YIMARDOOWARRA : ARTIST OF THE RIVER

the art of loongkoonan

SOLELY NYIKINA:
THE ART OF LOONGKOONAN

by HENRY F. SKERRITT

I am Nyikina. Solely Nyikina. I'm from Jarlmadangah. I was born at Jarlmadangah. That's Nyikina. Not Mangala. I know that. As I was growing up, I learned that. [1]

The paintings in this exhibition are best considered as conversations with country. The country in question, as many of their titles attest, is Nyikina country: the lands abutting the lower stretches of Mardoowarra, the majestic waterway that in 1837 would be renamed by European colonists the Fitzroy River. The Aboriginal inhabitants of these lands call themselves Yimardoowarra—the people of the river—reflecting not just their habitation of this place, but their belonging to this country.

Coursing through the West Kimberley, the ebb and flow of Mardoowarra has long defined Nyikina life, shaping its rhythms, its ecologies, and its Law. The arrival of European pastoralists in the mid-nineteenth century violently interrupted this society, creating a clash of cultures as Aboriginal peoples were forced into the new regime of station life. But it could not alter the course of Mardoowarra, whose monsoonal fluctuations continued unabated.

Loongkoonan was born around 1910. She entered the world as the pastoral industry was reaching its peak in northern Australia. It was an industry she got to know well, working as a cook and station hand at Mount Anderson Station. But this was also a world in which Aboriginal traditions remained strong: the annual wet season saw station work cease, leaving Aboriginal workers free to return to their ancestral estates to attend to ceremonial obligations. Loongkoonan walked the length and breadth of her country, absorbing its poetry, learning its lessons, fulfilling her responsibilities as Yimardoowarra. A woman of considerable seniority, in years as well as community status, Loongkoonan is now one of the key custodians of Nyikina language and culture. She is also one of only a handful of Nyikina people to forge a successful career in the contemporary art world.

As the cattle industry spread out across the Kimberley, it attempted to redraw the boundaries that had long defined the socio-political life of the region. The fence lines of the new stations showed no respect for the territorial borders that had been established

Bush Tucker in Nyikina Country, 2006.

Looma Hills Dancing Ground, 2004.

her paintings, Loongkoonan would most often describe them in terms of the various "bush tuckers" that they contained: *wirrban* (bush onions), *koongkara* (conkerberry) and *magabala* (bush banana). However, such descriptions could be slippery. On different occasions, I recall Loongkoonan offering divergent descriptions of the same section of a painting, suggesting that the meanings of her icons were more impressionistic than strictly referential.

If this iconic multivalence suggests a certain level of abstraction, it is not to deny that these paintings contain all the knowledge of bush tucker that Loongkoonan amassed throughout her long association with Nyikina country. Loongkoonan's gallerist Diane Mossenson recalls "the delight it was to watch Loongkoonan meticulously paint her country as if she had the bushes and fruit right in front of her."[9] In recalling all the bountiful fruits of her country, "bush tucker" serves as a synecdoche for Loongkoonan's accumulated knowledge of Nyikina country. In her paintings Loongkoonan is undertaking a two-fold process of universalization. Firstly, she uses this accumulated knowledge to produce a holistic vision of her connection to country: a unified "world picture", in which her knowledge of the specific (bush tucker in Nyikina country) is translated into a totalized complex of perception.[10] Secondly, by asserting the persistence of this worldview within the context of the contemporary, Loongkoonan's paintings stake a claim for the universality of difference within our contemporary world. They are the cross-cultural transactions of something that, in Loongkoonan's words, is solely Nyikina: not mixed up with anything else.

It is both the dissonance and artistry of Loongkoonan's self-expression that makes these paintings such compelling contemporary art works. By creating paintings that unify and synthesize her specific way of relating to place; that recreate on canvas the effects of her particular way of seeing; Loongkoonan's paintings force the viewer to recognize the immanence of difference in our world. This is the elemental power that we feel in these works: an intimate and personal invitation into a world that is not ours, but on which we are allowed to eavesdrop. If these paintings point to the boundaries of what we can know, just as they point to the boundaries of Nyikina country, it is not to foreclose our understanding of the world, but to open it to all the beauty that lies beyond, as the river flows, connecting us to a world beyond the horizon.

solely Nyikina. In the words of art historian Terry Smith, Loongkoonan's art "achieves its own contemporaneity, not as an abstract right, but on its own terms, and as a strategy for surviving the present."[4] This is the clear lesson of this exhibition: a lesson that is revealed in insistently beautiful terms with an undeniable clarity of purpose.

