

JOHN GOLLINGS: SPIRIT OF PLACE

23 March – 21 July 2019

Heide II

Curator: Kendrah Morgan

Museum of
Modern Art
Heide



John Gollings *Sunset, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land* 2015 / 2019

One of Australia's most prominent and acclaimed photographers, John Gollings AM began his career in the late 1960s in the world of advertising and fashion. In the following decade he turned his focus to the built environment and has since gained widespread recognition for his images of iconic modernist buildings, and cities viewed from the air. While architectural photography remains a passion, Gollings also has a long-standing interest in recording the landscape, particularly ancient sites of spiritual significance to First Peoples. *John Gollings: Spirit of Place* explores this aspect of his practice through a selection of spectacular photographs taken between 1967 and 2015. Gollings' aim for the project is to raise public awareness of and respect for the importance of these places for Aboriginal people.

The site featured most extensively in the exhibition is Nawarla Gabarnmang, a magnificent decorated rock shelter in remote Arnhem Land, traditionally owned by the Buyhmi clan of the Jawoyn Nation. Described by some commentators as the Sistine Chapel of rock art, Nawarla Gabarnmang is an open-ended cave used as a dwelling or camping place for tens of thousands of years. Its ceiling is supported by naturally

occurring and partly excavated sandstone pillars and is embellished with layer upon layer of painted imagery, ranging from hand stencils and abstract motifs to animals and spirit figures. Within its gallery, which tells the rich stories of the shelter's inhabitants and their ancestors across the millennia, is one of the oldest known examples of rock art—a charcoal drawing dated to 26,000 BCE.

The exhibition also includes two monumental montages of symbolic paintings on Nourlangie Rock in Kakadu National Park, and a selection of poetic black and white photographs of landscapes around Victoria that Gollings took to illustrate Aldo Massola's pioneering publication *Bunjil's Cave* (1968). Massola's book presented stories, myths, and beliefs collected directly from Koori communities at a time when Aboriginal culture was virtually ignored by white Australians. The evocative photographs displayed here have been created from the recently rediscovered negatives, which Gollings digitised and printed on an expanded scale to expressively convey the connection to country and age-old narratives that inspired them.

AN INTRODUCTION TO NAWARLA GABARNMANG

R.G. Gunn



Exterior face, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019

Aboriginal rock art occurs throughout Australia: all rock art sites are of deep significance to contemporary Aboriginal peoples as a manifestation of their ongoing culture. There are some thirty-four recognised rock art regions, each with its own distinctive style or styles. Adjacent areas may share traits or stand in stark contrast. The techniques used to create the images include painting, drawing, stencilling, printing, applique, pecking, pounding, scratching and finger fluting. Colours are primarily earth reds, yellows and white with charcoal black.

The form of the art of some regions is very complex, while in others it is structurally basic. Generalising, the more decorated and colourful images occur in the north of the continent. In both extremes there are images and scenes that are of a highly religious nature with wide-ranging significance, and others that are of a more personal character. The form of the image, whether simple or complex, cannot be read as a reflection of its significance.



Rock art regions of Australia



Location of Nawarla Gabarnmang in Arnhem Land



John Gollings *Margaret Katherine (1947–2018), Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang 2015 / 2019*

The site of Nawarla Gabarnmang in the Northern Territory is an unusually large and impressive rock shelter in the centre of the Arnhem Land plateau. It is accessible today only by helicopter or a two-day walk following permission from the Traditional Owners. During the time we worked there, the Senior Traditional Owner of the Buyhmi clan lands was the respected Jawoyn storyteller, Margaret Katherine (1948–2018): a truly inspirational woman.¹

They [archaeologists] are magic people to look through the stone and the dirt but, to me, my grandparents they are here.

— Margaret Katherine 2013

Margaret’s ancestors have been using this rock shelter continuously for more than 50,000 years. It is not a major ceremonial site, nor does it contain any imagery that cannot be seen by men, women or children: it was simply a wet season camping place. During World War II all Jawoyn people were removed from the plateau and forced to live in settlements around its periphery. As access was very difficult, most of the thousands of decorated shelters on the plateau fell into disuse, with the consequence that many of the stories associated with these places were lost.



