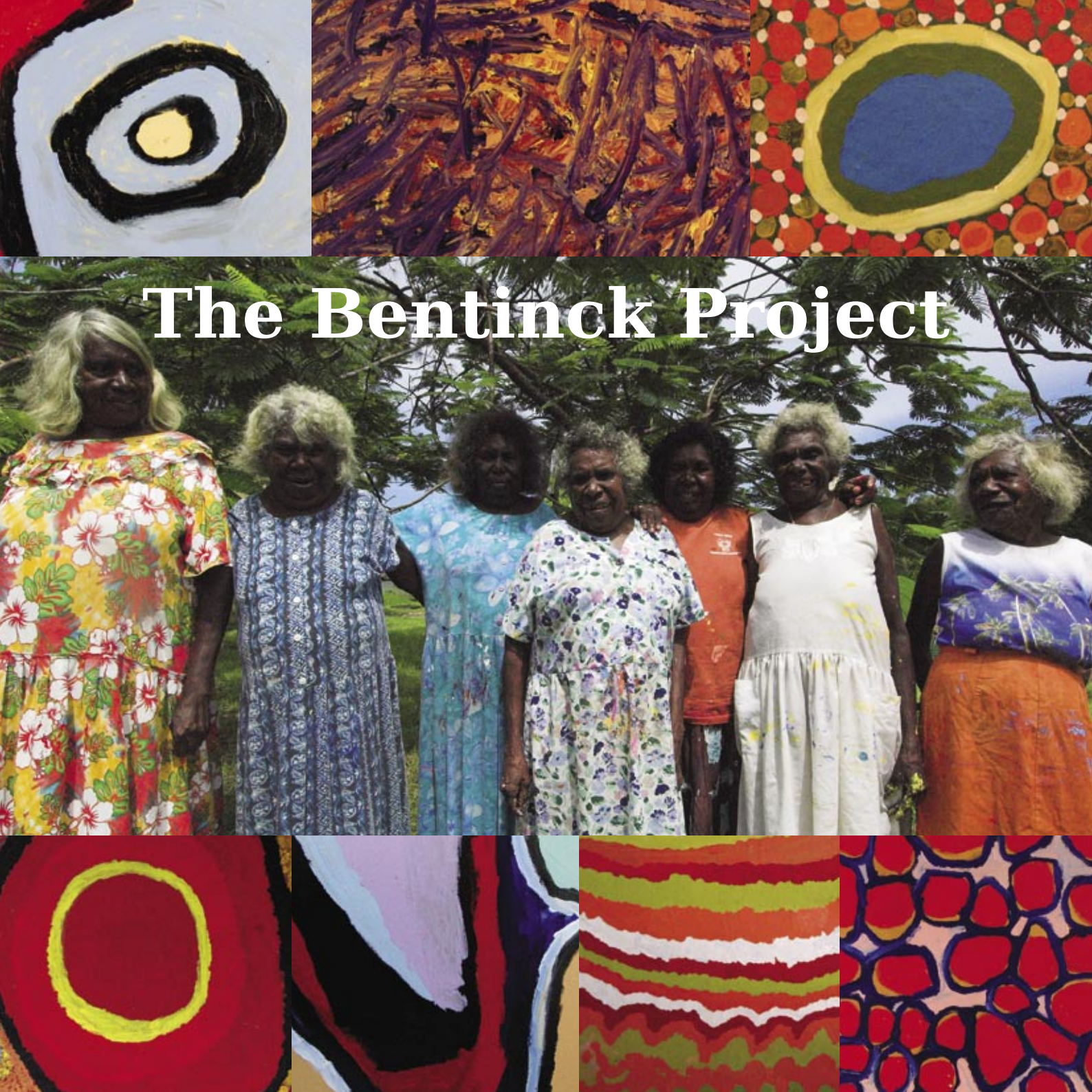

The Bentinck Project



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Burldamurra rarumbanda maku: Three Kaiadilt women

Sally Gabori, Dawn Naranatjil and May Moodoonuthi were all born in the 1920s and 1930s on Bentinck Island, the largest of the small group of low-lying South Wellesley Islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The first part of their lives were purely traditional, uninfluenced in the slightest way by the encroachment of Europeans: no clothes, no outside technology (not even stone axes), and no direct contact with European people or missions. They had practically no contact with non-Kaiadilt people, and lived from fishing and gathering shellfish and vegetable foods, and maintaining the stone fish-walls around the shores of Bentinck Island. They never went to school, speak little English, and cannot write their names. Their whole lives have been oriented to the Kaiadilt's ancient traditions, and even after the Kaiadilt were evicted to the Methodist Mission on Mornington Island, they have kept up a largely traditional life, fishing and gathering bush foods, remaining with family and the small Kaiadilt community.

Traditional Kaiadilt society was polygynous. Men sometimes had up to fifteen wives which is no small feat in a group never bigger than one hundred and fifty people. Ritualised fighting, sometimes fatal, was often involved in gaining a wife. This, plus the dangers of having the men fishing and travelling on rafts on which they voyaged out to sea, and frequently drowned, meant women outnumbered men by a considerable margin. Men only started obtaining wives in their late twenties, usually beginning their marital career by 'taking over' the widows of an older man who had died. Only as they themselves grew older did they manage to obtain younger wives. As a result, groups of co-wives often differed widely among themselves in age.

Co-wives shared the raising and suckling of young children, and in general showed a great deal of solidarity, made easier by the fact that co-wives were often sisters. A husband recognised that it was impractical to keep all the women away from the attentions of other men (usually the young bachelors) at all times, so at any one time, one woman was *yirbirr* – confined to camp, looking after the babies, cooking food, and becoming pregnant. Once a woman was pregnant she was allowed to move more freely, out to gather wood or fish or shellfish and if she took a lover then, at least she already pregnant to her husband. This polygynous system was replaced by a semblance of Christian marriage when the women were moved to the Mornington Island mission in the 1940s.

Having grown up in this strict traditional way, all three women have always been keen practitioners of traditional crafts, where everything they owned was made themselves. These crafts range from the building of stone fish traps, to the rolling of hibiscus bark string (*birrk*), and the making of dillybags and coolamons from traditional plant materials. All three women are also accomplished singers of traditional Kaiadilt songs, a distinctive lullaby-like style that often expresses longing for absent people or love or homesickness for particular places. A feeling for the close ties to country that these songs express, can be gained from the words of one of Sally's songs: *baluraayaanki mankinji / mankinji yanga jirrkurumirdamirda diijuru* – 'from being in someone else's country, in my previous night's camp in the west, I will sit down in my sea country to the north'.

But it is only in the last year that any of them have taken up painting, when co ordinator Brett Evans made appropriate materials available to them through the Art and Craft program on Mornington Island. Unlike in many parts of Australia where contemporary indigenous artists draw on long-standing local artistic traditions, rock or bark painting in Arnhem Land, sand-painting in the Centre, the Kaiadilt people did not have a developed graphic tradition in pre-contact times. The sudden explosion of artistic talent by the Kaiadilt women is indissolubly linked with their country, their families and tribe, their language, and their remarkable and dramatic history. The late and unforeseeable outpouring of artistic talent which this exhibition presents, in three women who have traversed the whole history of Aboriginal – European contacts in a single lifetime, is a striking testimony to the unpredictability of genius, and its ability to spring up after a lifetime of dormancy.

As stated, in pre-contact times the Kaiadilt were almost completely cut off from the rest of Australia, and had little contact with other Aboriginal peoples. In November 1802 Matthew Flinders anchored off Sweers Island for lengthy repairs to his ship. He encountered a group of "Indians" on Allen Island which is about halfway between Bentinck Island and the mainland. From his description of them it seems likely that they were mainlanders or Forsyth Islanders. He saw people on Sweers and Bentinck Islands, and these were no doubt the Kaiadilt, but there was no close contact. There were sporadic visits to the islands by Europeans over the next 140 years, but major contact occurred only in the 1940s. Severe drought in the period 1942-45 resulted in those on Sweers Island being evacuated to Mornington Island. The mission there had been trying for some time to bring the Bentinck Islanders under their sway, without any real success, but this environmental crisis gave them an opportunity to transport a good part of the Kaiadilt population across to the mission on Mornington. Finally, after a cyclone in 1948, the remaining Kaiadilt were persuaded to move to Mornington Island too. For the next four decades the Kaiadilt people had no choice but to live on Mornington, which they consider foreign territory. Such was the trauma of this forced shift that for several years no child was born and survived, rupturing forever the chain by which one sibling transmits their language to the next. No child born after the move has ever mastered the intricate Kayardild language, so that grandparents and grandchildren have no language in common that could be used to pass on tribal lore in the home. From the early 1990s many have returned to outstations on Bentinck Island, which now has a population of forty to fifty, as part of a move to establish a healthy community maintaining Kaiadilt traditions in their own country. Sally, May and Dawn now divide their lives between Mornington Island and the outstation on Bentinck.

