

WALKING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE ART OF JOHNATHON WORLD PEACE BUSH

The original inhabitants of Melville and Bathurst Islands, the Tiwi, have been separated from mainland Aboriginal peoples and from murrintani (white people) for much of their history. Evidence of Tiwiness is found in their language, customary ceremonies, material culture, kinship system and sexual politics. The two principal cultural events for the Tiwi are the pukumani (mourning) and kulama (coming of age) ceremonies, both of which are unrestricted in relation to age and gender. Tiwi art is intimately connected with song and dance and with jilamara, the painted designs with which performers celebrate kulama ceremonies and conceal their identity from mapurtiti (spirits of the deceased) in pukumani ceremonies. They create monumental tutini (poles), which possess a spectacular presence and are patterned with jilamara (designs) painted with ochre pigments of rich intensity.

Prior to contact with murrintani, which accelerated from the first decade of the twentieth century onwards, the locus of Tiwi art was ceremony. When Tiwi artists encountered murrintani anthropologists, artists and collectors who were interested in their material culture and ceremonies they were keen to share their art and its cultural meaning. Increasingly over time, and in response to contact, Tiwi artists have adapted their cultural objects and jilamara and pioneered the production of figurative sculptures, paintings on bark, canvas and paper, limited edition prints, batiks and ceramics that stay true to their culture. As local expression has intersected with global identity, Tiwi artists have interfaced freely with the taste and demands of the fine art market, enabling many Tiwi to develop as global contemporary artists. Individual artists such as Johnathon World Peace Bush create work that is nginingilawa (his and no-one else's.)

In the context of both customary and modern forms of Tiwi art, Bush has sprung out of left field. He was born in Milikapiti, on Melville Island, the son of Tiwi woman Doriana Bush and a Yanyula/Irish father. He grew up in Milikapiti and studied at Kimberley College in Darwin, where he enjoyed learning English and encountering the Yolŋu singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu. He lived for many years at Borroloola, in his Father's country, working as a stockman at an outstation, herding horses and cattle. In around 2015, Bush returned to his Mother's country and began to work at Jilamara Arts & Craft Association, Milikapiti, where he developed his singular art practice.

Bush is connected to his Tiwi ancestors through his commitment to filling the background of his canvases with jilamara, using white and yellow ochres gathered from the ground, different shades of red ochre made by baking the yellow ochre in yikwani (fire), and charcoal as his source of black. But Bush is unquestionably a new age talent: a universal man, a songwriter, poet and social commentator, with a fresh approach to painting who has stated that he wants to be his own artist, not conforming to any stereotype of Tiwi art, as he has explained:

My style is living in the Western world and the Aboriginal world. To combine everything together as one. I've been holding the Western laws and Aboriginal laws in two hands. We have to do something about building bridges. With painting I can communicate with two identities: Western and Aboriginal combined as one to make a painting.¹

Bush is one of very few Tiwi artists to work figuratively and to respond to archival photographs in calling out negative aspects of Tiwi post-contact history, such as colonial crimes, missionisation and subsequent intergenerational trauma. Moreover, Bush seeks to address issues of global concern, as he has stated: 'All I want is world peace. I want the government to take their finger out and do something about the suffering in the world', which is why other Tiwi have given him the name 'World Peace'.

Bush's work maintains a political critique – unusual in Tiwi art – calling out problematic aspects of Tiwi contact history, such as the contentious legacy of Catholicism and a violent massacre that occurred at Appaloose (Goose Creek), which continues to absorb him, as the artist explains:

This is my country, this is where my ancestors rest. A long time ago my people had a village there in Goose Creek. Joe Cooper, a buffalo stockman, came to raise buffalo on my country without my ancestors' approval. He and his men set fire to the camp. Half of my family were killed. Only Bugabai, my grandfather, my grandmother and my uncle survived the fire. All the others passed away. When the village was burnt my family found that Milikapiti had civilisation.²

Bush's modern paintings show his interest in blending the ochres with water, layering the paint and yoking together both figuration and jilamara, which is rarely seen in the work of other contemporary Tiwi artists. His paintings resist the tendency towards increasingly minimal and conceptual compositions characteristic of current forms of Tiwi art and Indigenous Australian painting. Rather than applying pigment meticulously with a pwoja (Tiwi comb) like many of his peers, Bush works vigorously with a brush, in a gestural, funky style of 'crooked painting'.³

Many of Bush's provocative works interrogate Catholicism and Western icons of art history, church, state and museum. He portrays Pope Francis, Queen Victoria II, the Statue of Liberty, Christopher Columbus, Burke and Wills and Joan of Arc through a Tiwi lens, setting them in a background of jilamara to assert his Tiwiness and subvert their authority in the Western world. Such paintings reflect his growing appreciation of European art and his deepening understanding of the cultural clash experienced by Tiwi through the establishment of Catholic missions at Wurrumiyanga (Nguiu) in 1911 and at Pirlangimpi (Garden Point) in 1940, the latter for Indigenous children of the stolen generations. Rather than representing figurations of Tiwi ancestors, Purrukuparli, Wai-ai, Jinani and Taparra, which narrate the Tiwi creation story and explain how death came to the Tiwi, Bush's 'Statues' depict Western explorers, monarchs, monuments and Popes within a Tiwi universe. Bush's works counterbalance two worlds, as he explains:

For both my Tiwi people and my global family I want culture to be strong. If you don't have culture, you fall and have to fight to reconnect. Without culture we are all lost ... I hold the Western and Aboriginal law in my hands for all mankind to be equal. I balance both laws. I have been through many obstacles for my words to be heard. I hope my art gives a glimpse into my strong desire for world peace and equality for all humankind. This time is your time: it is time for you to talk big. You need to fight to keep culture alive. I remember my older male ancestors saying this to me. They have all passed away now, but they have left work for me to do ... it is important to link the past to the present for healthy future regeneration. Like a chain reaction. ... I work for a future that is bright and where everything will be alright.⁴

- Judith Ryan AM

Judith Ryan AM

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1 - Johnathon World Peace Bush, quoted in <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-22/johnathon-world-peace-bush-tiwi-art-jilamara-milikapiti/103741186>>, accessed 16 December 2024.

2 - Johnathon World Peace Bush, quoted in <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/302.2018/#about>>, accessed 16 December 2024.

3 A term used by the late Tiwi artist Jean Baptiste Aputimi to characterise her painting.

4 Johnathon World Peace Bush, quoted in <https://www.lindenarts.org/exhibitions/linden-new-art/johnathon-world-peace-bush/>>, accessed 16 December 2024.