



Short St. Gallery

Leah Umbagai



Born	1973
Region	West Kimberley
Language	Worrora

Biography

Raised by Donny Woolagoodja and Mildred Mungulu, Leah demonstrates a great love and understanding of her culture in her artwork. She produces breathtaking Wandjina images and pictures of the constellations Seven Sisters and Wallungunder, son of the first Wandjina, Idjair, whose spirit lives in the Milky Way in the shape of an emu. In addition to being one of the Kimberley's top basket-ballers, Leah juggles her art with the care of her young son Folau and her work as an Executive Councillor for Mowanjum and the remote Larinyuwar outstation, where she spends a considerable amount of time. Leah has always possessed a conspicuous artistic talent - she was awarded the prestigious Marlene Bruce Art Award for Kimberley Aboriginal Art at the age of just 20. Her work is keenly sought and represented in many collections throughout Australia. Leah commenced practicing as an artist at a very young age. "I was small when I started painting with my Grandmother (ElkinUmbagai). She brought me up and then she passed when I was five years old." Leah then went to live with Mildred and Donny Woolagoodja. Leah likes "being around the older people". "I liked the stories my grandmother and grandfather used to tell me, passing on the law of our country. They didn't teach me they passed on the stories, telling me the significance of each animal and the way to live life." Leah's grandfather used to take her to the cave sites. "He taught me about the land, water, rocks. Janet Oobagooma was also teaching me what I needed to learn about our culture. We walked seven hours a day looking at the caves. When you are there the spirit speaks to you. It is glad you are around. Some places can be interpreted and in others I wonder what they are saying. My passion for painting is from these experiences." Leah continues, "My passion for painting is also from my relationships, my clan and my country and also in my dreaming. I dream when I am in my country. In my dream, my grandfather and grandmother gave me a song or dance. I say no I want to paint. I believe the spirits show you things through dreams. I can have a dream before I paint." Leah's totem is the freshwater barramundi. Leah explains, "It is my ungod, my dreaming. It belongs to the story about Ungud (the snake). In traditional storytelling ungod is given to the father or grandfather through dreams or as a



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living animal to the parent. When the child dies the spirit returns to the animal. What is taken by the earth is given back. If you have a special animal you cannot eat it. It just doesn't taste right, to sort of eat yourself." Leah represents her culture through painting stories about the son of the first Wandjina, Idjair, whose spirit lives in the MilkyWay, Wallununda, in the shape of an emu. It is said that the Wandjinas were sent by Idjair. The painting contains images of the snake, turtles and crocodiles, the whole of creation, and represents the dynamic forces between the spiritual and physical worlds, desire and law, procreation and ethical codes of conduct. Leah explains, "I got a grilling for this painting (Wallununda). I saw it in my dream. I told them the elders that I dreamt the story and they then said it was ok. The spirit spoke to you through your dream.' She adds, "You are not supposed to draw this story. Others can't draw this. You can only draw what you are allowed to tell in your country." In regards to her art practice Leah says, "As a painter, I'll try anything. I sketch, draw totems and landscapes. Living in a Western way, I can combine both ways. At first I didn't like using ochre on canvas. The traditional way is to use it on clay, slate or bark. It is awkward to change this traditional way of painting but the paintings I am working on now are ochre and look better, look nice." Leah likes to draw animals and stories and she confides that she will only paint her tribal Wandjina from Worrora country or all three Wandjinas together, representing the Mowandjum community. Leah started painting at home. At school she "practised all sorts of skills, learning to sketch, screen print, make etchings. Art was always there. Norval, the art teacher at Mowanjum Hall, encouraged me even more. My real passion for painting is influenced by my culture." She encourages her son and other young relatives to paint by drawing with them. "I draw cars, cartoons, draw stuff they play with and show them how to draw faces. We do paintings together. I look at stuff and I can draw it. I tell them everyone has their own way of looking. We are all different." What does Leah like about painting? "When I paint, I can have a million people shouting at me and I can't hear a thing. I am in the space. I love painting. Painting and even a song or a dance is connected to who you are otherwise it means nothing." Leah was born in Derby Hospital. She attended kindergarten at Mowanjum Pre-school and completed high school at Derby District High. Entering various competitions and exhibitions and armed with determination Leah maintained a constant focus on her art and its relevance to her traditional culture. She was awarded the prestigious Marlene Bruce Art Award for Kimberley Aboriginal Art at the age of 20. During the 18 years Leah has worked in the Mowanjum Art and Cultural Centre, assisting with all aspects of gallery management. Leah is currently studying community management. "I have worked in so many areas but now I will actually have a certificate to prove it. It's a good achievement for my community. You need to know the Western way before you can get something done. I would like to have my own business one day."

