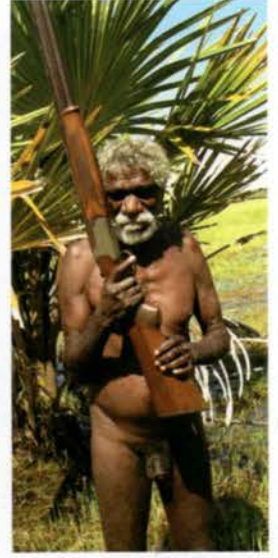
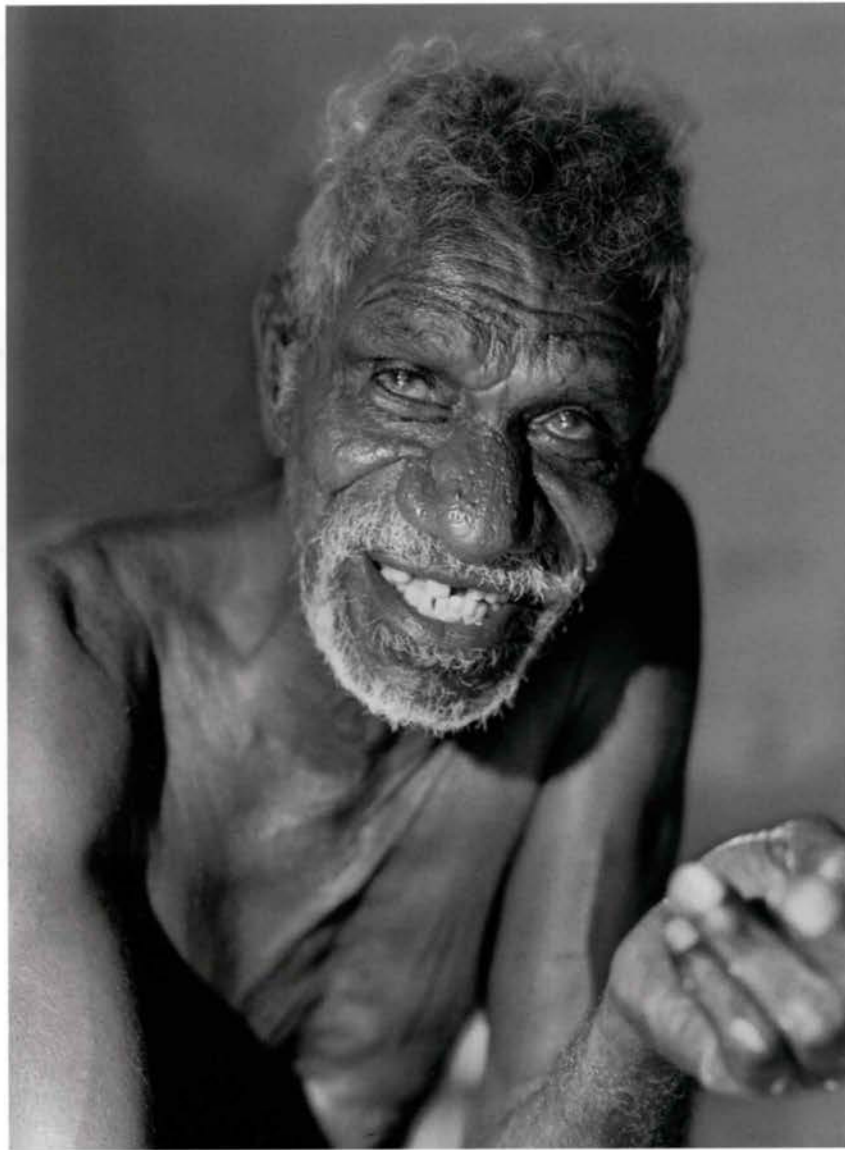


# PHILIP GUDTHAYKUDTHAY 'PUSSYCAT'

I'm botj (boss) here. Ramingining. My mother. Me *bungguwa* (leader), from my mother (for) *Marrawalwal* (Red Kangaroo tribe), *marrabal* (kangaroo), *gandayala* (kangaroo) [stories]. My mother here.

Me, number one painter ... Right up from ... Milingimbi, Ngangalala, Ramingining, Maningrida, now come here, Ramingining. Stop here. Number one painter here.

Bark, finish 'im up here; canvas, finish 'im up here. Hollow log. All painting here. Me, number one. *Maku* (maybe) Minygululu second [in line to take over responsibility] here.<sup>1</sup>





**PHILIP GUDTHAYKUDTHAY**, known as Pussycat, I think, will not ever fit into a tidy summing up. He always seemed one on the fringe, a peripheral dweller. When I worked at Bula'bula Arts at Ramingining in the mid 1990s Pussycat – as Gudthaykudthay is known – was certainly one of the regulars, but I never got the impression he was one of the lauded ones, nor that he ever would be. He was often in at the art centre, bringing in paintings or just visiting, always by himself, loping around on those broad long feet. We had sort of abstract conversations where we would muddle through, using words foreign and frowning and laughing.

