



where the water moves, where it rests

*Gambana Marathi (AM)*

# *Djambawa Marawili AM: CHANGE AGENT*

By Kimberley Moulton, Yorta Yorta

"To be free is to be able to question the way power is exercised, disputing claims to domination. Such questioning involves our ethos, our ways of being or becoming who we are. To be free we must be able to question the ways our own history defines us."

- Gordon Bennett

Djambawa Marawili AM creates art work that is more than just bark paintings; it is an expression of culture, of truth and of freedom. His work is a commanding manifestation of cultural knowledge and a physical materialization of sovereignty. This intrinsic belonging to country and cultural ways of being have been handed down by his Ancestors from time immemorial. These Ancestors and their knowledge continue to live and breathe through the land, and through descendents like Djambawa who create powerful and contemporary expressions of this cultural history.

"...This country  
has the stories.  
And those stories  
were there from  
beyond, from our  
Ancestors to us, our  
Grandfathers to our  
Fathers and to us."

Djambawa Marawili AM

The artwork of Djambawa is one important aspect of the role he plays within his own community and as one of Australia's greatest leaders. He defines his own identity and the way in which stories are passed down through his individual design on bark, ensuring that his voice and the voices of his people are heard, and respected. A senior leader and cultural care-taker of his clan, the Madarrpa of the Yolngu (Aboriginal) people of northeast Arnhem Land, Djambawa is a ceremonial leader and facilitates ceremonies from initiation through to death. He is also an activist, a political and social visionary and a mediator between the Yolngu and the rest of the world. He paints where the salt water meets the fresh water and all that runs between.



*Yathikpa*, 2015, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark



*Yathikpa*, 2015, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark

His work firmly places the living culture of Yolgnu people in the here and now and has been a monumental influence for other Aboriginal artists from the region since the mid-1990s, mentoring and developing talents and in turn creating new aesthetics. He changed formal compositions to express his stories in visually ground-breaking new ways, pioneering a new aesthetic. His artwork does not sit within the historical past; it is informed by Ancestral story and collective memory while at the same time making sense of the complexities of Aboriginal cultures in a colonized land. His work embodies Madarrpa culture and strongly speaks to grand narratives of sovereignty, Aboriginal rights, identity and the de-colonization of Balanda (white) viewpoints. These themes are integral to the current discourse of contemporary Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

Canadian Aboriginal Professor Taiaiake Alfred states that "De-colonisation is a process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies. It is thinking through what we think we know to what is actually true but is obscured by knowledge derived from experiences as colonised peoples...our struggle is with all forms of political power, and to this fight, we bring our only real weapon: the power of truth."

Djambawa Marawili's art acts as 'evidence' and holds a truth that could sit alongside any book or with any western epistemology in the world. Djambawa's works have been used as historical record for decades in the legal fight for Yolngu land rights and recognition. He used bark painting as a tool in the Yolngu Sea Rights claim of 2004, which he coordinated with his community. Their success at the High Court of Australia in 2008 determined that Yolngu people did in fact own the land between the high and low water mark in Blue Mud Bay in northeast Arnhem Land. His art is an active method of teaching and de-colonising western systems of understanding.

Djambawa's bark paintings hold immense presence, and are symbolic of the inherent link between person, sea and land, there is no separation of the three. This informs the everyday life and political realities of the Yolngu, as Djambawa states; "our intellectual knowledge exists in the fresh water and becomes one in the salt water."

Djambawa has been a strong advocate for changing the 'status quo' of what Yolngu art should and can be. Stepping outside of convention, he has created a unique diamond pattern that honors law and culture but conceptually moves beyond a general 'traditional' method of telling story. Flowing chains of diamonds in ochre move across the bark paintings, telling stories of Baru the crocodile, the bringer of fire. Hypnotising swirls of the water where Burri'tji the rainbow lightning serpent lives and waits to spit lightning into the sky creates optical illusions. The sacred areas of water and land come to life in complex layers of pattern and color.

The fire that is carried by Baru burns strong and ignites Djambawa's passion for freedom and self-determination, activating political change and highlighting the bond to culture. His art also speaks to a global audience and as a contemporary artist his works move in and out of, and challenge, western ideologies of what is 'contemporary' and what is 'traditional' Aboriginal art. While Djambawa's artwork fits into what people would generally conceive of what Aboriginal art should look like, his practice extends ideas of what the 'traditional' aesthetic is in his region to include a new conceptual form for expressing culture. Design and representation are re-envisioned, and yet continue to represent the living culture and story that is rooted in the Ancestral 'beginning,' or as the Yolngu call it Wangarr, the time before the first morning.



