

PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION, SWITZERLAND

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## Lin Onus

(1948-1996)

Yorta Yorta language group

*Cloud Fish* 1994

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

182.0 x 182.0 cm

signed lower right: Lin Onus

bears inscription verso: 049/SN18

### PROVENANCE

Savill Galleries, Melbourne

Private collection, Switzerland

\$300,000 - \$400,000



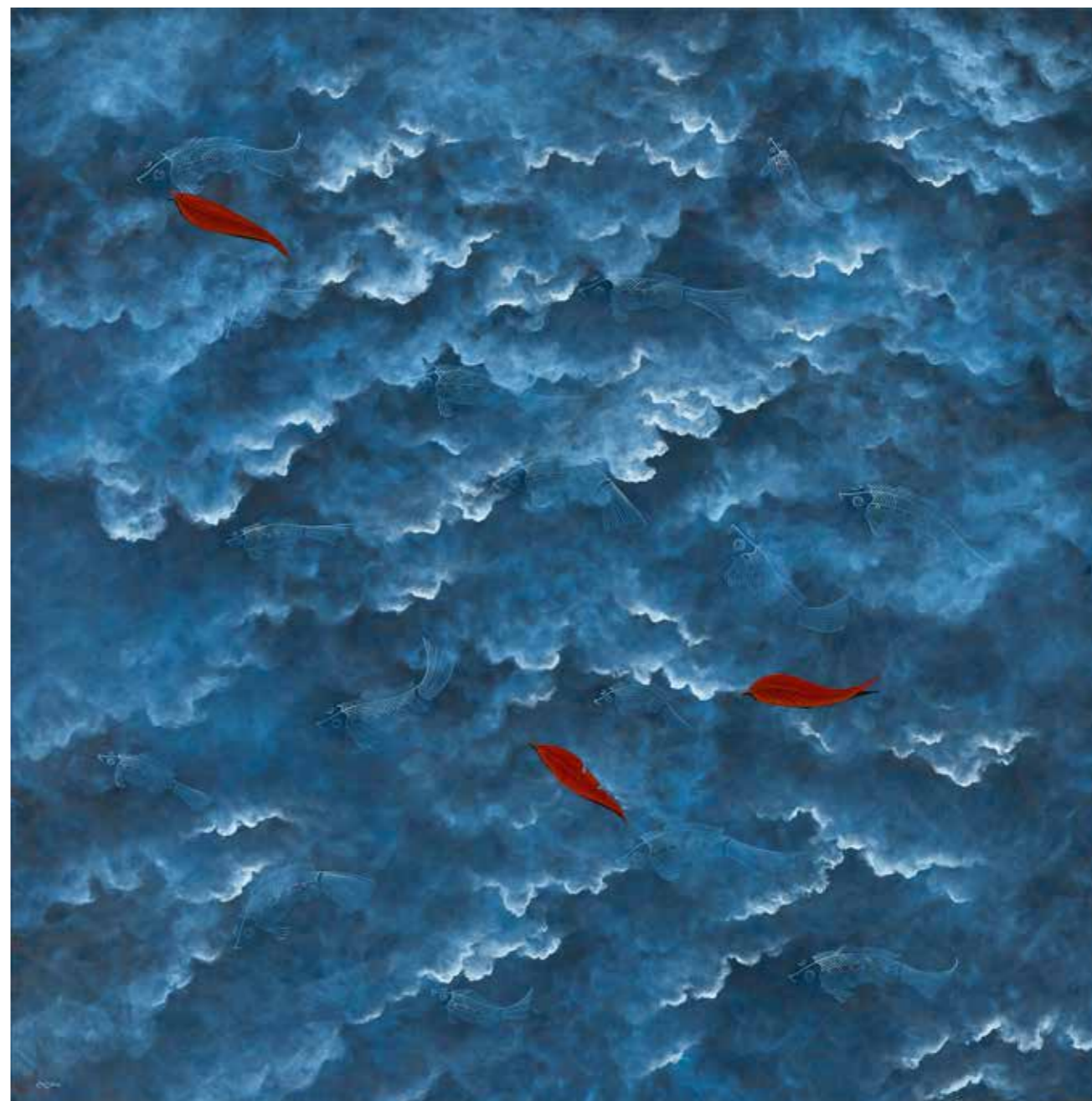
Figure 1

*Stingrays Also Dream of Flying* 1995

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

91.0 x 121.5 cm

The Estate of Lin Onus, Melbourne



*Yorta Yorta* artist Lin Onus was a master painter of great political intellect. Disguised by technical virtuosity and the beauty of their aesthetic thrall, his works are poetic and potent statements of Indigenous cultural authority. *Cloud Fish* stems from a sublime and ethereal corpus of carefully contrived water bodies, interwoven with layers of imagery, elements of which are sometimes, at least initially, obscured by reflected sky or reflected landscape, or both.

Depicting contradictory and ambivalent space was Onus's political forte, challenging one's 'viewing position' – preconceptions and assumptions – in a transcendental aesthetic engagement about cultural hegemony. Onus's nocturnes and watery landscapes are particularly successful in this regard. Dreamlike visual effects operate as a simulacrum of transparency to disorder reality; the obscured stands in for something other than the unseen: his 'understanding of what lies beneath the surface of things.'<sup>1</sup>

*Cloud Fish* recalls the landscape of Onus's ancestral spiritual locus, the Barmah Forest, the largest red river gum forest in the world, whose ecology is closely linked to the Murray River waterflows. Across the surface, the fish's forms, decorated with subtle striations of *rarrk*,<sup>2</sup> distinguish them from the predominant ripples of delicate reflected clouds with their luminous ruffled edges.

With technical precision and a gift for composition, Onus draws us around the picture plane, tracking the fish as they move between the turquoise surface and the depths below. Punctuating the water's skin are three gum leaves painted in a starkly contrasting vermilion, the vivid 3D effect of which halts passage, stilling the mesmerism. Senses awakened and focus hones; we see more deeply, becoming aware of the barely visible vegetation in the depths.

