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Aboriginal artist Nonggirnga Marawili's exhibition *Yathikpa* offers glimpse into another world

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Nonggirnga Marawili
Alcaston Gallery
Until February 14

Nonggirnga Marawili is one of the "old ladies" who paint in the courtyard of the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, in Yirrkala, north-east Arnhem Land.

For many years, Marawili assisted her husband Djutadjuta Mununggurr (c1935-99) with the fine cross-hatching of his barks.

"Mr Mununggurr taught me to be an artist," Marawili says in a video recording, but, although steeped in her husband's designs, Marawili is an artistic innovator. Her earlier screenprints show remarkable freedom of expression.

All of the barks and larrakitj (burial poles) in this show are titled *Yathikpa*, the name of a coastal area near Blue Mud Bay. Marawili's nomadic childhood included long journeys by canoe in its gulf waters. She represents the flickering movements of fire and water with undulating areas of diamond patterning.

Natural ochres on bark by Nonggirnga Marawili, part of her *Yathikpa* exhibition.
Catalogue number AK18913. Photo: Supplied



Natural ochres on bark by Nonggirnga Marawili, part of her *Yathikpa* exhibition. Catalogue number AK18904. Photo: Supplied

Describing catalogue no AK18919, the artist says matter-of-factly:

"The rock stands strong while the wave crashes against it. It's a rock that stands in the middle of the ocean. The saltwater comes and crashes into the rock."

But then, Marawili declares her artistic independence: "This is just my thinking. No one told me to do this pattern. I did this on my own. When the elders see it they will let me know what they think."

What Yolngu elders think is something John Rudder was urgently concerned with when working at the Yirrkala mission in the 1960s. The Yolngu welcomed his interest.

Indeed, according to notes for two concurrent exhibitions -*Transformations: Early Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land* (at the Ian Potter Museum, University of Melbourne), and *Yirrkala Drawings* (Art Gallery of NSW, both until February 23) - in the three decades prior to Rudder's arrival, the Yolngu had been keen to communicate their view of reality to tourists as well as collectors.

Rudder turned his experience into a PhD thesis, *Yolngu Cosmology: an Unchanging Cosmos Incorporating a Rapidly Changing World*, and in 2001 contributed to the catalogue of the stunning show *The Native Born: Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land* at the MCA in Sydney.

Of his first contact with the Yolngu, Rudder wrote: "The world to which [the Yolngu] introduced us had two sides, only one of which was even slightly familiar ... It was the world of everyday existence ... The other side of their world ... was constantly present but not normally visible."

But don't we all posit a reality beyond our grasp, whether expressed in ideological or spiritual terms? When Virginia Woolf wrote in the 1930s about "moments of being", meaning momentary glimpses of a true reality as opposed to the "unreality" of contemporary life, was she not expressing a similar dichotomy?

The point is that the Yolngu experience is characterised by an active, dialectical relationship with that other dimension so that Marawili solves unique problems of graphic composition while consciously sustaining a tradition of ochre decoration and being sustained by that tradition's ritual aspect.

Formal brilliance is par for the course at Yirrkala. Marawili achieves something more affective, partly by varying the application of colour. Sometimes her marwat (traditional brush made of twigs and human hair) must have held just a few long strands, so that her line meanders and blobs.

More significantly, what we respond to is not just grasped visually, but felt as a connection with a "hidden pattern" - that phrase, funnily enough, being Woolf's for her insight that the whole world is a work of art and that we are part of that work of art.

In always privileging the relationship between things as meaningful, rather than things in themselves, Yolngu cosmology can perhaps help us to achieve such insights in daily life.