Traditionally, Kaiadilt people receive a birthplace name, formed by adding *ngathi* to the name of the place they are born, and one to two further names – either a totem, passed down through the family, or a spiritual conception name, recalling a significant event marking the child's spiritual conception, such as a fish or animal presenting itself to be killed while the child's father was hunting, or some other unusual and noteworthy event that coincided with conception. Birthplace names are important because they keep track of the special rights that people have as custodians of the country they are born into.

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Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda

Sally Gabori

Sally Gabori's tribal name is *Mirdidingkingathi juwarnda*. *Juwarnda* means 'dolphin', which is her totemic sign, and *Mirdidingkingathi* means 'born at Mirdidingki' which is her country on the south side of Bentinck Island. The English name Gabori comes from her husband Pat Gabori and is a corruption of his birthplace name, *Kabararrjingathi*.
Her father was born around 1865 and died in 1930. From his name, *Thunduyingathi Bijarrb,* we know that he was born at Thunduyi, near Oaktree Point on the northern end of Bentinck Island. Her mother, *Murrukunabayingathi Karnda Thandamand*, was born around 1880 on Albinia Island (*Murrukunabayi*) and died around 1946. Her older brother King Alfred (*Makarrkingathi Dingkarringathi Thuwathu Bijarrb*) was born around 1897 and died in 1947. Her younger brother Percy Loogatha (*Dunkurrurriyingathi Wuyirra Bijarrb*) was born around 1922 and died in 1974.

At the time of coming to Mornington Island, Sally was one of four wives to Pat Gabori. Mission policy encouraged monogamy so two of Pat's wives were redistributed to wifeless men. Although, Pat managed to hold onto two wives: Sally, and Maudie Pat (*Dawaringathi kulkiji*) who died in 1984. Sally brought eleven children of her own into the world, as well as caring for her co-wife's children, following Kaiadilt tradition, and is grandmother and great grandmother to many more.

This shy great-grandmother in a largely unknown community, who barely speaks English and whose language can now be understood by only a handful of people, has rocketed to national artistic fame less than twelve months after beginning to paint. She has already held a highly successful one-woman show at WAG in December 2005, for which she received national publicity and acclaim.



Sally Gabori
Sandbar at Nyinyilki 2005
183x101 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Dibirdibi dulk, Rock Cod Country 2006
210 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Ngijinjina Makarrki Dulk, King Alfred's Country 2005
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Dibirdibi Dulk, Rock Cod Country 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Topwaa 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Dibirdibi Country-Topwaa 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Mosquito Story Place 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Dibirdibi dulk, Rock Cod Country 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Hunting ground at Dingaree 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Sally Gabori
Ngijinjina Kanthathuna Dulk, My Fathers Country 2006
183 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Thunduyingathi Bijarrb

May Moodoonuthi

May Moodoonuthi, was born around 1929 at Thundiyi on the north side of the island. *Bijarrb*, her totemic name, means ‘dugong’. *Thundiyingathi* was her birthplace. Little is known about her parents or siblings.

May was not yet married when the Kaiadilt people were brought to Mornington Island. Some years later, she was married to Darwin Moodoonuthi in a church wedding, and has a photograph of herself in a formal long white gown. Sadly, they lost their only child at birth, but because under Kaiadilt tradition women have many classificatory children (the children of anyone who counts as a sister), she has played an important part in bringing up many other children in the community. Her husband, Darwin, was born in 1939, and was a leader of the Kaiadilt people until his untimely death in 1983.

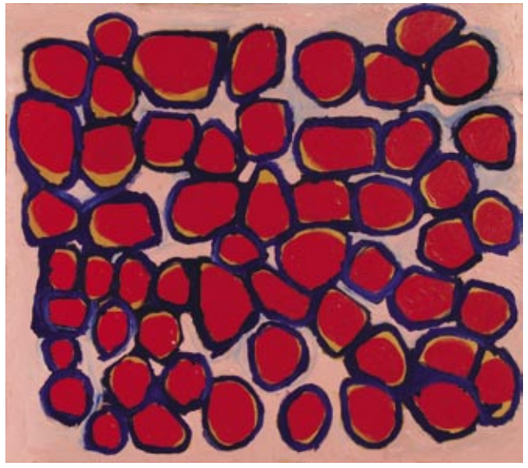
May is an amazing fisherwoman and hunter, described by her grandchildren as a “number one tracker”. She will spot a subtle change in the sand and immediately know how long ago the track was made, who made it and where they are headed. Many a goanna is pulled out of hiding crag a short while after May has spotted the elusive trail. A fire is built, the goanna is tossed on top and May is back out on the beach throwing a hand line into the sea, digging turtle eggs out of the sand (always leaving some behind), placing them gently into a child’s rusty beach bucket, and then filling an empty milk-powder tin with oysters and Keens curry powder – you will never go hungry with May beside you.

But it is her tracking abilities that are exceptional. We remember one time walking along the beach on Allen Island, when May spotted a trail of footprints along the beach. “Smithy” she said as clearly as if she was looking at a photograph of his face. We walked along the beach beside the footprints, when a second set of foot-prints appeared out of the bush-line, and joined the first. May’s eyebrow shot up, and in a half whisper she said “Rebecca.” The footprints continued together for awhile, side by side, and then disappeared into the bush. On the other side of the sand hill, hidden among the trees, we saw the footprints lead to a large pile of disrupted, and flattened sand. May just shook her head with a wry smile, as if watching a slightly embarrassing love scene unfold in a movie. The footprints separated on the other side of the sandhill, and May said, “Look, he has gone back to his wife, and she has gone back to her fishing.”

May has always been extremely artistic, conscious of how she looks and always wears beautiful bright clothes and decorates her home with beach-combed collages. She also makes delicate shell and seed necklaces, and beautiful hand rolled and hand dyed pandanus string, which she knots and crochets into small and stunningly beautiful dilly bags. Wherever May lives she plants gardens and hangs adornments around. While a formal knowledge of art was clearly absent through a lack of exposure or opportunity, May always intuitively knew what a picture represented, or what kind of mood was being presented in a picture. We remember how, on one our first trips to Mornington Island 24 years ago, May saw a Western Desert poster hanging on the wall of our donga, a mass of concentric ochres dots. She looked at it for a short while and said, “beautiful water-place, bubba.” The painting was called “Waterholes” and yet this was written in English, on the back of the poster.



May Moodoonuthi
Kamarra, Rocks 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



May Moodoonuthi
Kamarra, Rocks 2006
121 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



May Moodoonuthi
Body Stripes 2006
198 x 101 cm
acrylic on canvas



May Moodoonuthi
Body Stripes 2006
121 x 61 cm
acrylic on canvas



May Moodoonuthi
Body Stripes 2006
137 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



May Moodoonuthi
Body Stripes 2006
137 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Wirrngajingathi Bijarrb Kurdalalngk

Dawn Naranatjil

Dawn Naranatjil's place name is *Wirrngajingathi*. Wirrngaji is a 'wind story' place on the south side of Bentinck Island. People from Wirrngaji used to use wind-magic to call up or silence south winds blowing across the sea from the mainland. Dawn still knows the dances and songs of this ritual. She has two totemic/conception names: *Kurdalalngk* (long black-tailed ray) and *Bijarrb* (Dugong). She was born around 1935, the daughter of Hannah (*Kalnyirringathi Balibali Karwarrk*), and taken over as daughter by Kelly Thunduyingathi (aka *Bilinabangathi Bulthuku*) (1900-1950). Phoebe, Hannah and Roma were all co-wives of Kelly and Dawn thus called them all *ngamathu* (mother). Dawn is sister to Roger Kelly, a senior Kaiadilt leader, and classificatory sister with Paula Paul.

