Maryanne Mungatopi’s TIWI PORTRAITS

I can dance – all us Tiwi dance, my dance is crocodile, yirrikapayi. But I can’t sing, the old people know the songs but it’s too hard for us younger people! I heard my uncles and fathers singing, and my mother would tell me it was about country, and dance. Maybe when I’m old I’ll learn the songs! 1

Maryanne Mungatopi Mungawajimo died at thirty-seven, an age when many Aboriginal women become grandmothers and assume special importance in passing on knowledge to younger generations.

In August 2005 my family and I visited Milikapiti on Melville Island to attend the funeral of James Tipiloura, and to pay respects to people whose funeral rites we had missed in person – Kitty Kantilla, Freda Warlapinni and Maryanne Mungatopi. Tipiloura had been a carving artist, but I had known him better as painter Raelene Kerinauia’s companion. She would sometimes paint his tutini 2 and he always carved her ironwood kayimu wagakimi, the traditional Tiwi painting comb. Tipiloura’s death was a shock: forty years old, moderate in nature and fit in physique.

Many deaths do not come as a shock: a funeral can be a fortnightly event on the Tiwi Islands. I once counted the number of people I knew who had died over a two and a half year period. From a population of around 2,500 people spread across the islands of Melville and Bathurst, I could name ten people, only a fraction of the deaths that I know to have occurred in that time. Of those ten, only one died of old age.

Milikapiti, named Snake Bay by the British, was hit hard by Cyclone Ingrid in March 2005 and the loss of many old shade trees seemed a metaphor for all the flesh and blood the Tiwi had mourned over the preceding years. Milikapiti, with a population of approximately 450 people, spans a low saddle of open forest on the edge of the Timor Sea. There are gravesites in three directions.

In addition to the personal nature of the visit, I was selecting paintings for an exhibition at Raft Artspace in Darwin. Looking through rolls of canvas at Jilamara Arts & Craft Association with Art Coordinator Danielle Cullen 3, we talked about friendships and the people who mentor you, the families who assume ownership and responsibility for you and walk you through your time in the community, hunting with you, making gifts to you and requests of you. Returning without enjoying the dynamic presence of Maryanne Mungatopi and her partner Leon Puruntatameri was disquieting, and it felt strange talking about them but not with them.

It was this chance discussion that led to our viewing Mungatopi’s last paintings which had been placed out of circulation as a sign of respect following her death some two and a half years earlier. We unwrapped the fifteen works on paper and placed them around the art centre walls. They had an overwhelming impact, their silence speaking loud and clear of the tragedy of Maryanne’s premature death while singing out her unique vision. It was clear we were witnessing a legacy that deserved keeping together as a collection.

Mungatopi first started painting at Jilamara in the mid-1990s. Felicity Green, Art Coordinator from 1994 to early 2000, recalled her first meeting with [Maryanne] being “timid and shy”. In time she became an active and outspoken member of Jilamara, someone who took her responsibilities as member and officeholder seriously. She was forthright, asking questions and confirming answers, not subscribing to the culturally polite practice of passive agreement.

Mungatopi regularly painted alongside Leon Puruntatameri while he carved his highly refined tutini. She would sometimes contribute to his decoration in the interests of completing the work, but also as a partnership. 4 Mungatopi credited Puruntatameri with “getting her started”, along with her father Laurie One Eye, her uncle Deaf Tommy Mungatopi and the painter Aileen Henry Kumarjino. Mungatopi’s early work conformed to a stylised form of jilamara (which translates loosely as pattern or design) painted in bright natural ochre in formal, regular compositions. 5

In 1994 Anne Virgo and Martin King of the Australian Print Workshop travelled to Milikapiti for the first of several collaborations with the Jilamara artists. The workshop
Maryanne Mungatopi was a catalyst for a strong sense of direction to emerge in Mungatopi’s work. Acting as a further creative stimulant, in 1995 a small group of special needs artists started working at Jilamara under the banner Ngawa Mantawi (we are all friends). There was some confusion amongst artists following the market’s excitement over this ‘messy’ work, which featured a relaxed application of jilamara. Mungatopi and fellow artist Janice Murray assisted the Ngawa Mantawi painters with the practical aspects of grinding ochre, priming surfaces and sketching in some of the designs.

Between 1995 and 2002 Maryanne completed several series of figurative etchings, taking her inspiration from the ancestors of Tiwi parlinari (creation time), including Malakaninga and Murrukupwara and importantly, the story of Purukuparli and his wife Wai-ai (or Bima). Their story is central to Tiwi culture, and is re-told endlessly by different artists. It explains how death comes to the Tiwi, and most importantly, how to respond ritually through the Pukumani ceremony.

Wai-ai and her brother-in-law Taparra (or ‘second husband’) rendezvous in the bush while she is gathering food, leaving baby son Jinani in the shade of a tree. As time lapses, the shade shifts and Jinani dies from exposure to the sun’s heat. Purukuparli is alerted to the tragedy by the pelican/messenger, and comes looking for Wai-ai, finding his dead son. As Wai-ai emerges from the love-tryst in grief and remorse, Taparra approaches Purukuparli and offers to return the boy to life. Purukuparli refuses, declaring that from then onward all Tiwi will have to die. The brothers fight at length with clubs and spears until Taparra is badly wounded. As the artist Pedro Woneaemirri relates:

Purukuparli then went back and picked up his dead son, and walked towards the sea east of Melville Island where today we see a big whirlpool. Wai-ai turned into a night curlew, and we hear her every night during the dry season calling out to her baby son. The moon man [Taparra] sang himself a song then just slowly flew up, up, and there he stayed. Today we see him as the moon. Purukuparli made a big Pukumani ceremony for his dead son... Now we Tiwi people have Pukumani ceremony all dressed and painted up for any deceased person. We also sing and dance for them...saying goodbye and farewell.

