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Sally Gabori

(c1924-2015)
Kayardild language group

Dibirdibi **2009**
synthetic polymer paint on linen
196.0 x 100.0 cm
bears inscription verso: Artist: Sally Gabori/ Title: Dibirdibi Country/ Cat No: 4232-L-SG-0409/ Medium synthetic polymer/ paint on linen

PROVENANCE
Mornington Island Art Centre, Queensland (stock no.4232-L-SG-0409)
Private collection, Sydney
Private collection, South Australia

accompanied by a certificate of authenticity from The Estate of Sally Gabori, signed by Beverly Knight

EXHIBITED
KG Contemporary at Art Miami, Miami, 2-7 December 2025

$40,000 - $60,000

Dibirdibi on Bentinck Island is Country rich in ancestral, familial and lived meaning for Sally Gabori. John McPhee identified it among her most frequent subjects; Djon Mundine, too, noted its persistence in her oeuvre. *Dibirdibi* is not, however, a single motif. It is at once a varied place of saltpans, mangroves, swamps and sea. Metaphysically, it is a landscape charged with personal memory and harmonised with ancestral significance: *Dibirdibi* also being the name of the Rock Cod Ancestor, whose creation journey encompasses formation of channels and freshwater springs across the South Wellesley Islands.[1]

Gabori's art repeatedly returned to *Dibirdibi* without resolving a fixed image of place. As Terence Maloon observed, 'the stridency of colour and kinetic vigour never settled into a cliché'. Mundine explained her paintings as personal maps and memory walks,[2] in which sites acquire varied significance through tides, seasons, animals, birth, death and kinship. The same place might be recalled through a saltpan, a mangrove swamp, a freshwater hunting ground, or simply as 'my husband's country'.

Saltpans abound within this pictorial vocabulary. Mundine noted Gabori's 'beautifully swept lines' indicating rivers, saltpans and vegetated spaces, citing a work in which 'a large saltpan ... arcs its way across' her husband's Country.[3] Elsewhere, saltpan meets mangrove beside the sea, runs across Country, expands into 'the big saltpan', or becomes 'saltpan country' itself. Mundine understood such forms as more than topographical description: saltpans, mudflats, fish traps, reef rings, rivers and forests fuse 'colourful maps' with recollections of loved ones.[4]

Bruce Johnson McLean observed that *Dibirdibi* works with white as a major element often speak to inland floodplains – swollen rivers in the wet season and shimmering saltpans in the dry.[5] The present work, *Dibirdibi*, is a picture laden with emotional charge – a long white stretch of Country courses through fields of intense colour; another is caught, edged and redirected by darker currents, each enveloped in saturated colour of elemental intensity. Nothing settles into conventional topography. Instead, place is felt through expansion and contraction, separation and meeting, the sweep of a remembered course through Country known bodily, like a heartbeat.

Other *Dibirdibi* paintings extend this possibility. Saltpan country can arc, divide, thread, flare or dissolve; at times a dark seam cleaves broad fields, at others, pale passages widen and fragment until the whole surface seems to breathe around them.[6] What persists is a spatial rhythm – arc, seam, passage and division – through which *Dibirdibi* is revisited. The saltpan is less topographical artefact and more mnemonic device: a spatial plane through which Country emerges ... recollection enacted, rather than illustrated.

McPhee cautioned that without Gabori's own explanation, the precise subjects of her paintings could only be guessed. Their forms remain grounded in Country without forming a stable lexicon; recurrence is not repetition. In Gabori's hands, saltpan, mangrove and swamp are not signs to be decoded so much as conditions through which remembered place takes pictorial form – mutable, relational and alive.[7]

By 2009, four years after taking up a brush, Gabori had developed a language capable of holding physical place and interpersonal memory in the same pictorial field. In *Dibirdibi*, the saltpan becomes both landform and conduit: a sweeping presence through Country, carrying what Maloon termed the 'elemental energies of nature and memory traces of ancestral landscape' into colour and gesture.[8]

Gabori's emergence was as swift as it was singular. By 2012, her work had entered major public collections in Australia and abroad, followed by international exhibitions including the 55th Venice Biennale (2013). Posthumous recognition included a retrospective at the NGV (2016), and major solo exhibitions at Fondation Cartier, Paris (2022) and Triennale Milano (2023).

From intensely personal acts of remembering, Gabori forged a pictorial language of remarkable cross-cultural immediacy, now recognised as a defining achievement of contemporary Australian painting, and as Mundine concluded, part of the 'artistic zeitgeist' of our times.[9]

FOOTNOTES

1. McPhee, J., 'Danda ngijinda dulk, danda ngijinda malaa, danda ngad – This Is My Land, This Is My Sea, This Is Who I Am', in *Sally Gabori* [exhibition catalogue], Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, 2013, p.25; Mundine, D., 'The Road to Bentinck Island: Sally Gabori', in Mundine, D., and Baker, C., *Gabori: The Corrigan Collection of Paintings by Sally Gabori*, Macmillan Art Publishing, Melbourne, 2015, pp.13, 27
2. Maloon, T., 'Foreword', in *Sally Gabori*, op. cit., p.7; Mundine, D., op. cit., p.21
3. Mundine, D., op. cit., p.16
4. Ibid., p.27
5. McLean, B.J., 'A gift of works by Sally Gabori', *Sally Gabori: Land of All*, QAGOMA Collection Online, July 2017 (accessed 19 October 2026): https://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/index.php/page/gift-works-sally-gabori
6. Ref. examples in Mundine and Baker, op. cit., pls.46-47, pp.112-13, pl.58, p.127, pl.82, pp.158-59, pl.97, pp.184-85, pl.99, pp.188-89
7. McPhee, J., op. cit., p.29
8. Maloon, T., op. cit., p.7
9. Mundine, D., op. cit., p.27

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.