When the Kaiadilt were relocated to Mornington Island in 1948, Dawn was a co-wife with Sarah Winjarrkawurungathi Buranthand (1900-1968) to Alex Naranatjil (1920-1961). She is the mother to Dorothy, Maxwell, Rodney, Robin, Harry and Alex and matriarch to three generations of Kaiadilt and Lardil grandchildren. Being in her seventies does not stop her racing down to the beach to turn giant turtles onto their backs, or heaving around great rocks to repair the old fish traps, propensities which have earned her the nickname 'Superwoman' from the Kaiadilt community.

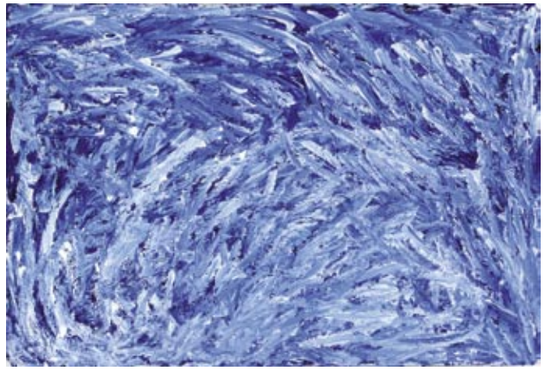
A magnificent story-teller, dancer and talented actress, her uproarious sense of humour makes any occasion with her memorable. No matter if she is in a tiny dinghy, or if a wind-magic stomp needs to be performed at the place where the boat is pitching in the sea, she will do it then and there, bellowing forth the ancient words of the ritual.

Her understanding of land and seascapes and their rich and deeper religious meaning is detailed and profound. She moves through the bush with the ease and familiarity of a mother embracing her child. She knows every plant, every curve, every potential disruption and very source of fresh water, perhaps hidden metres below the surface, casually pointing out a small ball of tasty resin on a tree, a tiny hole that houses a delicious grub, or what looks like an ordinary rock in the shallow estuary water and turns out to be the deadly stone fish.

As an artist Dawn Naranatjil's connectedness to her country comes through in a powerful and vivid form which in turn reflects her dignified and unquestioned connection to place.



Dawn Naranatjil
Yakuri, Fish 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Malji Balila School of Sardines 2006
101 x 151 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Minalda, Bushfire 2006
121 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
My Husbands Birthplace 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Dibirdibi, Rock Cod 2006
137 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Dugong 2006
141 x 86 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Dirrardirra, Ochre 2006
183 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
My Husbands Country 2006
151 x 101 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Karwarrka, Queenfish 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Dawn Naranatjil
Yakun, Bluefish 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas

Who are the Kaiadilt people, where do they come from and where does their art come from?

The paintings in this exhibition are by seven Kaiadilt women: Sally Gabori, May Moodoonuthi, Paula Paul, Dawn Narranatjil, Netta Loogatha, Amy Loogatha, and Ethel Thomas. When one arranges these artists in order of birth, the age differences between successive pairs run at two to six years. However from an Aboriginal kinship perspective it is possible to divide the artists into two generations: the older generation being Sally, May, Dawn and Paula born between 1924 and 1937, and the younger generation of the three sisters Netta, Amy and Ethel born from 1942 to 1946. The paintings of these artists mostly depict scenes of their country rendered in a highly expressive manner reflecting their unique perception and innate sense of aesthetic. Their work has been generated at the Mornington Island Arts and Crafts Centre in the township of Gununa, but this is not their homeland. So who are the Kaiadilt people and from whence do they come?

The migrations of the Kaiadilt

The origin of the Kaiadilt people is currently the subject of an intense scientific research programme that I am undertaking over the next five years with a large group of scientific colleagues, one of whom is the linguist Dr Nicholas Evans who has also written material for this catalogue. But the answers to these questions are by no means yet clear. The limited available evidence suggests that the Kaiadilt were a breakaway group from an earlier population which linguists have named 'Proto-Tangkic', meaning the first speakers of the early Tangkic language of the Wellesley Island region (see map, inside back cover). The Proto-Tangkic were probably living in the Southern Gulf area about 7,000 to 8,000 years ago when sea levels were rising after the Ice Age, breaking open the Torres Strait and the Arafura Sea, and flooding what was once Lake Carpentaria. As the sea levels rose to create the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Proto-Tangkic group may have been forced back inland. But then the sea levels dropped again, and Bentinck and Sweers Island, part of alsthe South Wellesley Islands, emerged in roughly their present outlines. These islands were then colonized by a breakaway group who travelled there by raft and took their stone-wall fish trap technology with them; they came to identify as the Kaiadilt. This migration may have been as little as 500 years ago (1500 AD) or could have been somewhat longer, maybe 700 or even 1000 years[1], but impending archaeological investigation is required to shed light on this.

The islands that the Kaiadilt colonized in the South Wellesley Islands were very flat made up of a low plateaux surrounded by tidal flats, mangroves and an outer rim of laterite cliffs and sand-dune segments that gradually built up over years into sand platforms and parallel sand ridges as more sand was gradually driven ashore in the stabilized climatic conditions. These sand platforms held the water sufficiently for freshwater wells to be dug in particular places to establish campsites, even in dry weather. The Kaiadilt depended mainly on sea foods for subsistence and constructed many hectares of enclosed fish traps around their islands so that they could readily harvest their catch out of these littoral paddocks.

They gradually named all of their country, differentiating the better food and water resources, good camping places and places they recognized as being of spiritual significance (Story Places). This early colonization period is encoded into the Kaiadilt sacred histories that tell of particular totemic identities such as Rock Cod, Crane and Seagull who were active in the final shaping of the coast and the establishment of the numerous coastal places.

What happened to the Kaiadilt when Europeans arrived? Dutch navigators and Macassan (Indonesian) fishermen arrived at the Wellesley Islands as early as the 1600s and 1700s. Mathew Flinders in 1802 was the first of a series of British navigators and explorers, who all had little contact because of the tactic employed by the Kaiadilt people of receding and hiding. Once British colonization of Australia had progressed, marine visits intensified until 1866 when a township named Carnarvon was established on Sweers Island. It acted as a port and a Customs House for the southern Gulf, as well as a sanitarium for those with fever and other illnesses. The Kaiadilt were kept off Sweers by the newcomers but maintained their control of Bentinck Island. Carnarvon, as a town, had ceased to be by 1880, but Sweers continued to be occupied intermittently by small groups of Europeans and other immigrants for 40 years, occasionally resulting in violence and loss of Kaiadilt lives. The Kaiadilt returned to Sweers Island whenever opportunity arose, to re-occupy and re-use their lands, including during the 1930s and 1940s.

Meanwhile, in 1914, a Presbyterian Mission was established on Mornington Island and the North Wellesley Islanders (the Lardil and Yangkaal who were also originally descended from Proto-Tangkic stock) were gradually concentrated into a Mission Village. The Missionaries made various attempts to befriend the Kaiadilt and during 1947-48 they were all persuaded to be transported to the Mornington Mission, including the seven women whose work is in the current exhibition. At this time Sally and May were young women. The sisters Paula and Dawn were girls, whilst Netta, Amy and Ethel were young children. There has been much debate over the years as to how the Kaiadilt were persuaded to emigrate from their homeland, but contributing factors were clearly drought, loss of freshwater sources after a tidal wave, group in-fighting and mission influence. They were the last tribal group of Aboriginal coastal hunter-fishers in Australia to leave their traditional lifestyle. As such they could be compared historically with the last group of Central Australian desert Aborigines to leave their traditional lifestyle, the Pintupi. It follows that one could make direct comparisons between the Pintupi members of the famed Papunya Tula Art School and the artists in this Kaiadilt School. (I shall leave this task for a later review.)