There is endless subject matter to draw on in this primal narrative. Mungatopi had achieved recognition for her printmaking, but it was not until mid-2000 that she started painting Tiwi ancestral figures in ochre directly onto paper.

“When I saw my first exhibition of etchings... I felt really proud, it’s good to have work on exhibition for everyone to see. Most of all now I paint figures because those are the ones that tell stories from way back. I feel good like I’ve found my own thing, what I like to paint.”

Munganpi was a dynamic storyteller, and she communicates the Tiwi narrative with direct visual imagery. The rich surface decoration on the figures and across the primeval landscapes are drawn directly from yirrirrpirwoja, the body-painting tradition so integral to Tiwi’s performative cultural expression.

Mungatopi’s characters express a sense of the gravity and solemnity associated with death, but this is not to conflate them with a celebration of mortality. The subjects are players in the great Tiwi tragedy, but also intent portraits of the Tiwi whose graves were desecrated to make way for white staff houses, the Tiwi who are dying today and the Tiwi who are still standing, unjustly burdened with grief and the strain of living tough and losing their loved ones.

Mungatopi expressed genuine delight in having “found her thing”; but her untimely death is hard to forget under the gaze of her Tiwi portraits. In learning the pukumani story we know the power in these mute figures is driven by human lust and grief. Through knowing something of the artist’s life, its richness and its struggles, Mungatopi’s images become poignant reminders of the woman behind her unique celebrations of cultural memory. The commitment and loyalty that Mungatopi’s friends enacted on her behalf, assisting in the preparation of this article, is a tribute to the special place she filled within her community.

I was living interstate when I heard the heart-breaking news of Maryanne’s death. The events surrounding her last months were complex and traumatic, adding to the anguish of family and friends. Traditionally, Tiwi are buried immediately following their death, a practice still followed whenever possible. Months later, the extensive Pukumani ceremony takes place, where in-laws of the deceased are commissioned to carve and decorate tutini, and people travel to be together over several days and ritualistically celebrate a life and mourn a loss. Sadly, contemporary death rates are so high, so dominant in the lives of the Tiwi, that this eloquent, essential aspect of funeral practice is largely being forced aside.

Maryanne Mungatopi was laid to rest in Milikapiti in the direction of her father’s country at Karlslake, famous for its
oysters and dugong, and the site of an early Dutch landing of 1705. Buried on Valentine’s Day in 2003, by 2005 she would once have been honoured with ironwood and bark, ochre, song and dance. I put my pale offering of silk orchids across a weathered blue tarpaulin and said a belated good-bye as my Tiwi companion called out our visit to the spirits of the deceased.

In 2011, reflecting on Mungatopi’s last paintings, I wonder at their final keeping place. With the support of the artist’s family I suggested they be offered to a major institution which was enthusiastic about acquiring the works if they could establish funds.” Soon after, the paintings were sold by Jilamara to a prospective donor, who continues to hold them until the institution’s public programming can showcase the works.

With the assistance of a Community Heritage Grant, work continues to refurbish and secure the Muluwurri Museum at Milikapiti. The museum, easily accessible to the Tiwi community and immediate family, may ultimately have been a more suitable home for Maryanne’s works. Nevertheless, Mungatopi’s relatives look forward to celebrating her achievements when the works are eventually exhibited. Here’s to their survival until that day and well beyond.

1 Maryanne Mungatopi’s artist’s statement for an exhibition at Redback Gallery in Brisbane, 2002.
2 Tutini is the Tiwi word for sculpted funeral posts, often referred to as Pukumani poles. Traditionally they were carved from bloodwood, but those designated for the contemporary art market are made of ironwood.

3 Danielle Cullen assisted in an early draft of this article, liaising with artists. Cullen & Steven Moore managed Jilamara from 2005-2007.
4 For a beautiful example of Mungatopi / Puruntatameri collaboration see the National Gallery of Victoria’s collection of six tunga (bark bags), also featuring the work of Mary Magdalene Tipungwuti.
5 Jilamara artists adhere to the traditional colours of black, white, red and yellow. The ochres are collected locally, white from the sea cliffs and yellow from inland. Yellow is ‘cooked’ over a flame to achieve a dark red. Black is purchased in a commercial powder form, replacing charcoal. All colours are now mixed with a synthetic binding medium.

8 Artist’s comment, artist files from Memory & History, Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne 1998.
9 In the late 1960s Pukumani poles along the sea cliffs at Milikapiti were burnt and bulldozed despite strong Tiwi opposition; some poles were salvaged through the actions of Tiwi elders and now form part of the Holmes Tiwi Collection. See Sandra Le Brun Holmes, The Goddess and the Moon Man: The Sacred Art of the Tiwi Aborigines, Craftsman House, 1995, pp. 64-65.
10 Janice Murray, Raelene Kerinauia & Pedro Wonaeamiri played a key role in editing the final draft of this article with the support of Art Coordinators Cher Breeze and Barry Hayes, who have managed Jilamara since March 2009.
11 Raft Artspace facilitated the sale and arranged documentation but waived the gallery commission on the suite.