This pattern of engagement, experienced more commonly as hypnogogic consciousness,<sup>3</sup> the state of transition from wakefulness to sleep, functions in Onus's watery reflections 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 ... from above, across the surface only or all three positions simultaneously?<sup>4</sup>

Unique among urban-based Indigenous artists' oeuvres, Onus's hypnogogic watery imagery comes close to evoking the realm of the Everywhen, in the same manner as does the spiritually laden optical effects in men's desert painting, or the shimmer produced by bark painters from the Top End. Their 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 ...'<sup>5</sup>

Once positioned as 'straddling a cusp in cultural history',<sup>6</sup> Onus had declared himself 'a self-confessed cultural mechanic',<sup>7</sup> or, as his friend and fellow artist Michael Eather described him, 'a cultural provocateur who believed that there was no distinction between the political and the beautiful.'<sup>8</sup> Academic and curator Ted Gott was more blunt in his definition of the artist's esteem, judging that it was Onus's ability to subvert the establishment and 'to cut the legs off high art culture' that made him such an extraordinary artist.<sup>9</sup>

Onus's experience of displacement and dispossession from his *Yorta Yorta* heritage provided fertile iconographic ground for his *bricoleur* visual language.<sup>10</sup> One of his pictorial motifs was that of a jigsaw puzzle piece lifted out of the picture, shown askew as it would not re-fit. This device was pointedly used in his award-winning 1994 *Barmah Forest* landscape, a metaphor for his dislocation 'caught between black and white, urban and rural, worlds.'<sup>11</sup>





Figure 2  
*Moonlight at Numerili 2* 1993  
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
 182.0 x 182.0 cm  
 Sold Menzies, Sydney, 31 March 2021, lot 25, \$515,455 (including buyer's premium)



Figure 3  
*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

His deep connections to Arnhem Land and kinship with Wunuwun, however, enriched his physical self and spiritual world view, and animated his mixed race/mixed cultural 'in-between space.'<sup>12</sup> It also heavily influenced his vision and optimism for his legacy, with hopes that history 'may see me as some sort of bridge between cultures ...'<sup>13</sup>