Once the Kaiadilt population of 63 persons had settled into the Mission, they established a separate village enclave but nevertheless maintained a strong and unfaltering desire to return to their homelands. From the 1960s a young Kaiadilt man, Darwin Moodoonathi, emerged as the political leader for his people and was appointed to the Mornington Aboriginal Council which was an advisory group to the Missionary, Reverend Belcher. When I first visited Mornington Mission in 1973, Darwin was calling for the Kaiadilt return to their homeland and had begun agitating for land rights. I was fortunate enough to accompany Darwin Moodoonathi and Arthur Paul (both since deceased) to map the Kaiadilt geography of Sweers Island in 1982. Both of their wives, May and Paula, are participating in this exhibition.

Darwin unfortunately died in 1983, but his vision came to fruition in 1986 when the *Nyinyilki* outstation was established on the south-east of Bentinck Island with assistance from the Mornington Shire Council. A modest newspaper article in *The Sunday Mail* (28 September 1986) carried the story on the establishment of the outstation. It was titled "How a dreamtime wish came true for Bluefish". It contained a photo of Darwin's gravestone engraved on which is his totemic name *Ngarrawurn* meaning 'Bluefish', and another photograph of the plaque which was unveiled at the outstation opening ceremony and which depicts an engraving of a bluefish. The artists in the present exhibition reside in the small *Nyinyilki* outstationoutstation. In the wet season they have painted on Mornington Island at the art centre. At *Nyinyilki* base camp, the older people are able to maintain their links to those places of their youth, which they had experienced in a somewhat different lifestyle in the 1920s and 1930s. These older Kaiadilt residents are mostly all women as almost all of the men of their age group have died in earlier decades. This largely explains why this exhibition is gender-specific.

Are there influences of style or precedents for the art of these Kaiadilt artists?
The first of the seven artists to take up painting barely a year ago was Sally Gabori, who first exhibited at the Woolloongabba Art Gallery in a group exhibition in June 2005, and then again in December with her one-woman show. Sally has encouraged and inducted the others into painting, all within the last six months. Sally can be likened to Emily Kngwarreye of the Utopia art movement – the senior female Elder and teacher of the group. Working as a group of seven creates a pleasurable and meaningful social experience of their painting sessions, during which they vigorously discuss and debate their ideas, and joke and reminisce on their experiences in their homeland which they transform into paint.

It seems improbable that there are any external stylistic influences on the art of this group. Sally herself had had little experience of travel to the mainland prior to her exhibition in Brisbane last year. There is no history of contact with art galleries or art texts or collections of foreign paintings. Although I might liken the historical context of these painters to Utopia or Pintupi art, there is no known influence from these mainland groups.

The only prolonged contact with the paintings of others would have been with the Lardil corpus of art produced at Mornington Island since the 1960s and originally initiated and led by the brothers Lindsay and Dick Roughsey[2]. Lindsay and Dick developed two distinctive styles that were taken up by younger Lardil artists – one was the rendition of stylised figurative depictions of sacred stories on messmate bark, often with a cross-hatched background (an influence from Arnhem Land), whilst the other involved romanticised scenes of mission lifestyle on Mornington Island rendered in acrylics (here Dick Roughsey was influenced by his artist colleague Percy Trezise to some extent). However neither of these two styles are in any way evident in the paintings of the Kaidilt women. We must conclude that their expressionistic works come directly and relatively spontaneously from the mind, from memory of country and from memory of experience in country. Reference to the titles of the paintings clearly indicates this.

Many of the paintings depict specific named Kaiadilt places (which are also often part of their titles).
The anthropologist Norman Tindale recorded over 300 place names in Kaiadilt country. One recurring geographic theme in this exhibition is Kaiadilt ‘Story Places’. These sacred sites are believed to have been created by ancestral beings who left something of their magical spirit or essence in the site. As in other parts of Aboriginal Australia, these ancestral beings are believed to have been part human and part animal, plant or meteorological phenomena. Some of these sites can be ritually invoked to yield the species or phenomenon that made the site. Thus for example, there is a ritual to cause the reproduction or multiplication of barramundi at the Barramundi Story Place.

Dr Evans and myself have recorded some 45 Story Places with Kaiadilt Elders in their traditional lands and seas and there are undoubtedly more. These site records were important evidence in the largely successful Native Title claim for the Wellesley seas in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Some of the more commonly known Story Places are Rainbow Serpent (*Thuwathu*), Barramundi (*Kurndawurnda*), Dog (*Kurthurrawarrayarba*), Lightening (*Birinka*), Waterspout (*Thandaman*), Rock Cod (*Dibirdibi*), Redbill (*Kathuka*), Barracuda (*Darrngkaa*), Moon (*Waldarra*), Waterlily (*Kardarra*) and Black Crane (*Bujuku*).

Other paintings of country especially by the older women (eg Dawn) do not appear to be site specific, but rather expressive of a landscape type or dramatic landscape event eg stones, storms, bushfires etc. These renditions are based on the many youthful experiences of endurance in what were often severe and harsh conditions, as well as more recent times. Yet other paintings, particularly by Sally Gabori are of environmental resources eg a turtle nest, a school of fish, etc.

Repeated types of significant places in the Kaiadilt cultural landscape were camping sites, dancing grounds, initiation grounds, fish traps, freshwater wells, springs, waterholes, swamps, fighting places, and other plant and animal habitats that yielded regular food supplies. Each named place on Bentinck and Sweers Islands was claimed by one or more owners. Thus there was a traditional land tenure system whereby rights in country were distributed between Kaiadilt individuals and families. Paintings are sometimes identified as such eg ‘King Alfred’s country’. Some of the artists have also painted their birthplaces, from which they traditionally obtained their first name. This personal name is formed from the birth-place name and the suffix ‘ngathi’.

If there is an exception to country as the source of inspiration for these paintings, it is two categories of paintings in this exhibition that are inspired by the making of body marks. But once again these involve experiences which I believe occurred largely in country in the 1930s and 1940s. Paula Paul has prepared works in which she depicts body scars. The repeated layering of strokes of paint to build up a solid mark is reminiscent of the cutting of one’s body on repeated occasions resulting in the raised cicatrix scare the Kaiadilt cut their upper bodies in several ritual contexts. For example, aA young man had cicatrices (*burrkunda*) cut on his upper arms or shoulders by his father-in-law as part of his initiation. Horizontal cuts were also made on men’s chests or stomachs. And women cut their scalps as part of mourning behaviour to express their grief, leaving deep wounds and scars (*burrkunburrkunda*).

The second category of body-based art is the set of cross-hatched stripe paintings by May Moodoonuthi.
There is no recent history of Kaiadilt people painting up in recent decades in this manner. However there is one set of photographs in the ethnographic record of the Kaiadilt which depict the application of striped body paint. This practice was carried out for male initiation ceremonies and the last authentic Kaiadilt ceremony was performed soon after they had arrived on Mornington Island in the late 1940s (about a half dozen photos taken by Missionary McCarthy survive). The photographs show several initiates being painted with parallel vertical white stripes on their chests, stomachs and backs, and horizontal stripes on their upper legs. The photographs also reveal older women performing this task[3].

It is their active memory of, and strong emotional connection to their traditional places that generates the art of these Kaiadilt painters. The extent of their outside art experience and influence is minimal. The national cultural heritage of Kaiadilt traditional life has been brilliantly expressed in an original, perceptually unique and strikingly creative art style after 60 years of migrations, readjustments and reconnection to their homeland.

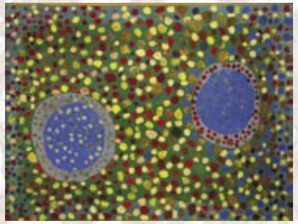
by Associate Professor Paul Memmott
Aboriginal Environments Research Centre
University of Queensland
21/3/06

Endnotes
1. Based on estimates by Dr Nick Evans on the basis of the degree of language differentiation, using glottochronology.
2. After 50 years there has been an abrupt liberation from these two styles depicted in a renaissance exhibition at Wooloongabba Art Gallery in June 2005 by Lardil, Yangkaal and Ganggalida artists.
3. It is to be noted that in the traditional Kaiadilt initiation ceremony, unlike that of other surrounding groups, both the older men and women were integrally involved in the circumcision phase of the ceremony. There is also reference in the ethnographic record of Kaiadilt Elders painting themselves for ritual dances to enact ‘increase ceremonies’ eg to make south-east wind and dust come at the Riithaldiyarrb or Majimaji Story Place.

