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Philip Gudthaykudthay

The Pussycat and the Kangaroo, 2021

text by Djon Mundine OAM

*Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to visit the Queen*

— artist Tony Djikilulu (dec.) showing off his English, 1980

One day in 1980 during the time I was resident at Milingimbi Art Centre on the island of Milingimbi in Arnhem Land, Tony Buwa'nandu (dec.) commented as he gazed at a painting of the creation of the Milky Way by Daisy Maynbunharrawuy (Dawidi's daughter), '*Ah, and there is the Pussy Cat!*', causing great laughter from all the artists present.

Buwa'nandu was making a pun about the artist Philip Gudthaykudthay known also by the nickname, 'Pussycat'. Pussycat, totemically, was the Quoll, the native cat, one of the most beautiful and lovable of Australian marsupial creatures. The small animal's red-brown fur was spotted with white blotches, those spots emblematic in the painting of the Milky Way story. I hadn't met Pussycat the painter then but did so when I began to buy bark paintings from Ramingining nearby on the mainland in 1981. One day in early 1982 dry season I had organised a boat to take me to the mainland to buy art. I was told that a road crew working on the road would meet me and take me the thirty kilometres into Ramingining. The boat headed back to Milingimbi and in the distance I could see an enormous tip truck coming.

About half-a-dozen men got out. One of these, it turned out, was Philip Gudthaykudthay. They started a fire. *We'll have some lunch first*, they told me. Lunch emerged from each man's cotton bag, large goannas that they baked in the fire and washed down with black tea. Pussycat was a tall, lean, lanky Liyagalawumirr man with a loping walk somewhat akin to that of the Pink Panther film character, or a 'moon-walk', a casual distinctive, 'cool' walk. He didn't seem to speak English and, even in the local Djambarrpuynu, he didn't enunciate his words clearly. He worked with the road crew, repairing and maintaining the roads and airstrip, driving an enormous tip-truck. He was friendly but where he slept was a bit of a mystery as were his social associations generally. He was something of an enigmatic persona.

In my observations of his art-making around that time, Pussycat created bark paintings at a fast rate that fell into two types of composition. One type, in contrast to the more figurative works represented in the current exhibition, was formal grids of horizontally-divided, tight, cross-hatched sections that I was told were gravel bed layers of his country, the place of the creation of the Milky Way and the creation of the first ritual of the Hollow Log/Bone Coffin ceremony, Gunyungmirringu Creek, a place to the east of the Glyde River. These 'landscape' bark paintings, as Diane Moon and I described them in 1983, were full of the movement of light and very beautiful but seemingly beyond the reading or appreciation of Australian audiences in the early 1980s, it appeared, who were only inclined to see Aboriginal art as figurative imagery rather than conceptual or abstract. Within tight formal arrangements of sectioned cross-hatched shimmer are small creatures, the Lotus Bird and others, secreted within the matrix of lines. The lines of the *rarrk* (cross-hatching) illustrates and embodies the principles of light and energy. Yolngu people have said to me that the areas of cross-hatching in their paintings are representations of the power of the original spirit (god) activating the world. Pussycat's form of imagery was free with vertical, sensuous lines reminiscent

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of the strands of segmented starchy tuber (Munyigany) that grows in damp swampy environments in central Arnhem Land around the Glyde River catchment and estuary.

Pussycat was unmarried and, as I was informed, had become an orphan as a child but was adopted, mentored by Jack Manbararra, a Wolkpuy-Murrungun man, whose land bordered both sides of the Glyde River. Manbararra and family lived next door to me in 1983 and so I spent time with the family and Pussycat. The land the town of Ramingining is built on was created by a number of *Wanggarr* (creative spirits): the Black-headed Python Rainbow Serpent spirit, Garrkman the burrowing frog and Gartjambal the Kangaroo. The name 'Ramingining' comes from the word 'Raman', the white fur on the chest of the Kangaroo.

Pussycat was tall, lanky and moved slowly. For all appearances, he moved like the Pink Panther and was loved by all. Despite these outward characteristics, Pussycat's paintings were loaded with energetic movement, tonal variations and real life. They are his mother's and his father's dreaming, the latter being the creation of the world (the two Wagilag Sisters who set up the malk-skin system of social interaction), of contemporary ceremonial life happening right now (the 'Gunapipi ceremony' which took place recently in Ramingining, climaxed 22 August) as well as contemporary dream-revelations. The painting of the Marradjirri string pole came from a dream of one living brother of his deceased brother, a mural version of this story was painted in 1988/9 in the Darwin Performing Arts Centre, commissioned by the Holmes à Court Collection - artists Paddy Dhathanggu, Andrew Marrgululu, Djon Mundine, Lin Onus, and Chips Mackinolty). Other stories include the present environmental struggle - survival of Frogs who sing for the rains to come - and of the major totems of the Ramingining area from Philip's mother.

