

GARRMALANG

MAMULUBMA | Mermaids from the
Batchelor Institute Art Collection



24 MAY–10 JUNE 2023

Darwin Entertainment Centre



left: Jimmy Njiminjuma (1947-2004), Kunwinjku
Yawkyawk, 2000, ochres on stringybark, 216 x 54cm
 © Estate of Jimmy Njiminjuma / Copyright Agency
 Batchelor Institute Art Collection: 03026

right: Owen Yalandja (b. 1960), Kuninjku, *Mermaid* /
Yawkyawk carving, 1998, ochres on wood, 195 x 29 x 24cm
 © Owen Yalandja / Copyright Agency
 Batchelor Institute Art Collection: 01816



**Batchelor
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Introduction

The seed for a mermaid exhibition from the Batchelor Institute Art Collection was partly planted by Dr Wendy Ludwig. As editor for a forthcoming book on the Institute's Art Collection Wendy had singled out various themes for a 'Collection Highlights' section of the book. 'Mermaids' was identified as one of these themes owing to a number of significant works in the Collection depicting mermaids of various kinds and through various mediums.

Little did Wendy know then that this editorial theme would manifest as a fully-fledged (fully-tailed) exhibition independent of the book and as part of the Garrmalang Festival 2023 program for which she wears another hat, as Creative Director. As Wendy has commented during the book's editing process, mermaids seem to have gained in popularity in recent times. And so this exhibition happily taps into this zeitgeist in ways that lend a particularly Top End Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander depth and richness to the subject.



Danella Lee (b. 1961), Larrakia, *Mermaid*, 2023
 two-colour linoprint on archival paper
 42 x 30cm (paper), edition 1/20
 © Danella Lee

The Larrakia title for this exhibition, *mamulubma*, means 'tail', in this context alluding to the mermaid's defining feature of having a fish tail. Ngalberddenj, one of the related Kunwinjku language terms, translates as 'the young woman who has the tail of a fish'. The appearance of the tail signifies the transformative power of Aboriginal mermaids as in the mythology of Likanya and Marrayka, two sisters who escaped the Rainbow Serpent's wrath by taking refuge in a deep waterhole and eventually growing fish tails.

There seems to be no equivalent Larrakia word for 'mermaid' (i.e., female water spirit) as with the relatively well-known Kunwinjku term *yawkyawk* or the many other Top End Aboriginal words to denote the phenomenon. The Larrakia word for dugong (*memarrandjamul*) coincidentally sounds partly 'mermaid'-like. One Larrakia story about the origin of the dugong tells of a young girl who eats the forbidden seeds of a plant, causing her throat to itch unbearably until she thrashes on the ground and rolls into the sea to become a dugong.

While mermaids are on the ascendancy their place in popular culture reveals some curious misconceptions. The biggest myth, raised by Batchelor Institute PhD candidate Samantha Ludwig in the context of a broader discussion about mermaids and highlighted by recent international controversy, is that mermaids exist solely as a white/European phenomenon. Perhaps, as Samantha's following essay points out, the English word 'mermaid' ('mere' [sea] + maid) doesn't quite translate. After all freshwater 'mermaids' also abound in Top End art.

In dispelling one myth *Mamulubma* offers a world of other mythologies realised through age-old aesthetic traditions and innovations. Joining the mermaids from the Batchelor Institute Art Collection are those sourced from a number of other artists, art centres and public and private collections which greatly enhance the theme and for which I am especially thankful. As I am to the Darwin Entertainment Centre and Garrmalang Festival for giving these black mermaids, merman and merbaby space to be.

