

Shared Reflections on Artistic Creation Processes in Times of COVID-19

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The exhibition *Lines. Australian Aboriginal Painting: Tradition and Contemporaneity* was presented in Barcelona from 18 December 2021 to 12 June 2022. This project facilitated an exchange between members of the Milikapiti community and the museum.

The places from which the pigments are extracted hold ritual significance for Aboriginal People. These pigments, but also the wood and *Eucalyptus tetradonta* bark used in barkpaintings and *tungas* are preserved at the museum. Decontextualized, far away from their place of origin, they *recall* us to that land, also to the people who live in it. Some of these pieces are from Melville Island, where the small Milikapiti community lives. The natural pigments of contemporary *tunga* are also from the island, from that place, from their land. This *invisible* link between materials – between the natural pigments and their origins – was the starting point of the exchange, and the dialogue, that helped to care for contemporary creativity and artistic creation, but also to care about the people behind these objects, their *ecosystem* and the way they organized all aspects of their life – from the most everyday aspects to the most transcendental – around it.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to their elders past, present, and emerging.

Content note: First Nation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should be aware that this article may contain images and names of deceased persons.

Artist-in-Residence. The Project

In early 2020, the museum started working on an exhibition based around the museum's collection of Australian Aboriginal bark paintings. The idea was to use the collection, objects, and material heritage in order to link these pieces to present-day discourse and concerns, albeit with a contemporary approach to creation. The

names of contemporary artists such as Judy Watson and Brook Andrew emerged, whose works are closely linked to reflection about and claims regarding objects and documentation held in European museums and archives. The result was the temporary exhibition *Lines. Australian Aboriginal Painting: Tradition and Contemporaneity* that ran from 18 December 2021 to 12 June 2022.

Within this context, and alongside the start of this exhibition project, the idea of an artist-in-residence at the museum took shape, which would eventually lead to an experimental exhibition. The offer made to Narelle Jubelin, an Australian artist based in Madrid since the 1990s, to undertake a residency and study the museum's Australian collection (with a particular focus on items from the Tiwi Islands) was based on her creative work adopting postcolonial approaches. The artist's conceptual work, as well as her regular use of video, contributes to challenging the history of European colonialism.

In this spirit, Narelle Jubelin served as the artist-in-residence at the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món between September and December 2020, at the height of the global pandemic and as part of the European project TAKING CARE in which the museum participates. From the very beginning, Jubelin had a clear starting point: as a non-Indigenous Australian, beyond trying to create synergies (or discrepancies) between her work and the collection, dialogue would be the essential ingredient.

The artist's research and experience during the residency materialized in several artworks, including the audiovisual creation *Paintings Also Live* (Ngawa ninganawanga ngimpurrunu), a type of critical found footage film that has now become part of the museum's collection, as well as a dialogue with the *Milikapiti* people, a small community on Melville Island.

The global pandemic had a huge impact on the entire process. It made conversations with the community difficult (they were in lockdown at different periods throughout the project); in addition to this, technical problems with satellite internet meant the community could not be reached. Nonetheless, these and other problems merely underscored the importance of listening and the need for dialogue and healing – as the very name of the project states.

Jubelin's artistic and personal relationship with Brook Andrew made it possible to contact this Indigenous community and, more specifically, Pedro Wonaeamirri, with a view to having this conversation also result in a dialogue between these two contemporary artists through pieces and objects. The starting point was the museum's Tiwi collection, although the aim was also to forge a creative visual dialogue between the museum's pieces and the contemporary creations by Jubelin and Wonaeamirri.

One outcome from the process was the experimental exhibition **'PURRUNGUPA-RI-MUPURRA-PUJINGA- NGINI, PALINARI, AMINTYA'** (Bark-Skin-Voice- Past,

Present, Future) curated by Jubelin and Pedro Wonaeamirri themselves, which ran at the museum from 4 March to 5 June 2022.

