

The Spark

In a time of the first sunrise, a time that was, is, and will be, forever present and lived through song, dance and art, is a story of the first fire. Its regenerative sparks continue to birth and rebirth itself. Investing its deep knowledge in the land and the sea as it sparks the next generation into life.

As a member of the Gumatj clan Wanapati Yunupingu has been nurtured at the hearth of this fire. His father passed down the sacred knowledge of its ceremonial power and visual representation. A legacy treasured by all Yolŋu leaders.

After his father passed away Wanapati followed him in the continued practice of painting on bark and larrakitj. He made small works depicting the chronicles of the Gumatj clan stories stylistically recognisable as the classical way to share these stories. Faithful to the way that he was taught, according to his law. Conventionally showing the foundation which every ceremonially authorised clan member knows. But then came a spark of an idea. A desire to grow and spread, like the fire which guides him. To find a new way of sharing his inherited knowledge.

In early 2020 Wanapati came to Yirrkala from his remote coastal homeland, Birany Birany. He visited Buku Larrŋgay Mulka, his non-profit Indigenous owned Art Centre who represent over 300 artists from the North East Arnhemland region. That day he expressed a desire to 'do something', 'something more' in conversation with the art centre co-ordinators. It was unusual for a young artist to express such a wish. Especially one so outwardly shy and reserved. It gave a glimpse of the fire inside. He was seeking an opportunity to spread his story. Not for fame, or wealth or accolades. Just to assert his identity.

All artwork that comes from Buku Larrŋgay Mulka must come from the land. The directive, 'If you are going to paint the land you must use the land' was made by the art centres Yolŋu leadership in 1996. Current and future generations were instructed to source their materials from the same land which their designs/identity come from and not a foreign industrial factory. It restricted the artists to natural pigments, stringybark surfaces and ceremonial poles called larrakitj until 2010 when an artist Gunybi Ganambarr discovered a portal to a new way to interpret this statement. Gunybi sourced discarded building materials and other objects from the land - etching, cutting and carving his law into them and initiating what is now coined as the 'Found' movement.

Flash ten years ahead to that day when Wanapati swept into the art centre with an idea and a passion to reinvigorate his practice. In his hand he held a reflective yellow bent and twisted street sign, which he had found, discarded on the side of the road to Yirrkala. Yellow is an important ceremonial colour for the Gumatj Clan and it was Wanapati's idea to etch a contemporary interpretation of his clan's sacred designs into the surface of this ordinary object. A seemingly impossible idea as one would have to spend hours pushing through both vinyl sticker then adhesive then finally the aluminium of the sign. Undeterred by this Wanapati returned with the sign covered with a twisting fire of diamonds. Dancing like the tongue of flame which sings the songs of gurtha (fire). The work was bright and powerful, shimmering and moving as the light spread across it. Wanapati was smiling and Yolŋu people gathered to marvel at its creation. It is always a good sign that there is something special about a work when both cultures are drawn to it. The niln - spark - that has lit Wanapati's life and his path ignites itself in the form of these exciting and contemporary works.

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