Maurice O'Riordan, Curator

The Re-whiteing of Myths and Tales



right: Samantha Chalmers (b. 1973), *Wardaman / Yanyuwa, Ngardiji (Mermaid)*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 40cm
© Samantha Chalmers
Batchelor Institute Art Collection: 10462

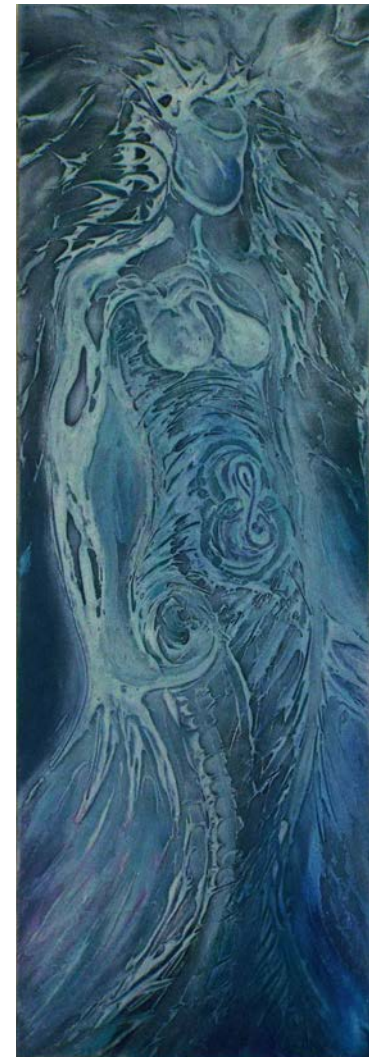
"This painting is a modern vision of the Mermaid Dreaming that we call Ngardiji." (Samantha Chalmers)

opposite page: Rex Wilfred (1951-2012), *Ritharrngu Baru & Kilirringkilirring*, 2000, linocut on Magnani white paper, 30.3 x 30cm (image); 56 x 38cm (paper); Workshop Proof, edition size: 50; Northern Editions Print Workshop, © the Estate of Rex Wilfred/Ngukurr Arts

On loan from Charles Darwin University Art Collection, CDU880

below: Thomas Anderson, Dalabon, *Mermaids Beswick Falls*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 122.5cm
© Thomas Anderson

"Husband and wife come from Beswick Waterfall, make compact, *wedalook*." (Thomas Anderson)



May 2023 marks the global release of the live action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. The announcement of Halle Bailey, an African-American actor, as the main character of Ariel, the little mermaid, caused much consternation and anger. Particularly so in some quarters of the United States of America that a 'white' actress was not cast in – what had to be in their minds – an exclusively 'white' role.

"Wokeness and political correctness gone crazy", screamed some of the commentary of this time ignoring that the 1989 sugary sweet with a dash of danger Disney animation took significant liberties with the original story, and was a whitewash of the much darker Hans Christian Anderson tale. A tale translated from the original Danish to German to English where – in search of an immortal soul – Ariel meets and falls in love with Eric, a prince of his European coastal country. However, as Shakespeare warns us, "the course of true love never did run smooth", and Eric marries another. Depending on the version of the story Ariel either ends up as a daughter of the air who spends the next 300 years doing good deeds for a chance to have an immortal soul, or as sea foam when waves hit the beach for all eternity.

The chatter also ignored the fact that First Nations peoples also have their own myths, tales and stories about mermaids, mermen, merchildren and merbabies as well as other water spirits. Needless to say, these mermaids and water spirits are not white, and they are not necessarily sweet and sugary either.

Potentially, the trouble starts when we apply the white / European name mermaid ('mere' [sea] + maid) and related cultural histories to these beings instead of their traditional names. In the Northern Territory context, when named in their own languages, the *yawkyawk / ngalberrdenj / ngalkunburriyaymi* (Kunwinjku), *jiljiring jiljiring* (Marra), *ngardiji* (Yanyuwa), *gawarrk* (Gumatj), *muli kanybubi* (Marri Ngarr), *kilirringkilirring* (Ritharrngu) or *mommom* (Dalabon) are their own distinct beings – perhaps mermaid-like but not quite 'mermaids'.¹ As explored in more detail in this catalogue, these beings come with their own cultural heritage, overlays and teachings.

1. There are also related names in Aboriginal languages which are restricted and/or sacred.

Presented in various mediums from wood carvings, to bark art, to weavings to works on paper, the Garmalang Festival exhibition *Mamulubma* (tail) offers both a celebration and a challenge. *Mamulubma* celebrates the mystery and allure of mermaids – female saltwater and freshwater spirits – in the Northern Territory. While a celebration of these beings, the *Mamulubma* exhibition also specifically speaks to and challenges the assumptions and assertions made by some that mermaid tales have an exclusively 'white' history and are a 'white' story based on the actions of 'white' beings. Mermaids have existed in First Nations stories for millennia and remain both contemporary and ancient.