Compositionally, we see the two Wagilag Sisters, either together or singularly, facing the viewer framed by the Witiitj, the Olive Python spirit who brings the 'real' rains of the full monsoon wet season, and swirls around the female human figures. Water goannas, frogs and other beings associated with the monsoon 'wet season' float within the frame. At the climax of this story all the Rainbow Serpents stand up on their tails with their heads in the clouds and in talking to each other realise that they are of different skin social designations and set the rules of interaction, reciprocity and responsibility. At the end of this discourse, Witiitj, the Olive Python, fell to earth and marked the ground with an elongated triangular pattern where his tail struck the ground.

In 1991, I travelled with Pussycat to his solo exhibition in Sydney at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery where he created a low-relief sand sculpture in the gallery. It was a very powerful artwork, but I had the feeling that Australian art audiences were still stricken by 'cultural cringe' and failed to adequately read the work. Philip was a confident and great travelling companion and, like many other artists, he really settled into the comforts and hospitality of the Regents Court Hotel in Kings Cross and its rooftop garden.

Philip's mother's stories and imagery are of two Kangaroo spirits who were chased from the East by two dingo spirits and came up to where the present-day town of Ramingining is. On the way, they ran into a web of the spider spirit that threw out a bigger and bigger web that caught their tails and marked them with the triangular rain cloud design. The web became a large cloud that rose into the sky bringing the first rain of the wet season.

The Kangaroos escaped and near Ramingining dug a hole, a soak. That water flowed out from forming the Ramingining creek. The Kangaroo spirit then 'exploded' and became the land itself. There is a small rock the size of a loaf of bread that is the central spirit of the Kangaroo, nearby is a ravine formed by the tail and Dhungundha, a nearby hill, is the head of the Kangaroo.

Ramingining, from an etymological perspective, should really be spelt with an 'a' - 'Ramangingin' - as it is the land that is the *Raman*, the white fur of the chest of the Kangaroo. Philip's paintings of Gartjambal Kangaroos are monumentally powerful as either whirling creative spirit-beings,

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circled/framed by the Black-headed Python/Rainbow Serpent with faces of great character, or formally placed within gridded landscape backgrounds.

Born in c. 1925-1935 in the bush on the outskirts of Ramingining, Gudthaykudthay was the only child to father, Lika, and mother, Ganinydja, of the Djardewitjibi Tribe, the landowners of the land on which the town of Ramingining is built. Gudthaykudthay's mother's country is Ramingining, making him a Senior Custodian (*djunngayi*, the manager) of Ramingining. He has in recent months still been participating actively in ceremony there.

Before coming to painting in the 1960s, Gudthaykudthay worked as a stockman, truck driver, fencer and crocodile hunter, selling crocodile skins to the Milingimbi Mission. He appears in this occupation in the 1968 film by Malcolm Douglas and David Oldmeadow, *Across the Top*.

Gudthaykudthay learnt the skills of painting in the 1960s, at the Nangalala Mission on the Glyde River, under the instruction of his half-brother, Wolkpuy artist, Jack Mirritja.

Gudthaykudthay's first recorded exhibition, *Traditions and Innovations*, was a group exhibition held in 1979 at the Legislative Assembly in Darwin. It was not till 1983 that Gudthaykudthay had his first solo exhibition, held at the Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney. This exhibition consisted of bark paintings, featuring abstract landscape grid designs and clan patterns of Gunyungmirringu Creek; the site of the creation of the Milky Way. The National Gallery of Australia acquired two of these bark paintings. His sets of grids, we called them 'landscapes', mystified contemporary art critics at the time but we insisted upon this reading of the marks and the exhibition was a great success.

A bark painting surface is covered by lines at about 30 degrees in a sequence of four lines of red, four white, four yellow, four white across the space of the composition. Within these grids something wonderful happened. Philip had altered the number of red lines and yellow lines, reducing the red from left to right so that a subtle yellow tone became stronger across the composition. We wondered whether this was accidental or deliberate. In the end we decided it was a deliberate action by the artist.

Gudthaykudthay created five *dupan* (hollow burial logs) for the 1988 *Aboriginal Memorial*, an installation of 200 *dupan* commemorating the deaths of indigenous people since white occupation. I conceived of and organised the creation of this monument during my time at Ramingining. The installation was exhibited at the *1988 Biennial of Sydney - Beneath the Southern Cross* (with Nick Waterlow OAM as Artistic Director), before it moved to the National Gallery of Australia where it is now on permanent display.

... a sorcerer can do things with it. When the tree branches rub in the wind, it makes a sore throat. Soon you'll feel like you're being choked to death ...

— Philip Gudthaykudthay (as The Sorcerer) in *Ten Canoes*, 2006

In 2006, Gudthaykudthay made his screen debut as The Sorcerer in the landmark Australian film *Ten Canoes*, written, directed and produced by Rolf de Heer. The film received many international film awards and aided in educating the outside world about Yolngu culture in Ramingining.

Pussycat is a painter of great composition both in a western compositional sense and in the sense of a spiritual cosmology bonding human beings, land, nature and spirit. His paintings speak of land, sky and water. They are strikingly energetic and have great character. They represent the creation of the world.