Group Exhibitions

2017 paintings & prints Derby Christmas Markets
2017 Sydney Opera House Sydney Homeground Markets
2017 prints Port Hedland Court house & Markets



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2017 Paintings Tarnanthi Art Fair (Adelaide, South Australia)
2017 paintings Darwin Art Fair Emerging Aboriginal Western Australian Artists (Fremantle Gallery - Perth)
2017 Revealed Painting Japingka Gallery (Fremantle)
2017 (prints) Fremantle Art Centre
2017-2005 Mowanjum Ar & Culture Festival Exhibitions
2017 Kimberley Art Prize
2016 Revealed, Fremantle Art Centre, WA
2016 Darwin Art Fair, NT
2015 Revealed, Fremantle Art Centre, WA
2014 Revealed, Fremantle Art Centre. WA
2012 NATSIAA, NT
2010 NATSIAA, NT
2009 Sharing Difference on Common Ground, Holmes a Court Gallery, Perth, WA
2008 Shinju Matsuri Wandjina Budda Budding, Broome 6 Gallery, WA
2008 Kimberley Art Prize
2008 Cultural Connections – Artija Art Gallery, WA
2008 Spirit of the Wandjina - Shinju Matsuri Exhibition
2007 Arralululai - Broome 6 Gallery
2007 Mowanjum Exhibition - Woodford Dreaming Festival, QLD
2006 Spirit of the Wandjina - Governor Stirling Tower, Perth
2006 Power of the Wandjina - Macquarie University Sydney
2005 Spirit of the Wandjina - Broome 6 Gallery
2005 Keeping the Wandjinas Fresh- Exhibi on and book launch - Alexander Library Perth
2005 Mowanjum Exhibition - Festival of the Dreaming Woodford, QLD
2004 Mowanjum Exhibition - Sydney Dreaming Festival
2003 Spirit of the Wandjina - Harvey Bay QLD
2002 Visions from the Cave - Sun Picture Theatre, Broome
2001 Recent Works - Melbourne Spirit of the Wandjina Gallery
2000 The Art of the Wandjina - Sydney Olympics Exhibition, NSW
2000 Spirit of the Wandjina - Compass Travel Postonja Slovenia
2000 Spirit of the Wandjina Exhibition – Melbourne
1999 Young Visions of Ancient Land – Governor Place, Sydney
1999 5th Telstra Art Award Museum and Art Gallery of the NT- Darwin
1999 Power of the Wandjina -Telstra National Headquarters – Melbourne
1999 Recent Works Spirit of the Wandjina Gallery – Melbourne
1999 Power of the Wandjina - Governor Stirling Tower, Perth
1999 Spirit of the Wandjina Exhibition - Governor Place, Sydney
1998 Spirit of the Wandjina - Telstra National Headquarters, Melbourne
1998 Mowanjum Wandjina Art – Matzo's Broome
1998 Spirit of the Wandjina – Grosvenor Place, Sydney
1998 Kids from the Kimberley – Art Gallery of Western Australia – Perth
1993 Marlene Bruce Awards for Kimberley Artists
1991 Kewdale Senior High School – Year 12 Art Awards
1987 America's Cup Poster Competition