Samantha Ludwig
Special Projects – Batchelor Institute Art Collection



Yawkyawk / Ngalkunburriyaymi



Yawkyawk is a word in the Kunwinjku language of Western Arnhem Land meaning 'young woman' and 'young woman spirit being'. The various groups of Kunwinjku people (one of the Eastern dialect groups call themselves Kuninjku) each have Yawkyawk mythologies which relate to specific locations in clan estates. These mythologies are represented in a variety of mediums including rock art.

The female water spirits Yawkyawk or Ngalkunburriyaymi are perhaps the most enigmatic of themes. Sometimes compared to the European notion of mermaids, they exist as spiritual beings living in freshwater streams, particularly those in the stone country. The Yawkyawk are usually described and depicted with the tails of fish. Thus the Kuninjku people sometimes call them *ngalberddenj* which literally means 'the young woman who has a tail like a fish'. They have long hair which is associated with trailing blooms of green algae (called *man-bak* in Kuninjku) found in freshwater streams and rock pools. At times they leave their aquatic homes to walk about on dry land, particularly at night.

Aboriginal beliefs hold that at one time all animals were humans. During the time of the creation of landscapes and plants and animals, these animal ancestor heroes in human form transformed into their animal forms via a series of significant events now recorded as oral mythologies. The creation ancestor Yawkyawk travelled the country in human form and changed into the form of Ngalkunburriyaymi as a result of various ancestral adventures. Today the Kuninjku believe that Ngalkunburriyaymi are alive and well and living in freshwater sites in a number of sacred locations.

The Ngalkunburriyaymi also have husbands and children of their own kind. Their sites are usually shared with the Rainbow Serpent Ngalyod. Some have ritual importance. For example, in some paintings the Yawkyawk holds ceremonial string just like the lengths of string women hold between both hands today during certain public ceremonies. Other sites and Yawkyawk Dreamings are represented in major regional patrimoiety ceremonies.

Yawkyawk beings are highly transformational and have a number of manifestations. Fish-tailed female water spirits are said to be non-different to Ngalyod. Images depicting both Ngalyod and Yawkyawk display a range of various features. Sometimes the serpent is painted with a fish tail and scales like that of a fish. One Kuninjku creation myth tells of a giant mermaid who was actually a Rainbow Serpent in disguise. Some Kuninjku paintings show Yawkyawk beings as fish with breasts or with coiled torsos somewhat like a snake. Other Yawkyawk beings may even have freshwater crocodile features.

© Maningrida Arts and Culture

above: Timothy Wulanjibirr (b. 1969), Kuninjku, *Hollow log with Yawkyawk representation*, 2000, ochres on stringybark, 206 x 30cm;
© Timothy Wulanjibirr; Batchelor Institute Art Collection: 03023

opposite page: Michael Naborlhborlh (b. 1966), Kuninjku *Kinga (Saltwater Crocodile)*, no date, acrylic on Arches paper, 61 x 41cm
© Michael Naborlhborlh

This painting follows the story of Kinga and Yawkyawk. Kinga, the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) is a highly respected and feared animal, associated with many Dreaming sites in Arnhem Land. In the past it was also hunted for food. Kinga can travel in saltwater or freshwater, and often travel long distances between river systems. Kinga make their nests in the long grass or forest areas close to rivers, billabongs and waterholes. These are piles of mud and vegetation where they lay their eggs. They are very aggressive around their nests. Kinga are often depicted alongside their prey such as *namarkol* (barramundi).

Nawu kinga nakka nabang mayh, minj karrikilekme karriborrkbun wardi kanbaye kanbun karridowen. Kariwern karrikengeme bininj dja mayh warridj dja bu korroko nahni mayh kinga birringuni dja Djang warridj ngadberre kadjangdi kore kubolkwern kunred ngadberre. Kinga nungan mayh kayawan kangun kare kore kurrula dja kare kore kubowinjku.