Pussycat was often alone, with no family or children around him, unlike other senior men. He had a succession of trucks that were so battered they barely stood a chance, but were used for hunting and being on country, allowing Pussycat to lead the solitary life that he had led thus far. As with other artists, he painted with the added incentive of saving up to buy a truck for hunting.

Pussycat is a Liyagalawumirr Wititj man and his paintings often feature, in figurative form, the key protagonists of the Wagilag narrative at Mirarrmina, where Wititj the Olive Python devoured the Wagilag Sisters.<sup>2</sup> Burruwara the native cat is also a principal totem in the story of 'Pussycat' and Crow, who created the Milky Way with the bones of the first hollow log coffin at Guyungmirringu.

Gudthaykudthay's somewhat ungainly figures have a wildness about them, their shapes blocked in to reveal watery stretches, where the pigment pools and dissipates across the surface. Often narratives are depicted less overtly, and Wititj appears in a shifting field of *miny'tji* (clan body design) and *rarrk* (crosshatching), or a patterned field may have no figurative clues at all.

The Milky Way narrative is represented by Gudthaykudthay as a distinctive grid design, in-filled with *rarrk*; a representation of Guyungmirringu. The hatching is the key to really engaging with the artist's character, his humanity: what elements are emphasised, what is left undone or to chance, and what is laden with knowledge to the initiated viewer. *Rarrk* is the sinuous, soupy travelling of pigment across the surface, thicker, then thinner, allowing translucency, ambiguity, frailty and, in Pussycat's case, a certain edginess. The fine lines run meanderingly parallel, move precariously close, then move apart.

There are moments where the end of long strokes are left to overlap beyond their outlines, not all tidied up, allowing us a glimpse of the interstices of process.

Some of Gudthaykudthay's paintings are almost entirely made up of high-key striations and laborious *rarrk*: expert, considered, full of energy, knowledge, power and playfulness. Looking at these the idea of *bir'yun* or brilliance in bark painting springs to mind. The more a bark 'sings' – to achieve a shimmer, an agitation, an energy to the surface – the closer the connection to an ancestral presence.<sup>3</sup>

In 1983 Pussycat had his first solo exhibition in Sydney, with great success. The National Gallery of Australia acquired some barks, and later Pussycat contributed five hollow log coffins, some bearing the same distinctive grid design as the paintings, to the National Gallery of Australia's *Aboriginal memorial* 1987–88, to stand with the *badurru* of fellow Liyagalawumirr artists.<sup>4</sup>

In 1995 I left Ramingining to work at the National Gallery of Australia, where I had contact again with Gudthaykudthay in the lead-up to the exhibition *The painters of the Wagilag Sisters story 1937–1997*, in which his work was included. A senior Wagilag custodian, Pussycat visited twice while the exhibition was on. On the first trip, he chose a big green overcoat from the pile of available winter woollies donated by the Gallery staff for the Arnhem Land guests.<sup>5</sup> At the opening, Pussycat, one of a significant contingent of visiting Ramingining and Yirrkala artists, was quietly but powerfully on the edge of events, in the background, in the coat, but very much present.

Pussycat and his art seem unshackled by influence. While the glorious *rarrk* and *miny'tji* are the cornerstone of any such work by a senior artist, in Pussycat's work the figure shifts in emphasis, but endures. In the 1980s Gudthaykudthay's minimal, apparently abstract, grid bark paintings became his signature pieces. The *miny'tji* was a key concern with his work in *The Aboriginal memorial*, where entire logs were enveloped in the Liyagalawumirr Guyungmirringu and Wititj *miny'tji*, without concern for the need of corresponding figurative clues. The early 1990s saw another shift, where the *miny'tji* remained foregrounded while players in the ancestral narratives had an increased presence.

His works in *Culture Warriors* seem a true reflection of the Pussycat that is so hard to encapsulate. He plays with us and our expectations;

#### PHOTOGRAPHS ON PAGE 8

MAIN IMAGE:  
Philip Gudthaykudthay, 2002,  
© MJN Bowles  
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:  
Central Arnhem Land river  
system, December 2006,  
photograph by Brenda L.  
Croft; Gudthaykudthay with  
*Wagilag Sisters*, with child,  
Ramingining, 2007, photograph  
by Belinda Scott; Portrait of  
Gudthaykudthay, © Steven  
Wilanydjangu, 2005; *Ten canoes*  
film still, provided by Rolf de  
Heer and Belinda Scott, 2006;  
Gudthaykudthay working on  
*badurru*, Ramingining, December  
2006, photograph by Brenda L.  
Croft; Gudthaykudthay's studio,  
Ramingining, 2007, photograph by  
Belinda Scott; Gudthaykudthay  
outside Bula'bula Arts office,  
Ramingining, December 2006,  
photograph by Brenda L. Croft;  
Daniel Boyd, Arthur Koo'ekka  
Pambegan Jr, Jean Baptiste  
Apuatimi and Gudthaykudthay  
in front of Jan Billycan's *All that  
jila*, National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra, April 2007, photograph  
by Steven Nebauer



