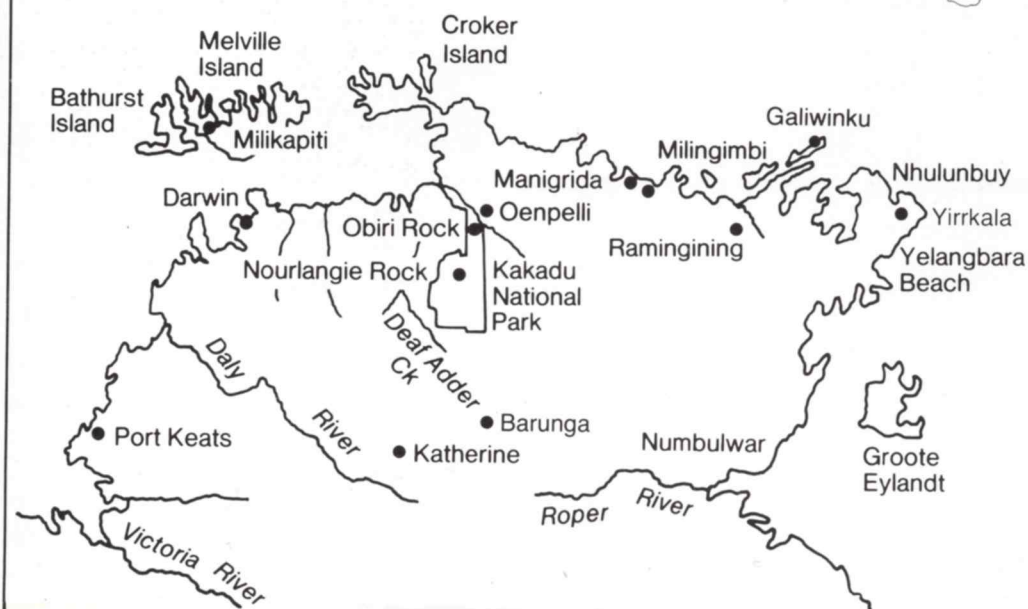




Aboriginal Memorial



Detail of the Top End of the Northern Territory of Australia



Glyde River Mouth, North Eastern Arnhemland

◀ Liyagawumirr/Manharrngu People
(Ramingining)

◀ Rembarrnga People (Katherine)

Opening Performance –

Paddy Dhätangu, David Malangi, Paddy Wainburranga (singing), Johnn Dhurrukuyu.

ABORIGINAL MEMORIAL

Since 1788 at least several hundred thousand Aboriginals have died at the hands of white invaders. Some time ago an elder artist in Ramingining brought me several videotapes belonging to his dead son. Not having a video cassette recorder, he wanted to play the tapes and show me. The son and the artist were and are very close to me. The tapes were battered and dust-ridden. I hesitated to run them through my machine but our relationship and my curiosity made me play them. His son had been a member of the Northern Land Council Executive and, in the course of his work contacts, had been given some more 'political' videotapes as background briefing for himself and the community. One of these was a copy of a John Pilger documentary called *The Secret Country*. In the opening précis of the program he talked of the decimation of a tribal group who owned land on the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales and who died 'to the last man, woman and child defending their country'. He continued that, throughout the land in every country town, there was an obelisk to those who had fallen in this war or that, but nowhere was there a memorial to these first Australians who died defending their country.

In the course of my work as Art Adviser, the major role is to make the outside world more aware and appreciative of Aboriginal art and culture. Some works of art are visually accessible to 'white eyes'; however, other aren't and are difficult to place. The Hollow Log Bone Coffin was one of these. During the sixties, when Aboriginal art was 'discovered', installations of so-called 'totem poles' were popular, though rarely placed in the prominent places which they deserved. Then, although a gradual growth in Aboriginal art appreciation crept up during the seventies, this was in the main to do with paintings, with the Western Desert school of 'dot and circle' leading the way. Sculpture, generally referring to bird and other animal life pieces, was also sought after; however, works as uncompromising as the Bone Coffins were still hard to place. The problem was to change people's perceptions of Aboriginal sculpture and art in general. A 'tour de force' was needed.

This cynically commercial venture lurked in the back of my mind until the Pilger program crystallised these thoughts. During the day-to-day business of the Art and Craft Centre in Aboriginal communities, a series of regular exhibitions is planned and run. Art is a way of recording history, aspirations and feelings of the period. Art is a communication medium that often transcends language barriers. The aim is that themes, concepts and ideas of Aboriginal culture are carried within each exhibition, which is visually accessible to the general viewing public. During the Bicentennial year in 1988 most Aboriginal organisations and many white ones are boycotting the celebrations. Many white artists have withdrawn their works from Bicentennial shows. As a commercial enterprise set up to ensure returns to artists, it was realised that any boycott decisions would have strong economic consequences. The bind was to present Aboriginal culture without celebrating – to make a true statement.

