

MARRNYULA MUNUNGGURR

30 JANUARY – 14 MARCH 2015

GAN4BU

Ganybu is Yolngu-Matha for fish net. Marrnyula Mununggurr's exhibition titled *Ganybu* comprises 252 small barks and one *larrakitj* (ceremonial pole), each of which depict her Djapu clan design of the fish net and the waters at her ancestral homeland at Wändawuy in North East Arnhem Land. Mununggurr's *miny'tji* (designs) comprise vertical and horizontal lines that reference the structure of the net, and diagonal or crosshatched lines that reference water in various states (fresh water — moving, like in a river; muddy; or still, like a pond). They are painted with a fine hair-brush and naturally occurring earth pigments — white clay (also used for body paint and *bunggul*), black manganese, yellow and red stones — mixed with water and fixative to form a fluid pigment.

Ganybu is a response to the well-known AIDS awareness design *If you love me love me safely* from 1993, commissioned by Northern Territory Health and Community Services.

Along with her sister, the artist Rerrkirrwanga Mununggurr, Marrnyula learned to paint from her late father (the artist Djutjadjutja Mununggurr) and his brother when she was about fifteen or sixteen years old: first by watching them paint, then by painting on small barks and helping them on their larger barks. While she never met her paternal grandfather, the renowned Djapu clan leader Wonggu Mununggurr, the shimmering, gridded and diagonal designs of his crayon on butchers paper drawings of the fish trap (such as *Fish trap at Wändawuy*, 1947) resound immortal in her paintings. Today, she frequently works with her mother, the artist Nonggirra Marawili, who has also painted the fish net.

Having worked at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala now for twenty-one years, Mununggurr's practice is diverse — ranging from soft-ground etchings of Yolngu string figures, such as those made in collaboration with visual anthropologist Robyn McKenzie now held in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, to community posters, such as her

well-known AIDS awareness design *If you love me love me safely* from 1993, commissioned by Northern Territory Health and Community Services.

Mununggurr has also painted large, figurative, story barks. She produced one, for instance, for the landmark *Saltwater* exhibition of 1999, held in celebration of the 1998 Federal Court ruling that native title existed over a 2,000-square kilometre area of sea and sea-bed adjoining Croker Island (and associated islands) in the Northern Territory.¹ This was the first time that Australian Courts recognised native title for off-shore areas, a landmark in the history of Indigenous Australian landrights. Mununggurr's contribution to *Saltwater*, a 111 x 96 cm bark titled *Living by the Sea* of 1998, depicts Yolngu people, dogs, birds, trees, spears, canoes, paddles, fish, turtles, sting rays, and dugong, and shows, in the artist's words, that 'we are all connected to the sea through stories and hunting for food'.² The small barks of *Ganybu* are approximately a tenth of the size of *Living by the Sea* (indeed many of the small barks come from a single sheet of bark from *gadayka* — *Eucalyptus tetrodonta*, or stringy bark), making them 'good for packing' and 'easy to move'.³ There may also be a connection with the artist's memories of learning to paint.

After experimenting with different configurations of the barks on the floor of the gallery, Mununggurr arranged the 252 small barks of *Ganybu* into a vast installation spanning approximately 4 metres high, and 6.5 metres wide — the entire breadth and height of the wall of the front gallery at Gertrude Contemporary. The central, inverted triangular configuration of barks refers to the shape of a hand-held, pelican-mouthed *ganybu* made of two branches interlocked at one end, open at the other, and laced with string. Two horizontal lines made from two rows of small barks flank this