© Injalak Arts and Crafts Association

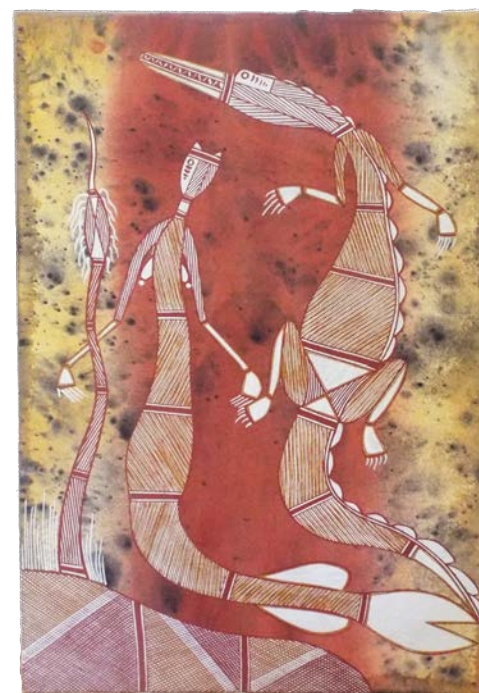


Wesley Nganjmirra (1961-2007), Kuninjku *Likanaya and Marrayka*, no date
ochres on bark, 71 x 41cm
© The Estate of Wesley Nganjmirra
Batchelor Institute Collection: 00694

This myth concerns two sisters who had been collecting food and begun cooking it near a deep waterhole. This angered the Rainbow Serpent who attempted to kill the girls. To escape they plunged into the waterhole and have remained there as a Dreaming to this day. This is why they have grown tails replacing their legs. This sacred waterhole is in the Gumader River and the Nadjalama clan artists of the Nganjmirra family are considered owners of this site.

Also shown here are *mimis* who are spirit beings who live in the trees and caves of the stone country above the floodplains. They existed before humans and subsequently taught Aboriginal people everything they needed to know. Mimis taught ceremonies, dance, song, hunting and all bush skills.

© Injalak Arts and Crafts Association



right: Bruce Bagalinga Nabegeyo (c. 1949-2009), Kuninjku, *Rainbow Serpent and Crocodile*, year, no date
ochres on bark, 112 x 31cm
© The Estate of Bruce Nabegeyo
Batchelor Institute Art Collection: 03325



Naiyu (Daly River) Mermaids



Margaret Gilbert, Ngan'gikurrungurr, *The Mermaids*, no date, acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 25cm; © Margaret Gilbert; Batchelor Institute Art Collection: 00906

"Long ago in the Dreamtime a man went out hunting. He came to a river, put down his spears and boomerang and sat down to rest. Suddenly he heard voices. He crept over and hid behind some rocks. He saw some mermaids sitting beside the river talking and sunning themselves. He was about to creep away but he dropped his spear on the rocks. The mermaids heard it, got him and took him to their cave. They dug a hole, filled it with rocks and collected firewood to roast him the next day. During the night he escaped without making a noise. They came after him but the man hid himself and when they got closer, he jumped out and dragged them back to his village to keep them for wives. After that the people moved away and went to live in the desert. They do not stay near the river because they are afraid of mermaids."

Margaret Gilbert

right: Kieren Karritpul (b. 1994)
Ngen'giwumirri
Mermaid fabric (detail),
no date, screenprint on linen
cotton, 200 x 130cm
© Kieren Karritpul



below:
Marita Sambono (b. 1968)
Ngan'gikurrungurr
Mermaids, no date
acrylic on paper, 58 x 75cm
© Marita Sambono



Works on Loan

A number of works have been loaned for this exhibition: from a fellow tertiary institution-based collection (Charles Darwin University Art Collection) and three private collections – that of Marie Munkara (Wagait Beach), Bidy and Chris Van Aanholt (Darwin) and Gary Lee (Darwin). Batchelor Institute is grateful for their generous support towards *Mamulubma*.

right: Mrs D. Yunupingu (c. 1945-2022)
Gumatj, *Mermaids and the Rock*,
2020, natural earth pigments
and recycled print toner on
composite board, 121 x 121.5cm
© the Estate of Mrs D. Yunupingu
Collection: Bidy & Chris Van Aanholt