Ngalworreworre figure with ‘paddles’ for feet

Only the more important religious sites were remembered with any detail. However, because art images continued to be produced in shelters around the settlements and in the form of bark paintings (and more recently on canvas), the names and stories of numerous characters depicted on the ceiling of Nawarla Gabarnmang continue to be told to children and tourists. Examples from Nawarla Gabarnmang include well-decorated female figures that lack feet: they are the *Ngalworreworre*, ‘mermaids’ who live in waterholes and entice young men to their deaths. These characters are also a popular subject with contemporary Aboriginal artists.

Similar female figures that do have feet are the *Ngalenjelenje*—female spirits of the plateau who will seduce young boys and then carry them



John Gollings *Barramundi Dreaming figures, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019*

forever into the rock. Ngalenjelenje appear in Jawoyn legends as the wives of Bula, the most important Jawoyn Creation being, though representations of them as Bula's wives are found only at Bulajang in southern Kakadu. The Ngalenjelenje portrayed at Nawarla Gabarnmang are not linked with Bula, but rather served as a warning to those who might wander the stone country alone.

Another figure with misshapen hands and feet is Ngamwul, the falling (or shooting) star: a sinister character who devours babies. When mothers see a falling star they must cover their babes and hide them from the eyes of *Ngamwul*. The many depictions of malevolent spirits throughout Jawoyn lands are a reminder to viewers of the consequences of not obeying traditional lore.

These figures are decorated with symbolic external patterns, however, the dominant images at Nawarla Gabarnmang, are shown with an X-ray form that depicts the internal organs of an animal or person. This is seen in the major fish and macropod images. Although they are commonly eaten species, their depiction in rock art, especially when heavily detailed, indicates that these are Dreaming figures. The Barramundi is the creator of the East Alligator River that rises not far from Nawarla Gabarnmang.



Ngamwul: the shooting or falling star



Graphic representations of the *Ngalenjelenje* at Nawarla Gabarnmang

The macropod, namely the antilopine kangaroo (*Kuppu*), is one of the principal characters in one of the major rituals of Arnhem Land. Other characters from this and other rituals are also portrayed in the shelter, such as the black wallaroo (*Parrk*), emu (*Turrk*) and flying fox (*Koynpam*)



John Gollings, *Kangaroo (Kuppu) dreaming figure, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land* 2015 / 2019

Some of the paintings at Nawarla Gabarnmang appear to the contemporary viewer as abstract designs, but many are in fact representational images. For example, a white loop design with cross bars and dotted infill doesn't provide immediately recognisable cues, but to someone familiar with native bees (which most Jawoyn people are, as their honey is a delicacy), the design is instantly apparent as a depiction of their beehive in X-ray form. The cross bars are the stage divisions within the hive, while the dots represent the bees and eggs.

From archaeological excavations scientists have determined that the present ceiling of the shelter formed around 13,000 years ago. All of the art now present must therefore have been created subsequently. The most recent art in the shelter was done some time between 1845 and 1930 CE, and most likely after 1900 CE. The numerous images made using extensive white pigment were produced in the past 500 years.

In addition to its extensive and well-preserved rock art and long occupational history, Nawarla Gabarnmang is also significant as the first shelter in Australia to be recognised



Small monochrome Sugarbag (*Wam*) motif

as modified by humans on a massive scale: many of the naturally-occurring pillars that support the ceiling were intentionally broken down and pulled away to make the interior larger—a dangerous intervention that caused sections of the ceiling to collapse. Following this discovery, shelters elsewhere in Australia have now also been recognised to have been similarly modified.

However, Nawarla Gabarnmang is just one of thousands of rock shelter art sites on and around the Arnhem Land plateau, and only one of the hundred thousand or so rock art sites throughout Australia that await to have their own stories told.