*Wagilag Sisters, with child* 2007



certainly the exquisite *miny'tji* and *rarrk* are present on the hollow logs but not without a deliberate inclusion of bold figurative depictions of Wititj and Djarrka. This new group provides a fine balance to the hollow logs in the *Aboriginal memorial*. In recent painting the figures do more than re-emerge with greater frequency; they are literally embedded in the painting. This action perhaps goes against the contemporary market penchant for big minimal *rarrk*-filled Arnhem Land works. Pussycat is like one of those artists who continue to paint highly rendered portraits when they are clearly out of fashion.

Pussycat's works are magnificent and unpretentious at the same time. In painting his ancestral inheritance with enduring figurative elements alongside knowledge-laden *miny'tji*, he says 'this is my place. This is what I do and always will'. Gudthaykudthay, the enduring figure

**Susan Jenkins**

**FROM THE VERY START** Pussycat was an enigma to me. I met him mid 2003, when I went to Ramingining to talk with David Gulpilil and others about what sort of film they wanted to make up there. Pussycat was often on the peripheries of the discussions but he was a mumbler: I could never understand a word of what he was saying; I could not even distinguish between his speaking English and his speaking his own language.

His eyes, though, had a sparkle, very alive, even wicked at times, as if there was a streak of naughtiness inside this old man, a streak that had been with him for life. On my subsequent visits I began to connect with him, despite the verbal communication barrier being almost complete. He would seem genuinely pleased to see me again and I was consequently genuinely pleased to see him.

He took great interest in the project that became the film *Ten canoes*. He would pore for hours over the folder of a hundred or so 1937 Thomson photos I had, pointing out things to me or anyone else who happened to be around. As the script developed I began to think of what might be a good role in the film for Pussycat but there was nothing obvious, apart from perhaps an old man in the background. Then one day I discovered him with a stick through his nose, through the septum hole I

didn't know he had. He looked like one of his own ancestors, like a Thomson portrait, a man from ages past, with wisdom and more than a little mystery. And I suddenly thought, 'the sorcerer!'.

Pussycat was proud of my interest in his septum hole, and pleased to have a role with so much prestige attached to it. He began to talk up his qualifications for the part, spreading the word that he had been a real sorcerer in the old times and since he was one again, people had better watch out.

His enthusiasm for the film now knew no bounds and he had to be part of everything. This was mostly very fortunate because he knew more than almost anyone except Minygululu about making bark canoes, and Minygululu was away when we first started to make one. I remember that day well, the day that the first canoe was completed. Old Pussycat was in the thick of things, cutting, sewing, shaping, showing the younger men how to do it. Then he had a moment of inspiration. He walked out of the mud we were working in and took all his clothes off. He turned and glared at the other men, daring them to laugh: this is how it should be done, this is how we used to do it. And then he walked naked back into the mud and continued working, as if nothing at all had changed.

Coming as it did only a week before shooting started, it was an important moment. The gesture was an indication of the depth of understanding Pussycat had about what we were about to do, and laid the ground for a much easier transition to nakedness for the actors when the shoot commenced.

Despite being a respected elder, Pussycat was often the butt of jokes and even derision. He would sometimes struggle with something he had to do in the film, making mistakes in blocking or saying something quite wrong. Each time there would be laughter and jeering from the others, to such a degree that sometimes I had to clear the set of non-essential personnel so that Pussycat could continue without this intense pressure. And for reasons I never understood, at rushes in the evening when everyone got the chance to see the raw footage, the loudest laughter was always reserved for a Pussycat stuff-up.

Even when he was not required for shooting, Pussycat used to come out to set, keeping an elder's eye out on the proceedings, joining in the shenanigans and skylarking, watching, sometimes sleepily, for crocodiles. Eventually though, the call of



LEFT: *Goannas* 2007 RIGHT: *Goanna and rarrk* 2006



the canvas proved too strong. Pussycat tired of the filming and life on set, he'd had enough of the high life. He went happily back to his painting, something he never seemed to tire of.

## Rolf de Heer

### I FIRST MET PHILIP GUDTHAYKUDTHAY in

1989 at Ramingining, when for a time he lived in a blue nylon tent outside the old craft shop *donga* (a rudimentary movable steel structure often used for 'temporary' housing in mining camps and remote communities). The guy ropes were always taut, his bare camp tidy, and the front flap zipped when he wasn't at home, which was hardly ever during daylight hours. What particularly struck me about his camp was the kink in the top of the tent.

