

FINGERPRINTS IN THE PAINT

Hayley Megan French
on how the work of
Nonggirnga Marawili
can at once ground
viewers in the present
and speak to another
time.



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If you stand up close to one of **Nonggirnga Marawili's** monumental bark paintings, you will likely see fingerprints in the paint, hairs trapped in the glue, drawing marks not fully erased. Stepping back, your eyes follow the lines mapping each movement of their maker, navigating the undulating surface of the bark. The materiality of the works are striking: sculptural in the way they protrude off the wall, embedded in their locality. When asked by Buku-Larrnggay Mulka coordinator **Will Stubbs** where is this place she is painting, Marawili replies that it could be anywhere, "my Country, your Country"—it is not what she is painting, but that she paints, that is important.

And yet the outcome of this action is transformative. A composition that at first glance may feel uneasy soon becomes the stand out feature of the work. Marawili's large voids and bold lines can slow you down, ground you in this moment, this place, while giving you a glimpse of another.

Marawili has developed a distinct and innovative style in the Yolngu painting tradition, divergent from that of her late husband **Djutjadjutja Mununggurr** with whom she began painting, yet drawing on this history and familial ties. Marawili's father was **Mundukul Marawili**, a great warrior ally to **Wonggu Mununggurr**—a renowned leader of the Balamumu at Trial Bay. She lived an extraordinary life in the bush, moving about the Blue Mud Bay region with her family consisting of more than 50 close relations. As a senior woman and mother, Marawili has primarily resided in Yirrkala for more than 20 years, participating as a woman of indomitable spirit at ceremony and as an artist with Buku-Larrnggay Mulka. Since coming to work in the courtyard of the art centre in 2011, Marawili has found space and time to develop her powerful style. Since 2013, she has had four solo exhibitions at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, and has participated in significant group shows and fairs in Australia and internationally. Her current works are part of her Yirritja period, which defines the movement away from her husband's Djapu clan style—the series of works in Marawili's first solo show *And I am still here*, 2013. The Yirritja period begins





1. // Nonggirnga Marawili
at work. PHOTO: PEP PHELAN.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BUKU-
LARRNGGAY MULKA CENTRE.

2. // Nonggirnga Marawili,
Baratjula, 2016. Ochre on
board, 200 x 122cm.

3. // Nonggirnga Marawili,
Thunderman Raining Down,
2012, Ochre on board,
188 x 63cm.

COURTESY THE ARTIST, BUKU-LARRNGGAY
MULKA AND ALCASTON GALLERY,
MELBOURNE.

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DWARFED AS WE ARE BY
MARAWILI'S WORKS, WE
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RHYTHM OF MARAWILI'S LIFE –
HISTORY, MEMORIES; THE WAY
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THE ROCKS AT HIGH TIDE, AND
THE BARNACLES LEFT ON THE
ROCK AS THE WAVES RECEDE
– CAN BE FELT THROUGH HER
ACTION OF PAINTING.

4. // Nonggirnga Marawili,
Lightning and The Rock, 2017.
Ochre on board, 192 x 122cm.

5. // Nonggirnga Marawili,
Lightning and The Rock, 2017.
Ochre on board, 200 x 122cm.

COURTESY THE ARTIST, BUKU-
LARRINGGAY MULKA AND ALCASTON
GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

with Marawili's second solo show *Yathikpa* in January 2014 and includes the *Baratjula* period: characterised by a divergence from the strict Madarrpa clan Yathikpa style to looser more undefined abstraction. The diamond shapes in the work refer simultaneously to water and fire

Marawili has said of her work:

And the paintings I do are not sacred. I can't steal my father's painting, I just do my own design from the outside. Water. Rock. Rocks which stand strong and the waves which run and crash upon the rocks. The sea spray.

Marawili's work dismisses any questions of the contemporaneity of bark painting: these works are challenging in their composition, subversive in their unprecedented rendition of clan designs, and innovative in their expansion of the medium and painterly techniques. Recent works have been painted on Bangarra boards, due to her prolific nature and the lack of availability of barks during the dry season. Marawili enlivens the flat surface by revealing their materiality: leaving her voids unpainted, the timber board confidently showing through.

When we do slow down, dwarfed as we are by Marawili's works, we experience an interruption to our own rhythm. The rhythm of Marawili's life—history, memories; the way the water crashes against the rocks at high tide, and the barnacles left on the rock as the waves recede—can be felt through her action of painting. We can experience here **Jacques Rancière's** statement of the contemporary: "There are several times in one time." Marawili's work embodies this defining notion—what was happening then, is happening now; and will happen—which is why it is imperative to a wide audience and painting discourse, both in Australia and beyond.

» ALCASTON GALLERY WILL HOST
NONGGIRRNGA MARAWILI'S FIFTH
SOLO EXHIBITION FROM 6 JUNE UNTIL
1 JULY 2017.





NONGGIRRNGA MARAWILI IS AN ARTIST WE RARELY GET TO SEE, A ONCE IN A GENERATION GREAT AND BRILLIANT PAINTER.

MARIELLE SONI

MARIELLE SONI
Director, Alcaston Gallery

Alcaston Gallery has worked closely with **Nonggirnga Marawili** and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka since 1999, describing the artist as “a once in a generation great and brilliant painter.” Director **Marielle Soni** identifies Marawili’s third solo exhibition, *Lightning and the Rock* in 2015 as a particular breakthrough: featuring new bark paintings depicting the story and energy of the Top End wet season in an unparalleled way. This work struck a chord with collectors and curators. That same year Marawili won the 32nd Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Bark Painting Award and was an invited finalist of the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards.

This year will be another extraordinary milestone in Marawili’s career. Her paintings and Larrakitj will be featured in *Defying Empire: National Indigenous Art Triennial* at the National Gallery of Australia 26 May – 10 September. Marawili is also featured in *Who’s Afraid of Colour* at the National Gallery of Victoria until April 2017; and a significant collection of her work is currently featured in a major North American touring exhibition: *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia*.

Soni speaks of a sophisticated market for Marawili’s works: “Because Nonggirnga Marawili’s work is so bold and confident, it commands a lot from the viewer. The collector has to be open to this.”

The price range for Marawili’s fifth solo show at Alcaston Gallery will be \$14,000-\$20,000. The show will include new works on bark and board, as well as works on aluminum for the first time.

Hayley Megan French