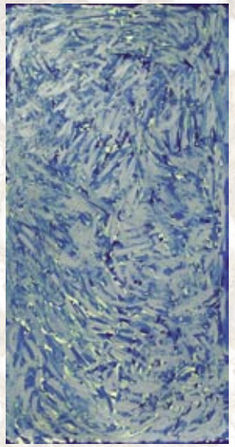








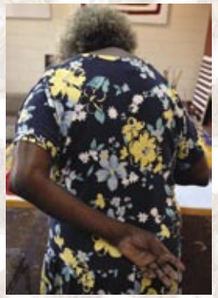








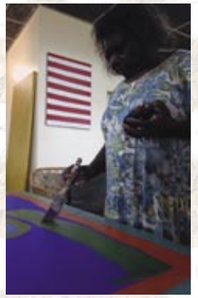














Kuruwarriyingathi Bijarrb

Paula Paul

“I was born on Bentinck Island on the south side called Karooi. My father was from Rarumbanda and my mother was from the Balumbanda of Bentinck Island called Grombali. I used to make dolls when I was young, from mud, play with my sisters. Big mob of young girls. We used to play catching one another, tiggy.

I was moved to Mornington Island to a dormitory. He was cruel, Mr McCathy. He would use the hose on us girls. Only when we got holidays did we get to go out camping. After dormitory life, I went with my parents to outside of Cloncurry to work on a sheep station. I worked in the house, washing and cleaning. Two years I worked on that station. Then I came back to Mornington Island and got married and had six children: three boys and three girls.

I went back to Bentinck after my kids had their schooling on Mornington Island and the mainland. I helped with land rights to get our country back. We have our own house there. We’re living there again. In my country I like fishing in the rivers for salmon and barramundi. We got a lot of fish on Bentinck Island. We make a lot of things from wallaby grass, like dilly bags and string, and shell beads.

Along the beach of my country are big white rocks. I paint them and I paint the little white shells that are up on the beach. We call them dingy shells. I want to be a good painter.

I have a lot of grandchildren. They make me happy. I take them for holidays on Bentinck when I go back after the wet season. When the air-strip is dry we can go home. Back to my home.

We just started learning painting. I seen my aunty Sally start painting. She makes good paintings. I want to be a good painter too. I like doing painting for myself and with those three sisters of mine: Netta, Amy and Ethel and with my aunty Sally and May May, her sister.”

~ Paula Paul



Paula Paul
Kardarra, Water lilies 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Poison fruit 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Jawarlda, Oysters 2006
121 x 61 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Red stones 2006
121 x 61 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Rocks on the beach 2006
124 x 74 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Jawarlda, Oysters 2006
121 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Jawarlda Kamarrbirdi, Oyster Reef 2006
121 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Red Rocks 2006
137 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Body Stripes 2006
121 x 61 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Burrkunda, Body Markings 2006
137 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Burrkunda, Body Markings 2006
121 x 61 cm
acrylic on canvas



Paula Paul
Burrkunda, Body Markings 2006
121 x 61 cm
acrylic on canva



Paula Paul
Burrkunda, Body Markings 2006
118 x 89 cm
acrylic on canvas



Birrmuyingathi Maali

Netta Loogatha

“I was born on Bentinck Island on the Northern side, Bilmee. When I was young I nursed my baby brother and sister, I learnt to hunt, fished from rocks, gathered shells, everything that our old people taught us. Camping out in humpies - we lived in humpies then - no clothes, nothing at all. Tribal way. Only grass strings around our waist. We used leaves to tie them to our bodies when Europeans came.

I was young when the Europeans came. My father had six wives. He was called ‘King Alfred’. They came three times after the war. In 1946 they came back to pick us up and lug us. I was on Sweers Island with my family when we were picked up and brought on the Lugger to Mornington Island.

When my father died my father’s brother, Old Percy Looagtha took over the family and all the wives. He had five kids. He took care of us and he had more children of his own. He shared his family. We often go and visit his grave site on Oak Tree Point on Bentinck Island and on Fathers’ Day we take flowers around to him.

Our families came together through initiation. They taught us to hunt for oysters and how to roll grass for string into dilly bags. We used to sit on the floating logs like a raft. We went straight into the dormitory on Mornington Island. They gave us ankmes and boys went separate ways to us girls in the dormitory. They also dressed us with clothes. We were homesick at first. Then when we met some girls who were friendly to us, we made good friends. Lardil girls from Mornington Island who were already in the mission.

When I was nineteen we went to work on the mainland. We had lots of boyfriends - white, black and brown. I was a housemaid on a cattle station with good looking riggers, Canobe Station. I worked on five differentstations, cooking, cleaning and looking after the kids. I came back to Mornington Island pregnant and I had twins. I also have two children from a girl from here named Grace who died. I looked after them from childhood. Amy is the last girl. They’re in their early twenties now. One has a son, Dominic. He’s a Lardil boy but he has Kaiadilt blood in him too. My mother and step-father both died here on Mornington Island. Grandmother and their families have all passed away on Mornington. Of my mother’s children there are three boys and three girls. She lost one of her boys. My mother’s sister had one boy and one girl.

I was a grandmother when we went back to Bentinck Island many years later. My daughter’s two boys were with me. We had to dance *toot toot* ‘cause we got our land rights. I was here for the sea claim for twenty-three years on the land council. We have homes on Bentinck Island so in the wet season we stay on Mornington Island and go home in the dry. My sister was in that plane crash here. She was my offsider on the land council. She has four girls and one boy left behind. They’re all grown up now. Good hunting on Bentinck Island. Caring and sharing on Bentinck Island. It’s better to be at home. When the boys get a dugong or turtle they share with the whole camp. We travel by 4WD to Mackenzie River and Oak Tree Point for fishing. My country. I got sick from the kids who threw fruit into the river. That made me sick. That’s a powerful place. I got a stroke from that on October 23rd and had to go to Mount Isa for a long time. I was getting home sick while I was there but they couldn’t let me go ‘til December. This all happened last year.

Rex Harold, my kid brother, he showed me how to make a painting. He sat down at my house and showed me how to draw birds and dugongs, swamps, and Phall Island or Sweers. Our aunty showed us the way, to learn from her. We have our own paintings now of our homelands and sacred places, birth places. There are a lot of boys on Bentinck Island. They ask me. I’m the boss. My grandmother delivered me from my mother on Bilmee. That has always been my homeland, my area, that’s my birthplace. It was my great great grandfathers land. As long as we’re all family we learn from each other. We started with our birthplaces.

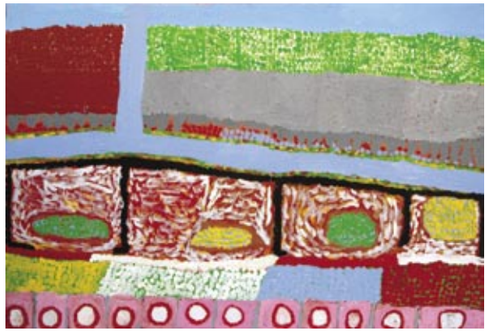
It’s good to do painting, learn from each other our culture and story and where you come from. I paint the story places, all different places, true story places. We learned these from the old people. We learned what’s not for touching. They tell us what it means. We do this so we can pass these stories down to our grandchildren while we’re still alive. They love to hear our stories because of the olden dreamtime stories and dancing. Before I went to the mainland I was working for Rev Belcher and his wife at his house, looking after his children. I was a housemaid too. I did everything and Ankin’s children too, I look after them. The same thing I done to them, as well as gardening in the garden, growing vegetables.

When we were naughty the Mornington Island councilors would cut our hair, ‘cause we had long hair and they wanted it for POSSUM (CEREMONY OBJECT). We would tie a bag around our heads to hide our baldy heads. There are lots of things that I remember to tell in stories.

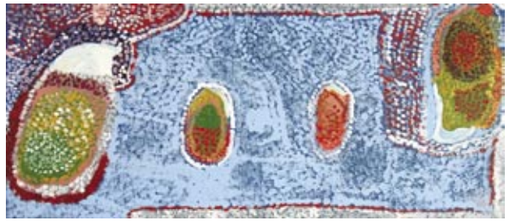
I am happy to show other people my country and culture through my paintings.