A deep kink would tell me that he had not been home for some time. Tall and lanky, Pussycat skulked about the place, barely spoke and mostly wore a wicked grin during our infrequent interactions. I had been told he was a 'clever [man]'<sup>6</sup> and he was scary.

At that time Ramingining had only about thirty houses, dirt roads only, and communications were by VJY radio telephone and short-wave radio. There were hardly any vehicles. Ramingining is Gudthaykudthay's mother's country and he takes his role as *djunggayi* (the boss or manager of the ceremonies of the land of his mother's clan) very seriously. In part, this was why he camped outside the craft shop. There had been a spate of petrol sniffing in the community and buildings had been broken into and ransacked. Gudthaykudthay was determined that this would not be the fate of Ramingining Arts and Crafts and his night-time vigil prevented that. (Subsequently a new art centre was built.)

One day, in the dry season of 1991, an older *balanda* (white man) turned up at the art centre. His eyes kept darting to a pair of paintings leaning untidily against a wall, which had been put aside for a Gudthaykudthay exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney. It didn't matter that I insisted they were reserved, the *balanda* kept badgering me to sell them to him, for a paltry price. He argued that they were not 'true' bark paintings, as they had been executed on plywood. What had struck me about these works was Gudthaykudthay's message about culture: I felt he was saying 'fuck you *balanda* mob, you can build

your houses all over my mother's country, but you can't destroy my ceremonies'. The plywood had been discarded after a major building project in the community that brought telephones and television with it. Tarred roads soon followed, and Ramingining doubled in size in a matter of years. The paintings, both titled *Wurrdjara* (*Sand palm*), are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

I left Ramingining in May 1993 and came back in May 2002. A glance through the work at Bula'bula Arts immediately revealed the capacity for a Gudthaykudthay solo show. Two months later *Wititj and Wagilag man* went on display at Karen Brown Gallery in Darwin, and with the success of that show Gudthaykudthay was offered financial assistance to prepare a show for Aboriginal and Pacific Art, Sydney. With recent income from exhibitions and the film *Ten canoes*, Gudthaykudthay was once more able to buy trucks to go hunting, painting and travelling for ceremony; his current vehicle is a troop carrier.

Over these recent times of significant creative productivity, needing assistance, Pussycat set up his 'studio' on my veranda. He worked daily and we spent hours together in the evenings and at weekends, him painting, me sitting, watching or reading, fetching him endless mugs of tea and clean water, and making us meals. It was often the company of shared silence. I broached the subject of making a short film of him at work, and the resulting piece, *Paintings in process: Garrtjambal and Wagilag Sisters*,<sup>7</sup> captures the creation of the painting of the same name.

In 2006, the third application for a two-year Fellowship for Gudthaykudthay was submitted to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council, and this time it was successful. The fellowship allowed Pussycat to fully support himself (and his recently acquired extended family) without the need to make work simply for sale. Eschewing the blocks of *rarrk* for which he is renowned, Gudthaykudthay is audaciously revealing spirit figures and animal totems, adding a new dynamism to his art. This year the National Gallery of Australia acquired *Wagilag Sisters, with child* from this period for *Culture Warriors*. Truly living as an artist, Pussycat is now at his most untainted and creative.

Belinda Scott

1 Statement taken from Philip Gudthaykudthay, interview with Belinda Scott, March 2007.

2 Wally Caruana and Nigel Lendon (eds), *The painters of the Wagilag Sisters story 1937-1997*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1997.

3 Howard Morphy, *Ancestral connections: art and an Aboriginal system of knowledge*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 194.

4 Neville Nanytjawuy and Paddy Dhathangu, now both deceased, and Yambal Durrurrnga. *Badurru* is the name for hollow-log coffin for the Liyagalawumirr people. See Susan Jenkins, *It's a power: an interpretation of the Aboriginal memorial in its ethnographic, museological, art historical and political contexts*, thesis, Canberra: National Institute of the Arts, Australian National University, pp. 139-45.

5 This stockpiling of clothing for visitors, especially from the warmer north, is now a well-established tradition, and in recent times has extended to staff donating clothes to be sent up to art centres in remote communities for distribution among artists and their families.

6 'Clever' meaning knowledgeable man with spiritual prowess.

7 Edited by Tania Nehme. See [bula-bula-arts.com](http://bula-bula-arts.com) for availability. Proceeds from the sale of this DVD are paid to Gudthaykudthay.



LEFT: *Wititj (olive python)* 2007 CENTRE: *Gunyaunmirringu* 2007 RIGHT: *Gunyaunmirringa (landscape)* 2007