EVERY CONVERSATION MUST BEGIN SOMEWHERE

Loongkoonan began painting in 2004, aged in her mid-90s. By this time, the Aboriginal art movement was well established in the Kimberley, and Loongkoonan had seen many of her peers in the region take up the brush. However, a suitable opportunity to paint had not yet presented itself to Loongkoonan, and she did not actively seek one out. It was only with the encouragement of her niece Margaret that Loongkoonan began to paint through the Manambarra Aboriginal Artists studio in Derby. The following year, twenty-six of her earliest works were exhibited in the exhibition *River Stories* at Mossenson Galleries in Melbourne, including the works *Nyikina Country* 2004 and *Looma Hills Dancing Ground* 2004, which can be seen in this exhibition.

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The works displayed in *River Stories* were remarkable for their absolute confidence of execution. Sparse and raw, with ragged and scratchy brushstrokes jutting awkwardly across the canvas, they betrayed little of the refinement and elegance that would soon emerge in her art. Although Loongkoonan was yet to master the handling of paint, there is no hesitation in these paintings. If anything, they are marked by an urgency to record the sacred places, or *booroo*, of Nyikina country. In fact, much of the "scratchiness" of these works comes from the speed with which Loongkoonan was working. So keen to keep moving, to make the

Bush Tucker in Nyikina Country, 2008.

View towards the community of Jarlmadangah Burru and Mount Anderson Station. Photograph by Bruce Anderson.

next mark, Loongkoonan would often not stop to dip her brush. The result can be seen in the way in which lines of dots trail off into increasing translucence. Loongkoonan would soon master this, giving her paintings a more accomplished look, but these early works are striking for their palpable sense of experimentation.

As with everything in her life, Loongkoonan threw herself into painting with gusto and industry. In just under five years, she produced around 380 works on canvas and paper. Along with a selection of her earliest works, this exhibition also features some of her final works, produced shortly before Manambarra Aboriginal Artists reduced its operations in 2009. As Loongkoonan's painting practice developed, she orchestrated an ever more sophisticated repertoire of color, figure and formal exploration. Paintings of great beauty are built up through mesmeric grids of vibrating dots and splayed lines, where intense color contrasts are studded and overlaid with iconic figurative elements: bush tucker of all sorts, tools for food gathering, and the ever present Mardoowarra. Loongkoonan's mature style was characterized by her use of alternating light and dark dots. This served to give her works a lightness and earthiness, softening her often high-keyed palette. At the same time, many of the motifs and devices that she used—circles, dots, the grid—can be seen in her earliest works. The resulting picture is of an artist pushing forward with confidence. Even when Loongkoonan settles into what might be termed her "signature style," she continues to find ways to adapt and innovate upon this basic repertoire.

This exhibition, *Yimardoowarra: Artist of the River*, affords the opportunity to watch these experiments as they unfurled, highlighting the gradual, but highly systematic, nature of Loongkoonan's formal development. The exhibition is not arranged chronologically, but rather, attempts to offset works from different periods in which these formal developments can be seen most clearly. The result is an insight into the working of a great artist challenging herself as she engages in an intimate and complex conversation with the country of her ancestors.

It would, however, be a great disservice to Loongkoonan's artistic project to view this progress purely in formal terms. Rather, this exhibition encourages a respectful practice of *looking,* in the hope that by tracing the formal development in Loongkoonan's work, we might gain some insight into what the artist is attempting to communicate. What do these works reveal about the world from which they came? And what role might art play in this world? To answer this, we need to eavesdrop into their conversation with country. Our aim should not be to catch all the details, but to gain some insight into a different way of seeing and knowing the world

A CONVERSATION WITH COUNTRY

What does it mean to say that these paintings are conversations with country? I have suggested that these paintings represent an act of bordering: of defining what Nyikina country is (Udialla, Mount Anderson, Manguel Creek, Yeeda, Lower Liveringa) and what it is not (Mangala country). As Stephen Muecke points out, discussions of place necessarily introduce both specificity and difference.[5] At the same time, place always exists in relation to broader frames: Udialla is a part of Nyikina country, which is part of the Kimberley region, which is part of the continent of Australia, on the planet Earth, and so on. Each of these frames relate in certain ways, just as Mardoowarra connects Nyikina country to other countries further upstream, or out to the Indian Ocean, and the world beyond.

