

NGURRUWARRA/
DERNERNYIN

STONE FISH TRAPS OF THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS



The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) team recognises that all our activities take place on Indigenous lands and waters. Australia is an exceptional country with a unique cultural heritage and biodiversity that has been under the care of Indigenous Australians for millennia. CABAH is thankful to those communities who partner with us in our research and outreach activities.

We acknowledge the Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangalidda Traditional Owners of the lands, seas and skies of the Wellesley Islands region and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of people who have since passed away.

Published by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage in partnership with Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation.



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
Centre of Excellence for
Australian Biodiversity
and Heritage



QUEENSLAND
MUSEUM



Queensland
Government



NGURRUWARRA/ DERNDERNYIN

STONE FISH TRAPS OF THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS

EXHIBITION
Queensland Museum Kurilpa
3 May - 24 November, 2024



This artwork is dedicated
to Kaiadilt elder Dibiridibi
Elsie Gabori.

FOREWORD

SEAN ULM, JOHN ARMSTRONG AND BERELINE LOOGATHA

Fish traps are central to Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangalidda culture, story and very identity.

Fish traps are a key element of material culture shared across the Wellesley Islands region.

This mammoth Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin canvas is a celebration of culture, story and relationship across the seas, lands and skies of the Traditional Owner communities throughout the Wellesley Islands region.

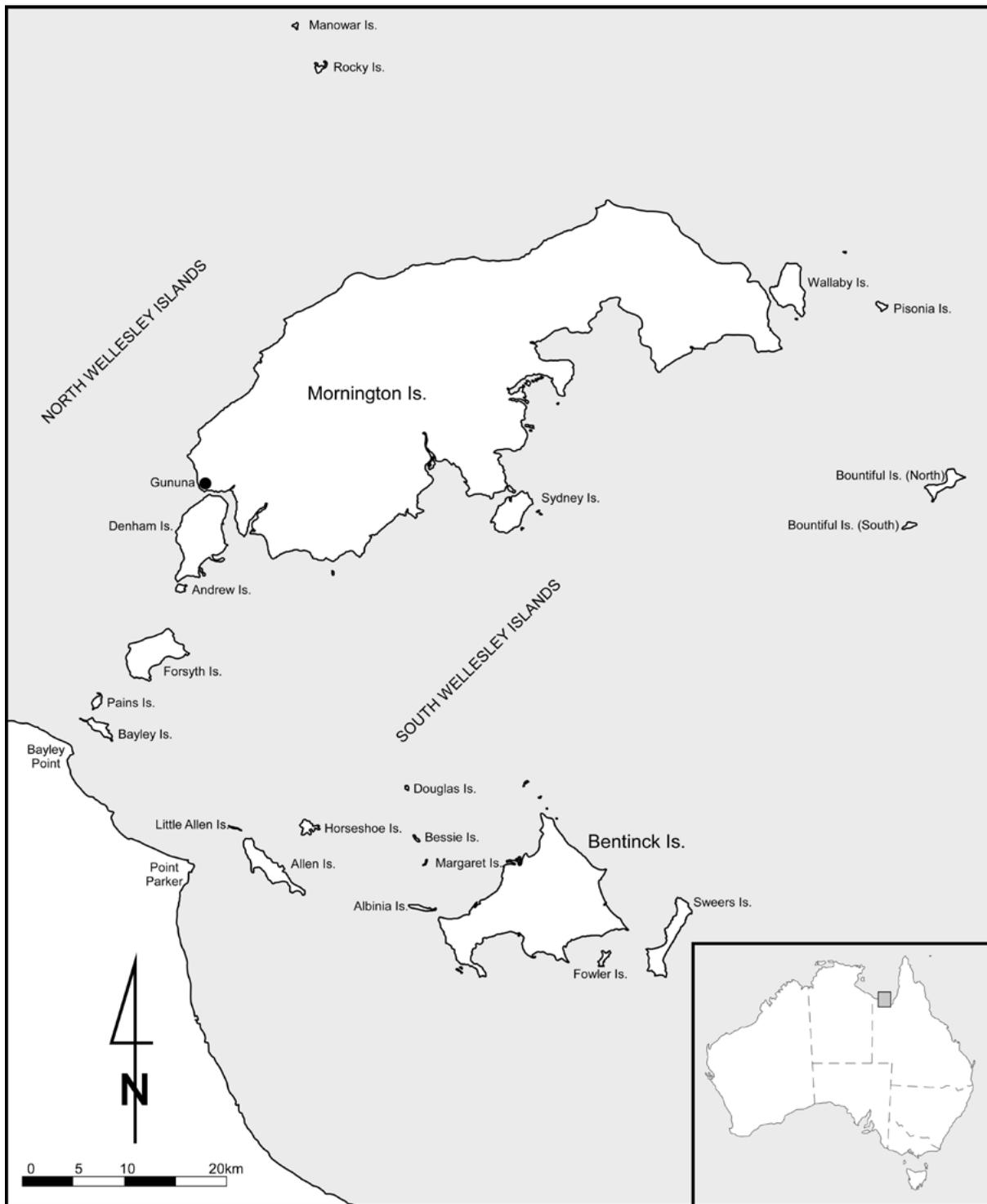
The artwork is a collaboration between ten Kaiadilt, Lardil and Gangalidda artists working together across a massive 20-metre-long by 2-metre-wide canvas. Each artist painted multiple sections of the canvas, with artists negotiating with each other to ensure continuity of story across contiguous elements of the canvas.

Between them, the artists are custodians of intimate knowledge of Country. The most senior Kaiadilt artists of the work, for example, were amongst the last coastal Aboriginal people to be institutionalised in Australia, being forcibly removed from Bentinck Island to a European Mission on Mornington Island in the late 1940s.

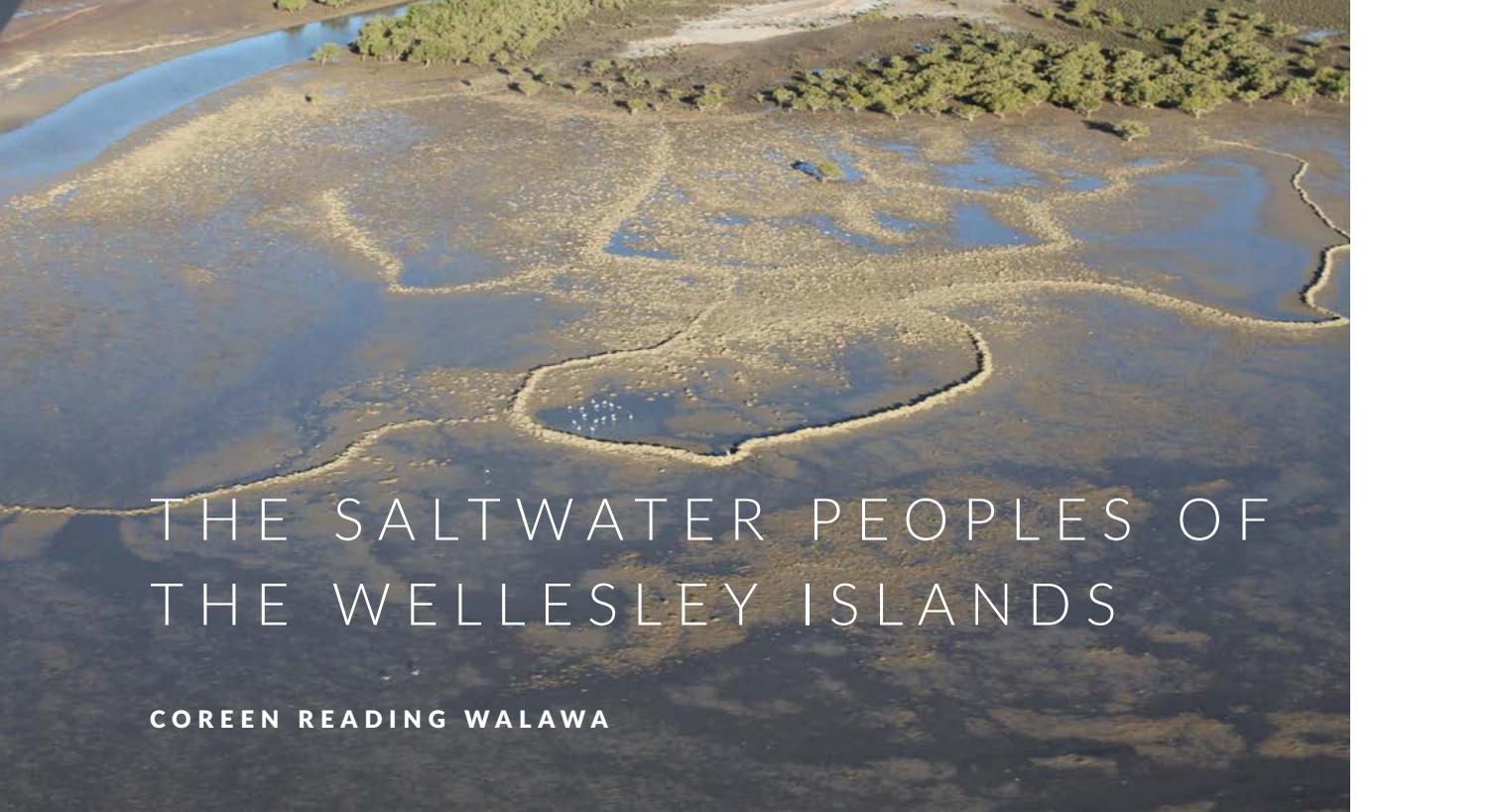
One of the first things the Kaiadilt community did when they arrived on Mornington Island was to build their own fish trap near their camp, which is still visible in the intertidal zone in front of the Kuba Natha Hostel.

