

38

Lin Onus

(1948-1996)
Yorta Yorta language group

Bulla Goonyah 1993
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182.0 x 182.0 cm
signed lower right: Lin Onus

PROVENANCE
The Estate of Lin Onus, Melbourne
Thence by descent, private collection, Melbourne

EXHIBITED
Lin Onus: Yinya Wala, Messum's, London, 28 June - 3 July 2016; Mossgreen, Melbourne, 4-28 August 2016; Jan Manton Art, Brisbane, 9-24 September 2016; Mossgreen, Sydney, 8-30 October 2016 (label attached verso; illus. exhibition catalogue)

\$350,000 - \$500,000

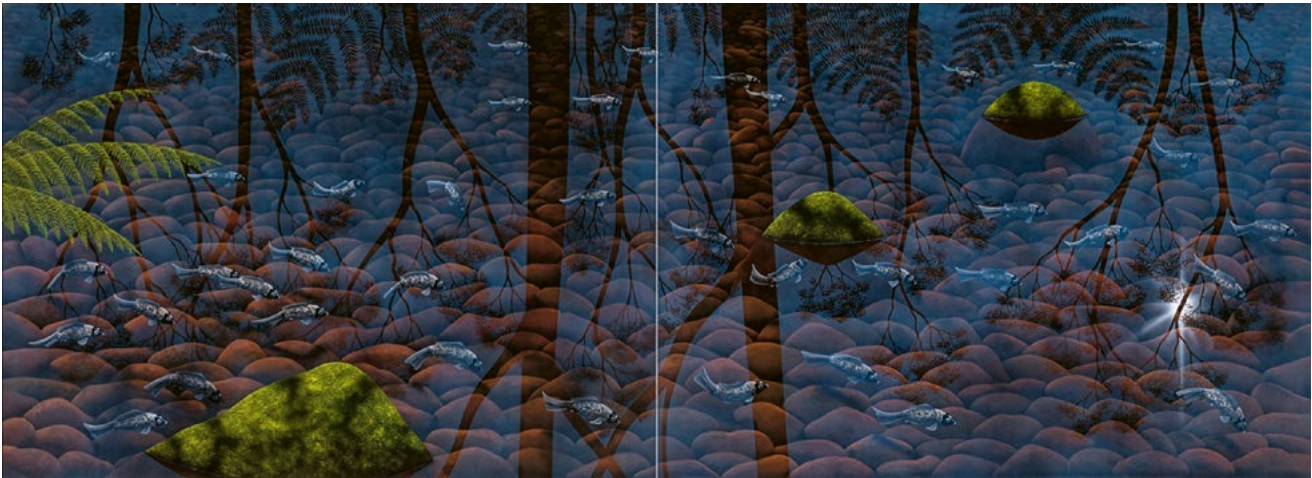
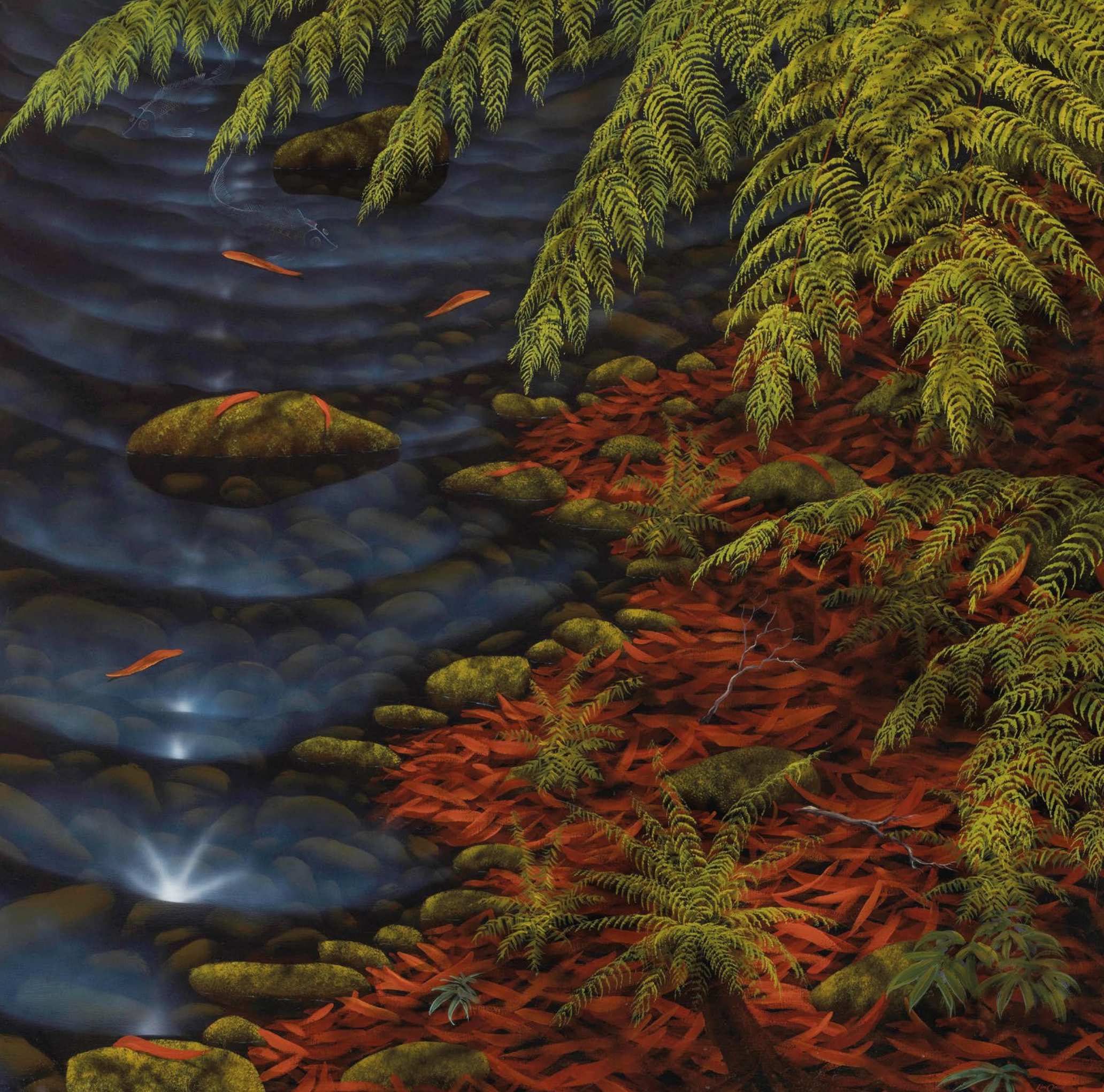


