

13. Manifestations of the *mimih*¹

Luke Taylor

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art is produced in a complex intercultural realm in which the artists are increasingly becoming self-conscious of their role as 'artists' for a world audience. In this circumstance new ideas are encouraged by local arts advisers and new types of artefacts can readily find favour with the market. In the Maningrida region of central Arnhem Land, a market for sculptures of spirits called *mimih* has virtually exploded in the last two decades. Stories and images of the *mimih* have a longstanding local history, although sculptures of them appear to be quite new. While one Kuninjku speaking artist started produced such work in the 1960s, hundreds of artists from many language groups now participate. The example of the expansion of the market for sculptures of *mimih* is a case study of innovative artistic practice and the social networks, including key non-Indigenous participants, that facilitate and constrain the acceptance of new ideas and practices.

Given this context for the promotion of sculptural work, this chapter addresses the question of the extent to which we may speak of a shared Kuninjku iconography for sculpture. It investigates Kuninjku social relations of sharing sculptural skills, ideas and innovations, as against the strong market support for individualism and promotion of unique artistic products.

Others have detailed the beliefs of the Kuninjku in respect to the *mimih* at length (Brandl 1973; Carroll 1977; Chaloupka 1993; Hoff and Taylor 1985; Taylor 1996). In essence, Kuninjku understand the *mimih* to be spirits that inhabit the rock country regions of their country. However, Kuninjku also use the term *mimih* as a gloss for talking about other sorts of spirits as well, mainly those which are also seen to be more like tricksters and ghosts and are distinguished from Ancestral

Creator Beings known as *djang* which have powers — *kun-ngudj* — which can be used for much more beneficent effects.

Mimih are believed to be long, thin beings that generally live inside the rocky escarpment country. They are so thin that they can pass through cracks in the rock to leave their realm to visit the world of humans. Kuninjku say that only humans with a similar clever power or *markidjpu* can see these spirits and converse with them, yet knowledge about their characteristics and activities is shared broadly.

In sculptural form Kuninjku capture this long thin form of the *mimih* by carving relatively thin trunks of trees, often softwoods such as kapok (*Bombax ceiba*). In this sense the elongation of the body form is universally understood by Kuninjku as appropriate for the representation. The collective term that Kuninjku use to refer to these wooden sculptures is *kundulk*, which means stick or log. There is a sense in which the attenuated body forms connote something of the humour that surrounds beliefs in these beings; the beings are so thin that a gentle wind can break their necks. There are also salacious stories of *mimih* leading human hunters astray and taking them to their rock country world where the hunters fall in love with *mimih* women and refuse to return. Rock paintings of thin figures engaged in hunting or sexual activity can be interpreted along these lines.

Beliefs relating to *mimih* comprise an important body of knowledge that links Kuninjku to the escarpment country in the south of their traditional lands. These relatively profane stories are readily shared with other groups and in a regional context the association of Kuninjku with the *mimih* is taken as a marker of their cultural uniqueness and of the environmental and spiritual distinctiveness of their country.

The production of wooden sculptures of *mimih* spirits among the Kuninjku language group seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. Berndt and Berndt (1982:96) recorded that the Kuninjku made small sculptures called *waral* that were placed over burnt and buried personal effects of the deceased.² This placement of the *waral* sculpture warned people not to camp near these personal effects of a recently deceased person. The sculpture is a representation of the ghost of the person who is said to linger near the place until the full cycle of mortuary rituals have been performed. The conceptual links between *mimih* and *kunwaral* lie in their shared trickster qualities, their general exclusion from the active lives of humans, their inhabiting of infrequently visited places, and emaciated and attenuated body forms.

One man's vision

The theme of the activities of the *kunwaral* ghosts and *mimih* tricksters are particularly elaborated in the Kuninjku ceremony called Mamurrng. Mamurrng is understood as a public camp ceremony that Kuninjku undertake to perform for other language groups in the region (see Altman 1981, 1987; Taylor 1996). The ceremony addresses themes of death and the activities of ghosts, while at the same time operating as a celebration of life since it is generally organised to celebrate the birth of a young boy. Dancers paint themselves as skeletons and wear headdresses featuring carved wooden bones. While these features create a sense of the macabre, the dances are generally designed to promote considerable mirth.