This artwork was commissioned by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) to celebrate the relationships between Traditional Owners and researchers working on Country.

The artists dedicate this artwork to the late brilliant Dibirdibi Elsie Gabori, who passed away after the work was completed. She is sorely missed.



Map of the Wellesley Islands and adjacent mainland. Image credit: Sean Ulm.



THE SALTWATER PEOPLES OF THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS

COREEN READING WALAWA

Catfish Story, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

The Lardil, Kaiadilt, Yangkaal and Gangalidda people of the Wellesley Islands and adjacent mainland coast in the Gulf of Carpentaria are saltwater people. Our diets rely heavily on our surrounding *mala** (sea). *Yakuri* (fish), *birnkurnda* (crab), and *mala kunbulka* (sea animals), stingrays, dugongs and sea turtles, have always been primary sources of *wuranda* (food).

Our livelihoods depend on the *mala kunbulka* to sustain and nourish our people. Our ancestors understood the importance of maintaining *wuranda* supplies, so over many thousands of years, they needed to design and implement sustainable methods to maintain this supply. Our islands are also subject to extreme weather conditions, from *minjirrinda* (cyclone) to *dinthirra* (drought).

Our very existence is irrefutably intertwined with nature. Our *ngankirra* (mob/families) and our *birrjilka* (law) are synonymous with *yarbuda* (animals), and our *diiija* (land) and *dulka* (territories) are protected and nurtured by *Dulmarra Dangkaas* (clan chiefs). *Yarbuda* and *diiija* are inherent to our spiritual and cultural belief systems.



Nyinyilki, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.

Our *ngankirra* needed to design hunting methods that could withstand weather and time, whilst also having minimal disruption to our natural habitats.

Ngurruwarra (Kayardilt)/*Derndernyin* (Lardil) (stone fish traps), are the result of our *ngankirra*'s ingenuity. Circular rock walls that extend off our island coastlines into the sea gave more consistency to our people's food supplies, complementing our natural habitats. The *ngurruwarra* are often covered in oysters and seaweed, creating shelter for crabs and other crustaceans, whilst being engineered to capture food for our people.

Over thousands of years the *ngurruwarra* have been built and maintained to work within our tidal environments. The high tide would bring the *mala kunbulka* close to our shores, and then, as the tide recedes, they would become trapped within the stone walls.

Below, left to right: Sean Ulm, Lily Ulm, Netta Loogatha (deceased), Poppy Ulm, Ethel Thomas (deceased), Dolly Loogatha, Amy Loogatha, Mirdidingki, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.



As a *kunawuna* (child) living on Dulka Warngiid (Bentinck Island), I remember that the *ngurruwarra* closest to us at Nyinyilki was checked daily. First, by the *bithiinda* (men), then followed behind by the rest of us *maku* (women) and *kunawuna*. It is important that the *Dulmarra Dangkaa* of that Country would check the trap first. If one of my *Jambathus* (grandfather's siblings) wanted to check another *ngurruwarra* further away, it would be up to the *dulkuru-dulkuru* (owners of that Country) to give permission. I fondly remember that during *riyathi-diinda* (full moon), the *Jambathus* would be very excited for the next day; greater tides would mean the chance of a greater catch.

As *kunawuna*, during our Loogatha family holiday trips back to Rukuthi, we would sneak along the high *karnda* (grass) and peep over the *bulbu* (high sand dunes) to the fish traps, hoping to spot *kunbulka* before our *Kakajus* (Uncles) would. If there was a good catch, we would then have to hide our *barrja* (excitement) to avoid being *rarrwatha* (scolded) by our *Kakuju* for checking the *ngurruwarra* before them.

Ngurruwarras are *jungarrba* (important) to the people of Wellesley Islands. They are a part of our heritage, fixed in our memories, and continue as a part of our *dulka*. They were made by *ngankirra* for *ngawuuja* (subsistence/food); they meant the difference between *birjinda* (life) and *marndurrwatha* (death) for *ngankirra*.

*Unless otherwise noted, language words are in the Kayardilt language spoken by Kaiadilt people.

STONE-WALLED INTERTIDAL FISH TRAPS OF THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS REGION

SEAN ULM, LUCY HUGHES AND ANNA KREIJ

Stone-walled intertidal fish traps surround the Australian coastline and are the largest structures built by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some of the largest and most spectacular fish traps are located around the coastlines of the Wellesley Islands and adjacent mainland in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria.

Stone-walled intertidal fish traps are built to trap and control the movements of marine resources across tidal cycles. In the Wellesley Islands region, fish, dugongs, turtles, rays, and sharks are caught in fish traps. In some places, both Lardil (at White Cliff) and Kaiadilt (at Kirk Point) Traditional Owners have identified traps as specifically built for dugong. The sheltered sediments and waters of fish traps also host crabs and other crustaceans, and the walls offer a substrate for shellfish such as oysters.

Ngathald and Kabar
Bays, Sweers Island.
Image credit: Anna Kreij.



Fish traps do not operate by indiscriminately killing everything caught by the trap. Rather men and women entered the traps with spears, hand nets and bark containers at mid-to-low tides and selectively harvested what they wanted. Unwanted catch swam out on the next tide. When fish traps were unused for periods of time a gap was made in the walls to ensure animals did not die by accident.

We estimate that there are more than 500 individual fish traps constructed across the region. Some of these form vast complexes of interlocking fish traps covering many square kilometres of the intertidal zone. Multiple pen fish trap complexes are a feature of construction in the southern Gulf and Torres Strait, but are rare further south. The walls of some individual fish traps exceed a kilometre in length. Some fish trap complexes are built at different elevations in the intertidal zone to be operational across differences in tidal range across the year.

We believe that the Wellesley Islands region fish traps are the biggest aquaculture system known in Australia dating to before European invasion. Designing, constructing, and maintaining all the fish traps was a feat of engineering, requiring deep knowledge of construction methods, intertidal sediments, tides, currents, and fish behaviour.

In the Wellesley Islands region, there are so many fish traps that they changed the way that water and sediments move around the islands and what mangroves grow inside and outside the traps.



Kabar Bay, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

Over the years various projects have been undertaken on fish traps in collaborations between Traditional Owners and researchers. Previous research experimented with different ways of recording fish traps, including using aerial photographs, drones, LiDAR and on Country surveys.

But there are still many questions remaining to be answered.