Mermaids are a recurrent theme in Mrs D. Yunupingu's work largely in light of her spiritual conception as a mermaid as relayed by an encounter her father (Munggurawuy) had while fishing and learning soon after his wife was pregnant. In the catalogue for the artist's first solo exhibition, *I am a Mermaid* (Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 2021) she states: "He [Munggurawuy] dreams. In his dream he sees the mermaid and realises it was no ordinary fish. It was me. I was telling him in the dream, 'That was me, Dad. Don't spear me, Bapa. Why did you try to spear me? ... It is I, it was not a fish.'"



left: Andrew Cameron,
Gunwinggu/Kunwinjku,
'Swimming Yawk Yawk', no date,
acrylic on wood, metal,
wooden base, approx.
10 x 34cm (each figure);
45cm (diameter, base)
© Andrew Cameron
Collection: Marie Munkara



left + right:
Jeffrey Maliwanga Campion,
Rambarrnga, Untitled, c. 1992,
carved dilly bag: ochre on wood,
handmade string 42cm
(high) x 61cm (diameter)
© the Estate of Jeffrey
Maliwanga Campion
Collection: Marie Munkara

"The wooden dilly bag was made by my Uncle Jeffrey Maliwanga Campion, now deceased. He is Rambarrnga and this dilly bag was made for me just over 30 years ago. Rambarranga were the only ones who made carved dilly bags. The three panels are the Yawk Yawk, Borlung, the Rainbow Serpent, and the third one is the Morning Star design which was my Grandmother's Dreaming."





Eddie Blitner (b. 1964), Marra
Jiljiring Jiljiring Creator Woman from Marra
no date, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 46cm
© Eddie Blitner / Copyright Agency
Collection: Gary Lee

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the artists and to the following people, organisations and businesses for making *Mamulubma* possible: Wendy Ludwig; Batchelor Institute: David Cusack, Kathryn Gilbey, Samantha Ludwig, Marty Cardona; Darwin Entertainment Centre: Jo Boniface, Melissa White, Josh Batten, Sarina Jan; Gary Lee, Marie Munkara, Bidy and Chris Van Aanholt; CDU Art Gallery: Joanna Barrkman, Eileen Lim; Merrepen Arts: Cathy Laudendach, Laurence Rimes; Injalak Arts: Mike Stitfold, Gioia Johnson; Top Didj Cultural Experience & Art Gallery: Petrena Ariston; Outstation Gallery: Matt Ward, Don Whyte Framing: Leon Waud; Frames Framing: Pete Hayes



Thelma Dixon (1937-c.2020), Garrawa
Mermaid woman, 2008,
screenprint, 17.5 x 17.5cm (image)
38 x 28cm (paper); edition 2/9
© The Estate of Thelma Dixon
On loan from Charles Darwin University
Art Collection, CDU1529



above: Nadine Lee (b. 1971), Larrakia
Shardine, 2023,
metallic watercolours, shells, etched +
carved driftwood, sardine tin, 11 x 8 x 2.5cm
© Nadine Lee

left: Paul Seden (b. 1971), Wuthathi / Muralag
Torres Strait, 2023
chalk pastel on paper
55 x 37cm
© Paul Seden

List of Works (height x width x depth)

Thomas **ANDERSON**, *Mermaids Beswick Falls*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 122.5cm

Priscilla **BADARI**, Lynne **NADJOWH**, Sylvia **BADARI**, Katra **NGANJMIRRA**, *Manlabarrl* (Freshwater Billabong), (n.d.), screenprint on cotton, 200 x 152cm

Sylvia **BADARI**, Priscilla **BADARI**, Lynne **NADJOWH**, *Mandjabu* (Fish Traps), 2017, screenprint on cotton, 200 x 145cm

Eddie **BLITNER**, *Jiljiring Jiljiring Creator Woman from Marra*, (n.d.), acrylic on canvas, 36 x 46cm; Collection: Gary Lee

Andrew **CAMERON**, 'Swimming Mermaids', (n.d.), acrylic on wood, metal, wooden base, approx. 10 x 34cm (each figure); 45cm (diameter, base)
Collection: Marie Munkara