In the 1960s the acknowledged leader of this ceremony was the famed Kuninjku singer Crusoe (also Caruso) Kuningbal (1922–84). He is said to have invented the songs and dances that were used in the ceremony at this time. The personal creativity associated with the development of this ceremony is explicitly distinguished from ceremonies that deal with Ancestral subject matter. Kuningbal was broadly recognised as a 'virtuoso' at singing and dancing *mimihi*, and contemporary Kuninjku still smile with pleasure as they recall Kuningbal's hilarious performances and evocative singing. He incorporated life size carvings of *mimih* in his performances and these distinctive sculptures, songs and dances were popularised in a local setting through the medium of the Mamurrng performance. Such creativity on secular ceremonial performance has been recorded elsewhere in Australia (Akerman 1999:22–4; Davis 2002:303–4).

The earliest carving by Kuningbal (Fig. 1) that entered a public collection was collected by Louis Allen in 1964 (O'Ferrall 1991). The head is carved to a conical shape with chin and mouth painted as detail, while the body of the figure has been waisted so the arms hang beside the figure and flares again at the hips. The figure has been painted initially in red and dots of white and yellow have been applied against this ground. A very similar figure was collected by Helen Wurm in 1968 (now in the collection of the National Museum of Australia).

The sculptural form of Kuningbal's early *mimih* carvings relates strongly to that of the *morkuy* carvings of eastern Arnhem Land. It is known that Kuningbal spent some time at Milingimbi Mission prior to World War II and it is likely that he became familiar with the carving styles of more eastern language groups while he was there.³



Fig. 1. Mimih figures by Crusoe Kuningbal from the early 1970s. Private Collection, Sydney. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney. Photo courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales.

However, the form of dotted patterning, often also using black dots, that was used by Kuningbal on all his sculptures and bark paintings over the next twenty years gave his works a unique character. The dotted style was particularly characteristic when compared to the cross-hatching styles of patterning that were common in the sculptures and paintings of other artists working in the central Arnhem Land region.

In September 1981, I observed Kuningbal's *mimih* sculptures used in another performance of the Mamurrng ceremony. This ceremony was unique in that it was held in honour of Peter Cooke, an arts adviser who had lived at Maningrida during the years 1972–81 and who was about to leave the town. Being an older man Kuningbal did not lead this performance although he did contribute his sculptures. The carvings of *mimih* were incorporated into the performance along with the construction of a burial platform with a paperbark bundle of wooden bones emulating traditional mortuary practices. At the conclusion of the performance these sculptural works were gifted to Peter Cooke and his family and in return Cooke presented blankets, lengths of cloths and other utilitarian items (Altman 1981; Hoff and Taylor 1985).

The performance of the Mamurrng ceremony for Peter Cooke is significant in the changing orientation of Kuninjku to broaden their cultural influence. In his role as arts adviser Cooke was responsible for marketing the works of artists from many different language groups in the Maningrida region. However, he had developed particularly strong personal relationships with Kuninjku artists and had been bestowed with a classificatory relation to a Kuninjku clan.

For many years Cooke had promoted the sculptural work of Crusoe Kuningbal and it was appropriate that some of these sculptures formed presents at the completion of the 1981 Mamurrng ceremony. At this time Kuningbal was the only Kuninjku artist recorded as making *mimih* sculptures for sale to the market. By the early 1980s Kuningbal was producing many more works although they were highly simplified with the arms merely represented as grooves in the body. The sculptures were not generally taller than 1 m. Kuningbal earned in the range of \$12–\$50 for his slender sculptures and his works were established as a unique item in the craft niche of the market. Cooke had considerable difficulty selling Kuningbal's bark paintings as it appeared that the market was uncomfortable with his unique dotted style where other artists chose to use regular cross-hatching techniques. However, in 1984 a group of Kuningbal's sculptures was purchased by the NGA through

the agency of Jennifer Hoff, a curator with research interests in Aboriginal sculpture. Kuningbal died in 1984.

