

# FLYING VISITS

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funeral rite. Nothing has been staged for our benefit, and the naked, unvarnished authenticity of grief and loss produces a moment of shared emotion that makes everyone quiet. The encounter becomes a high watermark of understanding, but it is not the only one.

An equally moving, but very different, connection occurs at Yirrkalla's renowned arts centre, Buku Larrnggay Mulka. This is a highly significant pilgrimage site for anyone interested not only in Aboriginal art but indigenous culture, rights and spirituality. It is home to the two famous church door panels that the Yolnu people painted in 1962-63 to demonstrate their ownership of country. Seeing these intricately decorated works, depicting tribal creation myths worked on collaboratively by clan elders using traditional ochres, is incredibly moving: the sophistication of the imagery and the complexity of its purpose as a document of belief and native law gives it a potent eloquence. It's like seeing *Guernica* and the Sistine Chapel all at once.

As if this were not enough, here too we meet rising star Wukun Wanambi, featured in this year's Telstra art awards with a stunning painting using his totemic mulloway fish motif swirling in a feeding frenzy. It has a pulsating rhythm and exuberant energy, like the man himself, a former diver who generously rushes home to fetch us his latest work in progress, then sings us a song about Blue Mud Bay, a contested fishing place.

At Oenpelli, in the heart of Stone Country, we walk a rocky trail high above a flooded billabong where jabirus are feeding alongside crocodiles. We are with Wilfred Nawirridj, a distinguished senior artist. Through body language and long silences, he forces us to switch to his rhythm from our own more

rushed pace before embarking on explanations of the rock art we have come to see.

We are not spared squalor, ugliness or despair. We see appalling housing, where 20 people share a two-bedroom house and litter festoons the surrounding earth. We see people who look sick, have terrible teeth or missing limbs, don't have enough to eat and whose eyes are empty of hope. We ask questions to which the answers are complex, emotive, politically divisive. Our ignorance of social pressures is exposed and some of us feel ashamed, while others look away, indifferent to what they see, or with a different explanation for its causes. Some of us cry.

Somehow, the group finds its collective equilibrium and avoids conflict. Read watches quietly from the sidelines, without interfering. Experience has shown that her groups tend to follow a pattern. "On the first day, people are excited, on the second they ask questions like: 'Why don't people tidy up the litter, why do they live like this, why don't the kids go to school?'; the third day is usually the angry day, when people wonder why things can't be fixed. The fourth day there are often tears. And on the fifth day, people are usually quiet, doing lots of listening."

We do not follow this particular pattern but have our highs and lows and moments of tension, dissipated when a hot shower comes into view or a new island appears beneath us. From the air, the landscape is an artwork in progress; when we fly over the croc-infested Arafura Sea, where sandbanks carve and curve through the azure waters, we are silenced in wonder. Even the huge aluminium mine on the Gove Peninsula looks good from up here.

On Bathurst Island, the upbeat energy of arts centre co-ordinator Tim Hill at Tiwi Design is infectious. His enthusiastic pride when introducing us to artists printing on



fabric at the long silk-screen tables or painting on canvas makes him a natural ambassador for a talented group. Similarly, the stylish Apolline Kohen, a French art curator with many years experience at Maningrida, runs the centre and the marvellous adjoining Djomi museum with dynamic efficiency, displaying a stunning selection of work in many media. There are funerary poles, mimi spirit carvings, works on bark and paper, fishtraps and a selection of painted fibre wild dogs and pigs and disturbingly lifelike crocodiles.

At Ramininging's Bula'bula arts centre, we meet some of the cast of *Ten Canoes*, many of whom are local artists, and attempt to sort through the tangle of woven and coiled baskets and dilly bags dyed with natural ochres and plant pigments. At Nguui, on Bathurst's southern tip, we visit Ngaruwanajirri, a small centre run by John and Joy Naden for artists with disabilities. Artists, ranging from the very young to the elderly, work on linocuts and painting, listening to John Denver (their

favourite). The sight of an approaching tour bus prompts shouts of "Tourists! Tourists!", which somehow morph into "Terrorists! Terrorists!" amid shy giggling.

The spirit of this place is uplifting, even though the community has problems: a new swimming pool nearby is full but unused because it has been poorly constructed and cannot be maintained.

Read ferries us from place to place, somehow managing to keep her white linen shirts looking crisp and clean while we all get progressively grubbier, covered in red earth. When our energy flags, she hands out another bottle of cold water. There is the occasional disapproving frown when we ask a question that betrays ignorance or lack of sensitivity. Discreet when it comes to her own artistic taste, her political opinions of what she calls "the second invasion" are very clear, but we are never lectured.

Later, back home, some clients call Read and ask how they can help, donating funds or

## NORTHERN TERRITORY



**Myth and magic:** Peter Datjin Burarrwanga beneath the Tree of Knowledge

Picture: Caroline Baum

clothes or forging direct links with communities where they have made a personal contact. A corporate executive in our group has previously given the Milingimbi art centre a much needed laptop computer and is delighted to see it being used to create a database for local artists.

It's hard to return from one of these trips unchanged. The shift may be small, the awareness only partial, but it's a trigger. You simply cannot divorce the luminous art (Read calls it "spiritual expressionism", an apt description for its transcendent power) from its context and that can make the experience paradoxical and uncomfortable in more than a merely physical sense.

But something remains after we've come home. That's when we realise, as we shake the persistent red earth from our clothes, that it will not all wash away and that we are only at the beginning of the journey.

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