Figure 1
Fish, Ferns and Rocks 1995
synthetic polymer paint on canvas (diptych)
200.0 x 550.0 cm (overall)
Sold Sotheby's, Sydney, 16 May 2018, lot 10, \$793,000 (including buyer's premium)



Bulla Goonyah (translated as *Two Fish*) is a beautifully composed visual counterpoint about Indigenous ways of seeing, in which Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus orchestrates ecological knowledge and cultural memory across different visual registers. In so doing, he rewards our attentive looking with a deeper respect for Country.

Onus frequently employed visual and conceptual paradoxes to unsettle expectations. Characteristic of his intellectual wit, the title itself contains a quiet pun. 'Two Fish' sounds disarmingly literal yet also invites us 'to fish' for something beyond the immediately visible.

While the title identifies the painting's ostensible subject, the two fish are not instantly evident. Concealed in the dark water beside a submerged rock at the upper left, they are revealed through sustained attention. By contrast, the orange forms of fallen leaves scattered across the rippled water are conspicuous and initially distracting.

Onus's title is instructional – we must search for the fish between the painting's two visual registers: the conspicuous mobile surface accents of fern leaves, gum leaves, ripples and glinting sunlight, and the subdued pebbled underwater floor.

Depicting contradictory and ambivalent space was Onus's political forte. These works question narratives by challenging one's 'viewing position'— preconceptions and assumptions – in a transcendental aesthetic engagement about cultural hegemony. With the fish camouflaged, Onus asks us to adopt a different mode of looking, to look beyond the surface of things to what lies beneath.¹ Once found, we wonder why we failed to see the fish in the first place.

In *Bulla Goonyah*, Onus constructs an experience of *cross-cultural perception*, one that quietly recurs throughout his water-based oeuvre. Through his expert handling of transparency and reflection, water functions as a threshold; one is uncertain whether we are looking into the depths, across its surface, or the reflections upon it. *Bulla Goonyah*'s fish therefore occupy a liminal space. They are neither fully visible nor fully concealed, much like the cultural knowledge and ancestral presence that permeates Onus's paintings.

This is the inverse of Western illusionism from the Renaissance onwards. Where European naturalism sought to reveal the world through increasing optical clarity, Onus employs photorealism to achieve something almost opposite: the more convincing the illusion, the more it can conceal. His technical virtuosity slows perception rather than accelerating it, recalibrating the act of looking itself.

Onus's many 'spiritual pilgrimages' to Arnhem Land, his Yolngu kinship and initiation and his personal relationship with acclaimed artist Djiwul 'Jack' Wunuwun (1930–1991), enriched his physical and spiritual worldview, and animated his mixed race/mixed cultural 'in-between space.'² It also heavily influenced his vision and optimism for his legacy: 'I kind of hope that history may see me as some sort of bridge between cultures ...'³

That aspiration is realised in *Bulla Goonyah*, where the act of looking at itself becomes a bridge between cultural ways of knowing. For non-Yorta Yorta, the title *Bulla Goonyah* has no immediate semantic meaning. Like the fish, its significance is not instantly known. The title therefore mirrors the painting's purpose: understanding comes through patient engagement rather than immediate recognition. Even after we know where the fish are, we still find ourselves looking for them again – as though the painting is teaching us, each time, to see more carefully.

Bulla Goonyah may depict one of the many lagoons or billabongs throughout Onus's ancestral spiritual locus, the Barmah Forest, an important floodplain forest ecosystem that straddles the Murray River on the NSW–Victoria border. The Barmah is not just an ecosystem, but a cultural landscape, where ecology, history and archaeology are inseparable. Scarred trees, earth mounds and occupation sites record thousands of years of Yorta Yorta custodianship, yet colonial ways of seeing were often blind to this relationship.

Margo Neale observed that Lin Onus 'wrote his own history', and in so doing 'he not only raised questions about the place Aboriginal art occupies in Australian art history, and his location within each, but its inextricable relationship to colonial history.'⁴



Figure 2
Bulla Goonyah (Two Fish)
 synthetic polymer paint on compressed card
 27.0 x 63.0 cm
 Sold Menzies, Sydney, 31 March 2021, lot 17, \$90,818 (including buyer's premium)

The concealment of the two fish acquires particular force within the history of colonial seeing – as in comprehension – of the landscape. Indigenous presence was seldom literally invisible to explorers and settlers who encountered people, camps, fishing places and managed environments. Yet such evidence was repeatedly detached from the country in which it was observed; treated as incidental within landscapes construed as unexplored or awaiting productive use. In *Bulla Goonyah*, Onus reverses this phenomenon, and visibility becomes an ethical test. The fish are neither absent nor prominent; but nonetheless there, accommodated within the watery shadows. Their discovery depends upon us relinquishing our rapid, acquisitive glance and learning instead to realise and recognise presences in the landscape not automatically disclosed.