A fundamental question is working out how old the fish traps are. Histories document that some traps were built by Ancestral Beings (like Crane in the Rock Cod story on Sweers Island told later in this catalogue and the first Lardil people—Maarnbil, Jirnjirn and Diwaldiwal—who brought culture and language to Mornington Island), while others are known to have been built and maintained more recently.



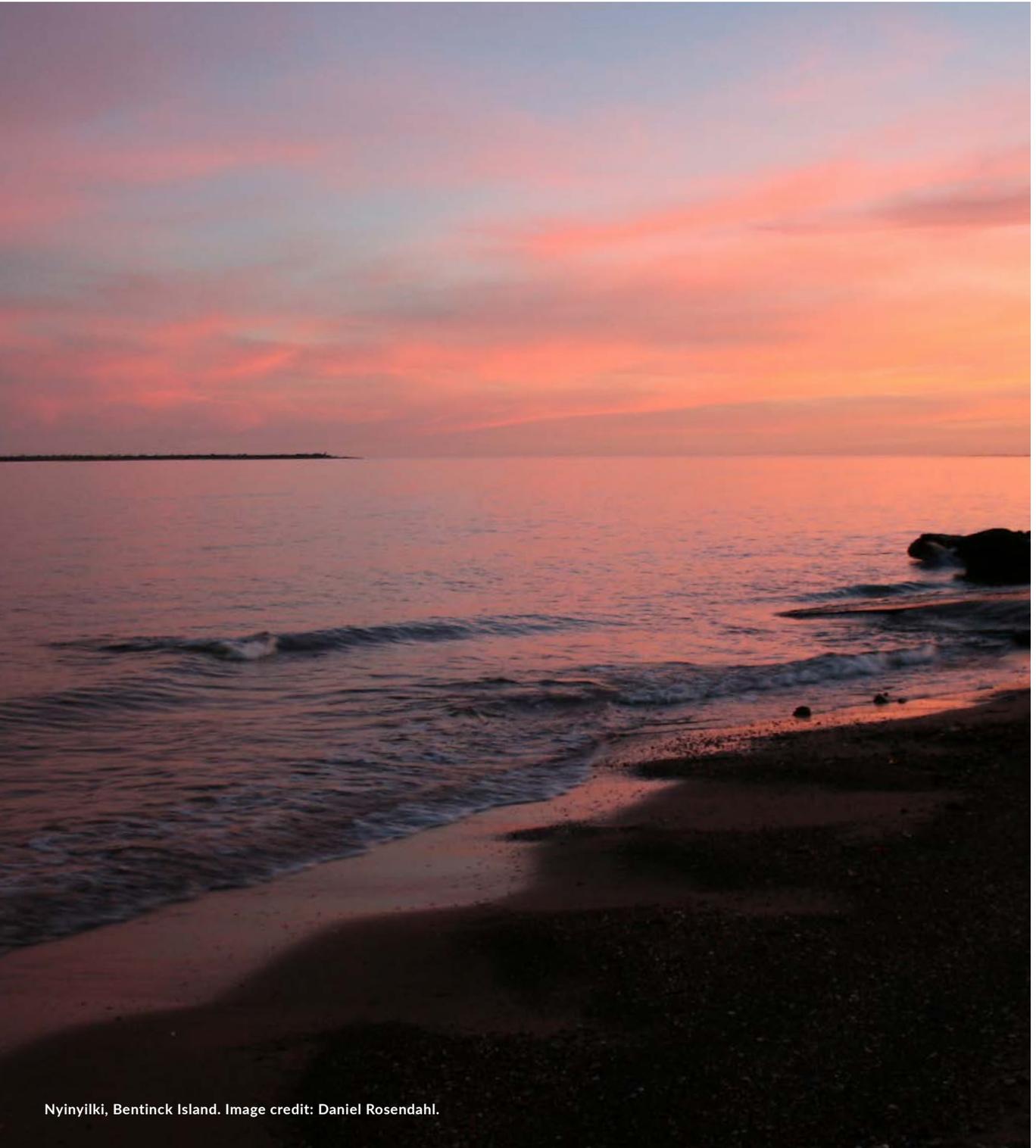
Crab, Kabar Bay, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

A recent study showed that some fish traps on Sweers Island operate most effectively at modern sea levels, dating them to the past 3500 years. This broadly matches results from archaeological radiocarbon dating of cultural places across the Wellesley Islands showing early occupation by at least 3500 years ago, with evidence for more sustained occupation dating to the past 2000 years, and especially intense occupation in the past 700 years.

However, there are fish traps constructed both lower and higher in the tidal zone that may date to earlier periods.

Traditional Owners are vitally concerned about looking after their Country and maintaining fish traps has been of increasing concern to the community in the face of increased storm surges as well as sea-level rise impacting fish trap walls.

A new wave of research instigated by the Wellesley Islands Rangers working with Traditional Owners and researchers from CABAHA aims to answer some of these questions. We want to not only understand more about these fish traps and document the Indigenous knowledges related to them but also understand how to monitor the health of fish traps and protect these extraordinary cultural landscapes into the future.



Nyinyilki, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.

MARINE SUBSISTENCE AND TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS

PAUL MEMMOTT



Dugong nets, *barkuwen*, varied in size, occasionally as large as 9-metres-wide and 4.5-metres-high, but more often 2-metres-high and 3-metres-wide. The netting consisted of strong ropes manufactured from *madarr bark* (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*), and was fixed to two long poles, *karnkul* (Photograph: MacIntyre J N, 1921 *Capabilities of the Gulf Country*, Sydney, Mitchell Library, unpublished manuscript).

Research in the Wellesley Islands reveals some striking differences in the ways people made and used material culture technologies between the Lardil of the North Wellesley Islands and their neighbours, the Kaiadilt of the South Wellesley Islands. In 1975, I was engaged by the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum to commission Lardil and Kaiadilt artisans, who had

lived full hunter-gatherer lifestyles in their younger years, to manufacture complete repertoires of their traditional artefacts.

The Lardil repertoire included more than 65 artefacts. The Kaiadilt repertoire was in the order of 30 items.

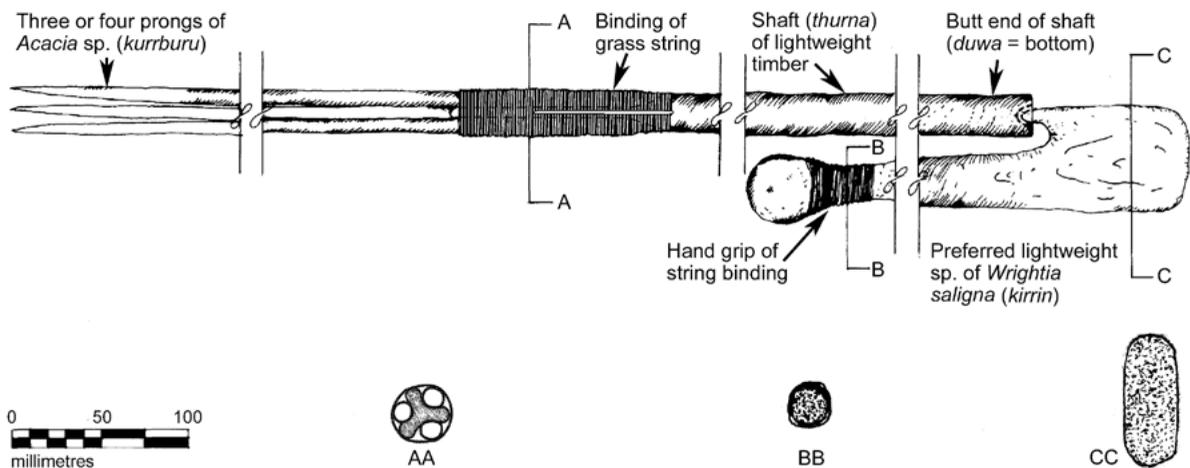
Some 16 artefact types (including spear throwers, rafts and raft paddles) were used by both groups and had similar designs. Eight artefact types (including food pounders, return boomerangs and men's fighting sticks) were used by both groups but differed in their design. Some 28 Lardil artefacts were not used by the Kaiadilt at all, whereas only two Kaiadilt artefacts were not used by the Lardil.

