey and beeswax or the 'particularly gelatinous sap of one of the tree orchids' was used as the binder for these friable ochres, they are now fixed with PVA glue, often used in woodworking.¹⁰

There has never been any prohibition on women's full participation in ceremonial life and art-making, and innovation in Tiwi art is extended to both men and women. Kitty Kantilla, whose art has had a particularly strong influence on the Tiwi community, had been making art for 40 years before her first exhibition in 1988 — a group show of carvings and paintings on bark with other women from Paru, her mother's country on Melville Island.¹¹ Kantilla said of her work:



Kitty Kantilla
Australia b.c.1928–2003 / Tiwi people
Traditional Tiwi motif XVI 1997
Sugar-lift etching ed. 99/99 / 50.3 x 33.5cm
Purchased 2002, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation



Kitty Kantilla
Parluni Jilamara (Old design) 1993
Natural pigments on Lanaquarelle paper / 49 x 68cm
Purchased 1993, Queensland Art Gallery Society

I paint like my father. The jilamara that I do it's my father's design. I watched him as a young girl and I still got the design in my head . . . I will paint until the day I die.¹²

At the time of this exhibition, Kantilla had been living at Milikapiti for three years, and had been painting at the recently established Jilamara Arts and Crafts alongside her friend Freda Warlapinni, working on the padded surface of an old fabric printing table in the art shed.

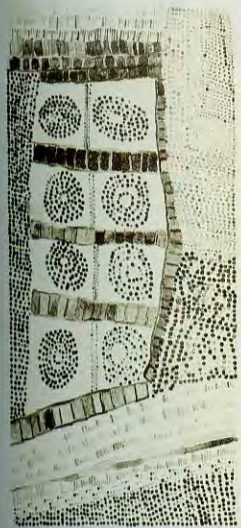
Kantilla's work is notable for its rectangular blocks or bands of solid colour which are often placed in the centre, or just slightly off-centre, as if to suggest the source of the design, or used as vertical or horizontal girders that hold the delicate, scratchy jilamara in place. Kantilla's art is never representational¹³ and even her figure carvings are relentlessly covered in geometric patterns, resembling scaled-down tutini. Her painting *Partini Jilamara (Old design)* 1993 is typical of the first phase of her work, laid on a black background with horizontal strips of dots bisected by a wide band of dots. Kantilla's predilection for dots applied with a coconut-wood stick earned her the nickname 'dot dot'. The same essential form is discernible in her sugar-lift etching *Traditional Tiwi motif XVI* 1997, made with Franck Gohier for Redhand Prints, and also in the lithographs *Jilamara (Good design) #1* and *Jilamara (Good design) #2*, both from 2001.

Curator Judith Ryan noted a significant shift in the later phase of Kantilla's career when, around 1997, she abandoned the black ground as the base for the jilamara, and began using a white ground 'which ushered in dynamic changes in her painting'.¹⁴ Up until then the black ground that represented the skin of the body was conventional in Tiwi art — when painting tutini the poles are frequently blackened in a fire first. Kantilla's innovation was taken up by other artists, in particular her niece Dymphna Kerinauia, and became part of Pedro Wonaeamirri's repertoire as well.

Wonaeamirri has acknowledged Kitty Kantilla as the most significant influence on his work as a painter; however, he also recognises his own contribution to Tiwi art, as this essay's introductory quote shows. Wonaeamirri has played an important role and his influence is comparable to that of Bede Tungatalum in the 1970s. Both artists are leaders who came to prominence when very young: Tungatalum was only 19 when, together with Giovanni Tipungwuti, he founded Tiwi Design under the guidance of senior artists Raphael and Declan Apuatimi. Similarly, Wonaeamirri was 17 when he first exhibited with Jilamara Arts and Crafts in 1991. Over the last decade-and-a-half he has served variously as vice-president and president of this association, aided by mentors including Kitty Kantilla, Paddy Freddy Puruntatameri and Freda Warlapinni.

