



This presentation is based on my personal experience with the Yiribana collection at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Sydney, Australia. It is the largest single space devoted to the permanent exhibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island art and culture in the world. The images in this presentation were taken from the catalog book of the opening show of the newly renovated gallery in 1994. The show was curated by Daphne Wallace of the Gamilaroi group in New South Wales. I am unable to discover who the current curator is, and in fact am concerned that there is no listed curator in their senior staff on their web site.

The Gallery's collection represents works collected by the gallery since the late 1940's, when it began as a donated collection of bark paintings. Curator Tony Tuckson, an artist himself, joined the gallery as assistant to the AGNSW Director in 1950, and had a deep love and respect for Aboriginal Art not as an anthropological study, but as a unique art form. Under his direction until his death in 1970 the gallery actively collected works through acquisition and commission and was likely the only institution to recognize the works of art they really were.






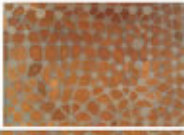




In a telling event in 1959, the gallery installed 17 grave posts, known as the Pukumani Grave Posts, in the central forecourt effectively proclaiming them as a living art form more appropriate to art galleries than museums. In response, Douglas Stewart, a major Australian art critic, wrote in the Bulletin newspaper "...the graveposts... made a somewhat bizarre display... and most people, admitting that the poles are delightful in themselves, will wonder if the proper place for them is not the museum...though they have definite artistic merit of an elementary kind, are really in the nature of ethnological curiosities than works of art."

In what I am sure Nakamura would find an marginalizing and condescending response, artist James Gleeson wrote in The Sun newspaper shortly after "Whatever their symbolic significance might be they represent an ensemble of abstract shapes of aesthetic appeal."

In a somewhat tangential reference, one of the artists in the collection, David Malangi, had one of his designs appear on the first Australian dollar bill when decimal currency was introduced in 1966. From the catalog's text: "The image was used on the dollar bill without his knowledge or consent, though later he received some recognition in an incident which anticipates contemporary campaigns aimed at safeguarding the copyright of Aboriginal artists." (p14)

The collection languished pretty much ignored after Tuckson's death until the collection came under the umbrella of the Australian art department in 1990 and a significant acquisition fund in 1992. In 1994 Daphne Wallace was appointed permanent head of the Gallery's Aboriginal art department, becoming the first Aboriginal curator to occupy such a position in an Australian public art gallery.

It's difficult to present these works and not tread on Nakamura's carefully drawn lines of exoticizing the Other. However, I find these works deeply moving on a fundamental level – perhaps I can even reconfigure Stewart's use of the word "elementary" to refer to the elements and not primary school – and deeply influential in my own approach to my art practice.

 <p>Manggangina Wurrarama The Kestrel 1948</p>	 <p>Mawalan Marika Ancestral Figure of The Dhusa moiety 1959</p>	 <p>Mawalan Marka Djang'kawu Creation Story 1959</p>	 <p>Mawalan Marka Djang'kawu Creation Story 1959</p>	 <p>Dorothy Djukulul &amp; Paddy Lilipiyana The Wagilag Sisters' Story: Wurrutjorra - Sand Palm 1989</p>	 <p>Trevor Nickols Garden of Eden 1982-84</p>
 <p>Willy Tjungarrayi Tingari Story 1986</p>	 <p>Various Artists Pukumani Grave Posts 1958 Personal Sketch</p>	 <p>Various Artists Pukumani Grave Posts 1958 Personal Sketch</p>	 <p>Pukumari poles in progress</p>	 <p>Mathew Gilbert Head 1958</p>	 <p>Lin Onus Fruit Bats</p>