Why did such stark differences exist, especially since Lardil and Kaiadilt people live in similar island environments and speak related languages?

Let us consider their respective technologies for catching marine animals. Fishing spears were similar, both called *kurrumbu*, both employing a lightweight shaft made from branches of the *Hibiscus tiliaceus* tree (*madarr* in Lardil language and *madarra* in Kayadilt language), and both with prongs made from the hard *Acacia alleniana*, lashed to the shaft with grass fibre string. However,

the prong design details of the two differed. The Lardil *kurrumbu* spear employed three, four or five 30-centimetre-long prongs with cylindrical pointed shafts. The Kaiadilt spear had three much longer 50-centimetre-long prongs made from a 2.5 centimetre-wide blade of acacia and with carved serrated barbs along one edge of each bladed prong. The Kaiadilt also had a larger variant of this spear named *muurratj*, used for spearing turtles and dugongs, that had a similar head blade, albeit a single one, that was a metre long and serrated along one edge.

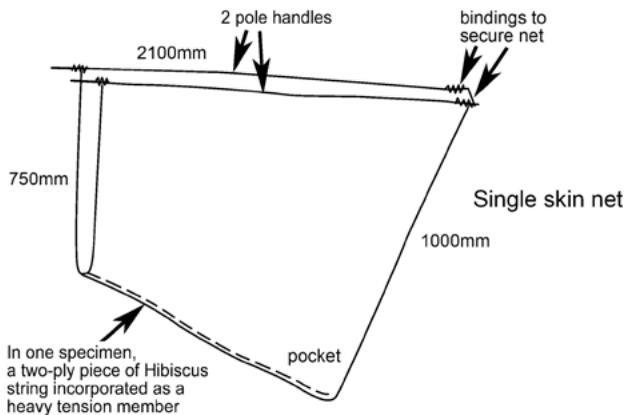
The Lardil caught dugongs mainly using large nets (*barkuwen*) that were at least 2 by 2 metres in size and up to double that width. They were manufactured of hibiscus bark rope and stretched across near-shore channels with vertical timber handles (*karnkul*). The hunters stood about chin-deep in the water and a wall of vertical branches



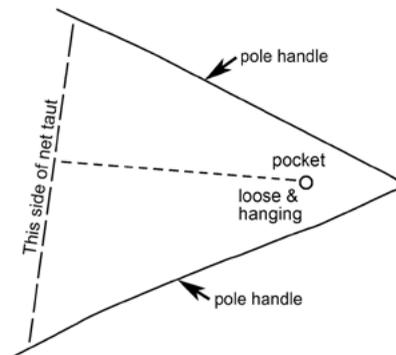
Detailed elevation and cross-sections of the Lardil fishing spear, *kurrumbu*, and the spearthrower *murruku*.

extended either side of the nets to create a V-shape. Other men chased the dugongs towards the nets on their rafts (*walpa*). When an animal was entangled in the net, they let it go, and the animal swam until it tired and raftsmen could secure a rope around its tail and hold it tail-up with its nose underwater to drown it.

The Lardil were well equipped with spears too, but specialised in net manufacture, having two more large types of fishing net made of grass string—the scoop net (*dumunthar*), used to catch prawns, and the purse net (*dulnhu kirra*) with two handles in a V-shape, favoured for schools of *dulnhu* fish. Again, hunters on rafts chased the fish schools towards



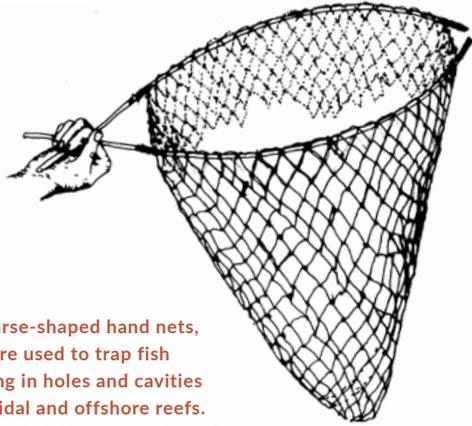
Side elevation, pole handles together



Plan - pole handles pulled wide apart

The *dulnhu kirra*, or net used for catching *dulnhu* fish. Once fish are in the net, the poles are twisted inwards towards one another, to close the mouth of the net.

those men holding the nets chest-deep in water. The Kaiadilt, on the other hand, only made one type of net—a small hand net (*mijilda*), held by only one person in one hand with two short pliable handles and used for scooping up a single fish at close quarters near reefs. A hand-net of identical design was used by the Lardil (*mijil*) and doubled up as a bag for carrying items.



Small purse-shaped hand nets, *mijil*, were used to trap fish sheltering in holes and cavities in intertidal and offshore reefs. They were frightened out by poking cavities with a spear or one's hand.

The fishing specialisation of the Kaiadilt was that of using many stone-walled fish traps and their extra-large spearheads for penetrating the thick skin of dugongs and the shells of turtles. People hunted in separate clans or small extended families in their own territories. Meanwhile, the Lardil hunting technology specialisation involved cooperative teams, which used nets and rafts to yield a communal catch that was then consumed in the social atmosphere of a large camp. This sociality was reciprocated with mainland groups through trading, joint dance and ceremonial events, bringing acculturation of new artefacts. In contrast, the Kaiadilt lived a more isolated lifestyle with fewer artefacts in their toolkit.

Reference

Memmott. P 2010 *Material Culture of the North Wellesley Islands*. Brisbane, QLD, Australia: ATSIIS Unit, University of Queensland. 94pp.



Mangroves, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

NGURRUWARRA / DERNDERNYIN

Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands

Acrylic on canvas. 20 metres x 2 metres.



CABAH Art Series commission in association with Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation, Mornington Island Art (MIArt).

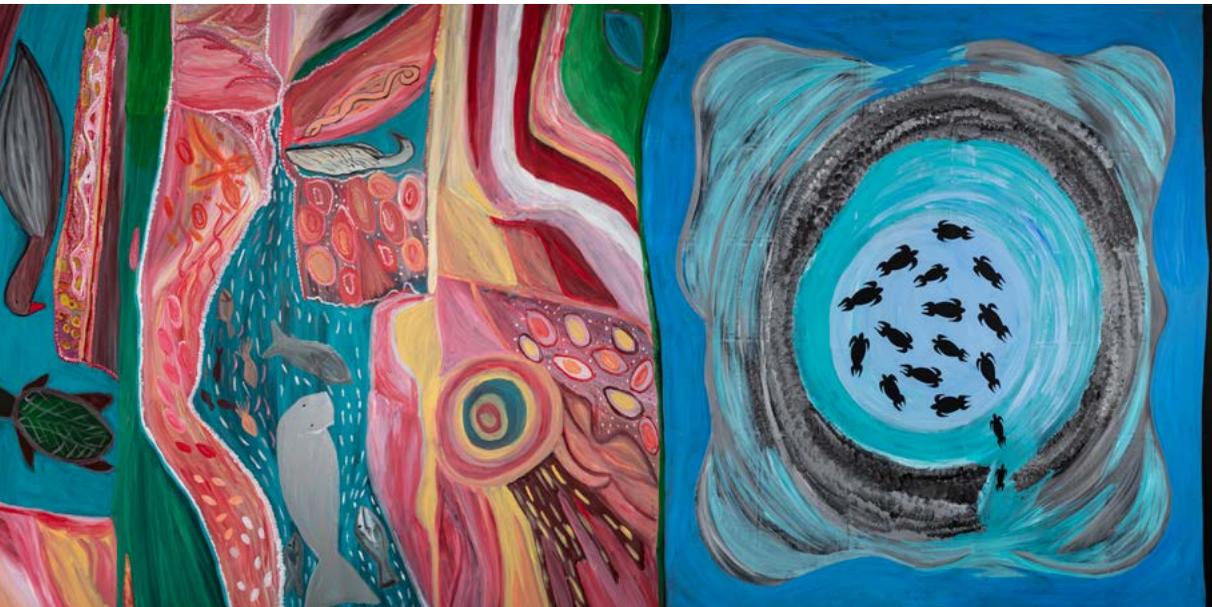


Image credit: Michael Marzik.



