

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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### Johnny Mawurndjul: hunter, fisher and country chronicler

JON ALTMAN THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 4, 2018

When I first met Johnny Mawurndjul in 1979, he was 27 years old. He was instrumental in sponsoring my residence at Mumeka outstation, negotiating permission with his father, Anchor Kulunba, for a balanda (whitefella) to come and live with his extended family.

My project as a doctoral student was to record and tell the everyday story of economic life at Mumeka and I think that Balang (Johnny), even as a young man, was keen to garner a sympathetic interpretation of the difficult Kuninjku quest to establish an - alternative way of living on their country and maintaining strong tradition in colonial Australia.

Mawurndjul's art practice was in its infancy, although he already demonstrated talent. He was being tutored and mentored, mainly by his older brother, Jimmy Njiminjuma, already an accomplished artist, and by his father-in-law, the senior artist Peter Marralwanga. But Mawurndjul was first and foremost a hunter and fisher and we undertook some memorable treks together in the quest for food, traversing the territories he owned and managed. On our first hunting expedition he took me to Kungorobu and led me, on a searing-hot October day, to a hide where we could shoot magpie geese and whistle ducks. He floated effortlessly across the brackish swamp, impervious to the swarming, bloodsucking mosquitoes that stole my blood as I stumbled behind. On another memorable occasion, we trotted together in Mawurndjul's customary hyper-energetic style, from Mumeka to Bulkay, a round trip of about 32km, as scouts to check if the flood plains were drying prior to a seasonal residential shift. We were the first human visitors on to the resource-rich wetlands that year and we harvested and feasted on a bounty of bush tucker.

John Mawurndjul's exhibition is at Sydney's MCA.  
Picture: Hollie Adams

Back then, Mawurndjul was a young member of a community of closely related Kuninjku artists who had retooled an eons-old tradition of rock art and ceremonial designs, depicting elements of Kuninjku cosmology, the Djang, as well as aspects of the everyday, into a new medium — painting on treated bark for cash. Money was scarce, as the social security income support net had not fully reached remote

Aboriginal places such as Mumeka. Income from art enabled Mawurndjul to provide for his immediate and extended families.

In those days, I never anticipated that Mawurndjul would become a famous artist and nor did he. Things started to change in the early 1980s when Balang took what was for him the brave and life-changing decision to travel outside of Western Arnhem Land to Canberra. The occasion was the exhibition **Artists of Arnhem Land: Maningrida Arts and Crafts present an exhibition of traditional Aboriginal art** at the Canberra School of Arts in July 1983.

Mawurndjul experienced deeply empathic recognition and respect from the Canberra arts community, which I believe had a profound impact on his self-identity. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see he made a transformative decision then to engage incrementally and strategically with Western arts audiences and markets. In this early period, he was fortunate to have two accomplished artists, Geoff Todd and George Burchett, as art advisers in Maningrida; they assisted in nurturing and fostering this fundamental shift at a critical juncture, and were followed by others, including Diane Moon, Andrew Hughes, Fiona Salmon and Apolline Kohen.

Mawurndjul's extraordinary trajectory as an artist, especially from the time his work was included in **Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia** in New York in 1988 and in **Magiciens de la terre** in Paris in 1989, and during his travel to **Aratjara: Art of the First Australians** in Germany and England in 1993 and '94, is well documented. As he developed his personal artistic style into a mesmerising, shimmering abstraction, with growing reference to complex cosmological and ancestral ritual power in his "landscape" art, his reputation blossomed internationally and domestically.

But it would be an oversight not to give proper attention to the personal challenges he has faced as a remote-living Aboriginal artist. Some of these challenges are structural: how to be an individual star while continuing to live in an egalitarian, deeply relational and resource-sharing Kuninjku community? How to deal with a revolving cadre of art advisers who have each had to balance their attentiveness to his burgeoning career needs alongside those of hundreds of other members of the Maningrida Arts and Culture co-operative? How to weather the vicissitudes in government policy that affect the life chances of remote-living Aboriginal people?

As I visit Mawurndjul regularly in Arnhem Land, and as we have travelled together in Australia and even overseas for exhibitions and art awards, I have witnessed the oscillations in his fortunes that I condense here into two phases.

For the first 30 years of our friendship, Mawurndjul cannily meshed his stellar arts career with his preferred everyday lifeway, which prioritised living on his ancestral land at Mumeka and then, from the early 1990s, at his own outstation at Milmilngkan. Here, he could talk to the ancestors, protect sacred places, participate in ceremony and maintain a productive hunting economy. With the assistance of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, the regional outstations resource agency, and MAC, its arts co-operative, Mawurndjul was able to live remotely and simultaneously engage with world art. With supportive institutional arrangements, he was empowered to reconfigure his art practice and success to ensure a robust reproduction of the economy and culture on which it was predicated.

Mawurndjul strove personally and politically to ensure that recognition of his art also encompassed a broader acceptance by the bureaucratic tentacles of the settler society of his right to live on his country in accord with the distinct Kuninjku norms and values that are foundational to his art's success.

For a time, this noble quest to live fundamentally differently in the most difficult of remote circumstances was abided and even given some state support.

All this changed after the Northern Territory National Emergency Response of 2007, known as the Intervention, when even as the high culture continued to be selectively celebrated, the everyday culture was demeaned.

Even highly esteemed individuals such as Mawurndjul were caught up in draconian measures including income management, mandatory work for the dole, endless training and reduced support for homelands living. With the combination of the global financial crisis and struggling management at MAC, Mawurndjul was suddenly impoverished. His health deteriorated, and he became deeply despondent about the escalating precarity of his family's circumstances. For a time, from 2011 to 2015, he effectively stopped painting as relations with a revolving door of art advisers became unworkable.

Paradoxically, all this was occurring as Mawurndjul was being celebrated, first with the Melbourne Art Foundation Artist Award in 2009 and then as a Member of the Order of Australia in 2010, "for service to the preservation of indigenous culture as the foremost exponent of the rarrk visual art style", with the ironic inability of this descriptor to comprehend its manifest contradiction: visual art culture is deeply embedded in everyday indigenous culture and vice versa.

Next month, Mawurndjul's artistic journey is being celebrated in Australia in a major retrospective, **John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new**. Mawurndjul is old; he is certainly overdue the Age Pension that he should have received last year, which would help him escape unedifying governmental surveillance instituted by the Australian state.

Since 2015 he has gradually re-engaged with art, even in the face of falsely rationalised but effective barriers erected by a recolonising state apparatus that challenge his efforts to return to living on country. Mawurndjul laments the absence of broader societal recognition of his right, and that of his descendants, to live on their country in accord with distinct Kuninjku values and traditions.

Yet these very values and traditions not only inform but also provide the vital drive for his art practice. It is Mawurndjul's hopeful aspiration that this retrospective exhibition will highlight to audiences his goal to live both as an acclaimed artist and as a member of the vibrant on-country community that I first observed nearly 40 years ago.

**Jon Altman is a research professor at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University. This is an edited extract from his catalogue essay for John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new, showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, from Friday to September 23.**



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