*Baru at Yathikpa, 2015, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark*

Djambawa's works are technically exquisite reflections of culture that retain a fluidity: they hang beyond the white cube while also sitting very comfortably within it. Collected and exhibited in many major galleries and museums across the world, the work generously shares the strength and complex layers of Madarrpa culture. Djambawa's paintings also sit on Yolngu Country at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Arts Centre in Yirrkala, and in situ on the walls, serve as silent teachers of culture for future generations.

"I want people to understand it's not just a colourful or beautiful show of paintings but it has meaning and is a document of my country." - Djambawa Marawili AM

Indigenous people have a birthright and inherent belonging to the land; this sovereignty transnational to Indigenous peoples across the globe. As one connects with the stories in Djambawa Marawili's work, his message can evoke reflection of positionality within space and the landscape - whose country are you on at this moment? Peel back the concrete veneer, the colonial rotundas and the fast food chains and gas stations to feel the footprints of the First Peoples that walked before the land was colonized. People continue to maintain, respect and care for land and each other, as they have for thousands of years. While First Peoples may appear to be physically absent or displaced within the landscape, the presence and sovereignty of these people will always remain and cannot be washed away with the tide of history. The leadership of Djambawa Marawili and the messages within his work connect beyond his country to educate and inspire change.

**"Whose country  
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moment?  
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He paints where the salt water and the fresh water meet, his voice is carried on the waves and sung to the stars, out past the sacred rocks and onto the rest of the world. "Every individual's name is a special name representing country. Country is where the flood waters rush by and become one. It is that, now we are telling you. Also the rocks. Rocks that the country holds. Where the water moves...where it rests".

<sup>i</sup> Bennett, G. In 'Notes to GB' exhibition room brochure, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> Marawili, D. in Djalkiri, We Are Standing On Their Names catalogue. Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Alfred, T. (2005) Wasase. Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom. Peterborough, ON. Broadview Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Marawili, D. Declaration in 'Saltwater: Recognition of Sea Country: The Recognition of Indigenous Sea Rights'. Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre, Isaacs. J and Associates. 1999. Pg 14.

<sup>v</sup> *ibid.*



*Garrangali, 2010, Etching and screenprint.*





## DJAMBAWA MARAWILI AM

Djambawa Marawili AM is an acclaimed artist and leader of his clan the Madarrpa of the Yolngu People of northeast Arnhem Land. He is a principal ceremonial leader and a land and sea rights activist leading the 2008 successful sea rights claim. In 1996 he won the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award for the Best Bark Painting, and his work is held in the collections of many major Australian museums, as well as many esteemed private collections. He is a painter, a sculptor and a print maker who has pioneered new aesthetics and been monumental in the development and mentor-ship of other Yolngu artists. In 2013 he was chosen by the Australian Prime Minister as a member of the National Indigenous Advisory Panel and most recently was invited to participate in the Istanbul Biennale. Djambawa is a leader in the interface between non-Aboriginal and Yolngu people of Arnhem Land.



## KIMBERLEY MOULTON

Kimberley Moulton is a Yorta-Yorta woman who has spent the past six years as the Project Officer and Curator of the Birrarung Art Gallery a space of the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum. An emerging leader and mentor in the Australian visual arts, she was recently a judge for the 2015 Western Australia Indigenous Art Awards and is the inaugural recipient of the Wesfarmers International Indigenous Curatorial Fellowship with the National Gallery of Australia. She is an alumni of the Wesfarmers Indigenous Leadership Program and the British Council ACCELERATE Program. Kimberley is currently combining a post-graduate diploma in Indigenous Studies and a Masters of Arts Curatorship at the University of Melbourne.

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*Djambawa Marawili (AM)*

**Curated by Kimberley Moulton**

**AUGUST 18 - DECEMBER 20, 2015**

## **Curator's Walk and Talk**

Thursday, August 20, 5:30 pm

## **Djambawa Marawili Artist Residency**

October 25 - November 7

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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Djambawa Marawili AM

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Maria T. Kluge

National Gallery of Australia

Wesfarmers

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