

## ***Guwarguwarmirri***

“It has been said that history repeats itself. This is perhaps not quite correct; it merely rhymes.<sup>1</sup> “

The mother of the two artists featured here was a joyful energetic matriarch of small stature and a powerful creativity. You can get a sense of this in the English names she gave her children; Kevin, Kenneth, Kathleen, Karen, Katherine, Carol, Christopher. One of the distinctive features of her award winning work was a facility at blending natural ochres to create novel colours.

Her greens and pinks and greys seemed to inexperienced art centre staff to be a new innovation but it later emerged that it was in fact a new stanza of an old song. In fact the Yolŋu matha dictionary revealed that there was an existing word for this practice.

The adjective ‘guwarguwarmirri meaning: coloured (pure ochres mixed).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly the Yolŋu names for these three colours are based on the English word.

In late 2019 a massive lightning bolt struck the house she was living in at the tiny remote homeland of Gängan. This village has been argued to have the highest concentration of successful artists anywhere. This despite being a four hour drive from the nearest power grid. To confirm this reputation the moment the house was struck was captured by famous artist Gunybi Ganambarr on his phone.

The shock of this violent incident effected Malaluba and she was taken to hospital in Nhulunbuy. From there she felt obliged to camp at a nearby funeral being held through a monsoonal week and became sick.

After her death the protocols required her art to be hidden from view and her themes to be left in abeyance. This convention meant that it was more than two years before her daughters began to paint again.

This long fallow period ended abruptly with an explosion of colour once the hiatus had been observed. Both sisters dove deep into colour experimentation from where their mother had left off.

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<sup>1</sup> 1965, *Curiosities of the Self: Illusions We Have about Ourselves* by Theodor Reik, Essay 3: The Unreachables: The Repetition Compulsion in Jewish History, Quote Page 133, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York.

<sup>2</sup> <https://yolngudictionary.cdu.edu.au>

In Yolŋu artistic practice colour is created by rubbing a hard rock against a grinding stone with glue and water added. Normally this means the artist must repeatedly and continuously refresh the palette. But if the artist is mixing colours that requires two rocks to be continually ground and for the mixture to be consistent.

To maintain a consistent blended colour over a large painting with pools of pigment sloshing around on a grinding stone is impossible. Their mother devised a method to maintain the tone of a blended colour throughout a large artwork. She would use a very large grinding stone and enough water and glue to make sufficient quantities of the desired colour. She would then mop it up with a sponge and squeeze it into a container which could be sealed. All of these paintings have been created using this technique invented by their mother.

Expanding the palette beyond the template of four primary Yolŋu colours- black, red, yellow and white allows the story to come alive. The prismatic shimmer of the snake scales or the stagnant billabong mirrors the colours of the rainbow. In this case Witiŋj- the Rainbow Serpent. In technicolour!

An old song in a fresh key.

**Will Stubbs 2026**