GIFTS OF THE ARTISTS

WARMUN ART OF THE KIMBERLEY

ENTRUSTED TO THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH
George Mung Mung

Bird

Ochres on wood,
height 30cm.
Gifts of the Artists
Warmun Art of the Kimberley
in the care of
the Sisters of St Joseph

Opened by Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

McGlade Gallery, Australian Catholic University
Strathfield, NSW Australia

Curated by Lachlan Warner MFA

May 1 to May 25, 2013
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Warning:
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this publication contains the names of deceased persons and images by deceased persons. This may cause distress. All such names and images in this publication are used with permission.

Cover image: Queenie McKenzie, Jesus came to Texas Downs, Ochres on canvas, 91 x 122 cm C. 1991. Courtesy of the estate of Queenie McKenzie: Red Rock Arts
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We celebrate the Gifts of the Artists exhibition which brings to the world an articulation in art of the life and spirituality of the Warmun community.

The Sisters of St Joseph are deeply honoured to be the recipients of the gifts of these works just as they were honoured to be invited by the Warmun community in 1979 to live among them and begin a Catholic school. The honour continues as three Sisters still live among and minister to the community in Warmun.

The Sisters very early in their time in Warmun introduced art materials into the community and then set about having the first works of the community marketed in Melbourne. Sr Clare Ahern rsj, first Principal of the Warmun School, recalled that ‘without realizing it we were helping to establish the Warmun School of Art and an embryonic Warmun Art Centre.’

The ‘two-way’ learning philosophy with which the Ngalangangpum School (Mother and Child school) began, has been significant in the relationship between the Sisters and the Warmun community over the past 34 years.

The Sisters of St Joseph value greatly the partnership that has developed between themselves and the Australian Catholic University particularly since the canonisation of St Mary MacKillop. The Sisters appreciate the generosity of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Greg Craven, in committing personnel and resources of ACU to assist the Sisters in their stewardship of the story, spirituality and legacy of St Mary MacKillop.

The Sisters of St Joseph thank ACU for enabling Gifts of the Artists to be exhibited.

Sr Anne Derwin rsj
Congregational Leader, Sisters of St Joseph
Gifts of the Artists brings together for the first time Gija art from Warmun in the East Kimberley, held by the Sisters of St Joseph.

Since 1979 the Warmun community and the Sisters of St Joseph have worked together to build the Ngalangangpum School. Over these intervening years, artists in the community have given or sold paintings to the Sisters. In 2013, the Australian Catholic University is privileged to be able to show this extraordinary body of art and legacy to the wider community.

This exhibition is a visual record of the birth and maturation of a unique indigenous representation of Christianity. Creation myths of the two traditions, Gija and Kartiya¹ meld together and enrich each other. We see in the gallery the art that comes from this interaction.

I acknowledge the artists of Warmun, both past and present, who have been able to represent their faith to us in such a powerful form. Australian Catholic University thanks the Sisters of Saint Joseph for entrusting to us their legacy for this historic exhibition and I thank the McGlade Gallery staff on our Strathfield Campus for their work that has enabled Gifts of the Artists to be presented to the world.

General Peter Cosgrove, AC MC
Chancellor, Australian Catholic University

¹ The Gija term for non-aboriginal people
The art of the Aboriginal people of Warmun gives expression to the life force pulsing through this small community in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. This life-force is experienced and shaped by a strong relationship with the land, adherence to the Dreamtime Law and a love of culture revealed and sustained artistically in corroboree and ritual, wood carvings and other art forms.

The Warmun people also remember the past: massacres by settlers, forced resettlement, location on a government cattle station in Violet Valley in the 1940s, escape to a more peaceful existence on Texas Downs Station, the introduction of equal pay for Aboriginal station workers in 1965 and the subsequent drifting of Aboriginal people into the area around Turkey Creek. There, until 1980, they lived in shacks made of corrugated iron, in little bough sheds or in old cars. Rarely do the artists of Warmun depict this history of suffering and displacement. Rather, their remembering encompasses the country, various landforms, myths of the area, traditional spirits, flora and fauna, their traditional and Christian beliefs.

In the time of great poverty, the Warmun people used cardboard boxes, pieces of tin, old doors, Masonite, even fly screens found in the local dump, as the ground on which to paint. Most of this earlier art had to do with myths linked with the local area. Significant places were depicted in traditional ochre colours, and painted with twigs or matchsticks, or just in paint blown from the mouth. Such works of art were carefully stored, and displayed during corroborees. While the community sang of the mythical sites, chosen dancers performed, holding the paintings afloat on their shoulders.

