

FEBRUARY 2021 NOTED

# 'TIWI' at the National Gallery of Victoria

By Miriam Cosic



*Purrukuparli ngirramini.* © Harold Porkilari / Licensed by Copyright Agency, Australia

## A must-see exhibition of Tiwi art from Bathurst and Melville islands, in which historical and contemporary media and imagery fuse

There is something magical about the *TIWI* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria (until March 8), and not in a New-Agey way referring to Indigenous spirituality. It's in the sheer beauty of the works, the rigorous curation, the scholarly purpose, and the delightful layout that leads the visitor from space to space in an other-worldly experience with no anchor in chronology or precise location.

This show of work from Bathurst and Melville islands, about 60 kilometres north of Darwin, segues back and forth from historical art forms that merged seamlessly with the traditional singing and dancing of the region, to contemporary media and imagery that fuse the worldview and experience of the artists. Mourning posts, bark painting, textile printing, canvas, paper, ceramics, screen-prints, woodblocks, etchings: Tiwi artists have actively encouraged each other to follow their own path, both in their ceremonial creativity and in their artworks made for sale, and to connect with and explore every medium and style they have met with over the years. Nor have they carefully guarded their ceremonial memes.

Tiwi pottery, for example, only began in 1972. By 1995, however, the potters had decided to stop making bowls, cups and other functional wares on a pottery wheel, and start fashioning sculptures that told of their way of life: the hunting and gathering, the impact of introduced animals, their creation stories.

Kitty Kantilla, one of the most famous Tiwi artists, went from using her father's motifs to pursuing an idiosyncratic style, a merging of tradition and Western minimalism. In 1989, she moved to the Melville Island community of Milikapiti, where an arts centre had just been set up, and there decided to switch from sculpture to bark painting.

Continuity persists in certain usages of stripes, cross-hatching and dots, which, curator Judith Ryan points out, are not used as fillers but represent deep concentration and care. It also prevails in the ochres that artists still collect by hand and use, not in calm monochromes, but in resplendent and bold effects.

In the Melbourne exhibition, the largest Tiwi show to date, 70 artists have contributed more than 280 works. Famous names abound, from Kitty Kantilla to Pedro Wonaeamirri, as well as less well-known artists either just emerging or never promoted by the volatile art market.

Local *Pukumani tutini*, or mourning poles, range from older, quieter iterations to a bright group where the laddered segments can be topped by an eye-catching totemic owl or seabird. A group of 1950s barks from the Mountford collection are all marked "artist's name not recorded", and the striking lines and blocked colours of more modern works are already evident.

Johnathon World Peace Bush's recent work introduces figurative human bodies against traditional backgrounds. Bleeding, washed out, vertical lines on them may evoke Tiwi *jilamara*, or prison bars. Bush's work is both prepossessing and intensely political. He addresses everything from the Goose Creek massacre, to the Stolen Generations, to the interplay of Catholicism and Tiwi culture on his lands.

There is much to admire and much to learn in this exhibition. It is a must-see.

*Miriam Cosic travelled to Melbourne as a guest of the NGV.*

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