Having a conversation with country is about communicating both the boundaries and connections of country. It is about giving form to particular ways of seeing and understanding place. In the case of painting, it is about presenting the aesthetic contours of the way of knowing country that comes from being Yimardoowarra: from literally *belonging to this country*. As Fred Myers has noted for the Pintupi artists of the Western Desert, "This is not an inheritance model, one that imagines human subjects 'owning' land as property. Instead, it conceives of the relationship between persons and places as embedded in identity-forming (and embodied) exchange: they share substance."[6] Loongkoonan's paintings do not "lie for Nyikina country," indeed, that would be

impossible. For the claims that they make are based on an embodied truth: the right to speak as part of her country, as one who *belongs to the river.* [7]

If, following Myers, we consider the relationship between country and self as "embedded in identity-forming (and embodied) exchange," then Loongkoonan's paintings can certainly be seen as a form of self-expression. However, we should be careful not to confuse this with modernist notions of genius or inspiration. In part, this is because the identity of both country and self is defined *a priori* by Bookarrarra (the Dreaming). Bookarrarra is not restricted to the past, but is expressed in the present as a feature to be known of place.[8] At the same time, it is a feature of place that requires articulation: the concept of "caring for country" is as much an act of representation (requiring the singing of songs, the performance of ceremony, the speaking of names) as it is a physical process (burning, clearing, and land management).

"As conversations with country, her paintings were as much love letters as encyclopedias: a private, internal communication with place, even as they keep alive a particular way of knowing this place."

To suggest that Loongkoonan's paintings represent a conversation *with* country is in some ways to downplay their intercultural intent. While Loongkoonan clearly painted for the Western art market, and enjoyed traveling to exhibitions to expound on her paintings, she expressed relatively little interest in the reception of her work, nor did their success have any discernible impact on her practice. As conversations with country, her paintings were as much love letters as encyclopedias: a private, internal communication with place, even as they keep alive a particular way of knowing this place.

In painting country, Loongkoonan's paintings externalized her own identity: giving it form in new and unexpected ways. While her paintings bear some affinities to other Aboriginal artists, they are essentially idiosyncratic. Like a love letter, the communication taking place in these paintings is one of total intimacy—a pure, intuitive understanding that cannot easily be translated. Although Loongkoonan developed a recognizable repertoire of forms, I think it would be incorrect to call this a "visual language." When pressed to describe

Bush Tucker in Nyikina Country, 2007.

and maintained over millennia of Aboriginal occupation. Station life brought Aboriginal peoples into contact with Europeans, but it also forced new relations between previously distinct Aboriginal groups. Speaking different languages and representing disparate cultural traditions, these groups found themselves "all mixed up" in the cosmopolitan interzone of the colonial frontier.

When starting a painting, Loongkoonan would generally begin from the outside, delineating the margins of her grid, before painstakingly filling each section. In doing so, she was defiantly reasserting the boundaries of Nyikina country:

> *I know all of the Nyikina [country]. Not the Mangala—nothing. That proper Nyikina country. Udialla, Mount Anderson, Manguel Creek, Yeeda, Lower Liveringa—they belong to Nyikina country. People lie for Nyikina country. Mangala country is 'nother side river.* [2]

It is, perhaps, paradoxical that late in her life it was these tightly bounded depictions of Nyikina country that brought Loongkoonan acclaim as a "contemporary" artist. The English philosopher Peter Osborne argues that contemporary art is characterized by the process of "de-bordering," reflecting the changed dynamics of transnational globalization.[3] If contemporary art is the art of border-crossing, how are we to consider these paintings, which begin (both literally and metaphorically) by defining their borders?

