

ON CARE: CONSULTATION

by Travis Curtin

While developing the 2018 exhibition *Miwatj*, I visited Yirrkala in North East Arnhem Land to meet with curatorial consultants Wukun Wanambi and Ishmael Marika. The exhibition saw LAI embarking on new directions in caring for and exhibiting material of cultural significance from the university collections, led by consultation.



Image: Wukun Wanambi, *Larrakitj*, Video Still, 3:10mins. Image reproduction courtesy of the artist, The Mulka Project and Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre.

Miwatj featured a small suite of bark paintings and larrakitj from the La Trobe University Collections, created by five highly significant Yolngu artists and leaders, all of whom contributed to the legendary Yirrkala Church Panels (1962-63), Yirrkala Bark Petition (1963) and Thumb Print Document (1963).

Advocating for improved levels of consultation and engaging Wukun Wanambi and Ishmael Marika as curatorial consultants was essential to the process of developing the exhibition and the curatorial methodology.

My job as a curator at LAI is to advocate for the work and practices of Australian contemporary artists and for me that involves ensuring artists from all over the country, from different social and cultural backgrounds and working in a diverse range of contexts are represented in the story of art we choose to tell, so if that includes the work of Yolngu artists it is essential that Yolngu knowledge holders speak about that work in an appropriate way and are engaged professionally to do so.

As Wukun Wanambi pointed out to me during an interview in 2018, "Some people can explain what is in the meaning of the painting, but some we don't, and this is where we have some Yolngu interpretation to translate that, in a meaningful way that people can understand... there is a story beyond that painting which is attached to

us... but whatever there is, there within the painting, it represents who we are and what we are and gives us the strength and the power for that” and “the other thing is, we only share things on the surface side of the water, but not beyond the water.”

The consultation with Wukun and Ishmael resulted in a significant larrakitj being withheld from the exhibition, due to the content explored by the recently deceased artist. Had it been pulled from the collection store and put on display without appropriate consultation, it would have been exhibited in breach of Yolngu cultural protocol at the time. In this case, showing appropriate levels of care and engaging appropriate consultants ensured that Yolngu cultural protocol was maintained. This level of consultation with Wukun and Ishmael extended to decisions around exhibition design and the layout of works in the gallery, so that the design of the exhibition reflected the Dhuwa and Yirritja moiety system, to which everything in the Yolngu universe belongs.

Working with Wukun and Ishmael on *Miwatj* has fostered an ongoing relationship with the [Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre and The Mulka Project](#), resulting in contributions to public programming and further curatorial consultation on exhibitions, including *unbranded* (2019) and upcoming exhibition *One foot on the ground, one foot in the water* (2020). For this upcoming exhibition LAI has engaged Yinimala Gumana as a consultant to discuss death from a Yolngu perspective and the work of late Yolngu artist Mr Wunungmurra in an interview with Kade McDonald.

For *One foot on the ground, one foot in the water* LAI has also commissioned Tiwi artist and cultural ambassador Pedro Wonaeamirri to document his account of the Purukapali story, which tells of the origins of mortality from a Tiwi perspective. Pedro Wonaeamirri is a long established member of [Jilamara Arts and Crafts Aboriginal Association](#), based in Milikapiti on Melville Island. I was lucky enough to meet with Pedro Wonaeamirri and exhibiting artists Timothy Cook and Patrick Freddy Puruntatameri in late 2019, when I visited Milikapiti in preparation for the exhibition.

One foot on the ground, one foot in the water will open at LAI from 2 November – 23 December 2020.

[Read more about the exhibition here](#)

The *Miwatj* catalogue features the transcript of the 2018 interview with Wukun Wanabi and Ishmael Marika conducted by curator Travis Curtin during his visit to Yirrkala.

[Read the full catalogue](#)