The establishment of a Bough Shed School in 1979 strengthened community determination that the children would learn to follow traditional beliefs, speak the language and cherish the culture of the people. Artists’ works were brought to the school. The children heard stories of the paintings in their own language. The art was prominently displayed. Thus began the collection of art in Turkey Creek.
George Mung Mung, artist, teacher and leader, brought the stories and songs of his country to the children and to the adults teaching in the school. He painted in ochres the landscapes and life of his country. Often he intermingled the shapes of spirits with the flow of rivers. George Mung Mung was also a skilled wood carver. A favoured subject was the Mother of Jesus. Using axe and chisel he produced such works as Mary of Warmun. For every Mary he carved he also sculpted ‘her little mate’ as he called the accompanying bird of the locality. George’s other carvings include images of the traditional spirits of the area, usually shaped like birds with very strong facial expressions.

The tiny community is predominantly Catholic. They sustain belief in their traditional rituals and customs and seem to experience little tension in uniting two belief systems. The art of the Warmun community of Turkey Creek reflects many facets of spirituality. George Mung Mung and Paddy Williams were strong Lawmen, whose work combined traditional and Christian beliefs. Hector Jandany provided a further distinctive example of an integrated spirituality.

Sister Clare Ahern rsj

Artist unknown

Ochres on canvas,
30 x 40.5cm.
Introduction

If you scrunch your hands up tight so that your knuckles stand up, and then hold them close to your eyes, it is easy to imagine the view of the Bungle Bungles as you stand waiting for the Kununurra bus outside the Turkey Creek fast food roadhouse early in the morning.

And you’ll also have a way in for your eyes as you walk around this exhibition. You’ll recognise the red earth and clays under your feet and the soft greens of the straggly trees which dot the hills. Above all you’ll understand the way so many of these paintings are about this particular bit of ancient Australia and the way the trees seem like dots on top of the rock-hills that are the Bungle Bungle landscape. In all of this, Warmun art is distinct from the works of Balgo in the Great Western Desert or the communities around Papunya, Utopia, Yuendumu and Fitzroy Crossing.

The land might be ancient but the community is quite young. The elders remember the times when the men dressed like cowboys and honed their skills as superb horsemen on the big ‘top end stations’ such as Texas Downs and Tickelara. The women talk of living in camps down by the creek and being paid with food and the relative safety provided by the station owners. Both remember their elders telling them stories about the massacres and the blood that spilled over the sacred earth. 1966 changed all that when the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission granted equal pay for Aboriginal station workers. One effect was that many Aboriginal stockmen lost their jobs and so indigenous families drifted away from stations and formed smaller remote communities. Warmun was one of these, with its geographical centre around Turkey Creek in the Eastern Kimberley. Gija was, and is, the language.

This exhibition dates predominantly from after the formation of a Catholic school in 1979. The little community, under the leadership of its elders George Mung Mung, Hector Jandany (Sundaloo) and Queenie McKenzie, invited the Sisters of St Joseph (Sr Clare Ahern and Sr Theresa Morellini) to take charge of the little Bough Shed School which was named ‘Ngalangangpum’ (Mother and Child). It was Winnie Budbaria who brought Christianity from the Derby Leprosarium and fought for a school.
From the beginning the education was to be 'two-way' - to teach traditional culture and also Kariya ('white fellow') way. And it was so for its religious education. Most days Hector Jandany or George Mung Mung or Queenie McKenzie came down to the classroom, often carrying their paintings to tell stories of the ancestors or creation and the Gospels. Often these were danced into life at corrobories and big Christian liturgies, especially those of Pentecost, Easter and the Ascension.

Perhaps the most breathtaking of these works - and certainly one of the great sculptures of the 20th century in my view - is in this exhibition (Page 10). Carved from a tree bough found deep in the Bungle Bungles, it was to replace a plaster statue knocked over by the dogs as a small group was praying around it. "I'll make you a Mary that will never break", George Mung Mung promised the people as he set off to find some suitable wood.

This Mary epitomizes the deep 'two-way' spirituality of the Warmun community at this time. She is a young woman, painted with the body paint patterns reserved for young, unmarried Warmun girls. Her womb is like a shield under her heart. Her unborn man-child dances. He is the One. She is the Mother. Together they remind the beholder that Mary and Jesus are the centre of this faithful little group. As Hector Jandany, the Ngapuny (God) man, said to me, "We always knew about Ngapuny and the Spirit, but youse mob had to tell us about Jesus and Mary".

It is a mark of the esteem with which the Warmun community still holds the Sisters of St Joseph that they have allowed this most sacred of art to travel to this exhibition.

