

## 25. LIN ONUS

(1948-1996)

Yorta Yorta language group

### *Moonlight at Numerili 2* 1993

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

182.0 x 182.0 cm

signed lower right: Lin Onus

inscribed verso: 032/ SM5/ "MOONLIGHT AT NUMERILI 2"/ #9508

#### PROVENANCE

The Estate of Lin Onus

Thence by descent, private collection, Melbourne

#### EXHIBITED

(probably) *Lin Onus: There and Back: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings and Sculpture*, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne, 15 July – 17 August 1993

*Super Art 2016*, Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane, 14 April – 15 May 2016 (stock no.FW14861)

\$320,000 - \$420,000

Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus has been described as a 'provocateur who believed that there was no distinction between the political and the beautiful.'<sup>1</sup> A self-declared 'cultural mechanic',<sup>2</sup> Onus challenged cultural hegemonies with satire and humour in overt political installations and by showcasing his Indigenous connection to country in his imagery of the natural world.

*Moonlight at Numerili 2* stems from a sublime corpus of paintings depicting bodies of water, whose aesthetic power enthralled. Executed in a peerless photo-realist style with great technical virtuosity, they comprise carefully contrived layers of imagery; elements of which are sometimes, at least initially, obscured by the reflected sky or landscape. These paintings are poetic and potent statements of Indigenous cultural authority – Onus's 'understanding of what lies beneath the surface of things.'<sup>3</sup>

In *Moonlight at Numerili 2*, this authority is brought to bear through circular compositional devices designed to mesmerise: the central obscured moon at first transfixes the viewer, whose gaze is then carried on a vortex current around the inky cloud and its tantalising, luminous edges. This pattern of engagement, invoking concentration through circular movement, is an effective device in hypnosis; more commonly experienced as hypnagogic consciousness, the state of transition from wakefulness to sleep. This dreamlike visual effect is pervasive in Onus's watery reflections,<sup>4</sup> where it operates to make transparency illusory:

... things are not always what they seem. Laden with cross-cultural references, visual deceits, totemic relationships and a sense of displacement, they, amongst other things, challenge one's viewing position: Are you looking up through water

towards the sky, down into a waterhole from above, across the surface only or all three positions simultaneously?<sup>5</sup>

Formal elements in *Moonlight at Numerili 2* showcase Onus's gift for composition, but there are more profound concerns at play; a deeper metaphysical passage. The journey began with the viewer encircling the picture plane, tracking the fish weaving in and out between the water weeds, up and down the water column ... and then the whirlpool is disrupted: a fish breaks the surface centre right, having loosed itself from the compositional tangle of weeds and reflected trees. The dreamlike state is punctuated; the viewer is asked to consider their place in this otherworldly realm: where do you belong? Are you intruder or kin?

This sense of dislocation – being a 'fish out of water' – certainly affected Melbourne-born Onus, having grown up disconnected from his Yorta Yorta heritage and in a family similarly disconnected from country: his father and uncle were born and raised at Cummeragunja Christian mission on the northern banks of the Murray River.

Clever pictorial cues were Onus's political forte, enabling him to challenge preconceptions and change narratives. *Moonlight at Numerili 2* is among Onus's most ethereal works: an upside-down landscape in the sky, with fish swimming through the heavens. What will the moonlight illuminate when the cloud passes? A moment of revelation for the viewer, or an annunciation? Are we looking at 'our' heavens, an idealised (and threatened) landscape, or a scene laden with unseeable Indigenous significance? Here, a challenge to one's





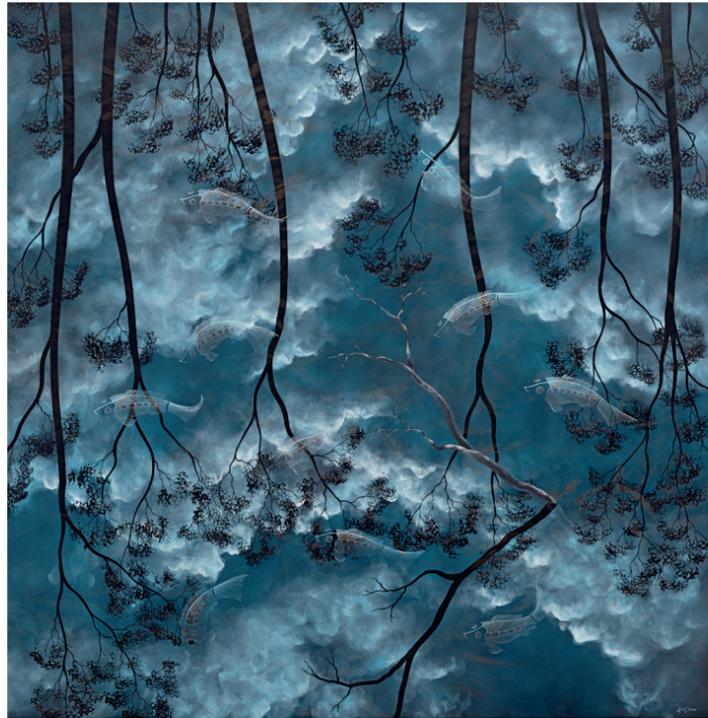


Figure 1  
*Fish and Storm Clouds* (Guyi Na Ngawalngawal) 1994  
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
 183.0 x 183.0 cm  
 Sold Menzies, Sydney, 28 March 2019, lot 38,  
 \$515,454 (including buyer's premium)

*'I kind of hope that history may see me as some sort of bridge between cultures ....'*

Lin Onus

'viewing position' is a statement about hegemony and our own cultural assumptions.