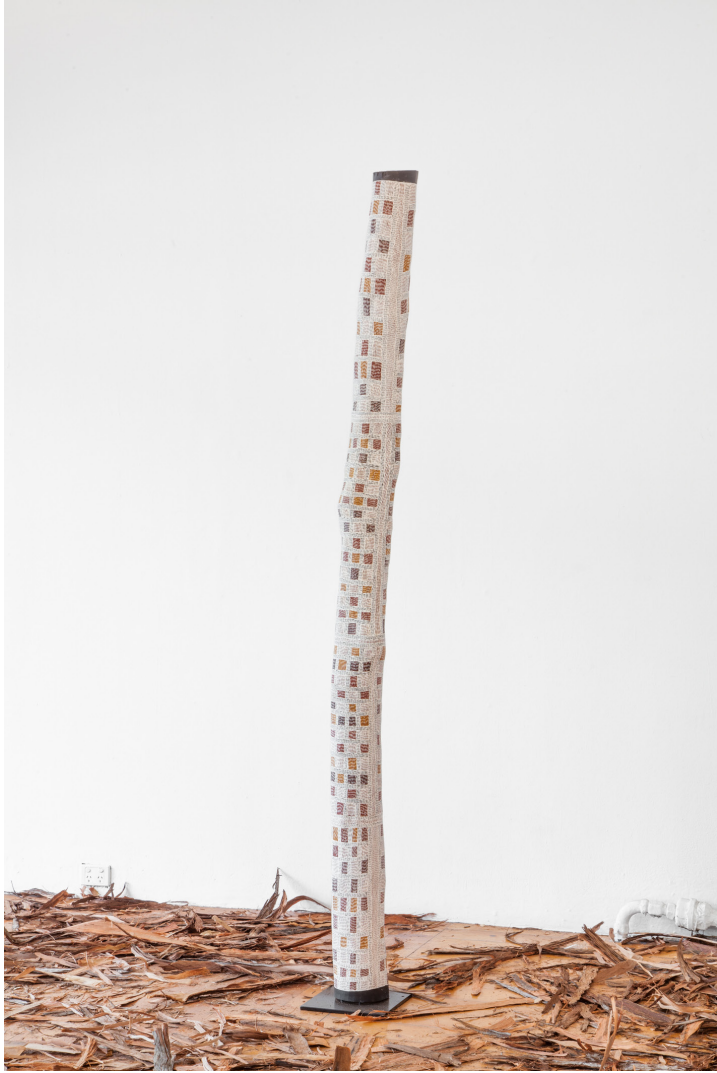
central shape, and it is crowned by a solitary, arching line that echoes the open mouth of *ganybu*.

Mununggurr explains that Yolngu have used this *ganybu* for a long time to catch catfish during the dry season: this *ganybu* 'is not a *balanda* net but Yolngu.' She adds that *ganybu* has metaphorical connotations too: 'to grab people or bring them and show them our culture, Yolngu people, including *balanda* [westerner, or non-Aboriginal people]... they never know what *ganybu* means... That's why I named the bark *ganybu*, so that people can come and see.' Directly facing the floor-to-ceiling windows that line the front gallery, Mununggurr's graphic installation makes a direct address to passers by on Gertrude Street, inviting them inside.