Rayarriwarrtharrbayingat Amy Loogatha and Dibirdibi Agnes Kohler starting work on the Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin artwork in the MIArt studio. Image credit: MIArt.

MORNINGTON ISLAND ART

Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation, Mornington Island Art (MIArt), is one of the longest-established art and cultural organisations in Aboriginal Australia. Situated in the remote Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia, and owned and controlled by an Indigenous Board, Mirndiyan Gununa has an Indigenous majority staff focussed on delivering locally relevant programs that produce internationally significant artwork.





Mornington Island artists are heavily influenced by and connected to their land and culture in their artistic interpretations. Their remoteness means the artists concentrate heavily on cultural and spiritual subject matter—all centred on connection to Country.

The artists work in many mediums, from painting to music and dance to storytelling. Language is integral to all creative activities at the Art Centre, and the primary purpose of the Mirndiyun Gununa is to maintain and develop the cultures of the Lardil and Kaiadilt people by strengthening the community and promoting the unique cultures to the rest of the world.

MI Art studio on Mornington Island is a place of shared culture and creativity—a place where stories are told and memories are kept alive. Joyful and exuberant and always tinged with the sadness of histories, the personal and family histories stretching back and back. Country is the location as much as it is the heritage and the abiding subject matter of the artists. These artists confidently tell their stories about their families' deep-rooted connections to the Old People that results in works of outstanding beauty and clarity because culture is strong and central to everything.

The richness and vibrancy in these paintings, by both the established artists and the new generations of emerging artists sharing and learning together, show that living in a remote community doesn't mean being out of touch.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

RAYARRIWARRTHARRBAYINGAT AMY LOOGATHA

Kaiadilt

Born 1942 at Dulkawalne, Bentinck Island

“I was born behind Nyinyilki on Bentinck Island. I remember when I was small and planes used to fly overhead, we used to run and hide in the mangroves. It was fun playing and growing up on Bentinck as small girls, but that soon changed when they came and took us away and dumped us on Mornington Island in 1946. Life was very hard in the dormitory. We were fed flour with weevils in it, we had to bathe in saltwater, and our clothes were made out of rough material like the canvas we now paint on. I went out to the mainland to work for a few years on stations before coming back to Mornington and having children. When our land rights came, it was great to be free of Mornington Island and be able to return to our home. I took my grandchildren with me to show them their traditional Country and to live on our homeland once again.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

THUNDUYINGATHUI BANGAA DOLLY LOOGATHA

Kaiadilt

Born 1946 at Thundi, Bentinck Island

“I was only a small child when our people were brought to Mornington Island and forced to live in the mission. I grew up in the dormitory like all the other children. My Father, King Alfred, was killed when I was only a baby, so I was really grown up by the missionaries. It was hard, they were cruel to us if we were naughty and would lock us up or cut our hair really short. As I grew into a young woman I went and worked on lots of cattle stations around Cloncurry and ended up moving to Darwin where I had a partner and lived there for 30 years away from Mornington Island and Bentinck Island. I only came back in 2008 so that I could be with my family and live back on Bentinck Island. Now I go to the Art Centre every day to paint my stories and keep my memories alive. I paint Thundi where I was born and Makarrki where my Father was born. It makes me feel good and proud when I see the finished painting.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

DIBIRDIBI ELSIE GABORI

Kaiadilt

Born 1947 at Minikurri, Bentinck Island, died 2023 at Gununa, Mornington Island

“I was born on Bentinck Island. When I was about two or three years old our people were all taken from Bentinck Island to the mission on Mornington Island. I was placed in the dormitory and kept away from my parents. I attended the mission school along with the Lardil children of Mornington Island. I went to school until I turned 15, and then I went to work as a housemaid in the mission house. I was paid about 10 shillings a week, but we lived off the land and sea and didn't really need money. I was sent to work as a house servant on a cattle property on the mainland for three years before I returned to Mornington Island. I raised a family of three girls and two boys with my partner Bob Thompson. I went up to the Art Centre with Mum to keep her company and decided to try painting for myself. I found that I loved it as well. I really want to become a good artist like my Mum and paint about Bentinck Island and my people and their stories.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

DIBIRDIBI AGNES KOHLER

Kaiadilt

Born 1952 at Mornington Island

“I was born soon after my people crossed over to Mornington Island. In those days, the Lardil mob fostered or adopted us as their family. The Jacobs adopted me and my sister Gay. In the 60s, I was sent out to work on the mainland. I worked at Julia Creek. As I raised my family, I also adopted a few more children. Now I am surrounded by my family. I used to muck around scribbling, drawing little houses with my kids. My children tell me to join the old people here at the Art Centre, save me from worrying, take my mind off things. It’s also good to be alongside family members at the Art Centre, working, creating and learning together.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

DIBIRDIBI DOROTHY GABORI

Kaiadilt

Born 1952 at Mornington Island

“I am the fifth child of my Mother, Sally Gabori. My Father was Pat Gabori; he was a hunter, a hard-working old fella. We used to go bush with our parents who taught us a lot about our homelands, both Bentinck Island and Sweers Island. I love being at the Art Centre with my sisters and the rest of my family. We learn so much from the old people about our land and Country. There are always so many activities to get into; I am glad that we have the Art Centre to go to.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

DIBIRDIBI AMANDA GABORI

Kaiadilt

Born 1966 at Mornington Island

“I was born in the township of Gununa on Mornington Island at the old hospital which is now the Council Office. I am one of 10 children. I went to school here on Mornington Island and then went to Atherton State School to complete years 11 and 12. I have four children and two grandchildren. I started painting when I was just sitting at home and wanted to go up and join my Mum, Sally Gabori, painting as she was really enjoying it. I paint my Country on Bentinck Island and Dibirdibi, which is my language name and totem given to me by my Father.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

JUDA JUDA RUKUTHINGATHI BERELINE LOOGATHA

Kaiadilt

Born 1966 at Kallaha Station

“My language name is Juda, named after my Mother’s Mother from Bentinck Island, and my birth sign is the Dingo. I have four children and five grannies. I have watched my Mothers paint and decided to paint as stress relief and I find it relaxing. It’s my way of protecting, keeping, and teaching Country, language, lores and customs for future generations so they would not be lost. I am a big believer in passing on knowledge to the next generation so that they become grounded in who they are.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

GLORIA GAVENOR

Gangalidda/Lardil

Born 1948 at Mornington Island

“After my Dad died we were left alone with Mum, and so she decided to return to Mornington Island, as she knew she’d receive support from her family. My sister Edna was six and I was a baby. We went into the dormitory whilst Mum lived in the settlement. I stayed in the dormitory until I was sent to work at 16 on a station called Blackmoor outside of Cloncurry. The dormitory system was shut down in 1954 and children returned to their parents; I returned home at the age of 20. I met my husband, Eric Gavenor, a Lardil man. We got married at the old church, against my parents’ wishes. I was a stay-at-home mum and raised my children. It was during this time I became involved with the Art Centre through my Mum, who was making hats to sell and for dancers. She was my, and my children’s, example to follow in dance hat making and in painting.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

KUTHAKIN CORALIE THOMPSON

Guthagun/Lardil

Born 1952 at Mornington Island

“I was born at Kunhanhaa on Mornington Island in 1952. My language is Lardil and my language name is Kuthakin. I like old stories and I like painting them as well as the animals and birds on Country. I also really like painting scenes of how things used to be—the old village and things like that.”



Image credit: MIArt.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

MADAR JOELENE ROUGHSEY

Lardil

Born 1982 in Mt Isa

Joelene is a proud Lardil woman and belongs to the Langananji clan. She was born in Mt Isa in 1982 but grew up on Mornington Island. Her language name is Madar meaning the stem of the water lily swaying in the breeze. Joelene is an accomplished painter and is part of the next generation of Lardil artists. Many of Joelene's pieces have been inspired by the work of her famous relative, Goobalathaldin Dick Roughsey. Her work depicts traditional stories and cultural practices. Joelene is also a dancer with the Mornington Island Dancers. Joelene's daughter was born in 2012. She is raising her girl to be strong and proud. She is determined to keep culture strong and is passionate about sharing Lardil stories and culture with her daughter and nieces.



