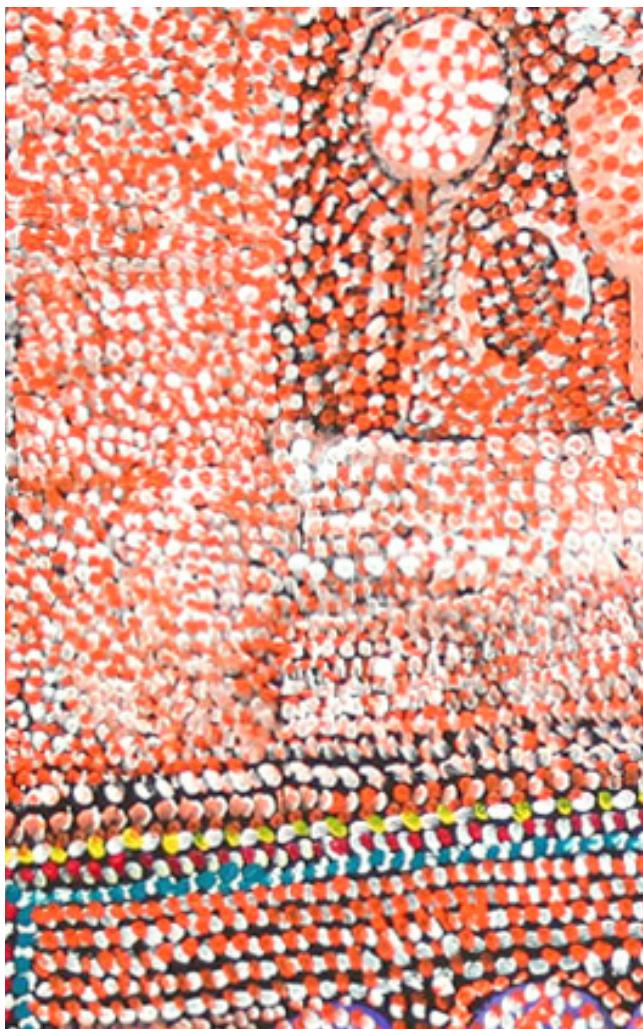


# Yimadoowarra: The art of Loongkoonan



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An elder of the Nyikina people of north-western Australia, Loongkoonan began painting in 2004, aged in her mid-90s. Delicately rendered in shimmering dots, her paintings are both a love letter to country and an encyclopedic chronicle of bush knowledge. Yimadoowarra is the first career survey of this extraordinary woman, featuring works from each stage of her remarkable career.

*“I am proper Nyikina, one of the Yimardoowarra or riverside people.”*

For millennia, the Nyikina people have made their homes along the western stretches of Mardoowarra: a majestic waterway that in 1837 would be renamed by European colonists the Fitzroy River. They called themselves Yimardoowarra—people of the river—reflecting not just their habitation of this place, but their belonging to this country. Coursing through the west Kimberley, the ebb and flow of Mardoowarra defined Nyikina life, shaping its rhythms, its ecologies and its Law. The arrival of European pastoralists in the mid-nineteenth century violently interrupted Nyikina life, creating a clash of cultures as Aboriginal peoples were forced into the new regime of station life. But it could not alter the course of Mardoowarra, whose monsoonal fluctuations continued unabated.

Loongkoonan was born as the first decade of the twentieth century came to a close. She entered the world as the pastoral industry was reaching its peak in the north-west of Australia—and it was a world she got to know well, working as a cook and station hand at Mount Anderson station. But this was also a world in which Indigenous traditions remained strong: the annual wet season saw station work cease, leaving Indigenous workers free to return to their ancestral estates to attend to ceremonial obligations. Loongkoonan walked the length and breadth of her country, absorbing its poetry, learning its lessons, fulfilling her obligations as a Yimardoowarra. A woman of considerable seniority, in years as well as in cultural status, she is now one of the key custodians of the critically endangered Nyikina language, and of Nyikina customary Law.

## **Yimadooowarra: The art of Loongkoonan**



When, in 2004, Loongkoonan began to paint, her deep understanding burst out like the breaking monsoonal banks of the river so central to her art practice. Her works were metonyms of an encyclopedic knowledge of Nyikina country and the techniques of food gathering and preparation that had sustained her people for generations. In this sense, each work is at once an encyclopedia and a love letter to country.