The art of Wonaeamirri is inseparable from the man: passionate and full of fresh ideas, with a seriousness, integrity and respect for the past — Wonaeamirri is one of the few young Tiwi who speak Old Tiwi. Gallery director Beverly Knight has known him since he was a teenager: 'There was always an aura about him, you could see he had the respect of the old people'.¹⁵ Wonaeamirri's work is distinctive for his use since 1994 of wooden combs (*kayimwagakimi*) to make repeat patterns. The revival of old designs began at Jilamara Arts and Crafts in 1990 when art adviser James Bennett encouraged artists to look at the images of Tiwi paintings collected by Charles Mountford. Bennett's suggestion led to the incorporation of the designs in ochre paintings on paper, and in fabric designs using bright, fibre-reactive dyes. Since then, other Jilamara artists, particularly Raelene Kerinauia, have begun using the combs, which are carved from ironwood and bloodwood.

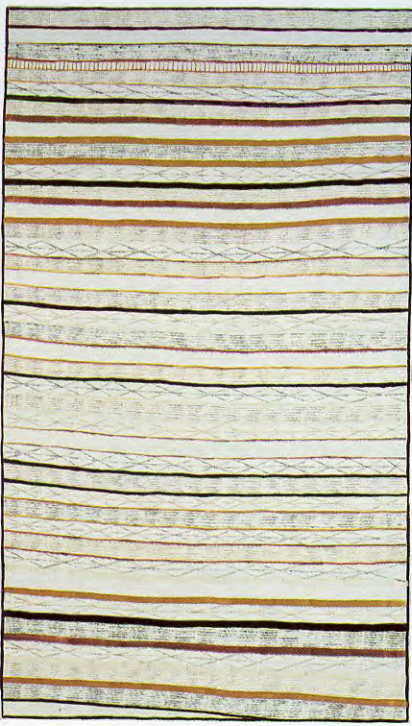
The four works by Wonaeamirri in the Queensland Art Gallery Collection titled *Pwoja* are based on pukumani body paint designs. They comprise two works on paper (painted in 2003) and two on linen and canvas respectively (painted in 2003 and 2005), made using the carved wooden comb and a fine brush. The works from 2003 are painted on a white ground and use traditional patterns: finely dotted open diamonds and tracks of dots, both made with the comb, punctuated by slim bands of solid colour, often finely barred vertically with a contrasting colour. The 2005 painting is almost a composite of the three earlier paintings, reworking and elaborating their elements and patterns. Wonaeamirri's unique style has a dynamic geometry: his parallel lines cross the canvas on a slight diagonal, creating unexpected triangular sections and slim wedges along the edges, as if the design continues beyond the painting surface. He effectively divides the painting in half, setting two fields of different coloured parallel lines against each other, making a rift between the two areas. In other works he sets horizontal tracks of lines, filled in with geometric patterns, at right angles to each other but with each field of tracks slightly off-centre. This creates a faceted picture plane



Kitty Kantilla

Jilamara (Good design) #1 2001

Lithograph ed. 68/80 / 65.5 x 33.5cm / Purchased
© Queensland Art Gallery Foundation



Pedro Wonaeamirri
Pwoja (Pukumani body paint design) 2003
 Natural pigments on linen / 203 x 118cm / Purchased
 2004 with funds from Corrs Chambers Westgarth
 through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation



Pedro Wonaeamirri
Pwoja (Pukumani body paint design) 2003
 Natural pigments on paper / 56 x 76cm /
 Purchased 2004

with a broken perspective, and different vanishing points. Some of Wonaeamirri's paintings could almost be folded over as with the tunga, the distinctive Tiwi bark baskets which are always painted on a single sheet of bark folded in half, with a different design on each side.

Wonaeamirri began making art by carving the pukumani poles or tutini which are still an integral part of Tiwi funerals and memorials.¹⁶ His poles are known for the contrast he creates between the austere geometric painted designs and the rounded sections of solid colour. Beverly Knight has described these poles as having 'a voluptuousness, an unusual fullness in the body curves'.¹⁷ While Wonaeamirri rarely includes explicitly representational elements in his tutini, the body is fully invoked, but camouflaged, as it should be.