Barmah itself intensifies this proposition. The forest at times appears dry and dormant, while retaining within its soils, channels and floodplain depressions the conditions of latent abundance. Its ecology depends upon cyclical processes not always apparent at the moment of looking. Similarly, Onus's barely visible fish insist that a state of non-apparency is not absence: the critical inter-relationship and interdependence of human presence and Country exist, regardless of the limits of uninitiated seeing.

The vegetation in *Bulla Goonyah* is not, however, wholly descriptive of Barmah's floodplain ecology. Onus frequently constructed landscapes that he wanted to be perceived as culturally and ecologically true rather than topographically correct. The luxuriant fern canopy is suggestive of the cool, wet forests of Victoria's Dandenong Ranges where Onus lived and worked, rather than Barmah's open river-red-gum woodland. This ecological compression transforms *Bulla Goonyah* from a particular locality into an intimate composite of Country.

The political power of *Bulla Goonyah*'s aesthetic beauty is subtle, or as Margo Neale sees it, deceptively straightforward: '... things are not always what they seem.'⁵ Onus's watery works are no less interpolative than much of his overtly satirical painted protests. His declaration that there is 'no distinction between the political and the beautiful' manifests itself in his watery landscapes, where ethical questions surface with deep aesthetic engagement.⁶ These concerns permeated Onus's mature practice and explain the extraordinary critical and institutional recognition his work received, with acknowledgement of his standing culminating in the bestowal of Member of the Order of Australia in 1993.



Figure 3
Birrikala Djini Bunarong Bugaja (Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest) 1993
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 242.0 x 242.0 cm
 Private collection

Onus's works were regularly selected for defining exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art, including *Koori Art '84, A Changing Relationship: Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art 1938-88, Australian Perspecta 1991, Crossroads: Towards a New Reality: Aboriginal Art from Australia, Strangers in Paradise: Contemporary Australian Art to Korea, Aratjara: Art of the First Australians* (1993), and *Power of the Land: Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art* (1994). Significantly, his oeuvre has also been the focus of eighteen solo exhibitions, including the important posthumous retrospective, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996* (Queensland Art Gallery, 2000 and national tour 2001), *Lin Onus: Eternal Landscape* (Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, 2019), and most recently, *Lin Onus: The Land Within* at Shepparton Art Museum (2021).

Lin Onus remains one of the country's most sought-after and important contemporary artists, with a legacy much greater than his modest hopes. His paintings continue to bridge ways of seeing, inviting deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and the enduring inseparability of ecology and culture. Like ripples across his reflective watery surfaces, works such as *Bulla Goonyah* generate new narratives within and beyond post-colonial discourse,⁷ reshaping understandings of Australian landscape as 'a cultural archive.'⁸

FOOTNOTES

1. Lindsay, F., *Lin Onus: Yinya Wala* [exhibition catalogue], Mossgreen Gallery, Melbourne, 2016, p.3
2. Lévi-Strauss, C., quoted in Neale, M., *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, Craftsman House, Sydney in association with the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2000, p.16
3. Lin Onus, quoted in Kleinert, S. & Neale, M., *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p.667
4. Neale, M., 'Tributes: Lin Onus, A Cultural Terrorist of Gentle Irreverence', *Artlink*, Issue 20:1, March 2000, p.31
5. Neale, M. et al, *Lin Onus: a Cultural Mechanic* [exhibition catalogue], Savill Galleries, Melbourne, 2003, p.1
6. This nexus in Indigenous art is considered at length in Ferrell, R., *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012
7. Sequeira, D., *Lin Onus: Eternal Landscape* [exhibition catalogue], Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, 2019, p.3
8. Sylvia Kleinert, quoted in Leslie, D., 'Coming Home to the Land', *Eureka Street*, Melbourne, vol.16, no.2, 2006, p.31

Jane Raffan

Jane Raffan is an accredited valuer under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Program. Her arts consultancy encompasses curatorial services, collection management, and a broad range of humanities-based research and writing.