Loongkoonan was the first Nyikina artist in several decades to attempt a sustained engagement with the art world. A committed and dedicated artist, in a few short years, she developed a practice in which, step by step, she created a new visual language. This exhibition traces this development, from its tentative beginnings, as Loongkoonan established her repertoire of forms, through to her establishment as a talent of national acclaim.

Loongkoonan's works display an aesthetic radiance that matches their cultural importance. As her painting practice developed, she orchestrated an ever more sophisticated repertoire of colour, figure and formal experimentation. Paintings of great beauty are built up through mesmeric grids of vibrating dots and splayed lines, where intense colour contrasts are studded and overlaid with iconic figurative elements: bush tucker of all sorts, tools for food gathering, the ever-present Fitzroy River. As a standalone artist among her peers, Loongkoonan's paintings were full of innovation from the first, yet she continued to recast her work in sophisticated and unexpected ways: refining her palette's joyous, explosive contrasts, tightening and then loosening her handling of the structure of a work.

As the only major Nyikina artist of her time, Loongkoonan's achievements are singular, and demand to be seen as such. Too often, Indigenous artists' work is viewed in group shows that fail to illustrate the focused nature of their practice. This exhibition aims to show the gradual, but highly systematic, nature of Loongkoonan's aesthetic development, displaying her unflagging determination to depict her ancestral country's majesty anew. The exhibition draws on works from each stage of Loongkoonan's career, showing the full depth and range of this great artist's practice.

## **Yimadooowarra: The art of Loongkoonan**



### **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

Loongkoonan was born around 1910 at Mount Anderson Station near the Fitzroy River. She is a senior elder of the Nyikina people of the central western Kimberley region in Western Australia, and the custodian of an expanse of traditional language and Law. In 2004 Loongkoonan began painting through the arts workshop Manambarra Aboriginal Artists in Derby, Western Australia. Her shimmering depictions of bush tucker and Fitzroy River country received immediate acclaim, being exhibited in every state and territory of Australia. Her work has been influential in inspiring a new generation of Nyikina artists. In 2006 Loongkoonan was awarded first prize in the Redlands Art Award, and in 2007 she was awarded the Indigenous award at the Drawing Together Art Awards at the National Archives of Australia. Her works are held in the collections of Australian Parliament House, Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, Macquarie University and the Department of Indigenous Affairs in Canberra.

### **ABOUT THE CURATOR**

Henry F. Skerritt is a curator and art historian based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is editor of the book *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting* (Prestel, 2015) and was consulting curator for the exhibition of the same title, which traveled to six US museums in 2015-16. In 2011 he curated the exhibition *Experimental Gentlemen* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, and from 2004-2009 was manager of Mossenson Galleries in Melbourne, where he worked closely with Loongkoonan. He has written extensively on Aboriginal art and culture, including contributions to the publications *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia* (Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University, 2016), *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art* (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2012) and *Menagerie: Contemporary Indigenous Sculpture* (Object: Australian Design Centre, 2009). He has contributed to the journals and magazines *Pacific Arts*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *Artlink*, and *Art Monthly Australia*. In 2014, Skerritt was editor-in-chief of the journal *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture*.

# **Yimadoowarra: The art of Loongkoonan**



## **EXHIBITION FACTSHEET**

**CONTENT:** *Yimadoowarra: The Art of Loongkoonan* features 26 works on canvas. The works are drawn from the collections of Diane and Dan Mossenson, and the Kluge-Ruhe Collection at the University of Virginia.

**SIZE:** The exhibition requires approximately 800-1000 square feet, but can be compressed via variable installation options.

**SCHEDULE:** Australian Embassy, Washington DC. February-April 2016.  
Kluge-Ruhe Museum, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, May-August 2016  
Available to travel to two additional US venues through 2017.

**PUBLICATION:** The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, featuring an essay by curator Henry F. Skerritt. The catalogue will be published by the Kluge-Ruhe Museum.

**ORGANIZERS:** Yimadoowarra is curated by Henry F. Skerritt and organized by the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia and the Australian Embassy, Washington DC.