



NGUNGUNI: Old Techniques Remain Strong

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Interviews with Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Henry Wilson

Ngunguni: Old Techniques Remain Strong arose out of a request from the Peppimenarti community in the West Daly region for information on their paintings, weavings and other objects held in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection. Inspired by seeing the images of bark paintings by their forebears, the elders of Peppimenarti began instructing a new generation of artists in preparing and painting on bark. *Ngunguni* features a selection of historic bark paintings collected by Edward L. Ruhe alongside two new paintings specially commissioned for this exhibition. All of the artworks were selected by Regina, Henry and Malcolm Wilson in collaboration with senior knowledge holders. The following interviews with Peppimenarti leaders Henry Wilson and Regina Pilawuk Wilson were conducted in April 2018 by Kade McDonald, Executive Director of Durrmu Arts Aboriginal Corporation.

HENRY WILSON: The Peppimenarti community is a very unique community in the West Daly River region. It is the only community that has continuous ceremonies every year. This is important because it is being pushed by the community leaders to preserve culture, knowledge and understanding of country and where people belong in the area. It's a very unique situation and we're happy here: unfortunately, some other communities don't have that. For Peppimenarti people, we'd like to preserve and keep it going for our future generations, our kids and their kids.

REGINA PILAWUK WILSON: Peppimenarti is about 300 kilometers west of Darwin. When you drive, it takes you four hours to get there, by plane about an hour and forty-five minutes. It's a small community that my husband and I started back in the 1960s. About 250 people live there. We've got a shop, club, office, and a small art center, and it is a really strong community. Our strength comes from our ceremonies and strong leaders at Peppi. We have big ceremonies in the dry season. Other communities join in: last year we had over 700 people, because other communities are not as strong. They have to bring their boys to Peppi for initiation because the elders are very strong in our culture. And it is a safe place. It's always been a happy place.



Majitid, *A Wader Catching Fish*, before 1966, natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 33'x17'. © Aboriginal Artists Agency, 2018.

HW: Around the start of the twentieth century, a number of missions were established in the West Daly River region: at Daly River and Port Keats (Wadeye). A lot of our people moved off country to the missions. In the late 1960s, my mum and my dad and my grandmother and grandfather and a number of other leaders from different family groups decided it was time to come home, and there was a big push to move people back onto country. Peppimenarti was established at that time. The main thing was to live on country, to preserve the culture, language and especially ceremony, and obviously to live the way that people used to live hundreds of years ago.

RPW: We moved back from the mission, because the missionaries didn't want the elders to do ceremonies and what they used to do before. So we had to move back and start Peppimenarti to practice our own culture, to look after the land and the totems, and to teach our kids the right way to practice our culture: ceremonies, making baskets and fishnets, and all the things we used to do many thousands of years ago. That's why 300 people moved away from the missions: to practice culture and to look after the land, and for our children to lead the way.

HW: Bark painting was traditionally practiced in the West Daly River region, but we haven't seen that practice for roughly twenty-five years. There's a number of people in the region who can still do it. Today, canvas painting has really taken over the market. Traditionally, bark painting was used to paint a picture of certain journeys, certain clan groups of different tribes, or a landmark or boundary. Totems were used—maybe an animal or a plant—so a tribe or clan could say “this is my land, my animal, my totem.” They were also used in ceremony, like traditional rag burning to mark the ground or place of the deceased; a young man's initiation; a map of the landscape or country they live in. In the region, the communities and different clan groups, we're all related one to another through culture, marriage, or skin groups. So culture is strong, and the languages are still spoken.

The bark paintings are used as ceremonial objects, similar to message sticks. So many paintings are saying, “this is a ceremony that happened.” They're very ceremonial. We use ochres to paint them, they're a type of clay, different types of rock that would be crushed

and made into paint by adding water. Yellow, white, and red are the traditional colors used for painting and ceremony. We make black sometimes by using charcoal. We paint with lots of types of brushes—it could be feathers, some people use the stem of a small tree, or a branch, it could even be the stem of grass. It could be a number of things. We call the bark *ngunguni*—stringy-bark, from the stringy-bark trees. The scientific name is *Eucalyptus tetradonta*—it's very similar to the native woolly bark tree. We generally harvest it around June or July—but you can basically do it any time if you need it.

RPW: It's important to keep the bark paintings for the boys and the men to tell about their stories, where the bark comes from, what they use, where the colors come from—it is important because it was forgotten because of the missionaries. They didn't allow them to do it. We started the art center to continue teaching the younger generation painting, weaving, and bark painting that was forgotten many years ago. I remember my uncles when we first came out to Peppi making bark paintings—we call them *ngunguni*—to sell. They'd choose to do a design, from rock art or their totem, whether it's an animal, tree, river, rock or hill. Each



Nathan Wilson presses on a piece of bark after it has been removed from the tree. Photo by Cassie De Colling.

