

Shirley Purdie, *That Warrambany (Flood Water)*
from last year, bin hanging that whole freezer up in our tree.
He's still there today, 2012

by Maya Hodge, 2022

Shirley Purdie is a senior Gija artist at the Warmun Art Centre in the East Kimberleys of Western Australia. Her sculptural work *That Warrambany (Flood Water)* *from last year, bin hanging that whole freezer up in our tree. He's still there today.* speaks to the environmental crisis and its impact on Country and life of First Peoples, in particular Purdie's community. The painted-up tree suspended in the branches is a snapshot of when the flood water was high; the freezer remained in the tree branches long after the water had receded. In light of the current Australian flood crises, Purdie's work is significant to the sudden losses of flood-affected areas of people, lands, waterways, trees, wildlife and everyday life in the face of ongoing disasters.

Purdie's work explores the intersections between spirituality and religion. Influenced by her late mother and senior Gija artists, Purdie's signature technique, earthy colours, and knowledge mappings are rooted in Country. She uses ochre collected from her lands, drawing upon her people's stories and Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) connected to traditional ancestral lores. The relationships Aboriginal people have with catholicism are complex. Purdie's work could be acknowledging the spiritual power of floods concerning Country's spirit and disaster narratives in religious scripture.

Purdie's paintings and sculptures share traditional mark-making and storytelling through the lens of contemporary experience. This work challenges not only the dismissiveness of the impact of floods on Aboriginal communities but also the immense power natural disaster has on our collective faith. The memory of what has passed still hangs over the communities, much like divine power watches over the people.

SOURCES:

Warmun Art Centre. Shirley Purdie. <https://warmunart.com.au/art/artists/senior/shirley-purdie/>

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Shirley Purdie. <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/shirley-purdie/>

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