We got a fright when we first saw Sallys paintings. We are proud of her for starting off, they are lovely works.”

~ Netta Loogatha



Netta Loogatha
Markarrki 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Murndamurra, Islands 2006
61 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Bilmee,Cyclone Storyplace 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Birrmuyi, Dog Storyplace 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Nyinyarrkee 2006
121 x 151 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Lookati 2006
121 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Big River at Loogathi 2006
121 x 183 cm
acrylic on canvas



Netta Loogatha
Mukajee 2006
183 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas

Influence Amongst Kin

When Brett Evans asked Sally what she would like to do with her painting money, she replied ‘what for’?
He explained that her works had sold at an exhibition in Brisbane and asked her the question again. This time Sally simply and quietly said, ‘I want to go home’. Amongst her possessions on that charter home with her old Dibirdibi, Pat Gabori, was a small canvas. Whilst Pat sung to his country on the beach of Nyinyilki, Sally sat with her sisters and nieces.

As Amy Loogatha recalls,
“We got the good news, that aunty Sally was coming with a message. To show us something she had done.
She showed us and gave it to Ethel.”

Amy has hinted that Sally may have favoured her sibling Ethel, who is the youngest of the group. Although only the women present at the time know what was said, the result of their conversation was named the Bentinck Project. As the wet season came to the gulf in November 2005, a group of senior Kaiadilt women walked into the Mornington Island Art & Craft centre. They started painting alongside a smiling Sally Gabori. May had been painting with Sally earlier in the year and now her nieces were to begin their schooling in Sally Gabori’s aesthetics. With modest formats arranged on tables, Netta, Paula, Ethel and Amy began painting.

At that time Sally was in full swing leading up to her first exhibition. She was painting some of the shows most admired works. With her confident and direct approach to painting, the long fluid stroke of her brush and scale of her canvases, she provided inspiration and confidence for her nieces as they began their infancy as painters. The development of a Kaiadilt dialogue in contemporary painting began to echo in and out of the studio alongside the women’s’ laughter and lullabies.

The sharing of language, the borrowing of imagery and the gifting of palettes have been important elements in the Bentinck Project. The initial influence and direction of Sally amongst her kin is evident in their early works. Despite the choice of subject matter or place being individual to each artist. The pursuit of an individual aesthetic is present in each of the women’s first works. The carefully deliberated use of an open mark and their choice of bright colours and bordering within the frame demonstrates the artists’ initial borrowing from the aesthetic influence of Gabori. As a matriarch and teacher of contemporary imagery, Sally was not only their starting point. She provided direction from the sharing of ‘her colours’ to her techniques and compositions.

Painting is a shared experience that binds these women in a new way. Each artist has found her own language within the medium. Their respective works share many common elements and yet remain distinctly individual. The projects progression has paralleled both the artists’ development as painters and the growth of a visual Kaiadilt vocabulary. Images of birthplaces, rocks, wild flowers, story places, hunting grounds, reefs, waterholes, body paint and scars have been developed through the women’s dialogues. They are responses to the subject of place. They are borrowed and given; collective and unique.

The painting “Sandbar at Nyinyilki” by Sally Gabori was produced during the Bentinck Project. It refers to an event in modern Kaiadilt history. The artist explains how two men once come to a sandbar with the intention of killing her brother, King Alfred. Despite their original intention the men themselves were fatally speared. This recording of a localised history indicates Sally’s awareness that painting can support modern Kaiadilt historical narratives.

All these painters are gifted with an inquisitive nature that can be seen in the experimentation with the properties of paint as a substance and as a medium of representation. Netta Loogatha’s visions have developed into an eloquent language through her open mark making, contrasting palettes and processes of layering. Her works allow for the addition and subtraction of form, colour and content. As a figurative painter, her use of colour is central and distinct. In works such as “Mukajee” and “Big River at Loogathi” the images patchwork-like compositions are separated by horizontal lines. In constructing her images, Netta renders and re-renders the painted landscape until she feels that her image resides with the nature of her country.

In the studio, the influence of Sally’s sisters Dawn and May reinforces the Kaiadilt cultural practice of valuing the old. Both these sisters’ presence and approach to painting has had a dramatic impact on the younger generation of Kaiadilt women in the B.I art gang. May’s approach to the canvas is as free as the wind. Her use of paint and brush is radical and unconventional. Meanwhile, Dawn’s immediate mark is delivered through bold and deliberate gestures. Dawn’s work, in particular her direct approach to the canvas, has encouraged the women to take a freer approach with their painting. The fluid direction of Dawn’s mark is aquatic in its nature: paint seems to swim within the frame. Using a layering of thick marks to describe a variety of subject matter, the colours, flow, merge and become entangled creating depth. Like Dawn herself, the mark is constant and conveys her knowledge of her country and its aesthetics.

Paula Paul scatters lightly toned pink oysters and tiny white shells across her paintings. Like a outgoing tide, the arch of her line fades as it crosses the width of her work. Paula’s most recent series the Burrkunda scar paintings were composed in direct response to May’s body stripe series. Buoyed also by the boldness of Dawn’s paintings, Paula developed a process of overlaying paint to build up tactile ridges or raised surfaces on her canvas. Paint is stacked to imitate the raised skin of a scar so the canvas, like the body, becomes a record.

Amy Loogatha is graced with a joy that is clearly articulated in her painting. The acceptance of the influence and advice of the other Bentick painters has allowed her work to develop in two distinct directions. Amy has followed Ethel towards a thicker aesthetic and her sister Netta into the landscape. In a similar method to Amy, Ethel’s aesthetic has split in two directions. The thick rich rocks and cliff faces of Ethel’s paintings reflects Dawn and May’s liberal approach to application. Reworking and layering is an essential element in Ethel’s process.
Like her sister Netta, the painting exists in a constant state of flux. There is no point at which the painting assumes a finished form. The work can be adjusted at Ethel’s will to follow a completely new direction.

The Bentinck Project demonstrates the value of kin and the benefits of creating a dynamic collective dialogue. Though Sally was the precursor and inspiration for the artists of the Bentinck Project, her work has not prescribed a preconceived idea of what an indigenous image is or how it should be painted. What the Bentinck Project has produced is a collective image of Kaiadilt country. Its law and its culture has been visualised.

The Bentinck Project’s methods have given an audience a opportunity to compare Kaiadilt perspectives and imagery to that of other artists and their work regardless of an artist’s cultural or racial origins. It is influenced by an unshakable faith and pride in Kaiadilt tradition and country, their island home. Lead by their matriarch, the artists of the Bentinck Project have portrayed places, patterns and memories with a vivid confidence.

Simon Turner
Director
Woolloongabba Art Gallery



Rayarriwarrtharrbayingathi Mingungurra

Amy Loogatha

“I was born on Bentinck Island behind Nyinyilki.
I remember coming across from Bentinck in 1946.
We landed on the beach down from the office and were lined up to be counted and given names and needles and taken to the dormitory.

I remember on Bentinck planes used to fly across - enemy planes. My mother and father and sisters used to run and hide in the mangroves. My mother used to say ‘lay down flat in the thickest part of the mangrove’. When the noises were all gone our mothers and fathers used to take us out.
We were really frightened in those times but it didn’t last for long. Then we would play at the fish traps and along the beaches and help our parents carry wood to cook fish, dugong and turtles.
My father for instance had three or four wives.
He used to make sure all the children had meat - we used to eat first. The next day there used to be a big whale boat.

We used to play ‘til my little sister went to Nyinyilki to baby-sit. A big wind was coming.
We used to put our little brother in the coolomon.
A fire started and the big wind-break caught on fire and the coolomon he was in as well. We pulled him out but he was already cooked burnt, and Netta and I, we had to stay there ‘til our parents came back from hunting. We both got a hiding from our father with a club and our mothers got a hiding too. From there we took his burnt body to Rough Point Koor Wati. That’s where we buried him there. The old people would leave fish around the fire to smoke while we were baby-sitting.