Image credit: MIArt.

BUJUKU, KAARRKU AND THE FISH TRAPS

DUGAL GOONGARRA, DARWIN MOODOONUTHI AND NICHOLAS EVANS

This story was recorded by Nicholas Evans in the Kayardilt language of the South Wellesley Islands from the late Dugal Goongarra in September 1982. It was then transcribed and translated by Nicholas with the help of the late Darwin Moodoonuthi. The present version has been re-checked and re-transcribed for maximum accuracy.

The story recounts one of the most important founding stories of the Kaiadilt: the siblings Crane and Seagull who travelled across Bentinck Island from west to east, and Rock Cod, who



Dugal Goongarra. Image credit: Nicholas Evans.

was responsible for shaping the South Wellesleys by eating out the land between the islands as he swam eastwards after an early unsuccessful attempt by Crane to spear him.

The story ties together the three main types of Kaiadilt fishing technology (stone fish traps, spears, and fishing lines); the order of events implies that fishing was only successful once Crane's sister Seagull arrived with the string that she had been rolling as she travelled. Note that Kaiadilt line-fishing did not use hooks: bait was first pounded to release the smell of grease, then tied to the string, and fish were then enticed to within spearing distance.



Black Crane, Sweers Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.



Bardathurra (Inspection Hill) and Jiiki Bay, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

Although this story does not emphasise the fact, the throwing away of Rock Cod's liver is of great significance, as it was transformed into the perpetual freshwater spring in the rocks on the southeast corner of Sweers Island.

This text is typical of mythological narratives recounting founding events that shaped the landscape; the emphasis on compass locations, and the lack of explicitness about key participants is entirely representative.

The action begins at Marralt, near the base camp on Bentinck Island, where Seagull is talking. As is typical in Kayardilt narrative, the characters are not always mentioned directly by name—in fact the story simply begins with someone saying 'my brother has been going along southward'. Gradually the characters get filled in as the story unfolds—it is only in paragraph 12 that the speaker's identity as Kaarrku 'Seagull' gets revealed.

But storytellers also expected that their listeners would hear the story many times and get to know the characters that way. For example, the fact that Kaarrku was rolling string as she went along—which would later be used as a fishing line to cast out the bait (*wululbu*) that Bujuku has pounded—is not mentioned in this telling, but came up at other times when we talked about this story.

This is a story about Ancestors. From their names—Kaarrku 'Seagull', Bujuku 'Black Crane' in Mornington English or more strictly 'reef heron'—it is not immediately clear whether the story refers to characters who really were animals, in the founding era (*yuujbant* in Kayardilt) or humans who had animal names as their totemic names. Since Kayardilt people traditionally had totemic names (as well as conception names and birthplace names), and since these were often names of birds, animals or fish, this is quite plausible—especially since they engage in such typical human behaviour

as carrying coolamons under their arm ('Seagull', paragraph 2) or sitting on the beach to make a fire (Bujuku, paragraph 9).

But it is also possible that the storyteller maintains an artistic ambiguity or uncertainty here.



Rock Cod, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.



Bardathurra (Inspection Hill), Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

Among the many interesting features of the story is the level of detail it gives about the labour and techniques involved in building fish traps (*ngurruwarr* in Kayardilt). Bujuku builds at least five fish traps during the story. Considerable attention is paid to the architectural order in which he proceeds: first the prow (*tharbarr*), then other corners (*wurdu*), before proceeding to make another wall (*murnduruth*), and then extend (*warraruth*) and then finally make high (*kiwarndiruth*) by carrying rocks (*kamarr*), carrying them on his head (*nalmaruth*) and placing them up high (*walmankarraruth*).

It is also clear from the story that different fish traps are good for different kinds of fish. The fish listed as being caught in the second fish trap, described in paragraph 5—purple rock cod, coral trout, spangled perch, white school bream, and nail fish—are different from those listed for the third fish trap in paragraph 7—rock cod, groper, greasy cod, bonefish and herrings of different kinds. The third fish trap (paragraph 7) is said to be good for catching turtles but not dugongs.

The story also makes clear that this is long, difficult, dirty work and a job requiring immense exertion. This is only appropriate for the largest built structures in pre-invasion Australia.

A final feature of the story worth noting is its liberal use of the rich vocabulary of terms which Kayardilt speakers use to anchor almost every action with respect to the points of the compass—*jirrkarr* (north), *riy* (east), *rar* (south) and *bad* (west). Kayardilt has a rich set of derivatives of each of these terms, allowing an exceedingly compact and accurate characterisation of spatial layouts.

Thus from *riy* (east) we can derive *rilungk* (eastward, heading east), *rimaruth* (putting to the east, looking to the east), *Ringurrng* (east across a geographical discontinuity such as an island to the east across the sea, or a patch of mangrove to the east across a salt pan), *riint* (coming/heading from the east), *riinmarri* (not coming from the east), *riyathi* (far to the east). Some other derivatives in the story, this time based on *rar* (south) and *rarid* (heading ever southwards), *Rangurrng* (south across

a geographical discontinuity, island to the south and from it *Rangurrngawaant* (person from a place south across a geographical discontinuity) and *Rangurrngangathi* (person born at a place south across a geographical discontinuity). In actual fact, Sweers Island used to be called either Ringurrng or Rangurrng, since from the perspective of Bentinck Island it is southeast, so more specific translations of some of these terms would be: Rangurrng or Ringurrng (Sweers Island), *Rangurrngawaant* (Sweers Islander, Traditional Custodian of Sweers Island), *Rangurrngangathi* (person born on Sweers Island).

Once he has finished building all these fish traps and cooked himself some wild yams on the beach, his Sister Kaarrku arrives with the string that Bujuku can use as a fishing line, and gets down to the business of catching fish. This was an essential part of the process of exploiting the fish traps—most of the time, they didn't simply deliver the fish but instead concentrated them in a place where they would be easier to catch. Then people would sit at a fishing spot (*barjajar*), throw in a line with pounded bait (*wululbu*) tied at the end, and wait to spear fish as they came into sight. Bujuku succeeds in spearing and catching one big fish—a groper (*minyngkalt*)—but another fish, a rock cod, evades his spear and swims away, nibbling out the land to form the three small islands of Margaret Island (Duurathi), Douglas Island (Nathayiiwint) and Bessie Island (Karndingarrbay) as he heads far to the west.

References

Evans, N. 1995 *A Grammar of Kayardild*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Kreij, A., J. Scriffignano, D. Rosendahl, T. Nagel and S. Ulm 2018 Aboriginal stone-walled intertidal fishtrap morphology, function and chronology investigated with high-resolution close-range Unmanned Aerial Vehicle photogrammetry. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 96:148-161.

Memmott, P., R. Robins and E. Stock 2008 What exactly is a fish trap? Methodological issues for the study of Aboriginal intertidal rockwall fish traps, Wellesley Islands region, Gulf of Carpentaria, Australia. In J. Connolly & M. Campbell (eds), *Comparative Island Archaeologies*, pp.47-67. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.



Turtle caught in a fish trap at Kirk Point, Bentinck Island.
Image credit: Anna Kreij.



Starfish, Sweers Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.

DUGAL GOONGARRA: CRANE, SEAGULL AND ROCK COD IN LANGUAGE

1 “Darriya wambalwarraanki warraa rarida ngijinda kularrint, “warraya dulki malay. Darri wambalwarraanki ngijinda kularrint, warraya yurda malay, wanjiiju Ringurrngawu, Rangurrngawu wanjiiju. Darri wambalwarraanki ngijinda kularrint, yurday, darri wambalwarraanki ngijinda kularrint, rilungku wanjiiju Ringurrngawu, Rangurrngawu Rangurrngawu wanjiiju, Rangurrngawu wanjiiju, darriya wambalwarraanki ngijinda kularrint, warray, yurdayurdaya malay, yurdaya rilungka malay ngijinda kularrinda darriya wambalwarraanki.