Onus's art requires Australians to more deeply consider our history and the country we inhabit, and in 1993, after a string of early career award accolades, he was bestowed a member of the Order of Australia. His oeuvre has been the focus of eighteen solo exhibitions, including the important retrospective, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996* (Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2000 and national tour 2001), and most recently, *Lin Onus: The Land Within* (Shepparton Art Museum, Victoria, 2021), and *Lin Onus: Eternal Landscape* (Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, 2019). Group show highlights include the ground-breaking exhibitions: *Koori Art '84* (Artspace, Sydney, 1984); *A Changing Relationship: Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art 1938-88* (S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 1988); *Australian Perspecta 1991* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1991); *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, Sydney and National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, 1992); *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians* (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1994, and international tour to Germany, United Kingdom, and Denmark, 1993-94); and *Power of the Land: Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art* (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1994).

Onus's oeuvre is filled with interjections in the academic pantheon of epic historical Australian landscapes painted by white men, and in so doing has influenced the writing of a new narrative, a process elsewhere described as responding to the landscape as 'a cultural archive.'<sup>14</sup> Like ripples in his watery landscapes, the power of works such as *Cloud Fish* continues to resonate and create new ripples in art-historical thinking. Indeed, 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>15</sup> a new narrative within and beyond the discourse and post-colonial imperative of decolonisation.

This thinking, and these works are, however, no less interpolative than much of Onus's 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.<sup>16</sup>

Lin Onus's messaging about valuing Indigenous peoples, their knowledge systems and culture, and respecting our natural world have reached across divides. As one of the country's most sought-after and important contemporary artists, Onus forged an artistic legacy that is already much greater than his modest hopes.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Lindsay, F., *Lin Onus: Yinya Wala* [exhibition catalogue], Mossgreen, Melbourne, 2016, p.3
2. Onus was granted permission to use his cross-hatching designs from artist Djiwul 'Jack' Wunuwun (1930-1991), who adopted him into his Murrungun-Djinang clan in the 1980s. See Cubillo, F. and Caruana, W. (eds.), *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art: Collection Highlights*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2010
3. Morrissey, P., 'Urban Dingo', *Humanities Research Journal* (Special Issue: Indigenous Knowledge), Australian National University Press, Canberra, 2000, no.1, p.104
4. Neale, M. et al, *Lin Onus: a Cultural Mechanic* [exhibition catalogue], Savill Galleries, Melbourne, 2003, p.1

5. 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, Yale University Press, United States of America, February-September 2016, p.19
6. Kirk Varnedoe, quoted [re: Jackson Pollock] 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.21
7. Eather, M., 'Lin Onus - Cultural Mechanic', *Artlink* special double issue 'Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art', March 1990, vol.10, nos.1&2, p.80
8. Eather, M., quoted in *Aboriginal Fine Art* [auction catalogue], Lawson-Menzies, Sydney, 23 May 2007, lot 57, p.58
9. Ted Gott, quoted in Neale, M. et al, *Urban Dingo*, op. cit., p.18
10. McLean, I., 'One Mob, One Voice, One Land: Lin Onus and Indigenous Postmodernism', in Neale, M. et al, *Urban Dingo*, op. cit., p.43
11. Alexander, G., 'Lin Onus', in *Tradition Today: Indigenous Art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013 (revised ed.), p.122
12. Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Neale, M. et al *Urban Dingo*, op. cit., p.15
13. Lin Onus, quoted in Kleinert, S. & Neale, M., *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p.667
14. Sylvia Kleinert, quoted in Leslie, D., 'Coming Home to the Land', *Eureka Street*, Melbourne, 2006, vol.16, no.2, p.31
15. Sequeira, D., *Lin Onus: Eternal Landscape* [exhibition catalogue], Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, 2019, p.31
16. This nexus in Indigenous art is considered at length in Ferrel, R., *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012

#### 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.