Life in the dormitory was hard for us, ‘cause we talked our language and Lardil children couldn’t understand what we said. But some children were from Bourke town - they could understand that. We used to get up very early. Katie and Roberta used to look after us in the dormitory. We were very poor. We used to have flour with weavels in it - no matter we were forced to eat it. And we didn’t have fresh water baths. We had to swim in the saltwater down at the beach. The water was very cold sometimes and we had no towel so we had to jump back into our clothes. They were made of material like the canvas we paint on today. It was very hard material. We went to school until Grade 9. We learned on slates with crayons. At dinner time our parents would bring us fish to go with our damper. The best feed was dugong, fish and turtle. They used to sell those fish for tobacco. We used to ‘til we were 15. Then we had to find a job when we were 16. I used to do gardening, growing coconut trees. It was hard. We used to rake up rubbish with our hands and a coconut broom.

After the Mornington Island kids went back to their parents, the Kaiadilt still had to stay in the dormitories.
For Christmas holidays we used to go to Denim Island - six couples. The first wedding we saw was on Denim.
We used to stay all Christmas holidays, sitting on the beach. Over there, there were great big coconut trees.
We used to climb them. They used to say ‘get out of those trees girls. You are not monkeys!’ Our parents used to come from bush camps. We used to watch them from the other island. We could see the smoke from our parents’ fire. They used to bring nuts from lilies. Gully used to go across and bring those nuts from our mummies.

When everything changed they sent us to another dormitory. They put us there. I don’t know why. It was better there ‘cause we could walk to our parents. After that, we could go and stay with our mummies and dads. I was working for some people as a housemaid, looking after children. I was a house girl. Then we started getting jobs on the mainland. I didn’t fly out, I went on a boat. I was frightened. I went to Bourketown hospital, top work.
That was first job.

I went out to three stations then came back to Mornington Island. Then I had my first child, Wendy. Then I had a relationship with a man and had two girls, but he died. I was left to grow my two girls up myself. Now they all have children of their own and nine grandchildren and another daughter in Mareeba. When I was free after my defacto died, I was free to go back to Bentinck Island. I took four of my grandchildren to Bentinck and started a new life.
I was really happy to be free from Mornington Island. We’ve lived and stayed there ever since, working there doing grass-string and shell necklaces, doing gardening and decorating my house with all sorts of plants until we got the good news, that aunty Sally was coming with a message. To show us something she had done. She showed us and gave it to Ethel. So we said we should start doing the same thing that Aunty had done and we got a shock when Brett came and got me and I found all my sisters up here painting. Now I’m still painting.

I like to let my children know to follow my foot-steps too. When the wet season is over we will go home and take our canvas with us. So we can paint at home on Bentinck and do painting in our home: a free life for us.”

~ Amy Loogatha



Amy Loogatha
Morning Glory 2006
76 x 101 cm
acrylic on canvas



Amy Loogatha
Wells at Lookati 2006
76 x 124 cm
acrylic on canvas



Amy Loogatha
Redbill and Lighting 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Amy Loogatha
Dunkangurru, Ceremony Ground 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



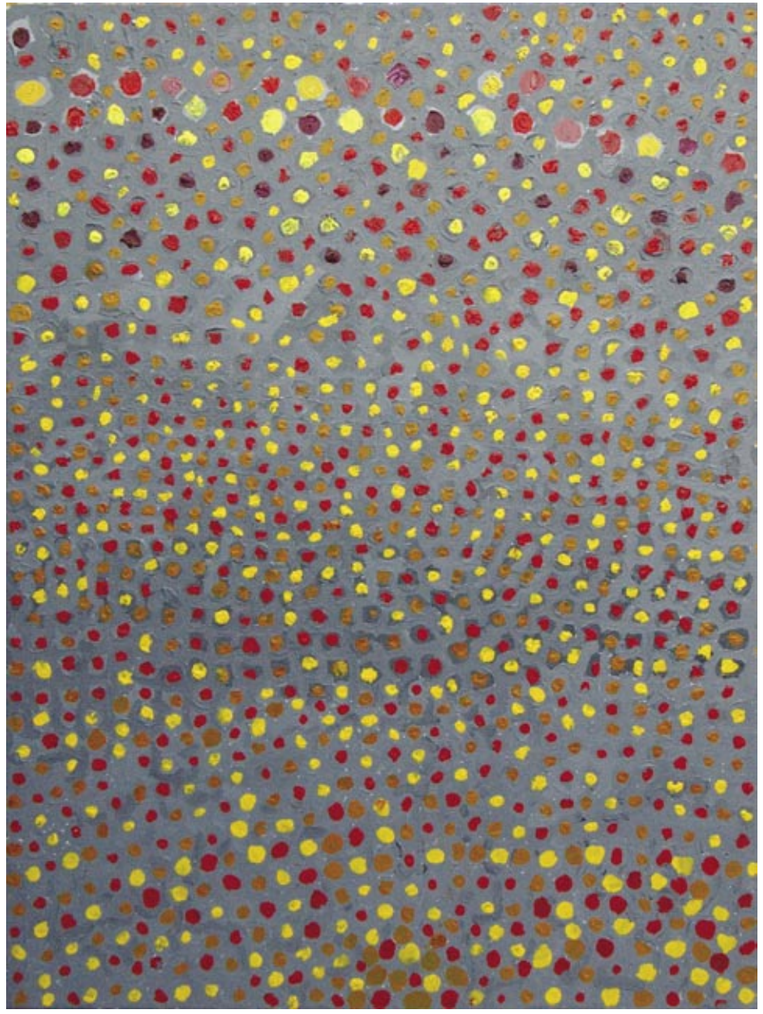
Amy Loogatha
Landing at Nyinyilki 2006
91 x 137 cm
acrylic on canvas



Amy Loogatha
Dunkangurru 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Amy Loogatha
Kamarra, Rocks 2006
137 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Amy Loogatha
Emu and Turkey Storyplace 2006
121 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Warthardangathi Bijarrba

Ethel Thomas (Loogatha)

“I was born on Bentinck Island at Oak Tree Point on the north side of our island. My mum used to carry me on her shoulders when I was very young. I used to play by myself with shells and I would cry for my mother and father when they went out hunting but my older sister would look after me. I liked eating all our seafood, fish, shark, stingray, oysters.

The missionaries came and took us from Arrunkiti and brought us to Gununa by a big boat. I was asleep when I came over so I didn’t know. I woke up on Gununa. My mother woke me and told me we are on Gununa, Mornington Island. I was two years old. I was crying for my older sister who was already in the dormitory. My mum said I had to wait till I was older. When I was five I went into the dormitory myself.

I missed my parents when I was in the dormitory. My mother used to go out and bring us wild fruits. She would bring it in a milk tin. We would also run away so we could see our mothers and fathers.

When I turned fifteen I did a little bit of work at the hospital caring for the sick and the old people here on Mornington Island. I’d work at the mission house, work for the white people who came, washing and cleaning up and doing laundry. I went to the mainland at Kurumba and worked on a station doing a similar job for one and a half years. On the weekends I would go back to the island and to the beach and walk around. I then came back for business on Mornington Island. I then worked on a cattle station. I had a year there and made lots of friends. It was good having parties on the weekends.

I worked on another station the year after coming back, Esmaralda station. That’s where I met my husband, doing the same job, being a house maid and going out fishing. George Thomas was his name. He came from Cloncurry. I met his family and then I brought him back to Mornington Island. He asked me to marry him. So old Douglas Bourke, he was like my step father, he gave me away.

George worked in the butcher shop and we had my eldest son here on Gununa. Then we saved our money and moved to Normanton. I had my second son when we were at Normanton but had my third son in Cairns. We went back Croydon where I had my first daughter who was born in Mareeba. George was working on a sugar cane farm in Cairns. We made our money and came back to Croydon then went to work on Strathmore station.

We went back to cairns to be with our children who were going to school there. I was pregnant with my son Clive. George went to work on a station in a brand new car after I had Clive. We went back to Croydon and we stayed for another year. We were working on Inaroo station. My kids really liked it there. I sent two of my boys to boarding school. They liked it there.

We didn’t come back for a long time. My husband was a working man, working his way back to Normanton, working at a sawmill station, a table top station, working everywhere. He really loved his work. I came back for my brother’s funeral and old Fiby’s funeral then went back to Croydon. I sent young Violet to boarding school. I was doing odd jobs in Croydon town.