The spark of what would later become the experimental show came from one of the tunga held at the museum (MEB 258–140), a piece that deeply interested Jubelin. As the artist herself states:

‘When I was artist-in-residence at the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món in 2020, by the end of the year I felt drawn to a beautiful object called a tunga (in the exhibition we use the older traditional name that Pedro taught us: wan-gatunga). When I felt drawn to the object, I and all of us, all those working around me during the residency, decided to look for an artist who made contemporary tunga. The exhibition included this piece that captivated me from the collection, as well as the contemporary creation by Pedro (the exhibition’s co-curator), which was purchased by the museum and is now part of the collection. This is in line with the clear aim of encouraging people to take a closer look at the museum’s collection, an extraordinarily interesting Tiwi art collection, which now, thanks to the addition of that Pedro’s piece, is also a way to document the continuity and strength of this specific culture.’ Narelle Jubelin

Fig. 1: Observing the past from the present. Narelle Jubelin. September 2020, during the artist’s residency. Collection Reserve. Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món. Photo: Salvador García.



Fig. 2: Narelle Jubelin. *Paintings Also Live* (Ngawa ninganawanga ngimpurrunu), 2020. Fotogramas. Ethnological and World Cultures Museum. MEB 558–1.



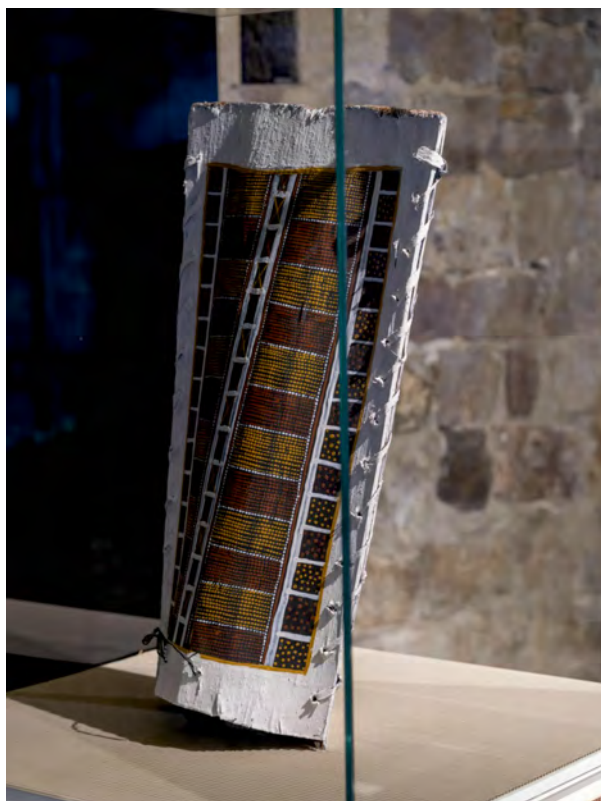
Fig. 3: *Tunga* (Wangatunga), c. 1960. Melville Island. Painting with natural pigments on eucalyptus bark. Ethnological and World Cultures Museum. MEB 258–140. Photos: Jordi Puig.



‘Tungas are a daily necessity for the Tiwi and are commonly used to carry food. When a Tiwi member dies, the tunga is placed face up at the Pukumani burial pole, evoking the end of a life.’ Pedro Wonaeamirri.

The museum houses a major collection of pieces purchased on different trips made to Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. Highlights from the many holdings include eucalyptus bark paintings (around a hundred) that are very typical in Arnhem Land. Painting for Aboriginal People takes different forms: bark, body, land, and rock painting. The yellowish, reddish, and orange-brown Sienna ochre used (in addition to black and white) are natural pigments and the only ones used in traditional painting. As with the bark of the *Eucalyptus tetradonta*, the pigments are closely tied to the earth and have a ritual significance for Aboriginal People.

Fig. 4: Pedro Wonaeamirri, *tunga* (Wangatunga), 2021. Natural ochre paints on eucalyptus bark. MEB 557-1. Exhibition photo. Photo: Jordi Puig.