I would argue that it is precisely Loongkoonan's "re-bordering" that makes her paintings profound and compelling contemporary art. In tracing the contours of Nyikina country, Loongkoonan's paintings visualize a certain way of seeing and valuing place. This is immensely political, as any discussion of geographic borders is bound to be. But the politics of country in Aboriginal Australia have tended to be framed in terms of the dialectic of colonizer and colonized. This dialectic has spread into discussions of Aboriginal art, epitomized by Richard Bell's famous theorem: *Aboriginal Art—it's a white thing*. What makes Loongkoonan's art and its politics so radical is that it sidesteps this dialectic. It does so precisely by engaging with its own, independent *conversation with country*.

It is not that Loongkoonan is unaware of the history of colonization: a history that, as a station worker she was forced to endure at the frontier. Indeed, her paintings are very much products of the modern world, but Western modernity is not their touchstone. Their conversation runs parallel to this history, even while remaining entangled with it. In doing so, they stake an unequivocal and total claim for coevality: for their right to be

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Nyikina Country, 2004

NOTES

1 Loongkoonan, video statement, Derby, Western Australia, 2006. www.mardoowarra.com.au. Accessed December 9, 2015.

2 Loongkoonan, quoted in Lucy Marshall and Colleen Hattersley, *Reflections of a Kimberley Woman* (Broome: Madjulla Inc., 2004), 75.

3 Osborne references the German term *Entgrenzung:* literally, the dissolution of borders, a term commonly associated with the processes of globalisierung (globalization). Peter Osborne *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verson, 2013), 28.

4 Terry Smith, "The Bowery in Two Contemporary Differential Systems," *The Brooklyn Rail* (December 2015/January 2016): 45.

5 Kim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country* (Fremantle: Fremantle Art Centre Press, 1996), 17.

6 Fred Myers, "Emplacement and Displacement: Perceiving the Landscape through Aboriginal Australian Acrylic Painting," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78:4 (2013): 444.

7 The political and philosophical implications of this embodied entitlement are taken up in Robyn Ferrell, *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 18.

8 Myers, *op. cit.* 443.

9 Diane Mossenson, email correspondence with author, December 15, 2015.

10 This idea is taken up with some force in David Brooks and Darren Jorgensen, *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2015).

All artworks are by Loongkoonan, courtesy the artist and Mossenson Galleries. Photography by Bo Wong.

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Bush Tucker in Nyikina Country, 2009.

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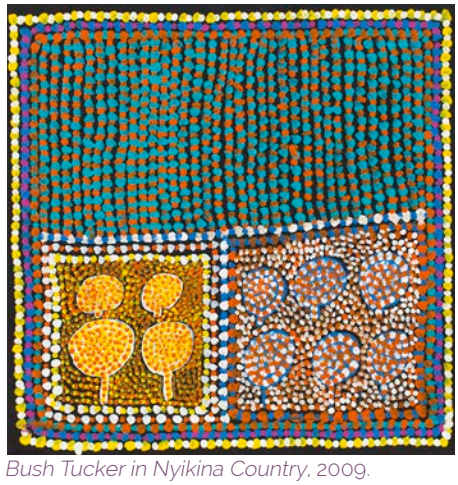

Bush Tucker in Nyikina Country, 2009.

Loongkoonan, Photograph by Kevin Shaw.

about LOONGKOONAN

"I'm proper Nyikina, one of the Yimardoowarra or riverside people."

An elder of the Nyikina people of northwestern Australia, Loongkoonan began painting in 2004, aged in her mid-90s. Loongkoonan was born at Mount Anderson Station near the Fitzroy River. In her early life, she worked as a cook and station hand, mustering sheep and cattle. Loongkoonan is an important matriarch in the Nyikina community, and is revered as a custodian of language, culture and Law. Her shimmering depictions of "bush tucker" have been exhibited throughout Australia, including the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, the Wynne Prize, the Blake Prize and the 2016 Adelaide Biennial. In 2006 Loongkoonan was awarded first prize in the Redlands Art Award, and in 2007 she was awarded the Indigenous award at the Drawing Together Art Awards at the National Archives of Australia. *Yimardoowarra: Artist of the River* is the first career survey of this extraordinary woman, featuring works from each stage of her remarkable career.

YIMARDOOWARRA : ARTIST OF THE RIVER

curated by HENRY F. SKERRITT

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Bush Tucker in Nyikina Country, 2006.