In north eastern Arnhemland present-day Aboriginal people carry on many age-old ceremonies and rituals. One of these is the Hollow Log or Bone Coffin ceremony. When

a person dies, the body is washed, painted with relevant totemic designs, sung over and mourned. Some time later the bones of the deceased are recovered and distributed to relatives in a small ceremony. After a period, which may be years, the relatives hand over the bones to ceremonial leaders for them to hold a Hollow Log ceremony. A log hollowed out naturally by termites is found, cleaned and painted with relevant designs like the body amidst singing and dancing in a special camp for those completing the ritual. The bones are cleaned, painted with red ochre and placed in the log in special dances. When a set series of songs and dances has been completed, the log is carried and danced into the main public camp and stood upright. It is then left.

Full-size versions minus the bones are made and sold today as sculptures. These works are art pieces in their own right. Originally being living trees, the installation is like a forest – an Aboriginal artistic vision of the forest and landscape. In the original ceremony each Pole would contain the bones of deceased people, embodying the soul. Each tree in this new forest would contain symbolically the spirit of a deceased person. The forest, the environment is us; we are the environment. Each Hollow Log is ceremonially a Bone Coffin, so in essence the forest is really like a large cemetery of dead Aboriginals, a War Cemetery, a War Memorial to all those Aboriginals who died defending their country. Two hundred Poles were commissioned to represent the two hundred years of white contact and black agony.

In south-east Australia many well-documented massacres of Aboriginal people occurred since 1788. Many of these were covered up and forgotten (buried) as reported in Pilger's program, and thus the name *The Secret Country*. In northern Australia present-day distortion of history continues still. It is widely touted that Aboriginals there were and are treated differently and did not suffer as other Aboriginals did from white contact. Thus they have no reason to feel betrayed, deprived and angry as those southern blacks and Queensland Aboriginals are. Though many benevolent acts were carried out, similar massacres were occurring in Arnhemland around the turn of the century about the time of similar incidents in other parts of Australia. This is still 'secret history' for most of Australia.

There is currently an upsurge in interest in Aboriginal art by the Australian public and overseas visitors. A large part of this is a result of the tourist boom sweeping the country. In other parts of the world where the particular indigenous art has become the flavour of the month, it has often led to attempts to exploit it commercially to the nth degree. The resultant pressure on artists to produce has led ultimately to collapse or emasculation of the art form. Aboriginal art is now under incredible strain to fulfil white wishes of their culture. Certainly different factions have tried to lead the art this way and that. Whether they truly represent Aboriginal cultural aspirations is questionable. Beyond these schisms and distractions Aboriginal artists and art have sustained their resilience in the face of these demands and continued to survive, convert and make real statements.

John Mundine, Art Adviser, Ramingining

GUPAPUYNGU PEOPLE

Tony Djikululu
Jimmy Wululu

LIYAGAWUMIRR/MANHARRNGU PEOPLE

Tony Danyula
Terry Day'purryun
Johnny Dhurrikayu
Neville Gulaygulay
David Malangi
Rrikili

WULAKI

Toby Gabalga

MALARRA/WOLKPUY-MURRUNGUN PEOPLE

Billy Black Durrmgumba
Terry Mangapal
Jacky Mirritji (2)
Roy Riwa
Their Mother: Jimmy Mamalunhawuy
William Watirri

MARRANGU-WURRKIGANYDJARR PEOPLE

Don Gundinga
George Jangawonga
Andrew Marrgululu
Dick Smith Mewirri
Jimmy Moduk

GALPU/LIYAGALAWUMIRRI/WAGILAG/WUDUMIN PEOPLE

Paddy Dhätangu
Tom Djumburpur
Ganyula
Philip Gudthaykudthay
Peter Mingululu
Neville Nanytjawuy
Jardi Ashley Wodalpa
Wurraki
Dick Yambal (1)

GUNWINGGU PEOPLE

John Mowandjul

REMBARRNGA PEOPLE

David Blanatji
Victor Pamkal
Joe Patrick
Paddy Wainburranga

GANALBINGU PEOPLE

Roy Burrunyula
Dorothy Djukulul
Djunginy
Charlie Djurritjini
Elizabeth Djuttarra
Agnes Marrawu
George Milpururru
Wubugwubuk



David Malangi – Manharrngu People



Charlie Djurritjini – Ganalbingu People



Jimmy Moduk – Marrangu People



George Milpururru and son – Ganabingu Group

LEST WE FORGET

**Collection commissioned and permanently installed at
Australian National Gallery**

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Biennale of Sydney
TELECOM AUSTRALIA
TRANSFIELD CORP**

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