There is a real sense in which all the works in this collection speak to and reveal the deep spirituality which underpins the ways in which traditional Aboriginal people have held their lives together. That this has changed somewhat in recent years with the advent of drugs, grog and some of the less desirable aspects of Western (white) culture does not negate the place of the ancestor myths of creation and right living, Ngarrangkarni (loosely labeled 'The Dreaming' by white people).
Whether they retell the Christian story in ways that recontextualise it within their culture (Hector Jandany, Queenie McKenzie and George Mung Mung) or appear to be only about a particular bit of the country (Freddy Timms, Beerbee Munngari, Henry Wambini and Jack Britten) they all hold and point to the sacredness of the land in which their ancestors once walked and in which they still dwell in its waterholes, snakes, trees, hills and to which they, the artists, will return to be born again.

The immensity of this stance came to me when I visited a one-person exhibition of Hector Jandany’s work some years before he died. Hector was sitting quietly, with his head on the side, in his signature big yellow-framed glasses, with his long fingers twined together. He was alone in a kind of ‘envelope of silence’ although the room was quite full of people looking.

I walked around the exhibition wondering about the power of works that could engage so many visitors. None of us knew more than their labels – My Country, Frog Hollow etc. Yet I think we sensed that there was and is more to them than meets the eye. None of them bore Christian titles, yet I recognized that some were about his favourite gospel stories of Ascension, Resurrection and Crucifixion, but had to be titled differently.

As I passed him – reluctant to speak for it was many years since we had met at the big ‘Aboriginal Art and Spirituality’ exhibition in the High Court in Canberra – he beckoned me over. "Where you bin? Where you bin?" as he put his arms around me. “Hector,” I said after a bit, “these are like your Ngapuny (God) paintings."

As well as his serenity and calm, Hector had a great and mischievous smile. He just waved his hands around and smiled. “All Ngapuny”, he said. “Everything Ngapuny.”

And so it is in this exhibition that honours the depths of these people and the wisdom and generosity of the Josephite Sisters who encouraged them, supported them and learned so much from them.

Rosemary Crumlin
March, 2013
George Mung Mung was an elder, a senior Lawman and artist. He was born at Turkey Creek, where his father was a Police Tracker. George himself worked as a drover and stockman for many years in the Kimberley, and settled again in Warmun, after the 1966 Pastoral Act.

With Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji, George Mung Mung painted the early dancing boards of the Krill Krill ceremony, then went on to paint for the newly established school at Warmun, of which he was a founding force.

In 1979, with Hector Jandany and Queenie McKenzie, George Mung Mung invited the Sisters of St Joseph to start the local school, using the ideas of 'two-way' culture, where Karlina and Gija culture inform each other in the teaching of the local children. George Mung Mung's paintings and sculpture were, and still are, instrumental in that 'two-way' teaching.
George Mung Mung

*Bird*

Ochres on wood, height 30cm.
George Mung Mung

Mary of Warmun

1983,
Ochres on wood,
64 x 32 x 12cm.

George spoke to Sister Rosemary Crumlin about Mary of Warmun: “This young woman she’s a young woman, this one. The spirit of the little baby comes in a dream to his mother. Proper little one, his mother says. The babe grows and he might be ready at Christmas time. He says, Mother, I’m ready now. And the old woman take her away and the little one is born down in the river here.”

Courtesy of Sister Rosemary Crumlin rsm
George Mung Mung

_Palm Sunday_

Ochres on board,
46 x 61cm.

Patrick Mung told the Sisters that this work was painted on stock route.
George Mung Mung

Kalarang

Ochres on board,
69 x 48cm.

Kalarang totem had a dream in the Dreamtime for spring water. Kalarang is a Rainbow Serpent-like figure, a yabby-like creature. This happens in the east, George's country.
Hector Jandany was the last of the original group of painters who defined the Warmun School of painting. He was born in Turkey Creek in the Warmun Community in the Kimberley. He was a talented bush artist, Dreamtime storyteller, station hand and camp cook on the many cattle drives out of Texas Down and Rosewood Stations, en-route to the facilities at Wyndham.

Hector's stories abound with the legends and myths of Narrangunny Dreamtime. His work is defined by his use of traditional spinifex or red and white gum glue as a binder with his natural ochre.
Hector Jandany

Manamapurra

Ochres on linen, 76 x 112cm.

Mary, at the centre of the picture is Manamapurra, the Dreamtime person, a spiritual leader, and a special woman like Our Lady, Jesus’s mother. The bush tucker minyjijarra (bush plum tree) on either side of Mary is a sign of how her spirit nourishes the Australian people, of how she follows the Ngapuny way (God’s way). Mary calls us to follow her spirit and join her in heaven when we die. The hill country represents her different camping places here on earth.
Hector Jandany

Christmas Dreaming

Ochres on canvas,
51 x 76cm.