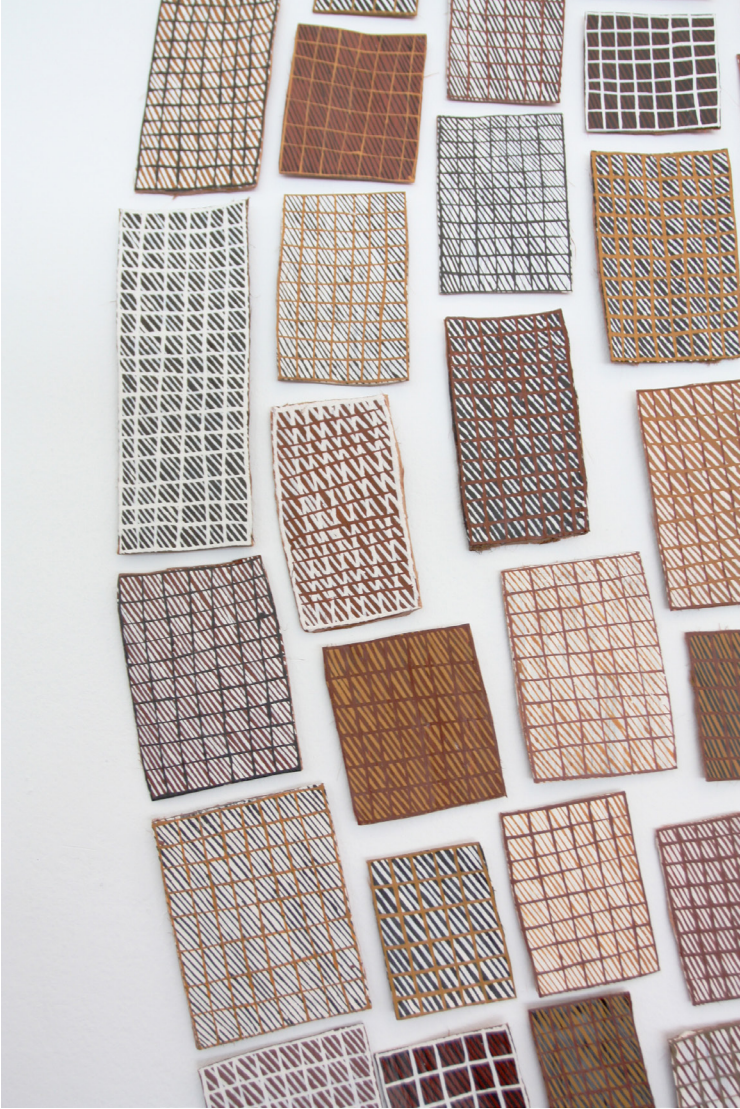
Upon entering, viewers step into a deeply interconnected environment: stories of the net and waters at Wändawuy homeland are cross-referenced across each of the individual 252 barks of the wall-mounted installation, the *ganybu* shape of the installation itself, and the *miny'tji* adorning the *larrakitj*. Further, large bark shavings that were stripped from the *larrakitj* as it was prepared for painting are scattered across the entire gallery floor to create a pungent carpet. The scent of eucalyptus and the texture of the stringy bark underfoot serve to 'show *balanda* that the bark [paintings] and *larrakitj* all come from the same tree.' The installation is a powerful reminder that, as Andrew Blake — former Art Coordinator at Buku-Larrnggay — has said, everything in traditional Yolngu life is connected: 'Every physical or meta-physical thing has a place on a complex but ordered grid.'⁴

Helen Hughes
Curator

1. Djon Mundine, 'Saltwater', in *Saltwater: Paintings of Sea Country, the Recognition of Indigenous Sea Rights* [1999], second edition, ed. Jenny Isaacs, Carol Dettmann, Andrew Blake, Will Stubbs, Raymattja Marika, Djambawa Marawili, Gawirrin Gumana, Dhukal Wirrpanda, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr (Neutral Bay, NSW: Chapter & Verse, 2014), p. 26. Mundine cites: *Mary Yamirr & Others v. Northern Territory*, Olney J, 1998, 771, Federal Court of Australia.
2. Marrnyula Mununggurr, cited *Saltwater*, [1999] 2014, p. 44.
3. Marrnyula Mununggurr, interview with the author, 28 January 2015. All otherwise unattributed information and quotations come from this interview.
4. Andrew Blake, preface to *Saltwater*, [1999] 2014, pp. 6–8.









MARRNYULA MUNUNGGURR

GANYBU

Curated by Helen Hughes

Gertrude Contemporary
30 January – 14 March 2015

Gertrude Contemporary
200 Gertrude Street
Fitzroy VIC 3065 Australia
Telephone +61 3 9419 3406
Facsimile +61 3 9419 2519
info@gertrude.org.au
www.gertrude.org.au

© artists, author and Gertrude Contemporary

Gertrude Contemporary is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria, the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding advisory body, and by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.

Image captions

Ganybu, 2015
(Iarrakitj)
210 x 16 cm
Photo: Christo Crocker

Ganybu, 2015
(wall)
natural ochres on bark
4 x 6.5 m (total)
Photo: Christo Crocker

Ganybu, 2015
(wall, detail)
natural ochres on bark
4 x 6.5 m (total)
Photo: Helen Hughes

Ganybu, 2015
(installation view)
natural ochres on bark, shavings of stringy bark
(*Eucalyptus tetradonta*)
Photo: Christo Crocker

All works courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala

**CREATIVE
VICTORIA**