Jeffrey Maliwanga **CAMPION**, Untitled, c. 1992, carved dilly bag: ochre on wood, handmade string, 42cm x 61cm (diameter)
Collection: Marie Munkara

Samantha **CHALMERS**, *Ngardiji (Mermaid)*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 40cm
Batchelor Institute Art Collection (BAC): 10462

Thelma **DIXON**, *Mermaid woman*, 2008, screenprint, 17.5 x 17.5cm (image), 38 x 28cm (paper); edition 2/9
On loan from Charles Darwin University Art Collection, CDU1529

Mikayla **EARNSHAW**, *Conception (Belyuen waterhole)*, 2022, gouache, texta on paper, 21 x 29.7cm (image)

Margaret **GILBERT**, *The Mermaids*, (n.d.), acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 25cm
BAC: 00906

Edna **ILES**, *Minyerri*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 57 x 42cm, BAC: 07663

Kieren **KARRITPUL**, *Mermaid fabric*, (n.d.), screenprint on linen cotton, 200 x 130cm

Kieren **KARRITPUL**, *Two mermaids together*, 2023, texta and acrylic on paper, 77 x 56.5cm (image)

Danella **LEE**, *Mermaid*, 2023, two-colour linoprint on archival paper, 42 x 30cm (paper), edition 1/20

Nadine **LEE**, *Shardine*, 2023, metallic watercolours, shells, etched + carved driftwood, sardine tin, 11 x 8 x 2.5cm

Michael **NABORLHBORLH**, *Kinga* (Saltwater crocodile), (n.d.), acrylic on Arches paper, 61 x 41cm

Bruce Bagalinga **NABEGEYO**, *Rainbow Serpent and Crocodile*, (n.d.), ochre on bark, 112 x 31cm, BAC: 03325

Bruce **NABEGEYO**, *Ngalyod, Rainbow Serpent*, 2002, lithograph, 44 x 64cm (image), edition

40/99; printer: Martin King, Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne

Wesley **NGANJMIRRA**, *Likanaya and Marrayka*, (n.d.), ochres on bark, 71 x 41cm, BAC: 00694

Jimmy **NJIMINJUMA**, *Yawkyawk*, 2000, ochres on stringybark, 216 x 54cm, BAC: 03026

Manuel **PAMKAL**, *Freshwater Crocodile*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 59.5 x 68cm

Paula **ROBERTS**, Untitled, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 38 x 45cm

Marita **SAMBONO**, *Mermaids*, (n.d.), acrylic on paper, 58 x 75cm (image)

Paul **SEDEN**, *Torres Strait*, 2023, chalk pastel on paper, 55 x 37cm (image)

Cyan **SUE-LEE**, *garawa gunuldwa*, 2023, acrylic and mica on canvas, 91.44 x 40.64cm

Rex **WILFRED**, *Baru & Kilirringkilirring*, 2000, linocut on Magnani white paper, 30.3 x 30cm (image); 56 x 38cm (paper), Workshop Proof (edition size 50); Northern Editions Print Workshop
On loan from Charles Darwin University Art Collection, CDU880

Timothy **WULANJBIRR**, *Hollow log with Yawkyawk representation*, 2000, ochres on stringybark, 206 x 30cm, BAC: 03023

Owen **YALANDJA**, *Mermaid / Yawkyawk carving*, 1998, ochres on wood, 195 x 29 x 24cm, BAC: 01816

Lena **YARINKURA**, *Yawyyawk Mermaid*, 2002, ochre on woven pandanus fibre, 135 x 20 x 20cm, BAC

Mrs D. **YUNUPINGU**, *Mermaids and the Rock*, 2020, natural earth pigments and recycled print toner on composite board, 121 x 121.5cm
Collection: Bidy & Chris Van Aanholt