Within the western painting canon, nocturnes have few masters, and within that coterie only a few nineteenth century artists utilised the genre to court the transcendental, wherein the obscured stood in for something other than the unseen. In *Moonlight at Numerili 2*, Onus's hypnogogic watery imagery evokes the realm of the Everywhen in the same way as does the spiritually laden optical effects in men's desert painting, or the shimmer produced by bark painters from the Top End. These diverse pictorial properties affect the physical self with a sensation that functions as an allusion to the spiritual realm and its 'eternal becoming... the totality of Indigenous knowledge and its future potential, made alive through both its immediate and continuing transmission... the Dreaming pushes ancestral memory into the present.'<sup>6</sup>

Onus's personal history, including the social and political activism of his family, along with his experience of racism, coloured the intellectual tone of his art and fuelled fertile iconographic ground, wherein his sanctioned use of cross-hatching designs known as *rarrk* was a tool for indigenising the Other, as well as an apparatus for subverting the primacy of western systems of representation.<sup>7</sup>

Onus's many 'spiritual pilgrimages' to Arnhem Land, his Yolngu kinship and initiation and his personal relationship with acclaimed artist Djiwul 'Jack' Wunuwun (1930-1990), enriched his physical self and his spiritual world view, and animated his mixed race/mixed cultural 'in-between space'.<sup>8</sup> 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 ...'<sup>9</sup>

Onus's oeuvre can be seen as interjecting in the pantheon of epic historical Australian landscapes painted by white men and influencing the writing of a new narrative, a process elsewhere described as responding to the landscape as 'a cultural archive'.<sup>10</sup> His emphasis on reflection and water surface in his mature resolved work has been recently defined as 'a call for deep consideration of one's experience of life, or more specifically, to make connections between oneself and the world';<sup>11</sup> a new narrative within and beyond the discourse and post-colonial imperative of decolonisation.

Onus's art requires Australians to think about ourselves and the country we inhabit, and in so-doing Onus became one of Australia's acclaimed contemporary artists of renown. Onus's oeuvre has been the focus of more than eighteen solo exhibitions, including the important retrospective, *Urban Dingo: the Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, organised by the

Queensland Art Gallery in 2000, which toured nationally in 2001, and recently, *Lin Onus: Eternal Landscape* (Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, 2019). Group show highlights include the ground-breaking exhibitions: *KooriArt '84* (Artspace, Sydney), *A Changing Relationship: Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art 1938-88* (S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney), *Australian Perspecta 1991* (Art Gallery of New South Wales), *Crossroads: Towards a New Reality: Aboriginal Art from Australia* (Museums of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan, 1992), *Strangers in Paradise: Contemporary Australian Art to Korea* (Art Gallery of New South Wales and National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea, 1992), *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians* (Germany, London, Denmark, National Gallery of Victoria, 1993), and *Power of the Land: Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art* (National Gallery of Victoria, 1994).

Onus's important messages about valuing Indigenous peoples, their knowledge systems and culture, and respecting our natural world have reached across divides. 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.<sup>12</sup> As one of the country's most sought-after artists, and whose work has strong international appeal, Lin Onus's artistic legacy is already much greater than he had modestly hoped.



Figure 2  
*Morumbeeja Pitoa (Floods and Moonlight)* 1993  
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
 182.5 x 182.5 cm  
 Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art collection, Brisbane  
 Queensland Art Gallery Foundation, purchased 1995

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Eather, M., quoted in Lawson-Menzies, *Aboriginal Fine Art*, Sydney, 23 May 2007, p.58
2. Lin Onus, quoted in Eather, M., 'Lin Onus - Cultural Mechanic', *Artlink*, vol.10, no.1 & 2, p.80
3. Lindsay, F., *Lin Onus: Yinya Wala* [exhibition catalogue], Mossgreen, 2016, p.3
4. Morrissey, P., 'Urban Dingo', *Humanities Research Journal*, no.1, ANU Press, Canberra, 2000, p.104
5. Neale, M. et al, *Lin Onus: A Cultural Mechanic* [exhibition catalogue], Savill Galleries, Melbourne, 2003, p.1
6. The term 'everywhen' was coined by Australian anthropologist William Stanner in 1953: 'One cannot 'fix' the Dreaming in time; it was, and is, everywhen.' Curator Stephen Gilchrist utilised this concept in his exhibition *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Harvard Art Museums, February-September 2016, Yale University Press, United States of America, p.19
7. Neale, M., *Urban Dingo: the Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, Craftsman House in association with the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2000, p.16. Onus was granted permission to use *rarrk* by artist Djiwul 'Jack' Wunuwun (1930-1991), who adopted him into his Murrungun-Djinang clan in the late 1980s.
8. Levi-Strauss, quoted in Neale, M., *Urban Dingo*, p.16
9. Lin Onus, quoted in Kleinert, S. and Neale, M., *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.667
10. Kleinert, S., quoted in Leslie, D., 'Coming Home to the Land', *Eureka Street*, vol.16, no.2, 2006
11. Sequeira, D., *Lin Onus: Eternal Landscape* [exhibition catalogue], Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, 2019, p.31
12. This nexus in Indigenous art is considered at length in Ferrel, R., *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012

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