



Short St. Gallery



Balwaldja Wanapa Mununggurr

Born	1953
Language	Yolngu
Region	Arnhem Land

Biography

"I was born in Yirrkala and lived at Wandawuy. When I grew up I learnt to cut barks and make yidaki. My first job was at Landcare now I work at Buku Larnggay Mulka. I cut bark for the artists and I pack the barks and send them to the barge." Balwaldja is one of Buku Larnggay Mulka's longest serving arts workers and is a mentor within the centre to new staff and supports the art centre with all major events onsite. Since the mid 1990's Bruce Balwaldja Mununggurr has been the mainstay of the Buku Art Crew. This is the team of men who attend work daily and drive out bush to cut bark in the Wet Season and larrakitj (memorial poles) in the Dry. They custom make aluminium frames for each bark. They burn the barks with blow torches to dry and flatten them. They sand the barks once dry. They drive for hours to collect earth pigments from known sites. They carefully and expertly pack the millions of dollars worth of artwork which leaves the centre every year. They collect supplies from the nearby mining town. They drive out to remote homelands to deliver and pick up artists and artworks. They do this as a team and so if one goes, all go. Many hands make light of the hardest work. They are humble, uncomplaining, tough, resourceful and always laughing. In the back shed where most of these activities take place the radio is firmly fixed to Yolngu Radio and the volume at eleven. Through these decades perhaps the quietest of all has been Bruce. Universally known as Wanapa he has maintained a constant energy of quiet achievement which the rest of the team fit into and flow with. No fretted brow or nagging bosses. Just a gentle easy happy hum of communal productivity. Wanapa is a slang Yolngu version of something like 'Wassup!?' The moniker's origins obscure but a suitably humble one for him. Wanapa is similarly dedicated but low key in honouring his ceremonial duty. Attending all ceremonies full time and dancing and singing with



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energy not just when the focus is on but deep into the night when the crowd has left. His mother is from a small arm of the Gumatj and she was famous as a dancer especially in the hilarious dhapi (circumcision) rituals. Gender reversal and absurdist choreography make the dances at this ceremony a riotous comedic affair whilst the songs stay on track in their ancestral immutability. And Wanapa himself is famous for slipping into a dress with some oranges in his bra and a wig on his head. He parodies vigorous inexperienced women's dancing and makes the families of the initiates roar with laughter. Faithfully attending to servicing the artists every day for over twenty years Bruce showed no signs of needing to become one. Happy and humble to provide the wiry muscle behind the engine room of the art centre. Until one morning in late 2020 after a year of lockdown he came to work with some line drawings on the back of discarded print proofs. Since then his loving portrayals of places he knows intimately have been appearing in bursts of weekend and after work activity. The humility and gentleness of his personality shine through. As does the persistent, determined drive to productive action. To use what he has to make the world a balanced happy place.

Solo Exhibitions

2022 Home, Outstation Gallery, Darwin, NT

Group Exhibitions

2024 41st Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards- Finalist - Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), NT

2022 Rising Stars 2022 - Outstation - Art from Art Centres, Parap NT

Collections

Artbank, Sydney NSW

Awards

2023 41st Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards - Highly Commended - Works on Paper