

AN AMERICAN DREAM OF ABORIGINAL ART



On show at the Seattle Art Museum, above: **Balgo Men's Collaborative** *Wirimanu (Balgo)* 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 181 x 296 cm, © the artists. Above right: **Mitjili Napanangka Gibson** *Wilinkarra* 2007, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 200 x 305 cm, © estate of the artist.

Seattle collectors Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan have been collecting Aboriginal art for as long as they have been married. On the eve of their 22nd wedding anniversary in June, they presided over the opening of *Ancestral Modern*, a major exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) showcasing over 120 Aboriginal works of art from their personal collection, all of which have been promised to the gallery. Margaret Levi has now fulfilled her long-held dream of formulating a museum quality collection, which, she readily notes “was born of chutzpah”, as she had “no reason to believe a US institution would be interested”.

On reflection, however, it is no surprise that Seattle’s premier institution was receptive to her bold plan. Seattle is a city of entrepreneurs. It is also a frontier city, built on the backs of those who went west, and then north to the Yukon to find their fortunes in gold. As it happened, the traders outfitting prospectors were the ones who grew rich. Just over a century later, the city’s contemporary wealth and character has been defined by early tech visionaries Microsoft and Amazon, underpinned by air industry giant Boeing, while the population at large is kept alert on Starbucks’ coffee.

SAM’s curator of African and Oceanic art, Pam McClusky, has been gazing across the Pacific Rim for more than a decade. A strong advocate of Australian Aboriginal art, her relationship with Levi and Kaplan has produced important firsts in the field: SAM is the only contemporary public institution in the US to have a permanent gallery dedicated to the display of Aboriginal art, inaugurated in 2007 and built around early donations by Levi and Kaplan; and in 2009 SAM was the first public institution world-wide to voluntarily return a sacred artefact, a stone *tjuringa*, to its Australian Aboriginal community.

From the outset, McClusky was astonished that Americans “could ignore something as significant as the longest art producing culture on the planet”. She believes *Ancestral Modern* poses “a chance to inaugurate an American awareness”. In this regard the exhibition and accompanying book also marks another first, in that it aims to bring new scholarship and a new artistic vocabulary to the reception and display of Aboriginal art in the US.

Wally Caruana, former senior curator of Aboriginal art at the National Gallery of Australia, co-curated the exhibition with McClusky. Their

professional and personal attitudes bring erudition and exuberance to the exhibition. Designed to encourage a broader understanding of the vast practice that is Aboriginal contemporary art, *Ancestral Modern* aims to move entrenched American expectations beyond dreaming narratives and notions of traditional iconography being centred on dot painting. In fact, the exhibition challenges audiences to cast aside presumptions about ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art altogether (hence no

‘dreaming’ in the title; an otherwise obvious museum drawcard).

Importantly in this regard, the contributing essay by an American contemporary art academic, Lisa Graziose Corrin, stages critical “conversations” between key works in the exhibition and other contemporary works in SAM’s collection. In a novel contrast, McClusky’s essay offers her audience a series of colloquially American reality checks, telling them to “Stop and Smell the Air in Blue Mud Bay”. For McClusky, the experience

Australian links beyond art

Margaret Levi’s connection to Australia dates back to 1984 when she came to this country to work on a social justice project through the ANU. She holds concurrent positions as chair in US politics and director of research and research training at the US Studies Centre, Sydney University, and Bacharach professor of international studies at the University of Washington. Robert Kaplan, a SAM Trustee since 2003, is a prominent lawyer who works on cases involving small business, charitable organisations, artists and authors. He serves on boards of non-profit and community organisations, and in 1996 was recognised by the American Bar Association for his pro bono work.

The book accompanying the exhibition, *Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art*, was published by Seattle Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012. Contributors are Pamela McClusky, Wally Caruana, Lisa Graziose Corrin (director of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum and a senior lecturer in art history, Northwestern University, Chicago) and Stephen Gilchrist (curator of Australian art, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire).

was all reward, citing her personal high as being able to travel to remote communities and meet the elders, whose perspectives “opened my eyes to a new way of thinking about the world”.

Amid the hoopla, Robert Kaplan is keen to point out that the exhibition is not a survey, nor is it comprehensive, as he and Margaret “only collect what we like”. Caruana and McClusky were given carte blanche to pick and choose the final selection, which concentrates on Eastern, Central and Western Desert painting, and works across the Top End, from Yirkala in the east, through Maningrida to the Kimberley in the west.

Occupying the same expansive space at SAM as the illustrious Parisian Picasso show (seen last summer at the AGNSW), *Ancestral Modern* is gloriously dramatic and generously well spaced. The show is organised along two major parallel arteries, with a middle gallery, known as the “spine”, offering a photographic glossary of

the landscape and its flora and fauna, and biographical information on the artists. The layout of the works in the galleries either side—from east to west and back east again—reflects the relative geography of the communities from which the works derive, as well as echoing a core narrative of many creation stories.

Narratives crisscrossing different cultures are offered in smaller bays where themes, such as ‘water’ and ‘portraiture’, are explored. And politics is not ignored, with minimal label text referencing important issues, such as the British atomic testing that dislocated the Spinifex people, and frontier massacres at the fore in the work of Kimberley artists. A broad historical overview is crafted in Caruana’s essay for the book, *The Bridge: A Brief History of Modern Aboriginal Art*.

Leading a tour through the exhibition space, Caruana explains that tradition is not ossified and that culturally authentic art is not tied to

a particular time period. The portrait room offers an intriguing juxtaposition of works by Ricky Maynard, Jarinyanu David Downs, Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Rerrkirrwanga Mununggurr. Caruana is at pains to distinguish European portraiture as identity—based on physical features—from an Aboriginal idea of cultural connectedness. In this sense he explains that portraiture can encompass painting clan designs, enacting an ancestral role through dance, or identifying with an animal totem represented on canvas. The audience is captivated. In the room dedicated to the work of John Mawurndjul, the shimmer in bark paintings created by *rarrk* (cross hatching) is likened to Byzantine gilt—each representing the essence of “the grace of god”—and the metaphor is accepted with nods and appreciative murmurs.

For Caruana, working out how to speak to a different audience posed the biggest challenge. In his essay he paraphrases Wanyubi Marika: “to

look at these paintings is like looking into a body of water: if you have the knowledge you can read the currents, tides, winds, and depth; if not, all you see is sunlight reflected off the surface – that is, the pure aesthetic effect. Both are required to fully appreciate a work of Aboriginal art”. The Seattle Art Museum, which was unable to secure interest from American institutions to tour the show, has taken a big risk investing in this exhibition, but the local press has been enthusiastic and attendance has been encouraging. *Ancestral Modern* is daring Americans to dive in headfirst and get to know the waters.

JANE RAFFAN

Jane Raffan has worked in the fine arts sector for over 20 years, including six years at the AGNSW. She runs ArtiFacts, a fine art valuation consultancy, and writes on the art market and Aboriginal art, including a forthcoming book, Power + Colour: New Painting from the Corrigan Collection of 21st Century Aboriginal Art.

Paintings below, from left: **Rosie Nangala Fleming** *Three Dreamings: Fire, Mulga Seed, and Emu*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 181 x 118 cm; **Yuendemu Women's Collaborative** *Mina Mina Jukurrpa (Mina Mina dreaming)*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150 x 120 cm; **Dorothy Robinson Napangardi** *Salt*, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 168 x 244 cm. All works © the artists. All photos courtesy SAM and © Nathaniel Willson 2012.