2 Darriya wambalwarraanki, kurday wakirii jirmaja kurday rilungk, wakiriija niwanda wakath. Bujuku kurrija jirrkaanmaruth, ngudija riinki miburi. “Ngijinda wakath, diij, riyathi Burririy, Burririy diija ngijinda wakath.

3 Niwanda wakatha jirrkaant, Burririy jirrkaant, warraj, rajurrij. Kurrija niwanji “Ee, Rangurrnga diij,” Rangurrnga diij niwanda kularrind.

4 Warraj, rarungka rajurrij, ngurruwarray jirmaj, badija kamarri. Tharbarra riint, ngariija jirmaj tharbarra riint ngurruwarr, wurduwa bad rarungk, bardak, jirmaja warraja ngurruwarray, wurduwa biniji, biniji, kiwarndi wurdu rarungk rilijuluth, murnduruth, warraruth, walmathiya diija, ngarnkiya marrwaya ee rilungka wanjiij.

5 Rilungka wanjiij, diij, rar, rar² thulath, jathaa ngurruwarra kabath, banga-diint, waradawuru diint, karwarrka diij dathinki ngurruwarray, mingungurr, kirdiy, kirdiya diija dathinki ngurruwarray, barduardu, kurrangk, matharr, dathinkiya diija ngurruwarray, bangaa, bijarrp, wanjiija jirrkar, ngarnkiiwath.

6 Barnkaldij, kurrija riya dulki rimaruth, rilungka rajurrij, barnkaldija jaljiya rukuthiy, jaljiya wuyirri, wuyirri jaljiya barnkaldij.

7 Rara thulath, jirmaja jathaa (ngurruwarray),
warngiid, rarungk, kurrkath, jirmaj,
jirrkurungka thaath, thaatha jirrkurungk, bada
wurduy, jirmaja kamarriya walmankarraruth,
kiwarnduruth, banga-diint, bijarrbawarri, bijarrba
diijarri dathinki ngurruwarray, banga-diint, bangaa
diij dathinki ngurruwarray, bada thaath, wurduy,
kiwarnduruth, yakuriya dathinkiya diij, dibirdibiy,
minyingkalt. Dibirdibiya minyingkalt, karndikarrmant.
Karndikarrmanda dathinkiya diij, duju, kirmurndu,
buranthant, wurrubarr, dawarra dathinkiya diija
ngurruwarray.

8 Thaldija kurrija rar, ee, warraja rarungk,
kirdiliya duuratha kamarriy jathaya
ngurruwarray, warngiiji ngurruwarray kirdiliya
duurath, dathina rarungk niya kurrkath, jirmaj,
rarungk, wurduya rar, wurduya kiwarndiruth,
walmunkarrarutha kamarr, rilungka wanjiij, jirrka
wanjiij, kalajalaja balungka thaath, jirmaj, badija
kamarriya nalmaruth wuu, kiwarndiruth, tharbarri,
tharbarriya ngurruwarraya kiwarnduruth.

Jirrkarr warraja jirrkurungk, kunyaa tharbarra kunyaa
bardubardu kunyaa bulthuku, rara kiwarndurutha
walmankarraruth, kiwarndiya wurdija kamarr,
wurdumaruth, bada jirmaja wurdu, jathaa wurdu,
wurduwa banki, bankiya kurrij, "dathinkuru diiju
yakuriy, wurrubarr, buranthant, dawarr, dathinkuru
diiju ngurruwarrayu".

9 Thaldija kurrija jirrka bankiy kuuj, kuujuuja
mardalka bulaaja, bankiy, bankiya kuujuuja
mardalka bulaaj jirrmanngarb, jirmajirrmanngarb,
jirmajirmaja ngurruwarray. Riinkiya warrkuya,
yulburriya warrkuy, jirmajirmaja niya ngurruwarray,
mardalbulaaj, mardalka bulaaja bankiy, bankiy
mardalka bulaaj, kuujuuj, kunyaya bankiy, jirrkarr
wanjiij, ngarnda balungka thaath, karnaja kaburrbay,
burukuraaja burukuratha wijiriy, kunawuna buruth,
burrij, wijiriy bardangu, burukurath, waduwa
wunkurriya kabath, karnaj, yaluluwa burrij, ngamanda
bardakawarri, thawalda wanjiij jirrkarr, wirrngaj,
wirrngaja thawali, bardakawuyiij, bardakawuyiija
niwanji, thawaliya wirrngaj, jirrkaanda thaath, diija
kaburrbay, barnkaldij, barnkaldija wurdij.

10 riya dulkiya kurrij, rilungku warraju, rabij,
thardamarutha kurrumbu wumburungk,
murruku marmaruth, rarungk, thulatha ngarnkiwath,
ee, ngarnda rilungk, rajurrij, rilungka rajurrij, kabara
jirrkaand, Jiilki jirrkaanda thulath, ngarnki. Ngarnda
rilungk, ee, niwanda wakath, danda riy, Jiilki, jiilkiya
niwanda wakath, diijjarri niwanda wakath, Jiilki.
wambali jirrkaanda warraja niwanda wakath, rara
barjajara Barjajara niwanda wakath, dathina niwanji
marrway buda jirrkaand, yuthij, rar, niwanda kularrint,
dathinmaanda dangkaa, Rangurrngawaanda dangkaa.

11 dathina barjajara balath, balatha wululbuy, warirr, riinmarri jawinmarri. darrngkaa, darrngkaa riinmarri jawinmarri, dakarrdiny, ralkaralk, dibirdibi, dibirdibiya kirmurndu, riinmarri jawinmarri rayinmarri jawinmarri jirrkaanmarri warirr. Rirrka waraaja rilungk “Ee danda riinda burrij, jungarra dibirdibi” Kurdalaaj, nalda rayiij, jawinmarri, wululbuyada diij, rirrka waraaja rilungk, kurirr, Darrbuuja banmaruth, “Danda riinda niy, burrij”.

12 Dathinmaanda dangkaa, kaarrkuwa dathinmaand, jirrkardirri Jiilki. Bujuku riya jirrkardirri, balatha jathaya barjajay, warngiiji barjajay jirrkardirri bujuku balath, bada Rangurrngawaanda dangkaa. dathina dangkaa, dathinkiya dangkaya kurdalath, minyingkaliya raaj, darrbuuj, jirrkaanda jawij, bujuku. wakatha niwanda kurrij, walmathinguni, jirrkaand, warraja ngarnki, wakirinwakirind. bujuku thaldija bardarriy, minyingkali, mirniwarrkiya dangkaa.

13 Rangurrngangathi, dathinkidirri barrij, Rangurrngangathiya dangkaa, jungarra dangkaa, niya raaj thangakara wumburuwarri, kujjiwarri, wumburungkuru thangakarawuru, thangakarawuru wumburungkuru dathina kurdalath, jirrkardirri ngudiija karmid, karmida jirrkardirri ngudiij, minyingkalt, jirrkardirriid, darrbuyiij, jirrkardirri, kamarriya ngukuy kuujuuj, darrbuuja wirrkaj, wirrkajarmatha darrbuuj, kuujuuj, wirrkajarmatha darrbuuja kuujuuj, jirrkardirri ngudiija karmid, jirrkardirri barjija karmid. Dathina barrkija wandawandawuru, narrawuru kalath.

14 Thungkuwa warrant, wululbu mardarr, wululbuya niya badij, walmathi rulungk, kurrkaaja wululbu, walmathi rulungk, kurrkaaja wululbu, balumbanji dulki na rayiij, kabatharri mirrayalath kunyaa murndamurr, Duurathi, Karndingarrbay, Nathayiwint, the black crane was missed trying to kill him after that rock cod warraja ni, dathina rulungka ni, wululbuya badij, Crane bin travel, niwanda wakatha kamburij: “Warraa ngijinda kularrind, wambalwarraanki”.



Mangroves, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.



Rukathi, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Anna Kreij.