This is the country to the East, called Nargurrum
Hector Jandany

*Jesus Died*

Ochres on board,  
46 x 61cm.

Jesus in the middle, with Mary (*Kurakal*) on the left and Magdalene (*Parika*) on the right.
Hector Jandany

Jesus Rising from the Grave

Ochres on board,  
41 x 51cm.

Ngarragarni Jesus is buried in the cave and now he is riser
Hector Jandany

Transfiguration

Ochres on board,
$41 \times 51$cm.
Hector Jandany

Sign of the Cross

Ochres on board,
57 x 47cm.

The painting depicts the sign as it is made on the body, hence the decorations. Hector created several paintings on this theme.
Hector Jandany

_Untitled (Jesus)_

Ochres on canvas,
70 x 66 cm.
Hector Jandany

Women Beneath the Cross

Ochres on canvas,
104 x 104 cm.
Hector Jandany

Children going to school, walking their way from the various camps to the teachers.

Acrylic on board, 60 x 30cm.

Given to Bishop John Jobst by Hector Jandany at the opening of the Kindergarten section of the School. Bishop Jobst gifted it to Sister Clare Ahern when he retired as Bishop of Broome. Sister Clare Ahern then gifted the work to the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph, January 2008.
Queenie McKenzie was a remarkable artist and well-respected cultural leader in the Kimberley area. She was referred to as the Lawwoman for the Kimberley.

In her role as a Lawwoman, Queenie would ensure that the traditional cultural practices were carried out correctly and at the right times. She also ensured that the younger generations learnt about their cultural heritage by teaching them about song, ceremony and story. She used her art as an educational tool at the school.

Queenie was an international artist who used her art works to teach others about her vibrant culture and her life and, most importantly, to inspire an interest in and respect for her peoples' connection with the land. In 1998, in recognition of her dedication to her role as a leader and advocate, the Government of Western Australian declared Queenie a 'State Living Treasure'.
Queenie McKenzie

*The Spirit of MacKillop*

Ochres on linen, 
76 x 112cm.

The mothers and the children are under the tree – the first school – in the top left. The pink, yellow and black shapes are mothers taking children to do bushcraft. The children are inside the preschool. The black ablution block abuts the primary school, which then abuts the Sisters’ house. The high school is top right. The lumpy shapes are the hills, and the brown square is the tank.
Queenie McKenzie
& Vanessa Thomas

Untitled

1995
Ochres on canvas,
65 x 80cm.

There is a gathering of beehive shapes in the picture which may represent children and Sisters.
Jack Britten was born at Tickelara Station in the Kimberley, and worked as a stockman until his mid 40s before moving to Warmun after 1969. He had been known as a great horseman.

He lived at Warmun briefly, before moving to the nearby community of Frog Hollow with his friends Henry Wambini and Beerbee Mungnari.

Jack was one of the earliest painters at Warmun, focusing on his country to the southwest that includes the legendary Bungle Bungles. He was the senior custodian of this area and depicted its sacred sites. He also incorporated body markings into his art with events and characters of the Narangani Dreamtime, indicating his senior position in Gija culture.
Jack Britten

The Bungle Bungles

Ochres on canvas, 51 x 61cm.

“This is country that we Aboriginal people cannot go into. It is our country. We cannot go there, the middle part is a man. If I go into that country he will hunt me round.”

On the left hand side, the first three mounds represent a woman. On the right side, the last two mounds represent a woman.
Jack Britten

*Warmun Dreaming*

Ochres on canvas,
75 x 50cm.

This work relates to the hill overlooking the community.
Jack Britten

_Untitled_  
_(Bungle Bungles)_

Ochres on canvas,  
61 x 91cm.
Freddy Timms was born at Police Hole on Bedford Downs Station. He worked as a stockman, gardener and later as a community worker at Frog Hollow. As a friend of Rover Thomas, he started painting in 1986, helping with the painting of ceremonial boards.

Timms' works map the land of the Gija, but in a more overtly topographical than mythical way. He has an abiding interest in the cultural and political histories of European colonization of Gija land: the massacres and displacement of local people and the flooding of their lands to create Lake Argyle.
Freddy Timms

Country round Bow River

Ochres on board,
46 x 35cm.
Freddy Timms

Untitled

Ochres on board,
35 x 46cm.
Beerbee Mungnari was born at Waterloo Station. He first worked at Texas Downs Station on the cattle drives to the port town of Wyndham. Hector Jandany and Jack Britten were also there at the time.