1 Margaret Katherine's traditional name was *Ngal-Buyhmi Belingjang*.

LIST OF WORKS

This catalogue is arranged alphabetically by artist then chronologically. Measurements are height before width before depth. All works collection of John Gollings unless otherwise stated.

John Gollings

born 1944 Melbourne



Fern bush, Gippsland 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
72 x 48 cm; 90 x 60 cm (sheet)



La Trobe River, Victoria 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
48 x 72 cm; 60 x 89 cm (sheet)



Lake Burrumbeet, Victoria 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
48 x 72 cm; 60 x 89 cm (sheet)



Lal Lal Falls, Moorabool, Victoria 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
72 x 48 cm; 90 x 60 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the
Wadawurrung people, Traditional
Owners of Lal Lal Falls



Lal Lal Falls, Moorabool, Victoria 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
48 x 72 cm; 60 x 89 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the
Wadawurrung people, Traditional
Owners of Lal Lal Falls



Moon over Gippsland 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
72 x 48 cm; 90 x 60 cm (sheet)



Sandhills in the Mallee, Victoria 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
48 x 72 cm; 60 x 89 cm (sheet)



Scorched trees, Gippsland 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
72 x 48 cm; 90 x 60 cm (sheet)



Scorched trees, Gippsland 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
72 x 48 cm; 90 x 60 cm (sheet)



Sunlit bush, Gippsland 1967 / 2019
inkjet print
48 x 72 cm; 60 x 89 cm (sheet)



Aerial view, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Ancestor and ceremonial figures, Nourlangie Rock (Burrungui), Kakadu National Park, Arnhem Land 1993 / 2019
inkjet print
100 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of Parks Australia on behalf of the Bininj/Mungguy peoples past and present as the Traditional Owners of Kakadu National Park



Mimi spirit figures, Nourlangie Rock (Burrungui), Kakadu National Park, Arnhem Land 1993 / 2019
inkjet print
89.5 x 173.5 cm (irreg.);
111.5 x 203 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of Parks Australia on behalf of the Bininj/Mungguy peoples past and present as the Traditional Owners of Kakadu National Park



Barramundi Dreaming figures, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Central ceiling, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
137.5 x 219.5 cm; 152.5 x 254 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Copulating couple, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Crocodile, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
90 x 35 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Detail of central ceiling, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
139.2 x 175.7 cm (irreg.);
152.3 x 203.2 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



North overhang at dawn, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Exterior face, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
132.5 x 220 cm; 152.5 x 253 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Exterior face, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Female figures, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
90 x 135 cm; 112 x 158.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Human or spirit figure, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Initiation stones, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
64.5 x 97 cm; 88.5 x 122 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Kangaroo (Kuppu) Dreaming figure, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
90 x 135 cm; 112 x 185.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Kangaroo (Kuppu) Dreaming figures, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land 2015 / 2019
inkjet print
88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)
Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Margaret Katherine (1947–2018), Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang

2015 / 2019

inkjet print

88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)

Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Namarrgon (Lightning Man) and spirit figures, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land

2015 / 2019

inkjet print

162 x 112 cm (sheet)

Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



North overhang at dusk, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land

2015 / 2019

inkjet print

88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)

Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



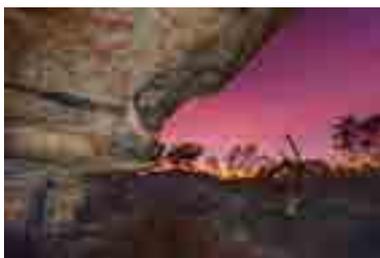
Rock shelter, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land

2015 / 2019

inkjet print

88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)

Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang



Sunset, Nawarla Gabarnmang, Arnhem Land

2015 / 2019

inkjet print

88.5 x 132.5 cm; 115 x 152.5 cm (sheet)

Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang

John Gollings, Edwina Kearney

Production stills, Nawarla Gabarnmang documentation project 2015–2019

6 inkjet prints

40 x 60 cm

Displayed with the permission of the late Margaret Katherine, Senior Elder of the Buyhmi clan and Traditional Owner of Nawarla Gabarnmang