Maria Josette Orsto is another young artist who has revolutionised the Tiwi art tradition, following in the footsteps of her mother and father, Jean Baptist and Declan Apuatimi. Orsto grew up in her father's country, Imalu, on Melville Island, where he taught her to paint; in his later years she was his assistant. In 1974, while still a young girl, she became the first female artist at Tiwi Design. After Declan's death in 1985, Orsto accompanied her mother back to her country, Wangurruwu (Marluwu), on Bathurst Island. A prolific printmaker, carver and painter, Orsto held her first solo exhibition in 1990 at the age of 18. Her usual subject is the pamijini (armbands) and the body painting related to the kulama ceremony — an annual event held at the end of the wet season that celebrates abundance and signals other events, including the initiation of young boys and the naming of babies.

Orsto begins with a dark coloured ground and then, with a thick brush, she paints her main shapes of circles and lines. She mixes up a variety of colours and using a small brush fills the shapes with seemingly endless combinations of coloured lines, rows of dots, dotted grounds and crosshatching.¹⁸ Orsto's *Kulama body painting* 2002 conforms to this model — its organisation is a central, highly elaborated roundel which represents the dance ground. Lines radiate from four concentric circles, dividing the space into quadrants. At the midway point along each line she places a small red ochre



Maria Josette Orsto

Australia b.1962 / Tiwi people

Kulama body painting 2002

Natural pigment on canvas / 90.5 x 90.5cm /

Purchased 2003. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

circle, creating an orbiting pathway. In each quadrant, she centrally positions large double circles, with lines from each further dividing the space into geometric segments filled in with dotting or crosshatching. Four small double circles, which appear within the red ochre circles, represent the panijini. The painting appears at first glance symmetrical, but on closer inspection there is no mirroring; rather, there is a dynamic balance of elements which gives the work vitality and movement. The painting almost spins on its axis, propelled by the blades of small double circles, but is anchored by the red ochre circles. Today, Maria Josette Orsto is an accomplished, mature artist, as she herself attests: 'My designs are growing stronger. I am always building up a new design in my head — sometimes I combine Old Tiwi designs with my new ones'.¹⁹

The art of Pedro Wonaeamirri and Maria Josette Orsto reflects contemporary Tiwi culture. Their exploration of established cultural practices and their introduction of new patterns, colours and media sustain art-making on the islands, ensuring both continuity and innovation. While Wonaeamirri and Orsto are key practitioners on the islands, the recognition accorded their unique cultural tradition extends broadly. Still tied to Tiwi ceremonial life, their art ensures the continued brilliance of centuries-old traditions, which remain vital and relevant to the current generation of Tiwi Islanders.

Suzanne Spinner is a Melbourne-based playwright who lived in Darwin for a decade and has written extensively on Northern Territory art and performance. She is currently working on a book about black and white artists working cross-culturally, *Looking Both Ways; Art Since Land Rights (NT) 1976*.

This essay has been adapted from a longer unpublished article, 'Continuity and innovation in Tiwi art: From Bede Tungatalum to Pedro Wonaeamirri'.



Pedro Wonaeamirri
Australia b.1974 / Tiwi people
Pwoja (Pukumani body paint design) 2005
Natural pigments on canvas / 196 x 118cm /
Purchased 2005. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

