

ARTS & ABOUT

Aboriginal art

Shalini Ganendra Fine Art @ Gallery Residence presents for the first time an exhibition that features the works of aboriginal artists from Elcho Island, Australia. MAYA KENDALL writes.



(LEFT) MARGARET GUDUMURRKUWUY'S ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

(TOP) PETER DATJING'S CHEST DESIGN

(LEFT) JEREMIAH BONSON'S CARVINGS OF THE MIMI SPIRIT, THE WIRRAH BUN BUN

DR SUSAN COCHRANE

PETER DATJING

MARGARET GUDUMURRKUWUY

JEREMIAH BONSON

ABORIGINAL art, and its age-old production methods, is gaining increasing exposure and appreciation, leading to a growing number of people acquiring these works for their aesthetic and historical value.

“The Living Art from Ancient Land” exhibition at Shalini Ganendra Fine Art @ Gallery Residence puts on show for the first time some of the most interesting and valued works by five outstanding aboriginal artists from Elcho Island, Australia. It showcases paintings by Peter Datjing, paintings and prints by Margaret Gudumurrkuwuy, Spirit Men sculptures by Jeremiah Bonson, bark paintings by Richard Gandhuwuy and soft sculptures by Mavis Warrngila Ganambarr. With works in the collection of museums, the artists are celebrated not only in Australia but also internationally.

The exhibition is curated by Dr Susan Cochrane, a researcher and writer specialising in contemporary aboriginal and Pacific art. Currently with Elcho Island Arts, a centre and hub for artists of Galiwin’ku and the Marthakal homelands, she offered insights into the history and current practices of aboriginal art at the Gallery’s Vision Culture Lecture – which was sponsored by HSBC, the Australian High Commission and UNESCO.

Elcho Island in the Arafura Sea, Eastern Arnhem Land, is home to the second largest aboriginal community in the Northern Territory of Australia. The Elcho Arts Centre represents award-winning Yolgnu artists and emerging artists, many of whose works honour ancestral forms while others explore contemporary art forms. The arts centre has built up a national and international clientele without losing sight of community values.

The centre works with some 200 Yolgnu artists in Galiwin’ku and the Marthakal homelands region. “The aesthetic wealth of the Yolgnu clans encompasses the landscape, seascape and all people, plants and creatures that inhabit their homelands. Each creation story and its location is recognised by specific references and patterns, coded imprints known to all Yolngu,” notes Cochrane.

The sacred geometry of Arnhem Land is based on intricate patterns of *rrark*, the meticulous cross-hatching that is the compelling feature of bark painting. “Richard Gandhuwuy’s intricate *rrark* pattern in red, yellow and white is specific to the story of the Djang’kawu Sisters at Garriyak, ancestral beings of the Dhuwa moiety who travelled across the country creating waterholes, landmarks, creatures and plants that provide the Dhuwa people with their spiritual guidance and physical sustenance.” Gandhuwuy also paints the story in a more graphic style on paper, showing the sisters in human form travelling across the landscape.

Datjing is, meanwhile, a leading Yirritja artist of the Gumatj clan, whose work focuses on his totem *Baru*, the crocodile ancestor. The distinctive elongated diamonds that distinguish *Baru* paintings also relate to the discovery of fire. Another of his designs called *Ganyiny* depicts a ceremonial object used in Yirritja ceremonies. The Warrimirri clan’s Yirritja designs are related to the whale, squid and other sea creatures. They are also the primary custodians of the stories linking Yolgnu people of Elcho Island to the Macassans, sea-going people from Indonesia who made long annual voyages along the coastline, staying with communities while they fished for and prepared *trepang* (*beche de mer* or sea cucumber) for hundreds of years before European contact.

Sandy Pascoe and his wife Gudumurrkuwuy are talented artists whose artistic scope spans traditional materials and methods to contemporary styles. Sandy executes the finest *rrark* in grid patterns on bark paintings, in acrylics on canvas and linocut prints. “Both Sandy and Margaret carve and decorate the famous Aboriginal musical instrument, the *Yidaki* or *didgeridoo*, and paint clan designs on the Larrakitj, large hollow logs that were previously used for funeral ceremonies. Margaret makes lively prints and paintings of daily activities.”

While *balanda* people or the Europeans collect the Dhuwa and Yirritja paintings on bark, canvas or paper, they are most significant to the Yolgnu people when painted on the body for traditional ceremonies.

In the local art scene, Shalini Ganendra Fine Art is known for presenting exhibitions that both visually stimulate and educate. “When we were given the opportunity to host this important exhibition, we embraced it! It is the first show for these artists in Southeast Asia. Some of the artists are exhibiting in London in tandem with this show,” says Datin Shalini Ganendra.

Through this exhibition, she hopes to engage the audience with the quality of authentic aboriginal art, its organic development and amazingly contemporary aesthetics. The exhibition is a wonderful entry point into great aboriginal art, she adds.

■ **The Living Art from Ancient Land** exhibition at Shalini Ganendra Fine Art @ Gallery Residence runs till Sept 30. For more information, visit www.shaliniganendra.com