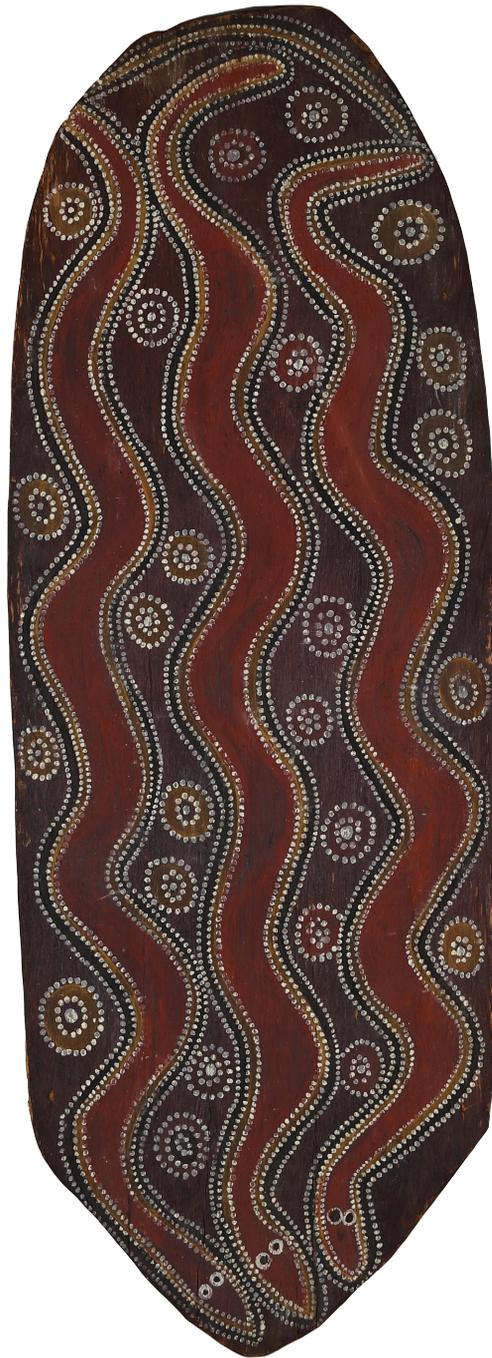


Nathan Wilson and Joseph Thomas begin to remove the bark. Photo by Cassie De Colling.

Aboriginal people have their own totem: you can't paint other people's totems. There are about ten totems at Peppimenarti: the water snake, the moon and others. But we can't paint other people's totems.

Our ancestors had passed away, so the men and boys started doing bark painting to refresh the practice. Women aren't allowed to paint on bark, only the men and the boys, because it's against our Law. We continue practicing art-making, ceremony, language, dancing, painting, songs. Some of the young boys can sing and blow the didgeridu, so their generation won't forget, and they can keep doing all these things for generations to come. I would like to see our boys refreshing what our ancestors did a long time ago: to refresh the painting practice that has been forgotten.

HW: We're really pleased that these paintings are being preserved in America. Pieces like these could easily get lost in the transition to modern technology and modern art. Preserving our traditional way of painting is very important. I went with a group of roughly five people, two



Nym Bunduk, *Water Snakes Swimming in a Lagoon*, before 1966, natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 42.5" x 15.5". © Aboriginal Artists Agency, 2018.



Jeremiah Wilson smoking out a bark to be straightened, with old man Captain Wodidj looking on. Photo by Kade McDonald.

older blokes and three younger folks, to collect some barks, which will be part of a video shown in this exhibition. There was a lot of interest after we cut the bark and took it back to the art center and laid some bricks on it to dry it out and keep it straight. A number of other older people approached and were very keen to give us important information and paint the ideas, which I thought was brilliant.

At the art center we could definitely start to engage more of the traditional styles of painting, as opposed to painting on canvas, and encourage more people to come on board and get more in touch with the community. It makes a lot of sense to me, having talked to different people around the community, there's a lot of interest. Both younger and older community members were really enthused about it.

RPW: In the early days, in the mission, you weren't allowed to talk language. And now that teaching is not happening at the school for us. Kids today speak more pidgin; there is a problem with losing language. The men used to have culture week—they would teach the boys about didgeridu, clapsticks. And I would take the girls, students used to come over, and we would do a workshop once a month. They used to bring the students and we would take them out to get pandanus [palm], stripping it, dying it. But suddenly it stopped. They didn't come over, and they forgot how to do it [weaving]. It is important I do this before I pass away so the kids know how to do weaving, so they will keep it up. It's important to keep that strong.

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HW: Going overseas to America has been a dream for me for a very long time. I've been to South Africa and other places but there's a big difference. It's a place I've wanted to see for a very long time. With my leadership role in different areas of the community, I think it's very important for me to go. With my background in this area having learned from people before me, I know a lot about the storytelling in most of these paintings. It made sense that I should go and give them some advice as a painter and share my knowledge with them.

RPW: Thinking back, I remember my uncle painting on bark long ago. I'd like to see the stories and totems on the paintings in Virginia so we can come back and tell our family—especially cousins, my uncle's family. It's a big honor for us to see the paintings over there. They have



Artist Regina Pilawuk Wilson. Photo by Cassie De Colling.



Collie Warina, Charles Kungiung and Harold Dumoo (background) examine images of works in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection. Photo by Kade McDonald.

been hidden for a long time. Yeah, I'm really excited to see those bark paintings in America. These paintings are a symbol of our cultural legacy. We need to keep this legacy strong.

HW: Now this legacy is passed onto me as a cultural leader in the community. I am glad that this has been handed on to me, and the leaders of other family groups to carry this culture on. It is a privilege and it is something that I would like to share with everyone. Especially my kids and my family, and the Peppimenarti clan group. Without language, without art, without culture, you don't have any connections to country. I don't want that. I want to keep that connection on country, and stretch our language and understand how things work culturally. It brings you a connection to country and a sense of belonging.



Country around Peppimenarti. Photo by Rikki Lovell.

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