Then the old fella got sick, a horse fell on him breaking his leg. We had to go back and forward to Cairns and Townsville hospital. They brought him back to Normanton hospital so I got all my children back from boarding school so they could see him. He asked me to ring his family and bring them up. We had a big party, all the family. A couple of weeks later he told me to go home to my family, that was his will, he told me to go back to my family. A week before we lost him, we heard on the radio that my family was going back to Bentinck Island. That was in the 1980’s.

I went back and forth myself from Gununa to Bentinck. I was fishing again and hunting with the old ladies. I learnt from the old ladies, Aunty Dawn, May and Sally and my older sisters, how to speak my language again and make string bags and necklaces. I was feeling much better being back. I went around to see the islands. I was seeing my family again and hunting.

Now I’m at the art centre. Aunty Sally showed me her painting when she came back to Bentinck. She gave me one cause I was her favourite. Now I’m doing the same painting with my sisters and aunties. It’s good painting all day to get away from the house.

I have four boys and three girls. They are my grand children. My eldest grand daughter Violet has a son so I have a great grand son. Also Clive, he has three boys and one girl. I have one adopted daughter. She is under my care. I also go back to the mainland for Christmas day and to see my two boys.”

~ Ethel Thomas



Ethel Thomas
Moon Man 2006
91 x 121 cm
acrylic on canvas



Ethel Thomas
Moon Man Storyplace 2006
121 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



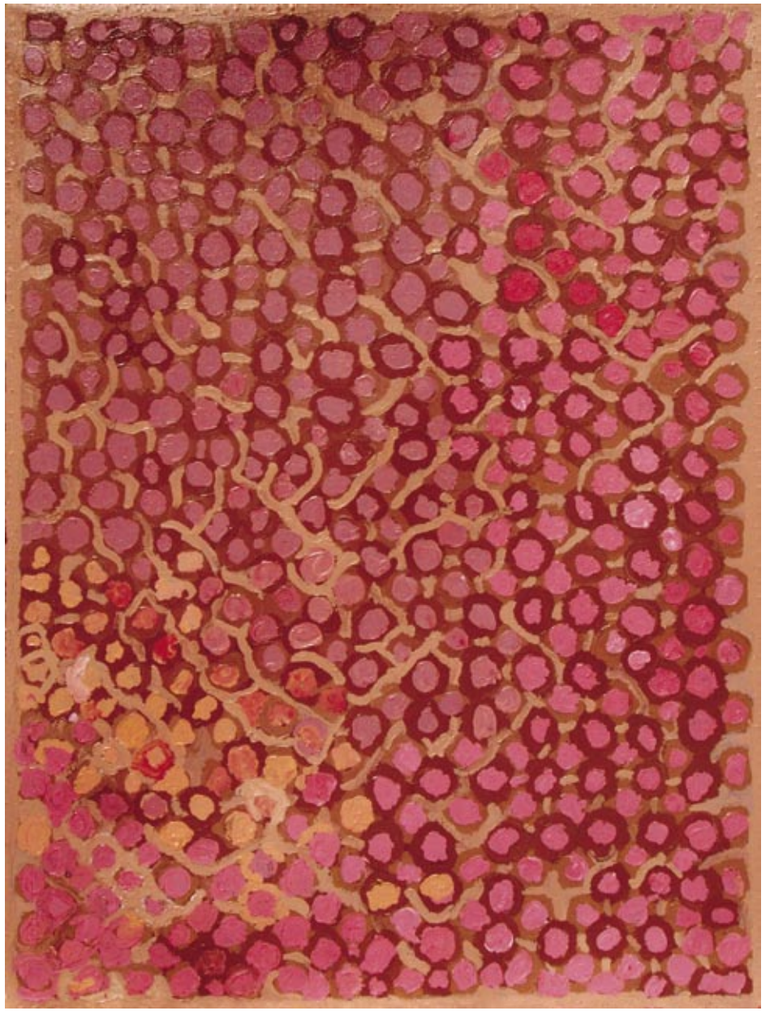
Ethel Thomas
Cliffs on Fredricks Country 2006
124 x 74 cm
acrylic on canvas



Ethel Thomas
Love Rocks 2006
101 x 76 cm
acrylic on canvas



Ethel Thomas
Fredricks Country 2006
120 x 85 cm
acrylic on canvas



Ethel Thomas
Mukajee, Outside Channel 2006
121 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas



Ethel Thomas
Markarrki 2006
121 x 91 cm
acrylic on canvas

The BI Art Gang

During 2005 Sally Gabori an old Kaiadilt women took up painting. As the year progressed so did Sally, from a shy old lady lacking in confidence as a painter and unsure of her place at the Art Centre, into an artist confident in her ability and proud of her work.

At the end of the year Sally had her first solo show in Brisbane at Woolloongabba Art Gallery and her first trip to a large city. On this trip Sally discovered a lot about herself as an artist and how people responded to her work. She saw her work on a gallery wall for the first time; she did interviews and met people on opening night. On her return to Mornington Sally had a week off painting spending her time with the other joy of her life, her Dibirdibi husband Pat Gabori. When she returned to the Art Centre it was a different Sally Gabori. It was Sally Gabori the artist. An artist that Queensland and Australian art lovers were responding to in droves for the freshness, vibrant colours, imagery and above all the cultural integrity that only someone of her stature and age radiates.

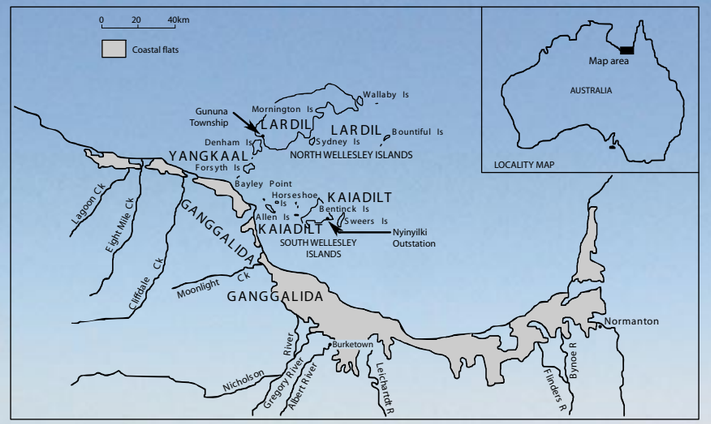
Back in September one of Sally's sisters, May Moodoonuthi, joined Sally for a painting session at the Art Centre. The two sisters laughed, danced and joked while they reconnected with their past on Bentinck Island. They painted this on canvas as only they can, with no help or influence from any body but each other. In November, other elder Kaiadilt women, Netta Loogatha, Amy Loogatha, Ethel Thomas and Paula Paul asked to join in with Sally at the Art Centre.

The women walked in with such a confidence and desire to paint. They had the confidence that Sally lacked when she first started. With no hesitation their first canvases were painted, each in their own way, a story of their birthplace or country. The power of influence amongst a group of custodians with such close connections to the origin of their artwork, Bentinck Island and their culture is all they need.

What gives their work authenticity is each other. They don't seek it from anybody else. They give it to themselves; it comes from who they are and what they represent. Seeing them paint together is a joy, how they interact, joke and relive old memories. Naming a new piece of work can be a bit like a committee meeting sometimes, you have to wait quite a while for the debate to subside before finding out the name of a piece. Sally acts as an adjudicator and basically has the final say if need be. Influence is never more evident than when one artist paints a bushfire as all of a sudden spot fires break out on other tables or someone paints wild flowers and suddenly every table is in full bloom as if it was spring.

This influence amongst the artists of the Bentinck Island 'Art Gang' is creating a senior indigenous women's painting movement in Queensland. This is in itself quite amazing, as up until 2005, before Sally started painting, the Kaiadilt people didn't paint or have a painting culture like Gununa, Mornington Island. It is completely new and fresh influenced only by each other. They paint what they want to paint with whatever colour they choose.

Brett Evans
Art Co ordinator
Mornington Island Arts & Craft Centre



Map of Southern Gulf of Carpentaria showing approximate territorial locations of the nine language groups or 'tribes'.

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