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- 1 Pedro Wonaeamirri, quoted in *Living Tiwi* [exhibition catalogue], Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 2005, p.31.
- 2 Pedro Wonaeamirri, quoted in *Primavera 2005* [exhibition catalogue], Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, p.49.
- 3 Pedro Wonaeamirri, quoted at <<http://www.tiwiart.com/jilimara/artist/Pedro/pedro.htm>>.
- 4 The Tiwi Islands, Bathurst and Melville, fit together 'like two irregular paving stones' grouted by the narrow Apsley Strait, and were made by Murtankala, the old blind woman during the creation period, Palaneri. Mainland Australia (Timbanbinibumi) is 80 kilometres away — the Tiwi regarded themselves as the people of the world, in a place of darkness, of nobody and nothing. See Colin Simpson, *Adam in Ochre: Inside Aboriginal Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1951.
- 5 In 1705 the Dutch landed and Macassan trepang (sea-cucumber) gatherers came in their wake. In 1824 a British garrison was installed at Fort Dundas and, later, adventuring buffalo hunters and timber cutters preceded the establishment of Bathurst Island Mission at Nguui by the Catholic Church in 1911. Buffaloes, Christianity, metal axes and Australian Rules Football were introduced and became thoroughly acculturated into Tiwi life. Anthropologists who visited the islands, Baldwin Spencer (in 1911-12) and Charles Mountford (in 1954), were followed by collectors and artists Russell Drysdale, Stuart Scougall and Tony Tuckson in the 1950s and Dorothy Bennett and Sandra (Le Brun) Holmes in the 1960s.
- 6 RH Major, *Early Voyages to Terra Australis*, London, 1859, cited in Jennifer Hoff, *Tiwi Graveposts*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1988, p.6.
- 7 Kathy Barnes, *Kiripapurajuwi (Skills of our hands)*, *Good Craftsmen and Tiwi Art*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission, Darwin, 1999, p.43.
- 8 The first record of paintings on bark in the North Australian region are from Melville Island in 1834 by Major Campbell — one in particular being neatly and regularly done all over, resembling the cross bars of a cell, as cited by Helen M Groger-Wurm, *Australian Aboriginal Bark Paintings and their Mythological Interpretation*, vol.1, Eastern Arnhem Land, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1973. In 2000, while in Adelaide working with the Australian Print Workshop on his first etchings, Wonaeamirri was able to see and study first-hand the Mountford Tiwi bark Collection at the Art Gallery of South Australia.
- 9 *Living Tiwi*, p.9.
- 10 Judith Ryan, *Art of the Tiwi: from the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria* [exhibition catalogue], National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1994, unpaginated.

- 11 Paru on Melville Island beside the Apsley Strait was Joe Cooper's old camp. A buffalo shooter and the first white man to live permanently on Melville Island, he lived at Paru from 1905 until 1918. Paru was later occupied by a vigorous group of older women as a widows' camp; they became known as the Paru mob.
- 12 Judith Ryan, 'The Magic of Ceremony translated into great art' (obituary), *Age*, 8 October 2003.
- 13 Franck Gohier worked with Kantilla on her last print, a three-colour silk screenprint, *Pumpini jilamara*, in which she came closest to making a print that looked like her painting.
- 13 Notwithstanding one painting which was described by Kantilla as being of a frying pan with an egg cooking in it.
- 14 Ryan, unpaginated.
- 15 Beverly Knight, interview with the author, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 24 April 2006.
- 16 To commemorate the Dutch landing 300 years ago at Karslake on Melville Island, a set of tutini were made by Jilamara artists and installed in 2005.
- 17 Knight, interview with the author.
- 18 Marie McMahon, *Munupi Dreaming* [exhibition catalogue], Melville Island, 1990.
- 19 Maria Josette Orsto, quoted at <<http://www.tiwiart.com>>.

Anne Wallace

Shadows of desire

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- 1 Neil Gaiman, *Sandman: Season of Mists*, DC Comics Inc, New York, 1992, p.21.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.17, ed. and trans. James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London, 1955, p.225.
- 3 See, for example, the iconic image of the unicorn in the *Lady with the Unicorn*, the famous fifteenth-century suite of tapestries in the collection of the Musée du Cluny, Paris; and depictions of unicorn hunting in 'The Unicorn Tapestries' in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 4 See Rex Butler, 'Anne Wallace's confessions', *Art and Australia*, vol.32, no.3, 1995, pp.390-5 regarding Wallace's early work and its relationship to adolescence.
- 5 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, London, 2002.
- 6 Douglas, p.150.
- 7 See Sue Smith, 'Moody hues', *Courier-Mail*, 9 August 2000, p.44; Louise Martin-Chew, 'Images from the dark side of femaleness', *Australian*, 23 May 1997, p.13; and Eve Sullivan, 'Anne Wallace', *World Art*, no.4, 1997, p.75.
- 8 'Stardust' 1928, music by Hoagy Carmichael and lyrics by Mitchell Parish.
- 9 Anne Wallace, 'Some notes on figurative painting' in *Anne Wallace: Recent Paintings* [exhibition catalogue], Arts Queensland, Brisbane, 1999, p.53.

- 10 Sally Bran...
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- 11 Julie Ewin...
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- 12 Ewington,
- 13 Curator Ju...
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