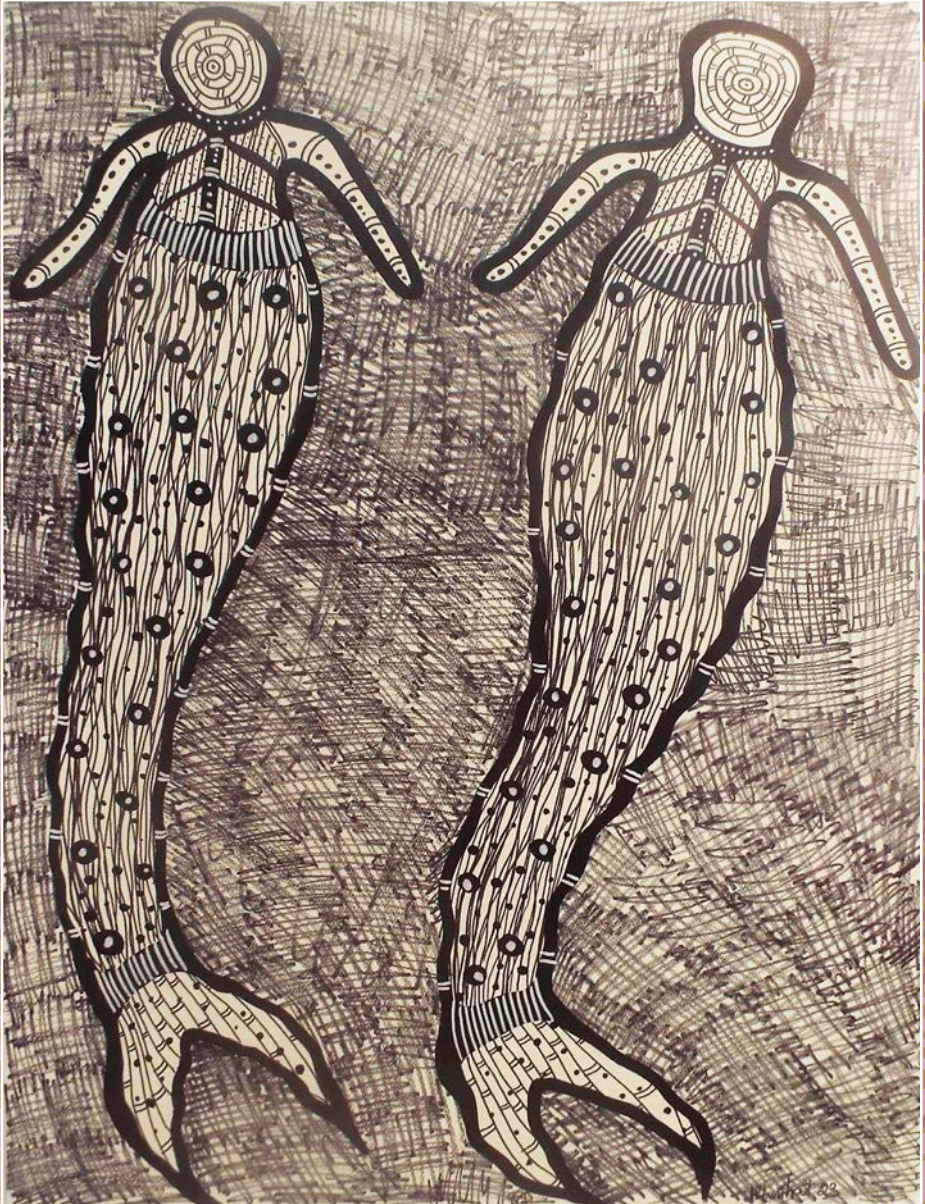
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Muli Kanybubi Tjitjuk Kawuny Na Yagatiya (The Two Mermaids' Dreaming Place): Ancestral Knowledge of the Marri Ngarr Yek Dirrangara People. © Wadey Aboriginal Languages Centre 2003

Alison Nannup, *Bindi-Bindi Koondarminy wer Maamoong Waangka, Butterfly Dreaming and Whale Story.* Stories © Alison Nannup 2013

front cover image:
Lena Yarinkura (b. 1961), Kune / Rembarrnga
Yawyyawk Mermaid, 2002,
ochre on woven pandanus fibre, 135 x 20 x
20cm, © Lena Yarinkura / Copyright Agency

back cover image:
Kieren Karritpul (b. 1994), Ngen'giwumirri
Two mermaids together, 2023
texta and acrylic on paper, 77 x 56.5cm
© Kieren Karritpul



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