After retiring from stock work, he lived at Wyndham then at Turkey Creek. He taught at the new school in Warmun, where he started painting in 1982, learning from Jack Britten. Later he moved to Frog Hollow, where he still lives with his extended family.

His work depicts the lands he knows: they were submerged in the building of Lake Argyle.
Beerbee Mungnari

Walla Walla Country; the
Dreaming around Frog
Hollow

Ochres on board,
35 x 46cm.
Henry Wambini was born at Tickalara cattle station, south of the Warmun township. He started work on the station, but during this time, he was put under observation and then admitted to the leprosarium at Derby. He later worked there as a gardener and doing odd jobs. After being given the "all clear" he moved back to the Warmun area, living at Bow River.

In the 1980s, Henry, with his friend Jack Britten, helped to establish the Frog Hollow community near Tickalara Station. As with several of the leading Gija artists, Henry painted for the local school using small boards, then, in the 1990s started painting on canvas.

Henry Wambini painted the countries of his mother and father, to the south and east of Warmun community, around the Bungle Bungles.
Henry Wambini

*Untitled*

Ochres on board,
38 x 76cm.
Henry Wambini

*Untitled*

Ochres on board, 25 x 50cm.
Henry Wambini

*Lightning in the sky, wet season build up, lightning on the hills.*

Ochres on Canvas

The background colour has changed over time because of the artist's use of Garlawan, a Red Gum resin.
Denise Mung was born at Wyndham in the East Kimberley and grew up at Frog Hollow. Denise Mung is the daughter of Beerbee Mungnari, the renowned artist and elder of the Warmun community. Denise's sisters, Joanne and Marika are also well-known artists.

Denise grew up around the burgeoning community of artists in Frog Hollow at the time, Jack Britten and her father Beerbee among them. Her work has been likened to her father's in terms of patterning and strength of design.

Denise has four children and now lives between Frog Hollow and Kununurra. Her work is shown at the Warmun Art Centre and in Kununurra.
Denise Mung

*The Bungle Bungles*

Ochres on canvas,
51 x 61cm.
Paddy Williams was a drover across the Kimberley for many years and has been immortalised in Slim Dusty's song, Paddy Williams.

Paddy Williams was a senior Lawman at Warmun with George Mung Mung, and was an artist in the first major group of painters, starting in 1979. He mainly painted teaching images for the school.
Paddy Williams

The Hills at Green Vale

Ochres on canvas, 25 x 35cm. The background colour has changed over time because of the artist’s use of Garlawan, a Red Gum resin.
Shirley Purdie

Born 1948

Shirley Purdie, daughter of artist Madigan Thomas, was born on Mabel Downs Station in the Kimberley. Shirley is a well-respected Law and Culture Woman amongst Gija people. She has lived and worked in the Warmun community for many years, but has relocated to the Norton Bore Community, where she and her husband Gordon Barney (a senior painter) are Chairpersons.

The stories of her paintings come from those told to her by her father, Madigan, and her uncle, the late Jack Britten.

Shirley Purdie won the 2007 Blake Prize for Religious Art for her work Stations of the Cross. The work portrays the fourteen stations, and also the history of conflict and racial violence in the area, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.
Shirley Purdie

*Bungle Bungles*

Acrylic on board,
30 x 40cm.


©the artist, courtesy Warmun Art Centre
Gordon Barney was born at Alice Downs Station in 1944. He now lives at Norton Bore Community with his wife, the artist Shirley Purdie. Gordon and Shirley are both joint Chairpersons of the community there.

Barney has worked for many years as a stockman. During mustering he would collect various ochres for use in his work. He is well-known at Warmun as a strong Law and Culture Man and as an important ceremonial dancer.

He started painting in 1998, often depicting the various hill lines located in his traditional country.
Gordon Barney

Country

Ochres on canvas,
40 x 60cm.

Lorraine was born in Wyndham and comes from a distinguished and artistic family. Her father is the senior painter, Gordon Barney and her grandfather was the late Hector Jandany. Lorraine’s mother, Jeanne Daylight, lived out on Texas Downs Station as a young woman.

She now lives at Warmun with her husband, the painter Christopher Churchill.

Her paintings describe the lands of her mother Jean (Purnululu and Springvale) and the country of her father around Alice Downs and Chinaman’s Gardens.
Lorraine Daylight

Dreamtime story of the Warmun Community

Ochres on canvas,
25 x 35cm.

Artist Unknown

Digging Stick

Ochres on wood, height 50cm.