‘The designs are already in my head, and I use the Kayimwagakimi – our traditional wooden comb made from sticks and natural ochre from the island – to paint.’ Pedro Wonaeamirri.

The bark, colours, and link to the land establish an invisible thread that connects the museum’s pieces from the 1960s and 1970s to the *tunga* made by Wonaeamirri in 2021, which is on display in the exhibition and now part of the museum’s collection.

Just as the pandemic made dialogue difficult, it also complicated the museum’s purchase of the contemporary *tunga* by Wonaeamirri. The geographical distance between locations was made even clearer in a context that undoubtedly underscores the need to consider the people behind the objects and their deep ties to them.

‘Communicating with Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association wasn’t easy, as sometimes we were interrupted by lockdowns, by the association shutting down and the Milikapiti community’s isolation as a result of the pandemic. We (Jilamara coordinators Hannah and Cameron, Narelle, Salvador, and myself at the museum) started to write email threads that seemed to go on forever. But once these cold, lengthy exchanges were over, we were entrusted with a delicate object that would connect our museum with the community where some of the pieces we house come from. It was so exciting to open the exhibition and see Pedro’s magnificent *tunga* there in its display case: it was a gift, a reward for the effort that all of us had put in to have it here with us.’ Ascen Labella. Museum administrator

Fig. 5: Exhibition display case. Inside are the two *tungas* from the museum’s collection. MEB 258–140, MEB CF 2453, alongside other Tiwi objects. Photo: Jordi Puig.



Returning to the exhibition, the architect Marcos Corrales was in charge of the overall design. We consulted with the community and Pedro on every step. Every element, from the title to the pieces, was the result of consensus. As a type of 'living archive', calling up the words of the curators, the objects 're-encountered' their home community, with Tiwi voices and knowledge resounding around and thundering through the museum.

Fig. 6: A handwritten document by Pedro Wonaeamirri, where he names the pieces from the Tiwi Islands in the museum's collection.

- ① Club or fighting stick were used for dancing. Carved and made from Iron wood. & decorated with Natural Ochre
- ② parrunguperrri armband. Woven with parrunguperrri and decorated with Natural Ochre & feathers
- ③ parrunguperrri armband.
- ④ Arrawinkirri barbed Spear. Carved blood wood timber and painted with Natural Ochre
- ⑤ Arrawinkirri barbed Spear.
- ⑥ Arrawinkirri barbed Spear.
- ⑦ Arrawinkirri barbed Spear.
- ⑧ Arrawinkirri barbed Spear.
- ⑨ parrunguperrri bark painting. Made of Eucalyptus bark and painted with Natural Ochre
- ⑩ parrunguperrri bark painting
- ⑪ parrunguperrri bark painting
- ⑫ Wangaritunga bark basket. Made of Eucalyptus bark and sewn like bush string and
- ⑬ Carved & painted futuni pole with Natural Ochre. Made from blood wood and painted Natural Ochre

The dialogue materialized not only through conversations and the written word, but it also became an artwork in its own right, with the voice(s) of the community resounding within the exhibition space. The videos chosen by the community itself to be part of the exhibition are a particular highlight. These include *Jilarti*, where Wonaeamirri chooses how to represent himself, in dialogue with viewers and listeners:

Fig. 7: Pedro Wonaeamirri, Jilarti, 2021. Single-channel video. Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association, Milikapiti, Melville Island. Exhibition photo. Photo: Jordi Puig.



'When we paint ourselves for a ceremony, wearing ornaments such as the Tjimirikamarka, and go into the ceremonial space, the elements distinguish us from the spirit so it cannot recognize us. All these things connect to song and dance.'
Pedro Wonaeamirri on *Jilarti*.

In this project of bark, skin, and voices, the collective voices move us through a creative process (and dialogues) embodied in an experimental exhibition that fuses past, present, and future.

'Ma-mana wuta kitja kitja'

'Little by Little'. (Tiwi)

Narelle Jubelin, Pedro Wonaeamirri, Salvador García, Ascen Labella, Ainize González