

From Milikapiti, Tiwi artist Johnathan 'World Peace' Bush is a voice of the old and the new

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By [Steve Vivian](#)

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Johnathan Bush is from Goose Creek on Melville Island. *(Supplied: Jilamara)*

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Despite being some of the most isolated in Australia, the artists of Milikapiti on the Tiwi Islands attract international acclaim.

The community was established in 1941 as a permanent Aboriginal settlement by the Australian government.

It sits at the top of the Tiwis, about 150 kilometres north of Darwin, at the mouth of one of many of the islands' serpentine rivers.



The Tiwi Islands are home to many great artists.(ABC News: Michael Franchi)

There you will find a community store, school, health clinic, hall, welfare office, footy oval, fishing lodge and about 400 residents that produce some of the country's greatest creative work.

Johnathan "World Peace" Bush is the latest artist from Milikapati to gain global recognition.

His work last September at The Armory Show in New York – where the world's leading contemporary artists annually exhibit – was highlighted by the Wall Street Journal:

"Painted in warm ochres, his canvases draw on famous masterpieces and religious icons and render them in Indigenous patterns and symbols, creating a synthesis of these different cultures and emphasising the best in both".



Johnathon Bush with his exhibition at The Armory Show in New York.(Supplied: Jilamara)



Bush was among 30 exhibitors at the The Armory Show.(Supplied:Jilamara)

"He's telling a really contemporary story about what it is to be a First Nations person living in a remote community in the 21st century," says Will Heathcote, coordinator of Jilamara Arts, the art centre in Milikapati where Bush paints.

"That's really resonating with international [and contemporary art] audiences, and he's seen an exponential growth in the interest behind his work."

Bush, 49, is the latest in a long line of remote Indigenous artists that have become conduits from tiny communities to the rest of the world, both by telling their stories to, and finding a value with, international audiences and buyers.

"It's really celebrating the variety of cultural narrative in Australia and doing that through contemporary art," Heathcote says.



Bush speaks at a recent exhibition of his at a Melbourne gallery.(Supplied: Shelley Xue)



Bush and Heathcote in Melbourne. (Supplied: Shelley Xue)

"And the story behind that is the contemporary art world, not just the conventional Indigenous art world, giving someone like Johnathon a platform to tell his story.

"He has his own voice, represents his work really well and he loves to share his perspective."

Bush uses Jilamara – a traditional body paint design used in ceremonies – and mashes it with images of catholic figureheads and references to the church, which defined the settler experience of the Tiwi people through the mission on Bathurst Island.



Johnathon Bush's "Saint Matthew". (Supplied: Jilamara Arts and Crafts)



Traditional Tiwi art and religious imagery are interlaced at the Catholic church on the islands.(ABC News: Peter Garnish)

"My style is living in the Western world and the Aboriginal world. To combine everything together as one," Bush says.

"I've been holding the Western laws and Aboriginal laws in two hands and we have to do something about it. Building bridges.

"With painting I can communicate with two identities: Western and Aboriginal combined as one to make a painting."



Bush on the Tiwi Islands.(Supplied: Jilamara Arts and Crafts)



The Armory Show is held in Manhattan.(Supplied: Jilamara)

Bush, who travelled to New York alongside Heathcote, enjoyed his time in the capital of the art world.

"I had to try and adapt in a new environment," Bush says.

"I liked it. I listened to what everyone had to say."

Closer to home, Bush's most recent commission is now on display at the National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV) Ian Potter Centre.

Working with his cousin Pedro Wonaeamirri, a world-renowned artist also from Milikapati, Bush has painted the story of his grandfather being pushed off his homeland by a pastoralist 100 years ago.



Senior artist Pedro Wonnaeamirri is currently in Europe to talk about Tiwi art.(Supplied: Jilamara Arts and Crafts)



Johnathon Bush and Pedro Wonaeamirri in Melbourne.(Supplied)

In taking his story and experience of colonisation across the world, Bush has, like Wonaeamirri, become an ambassador.

In 2018, the 50-year-old Wonaeamirri, a master carver and painter, travelled to the Vatican to view traditional Tiwi tutuni burial poles, which, fed by the arrival of Catholic mission to the Tiwis, had funnelled through Europe.



An image taken in 1948 of Tutini poles on the Tiwi Islands. (Supplied: Axel Poignant / National Library of Australia)

Wonaeamirri, who is currently back in Europe, this time in Venice to speak at the Venice Biennale and Peggy Guggenheim museum, says he's proud of his cousin.

"His career is coming up," says Wonaeamirri, who has mentored Bush for the "Country Road + NGV First Nations Commission" program at the NGV.

"I'm very happy and pleased for Jonathan. We come from the same country."



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