DUGAL GOONGARRA: CRANE, SEAGULL AND ROCK COD ENGLISH TRANSLATION

1 “My brother has been going along southward through the bush for a long time. Far out at sea. After travelling through the bush, my brother is far out at sea, and will come up on Sweers Island, on Sweers Island he’ll come ashore. After travelling through the bush for a long time, my brother is far out to sea. He will land eastwards on Sweers Island (across the sea to the southeast). He will land on Sweers Island, will land on Sweers Island. My brother has been travelling along for a long time. He’s far off, way out at sea. He’s been heading eastwards far out at sea, my brother, for a long time”.

2 She (Seagull) went along travelling, carrying a coolamon under her arm. She held up her coolamon towards the east, his (Crane’s) sister carried it under her arm. Crane looked from the north (for his sister), from the east he cast his eye: “My sister has sat down far in the east at Burririya. At Burririya my sister has sat down”.

3 His sister came from the north, went walking around from Burririya in the north. She saw him “Hey, he’s sitting down on Sweers Island”. Her brother was staying on Sweers Island.

4 He went south. He built up the fish trap, carried stones. Built the corner coming from the east. First, he built up the corner of the fish trap coming from the east and a corner in the west. Built up a bulge towards the south, went along building up the fish trap. Finished the corner, finished it with a high corner. Going south he moved it along to the east, building on another corner, made it go further, (until) it came to rest high, near the beach, yeah.

5 He went eastward, then came to rest in the south, went down to the south, and found another (place for a) fish trap, (a place where) turtles get trapped, where trevally get trapped. Queenfish get trapped in that fish trap. Purple rock cod and coral trout, coral trout get trapped in that fish trap. Spangled perch, white school bream, nail fish get caught there in the fish trap. Turtles and dugongs go up onto the beach.

6 (Black Crane) sat with his legs crossed and looked at the land in the east, looked east and (then) travelled eastward. He sat cross-legged in the shadow of a casuarina tree, in the shade of a casuarina tree he sat cross-legged.

7 (He) went down to the south and built another fish trap. To the south, he took (stones), piled (them) up, went back northward, went back northward. In the west, at the corner, (he) piled the stones up high, made it high. Turtles get caught (there) but not dugongs, dugongs don't get caught in that fish trap. Turtles get caught there, turtles get caught in that fish trap. (He) went back west, at the corner, he built it high. Fish got caught in that one, rock cod, groper. Rock cod, groper, and greasy cod. Greasy cod got caught in that one, small rock cod, long-tailed rock cod. Bonefish, herrings of different kinds got trapped there in the fish trap.

8 He stood up and looked to the south, yeah, went to the south. and stuck stones in the back of it. Another fish trap, he stuck one fish trap behind another. There to the south he took it. Built it up southward, south at the corner, he built it high at the corner. Raised the stones high. Went up eastward, went up north. Moved all around heading back west, piled them up, carried the stones, put them on his head, made the corner high, made the corner of the fish trap high. (He) went north, to the north. A small corner, a small, low, really small one. Made it high in the south, the stones are really high (there). Put another corner on, and in the west built up a corner, and another corner. The corner lagoon, he looked at the lagoon (i.e. the enclosed body of water in the fish trap), and said: "Fish will get caught there (now). Giant herrings and bonefish will get caught there in the fish trap".

9 '(He) stood and looked at the north lagoon, bathed in the lagoon and cleaned the mud off himself, bathed in the lagoon and cleaned mud off himself, after building, after building and building, he had built fish traps all over the place. Since morning, for a long time he had been building fish traps. He cleaned mud off himself in the lagoon, cleaned mud off himself in the lagoon, bathed in the small lagoon. He went ashore in the north, went back westwards along the beach, and lit a fire, made a fire with (his) fire drill, rubbed fire sticks together, a big fire stick, and took a small one, rubbed them, and smoke came up. He put the flame in some dried grass, burned it, and the flames came up, he was hungry, hungry. A yam (vine) was running up in the north, and he dug, dug up yams. He had dinner, dug up yams, and came back from the north, sat down by the fire, stayed there sitting with his legs crossed.

10 He looked at the country in the east, wanting to go east. He got up and put his pronged spear on his shoulder, and his spears, and took his woomera in his hand, and went down southward to the beach. Yeah, eastward along the beach he travelled, he travelled eastward. From the salt pan in the north, from Jiilki in the north, going down onto the beach. Going eastward along the beach, yeah, (he saw) his sister (coming down) here in the east. Jiilki, his sister was at Jiilki. His sister didn't stay at Jiilki. She had gone through the bush from the north, his sister, (and was) in the south at the fishing spot. His sister was at the fishing spot, there near him, she had come after him from the north. Her brother was ahead of her, in the south, the one from there, the custodian of Sweers Island.

11 There at fishing spot he was pounding, he pounded the bait, but nothing, from the east no (fish) were running, no barracuda were running from the east, no slender barracuda or pike, no rock cod or long-tailed rock cod were running from the east, or from the south or running from the north, nothing. The fat was thrown to the east (as bait). “Hey, here comes a big rock cod from the east.” It was speared in the head, and didn’t escape, it just stayed there by the bait. It was dead, he dragged it to the west. “Here he comes from the east” (thinks his sister).

12 The person from there, Seagull, from there, was in the north at Jilki. Crane was in the northeast, he pounded (bait) at another fishing spot. At a certain fishing spot in the north, Crane was pounding (bait). The fellow from Sweers was in the west. He speared that fellow, speared Groper, ran along dragging him from the north, Crane did. His sister saw him, from high up to the north, as she went along the beach carrying a coolamon. Crane was standing by the rock cod’s tail, by the Groper, as victor in the hunt.



13 ‘[Groper] was born at that place, he was a Sweers Island person. A great big fellow, he speared him with a handle, not with a barbed spear but just with a spear shaft. Its liver was thrown to the north, in the north the liver was thrown. Groper was dragged northward, in the north, and (Crane) bathed in the water by the rocks.’ He dragged (Groper) along as it danced, he made (Groper’s body) dance as he dragged it along through the water. He dragged it along through the water making it dance. Its liver was thrown away to the north, its liver fell in the north. He chopped it up there with an axe, cut it with a shell knife.

14 Going along through the mangrove scrub, (with) stingray bait. He carried the bait, high up going eastwards, the bait was taken. High up going eastwards the bait was taken, (Rock Cod) had been speared at in the country to the west, (but) (the spear) didn’t find him. (As he swam, Rock Cod) made the little islands, Duurathi, Karndingarrbay, Nathayiiwind. Black Crane had missed killing him earlier and after that Rock Cod had gone around, He had gone eastwards there, (Crane) had carried the bait, Crane had travelled, and his sister said: “My brother is far off, he is travelling a long way”.

Rukathi, Bentinck
Island. Image credit:
Daniel Rosendahl.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

ARTWORK

Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin

Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands

Acrylic on canvas. 20 metres x 2 metres.

CABAH Art Series commission in association with Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation, Mornington Island Art (MIArt).

ARTISTS

Rayarriwarrtharrbayingat Amy Loogatha (Kaiadilt)

Thunduyingathui Bangaa Dolly Loogatha (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Elsie Gabori (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Agnes Kohler (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Dorothy Gabori (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Amanda Gabori (Kaiadilt)

Juda Juda Rukuthingathi Bereline Loogatha (Kaiadilt)

Gloria Gavenor (Gangalidda/Lardil)

Kuthakin Coralie Thompson (Guthagun/Lardil)

Madar Joelene Roughsey (Lardil)

CREDITS

Managing Editors: Jacqueline Wales, Conni Lord

Design: Paul Martens

Authors: John Armstrong, Nicholas Evans, Lucy Hughes, Anna Kreij, Bereline Loogatha, Paul Memmott, Coreen Reading Walawa, Sean Ulm, Mornington Island Art Centre (MIArt)

Photography: Nicholas Evans, Anna Kreij, Michael Marzik, Martin Potter, Daniel Rosendahl, Sean Ulm, Mornington Island Art Centre

The artwork and the research featured have been supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council Centres of Excellence scheme (Project Number CE170100015). Views expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.