After 1984 Kuningbal's sons, Owen Yalandja (b.1962) and Crusoe Kurddal (b.1964), were producing very large, log-sized *mimih* carvings with a carved form and dotted infill that was, other than the size, the same as that used by their father. The move to larger works seems to have been supported by the arts advisers at the time, Geoff Todd, an artist (1984–85), and then Georgio Burchett (also a practising artist who had strong links into the art world) in 1985, who both made an effort to move *mimih* from the craft category into that of fine art sculpture.

These arts advisers recognised the importance of larger scale as a feature implicated in the construction of art as opposed to craft in broader market circles. Major Australian state galleries and the new National Gallery of Australia (opened in 1982) followed a world trend in the incorporation of vast internal halls and outdoor garden spaces reserved for sculpture exhibitions. Sculptures are required to be imposing to sit comfortably in this exhibition context.

Kuningbal had found support for his relatively frequently produced and smaller works among the tourist market but the change to much larger works by his sons was a relatively dangerous marketing move at this time. Such works create difficulties down the line in terms of costs of freight and handling and were notoriously difficult to sell to non-institutional customers. There appears to have been some support for this change as a number of Crusoe Kurddal's large works were collected by major collecting bodies such as the National Museum of Australia and Art Gallery of New South Wales, which both purchased works in 1985.

Promotion of sculpture

A key art event in 1988 transformed the Australian public view of large sculptural artefacts from Arnhem Land. The Aboriginal Memorial featuring 200 hollow log coffins was produced by the artists of Ramingining in central Arnhem Land for the Sydney Biennale (Bula'bula Arts 2000; Mundine 1988, 2000). Part of the genius of the total work was the way that it presented mortuary sculpture as an art installation and broke down barriers between different artistic categories. Mundine (2000) noted the difficulty of marketing such artefacts and the need for a tour de force event to help audiences to

understand the power of the works. The work in toto was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia in 1989 and was installed in a prominent place adjacent to the gallery foyer. Art centres in Arnhem Land are now able to sell major commissions of Lorrkun and there is a steady resale market at auction. The Memorial opened the market's eyes to the possibilities of Aboriginal sculpture more broadly.

From the early 1990s Maningrida became involved in a series of events that rode the wave of interest in larger sized sculptural work. In particular, collaborations between the Maningrida arts adviser Diane Moon and the Melbourne-based dealer Gabrielle Pizzi (1997) helped to develop the market for Maningrida sculpture through the 1990s. As Ryan (2001) noted, a sculpture project in 1990–91 resulted in the production of 26 monumental works by eighteen artists for the exhibition *Sculptures from Maningrida*. The National Gallery of Victoria purchased the entire set of works for its permanent collection. There followed exhibitions that included sculpture in 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1996. Gabrielle Pizzi, now deceased, was able to exhibit the works in Italy and Switzerland in 1994 and develop a major exhibition entitled *Metamorphosis* for the Venice Biennale in 1997 (Pizzi 1997) that incorporated the diversity of sculpture from Maningrida.

A significant development over this period was the introduction of female sculptors. In the early 1980s women occasionally helped their husbands to complete the more arduous cross-hatching components of bark paintings, but more generally they specialised in fibre work for which they received very low remuneration. However, from the mid-1980s, the first female arts adviser at Maningrida, Diane Moon, encouraged developments in sculpture and weaving among women. Women who were helping their husbands to paint on bark and to carve were also encouraged to market work under their own name at this time.

It is now common for men to work with their wives and daughters on joint works, as well as with their sons. Men are deliberately encouraging female kin to become independent workers. Kuninjku men now say that it is good that women are able to work on their own and women say that they prefer to work on sculpture because it is much more lucrative than basketry. Family incomes derived from the combined work of women and men specialising in fine art bark painting and sculpture can be much more substantial than twenty years previously.

Apart from exhibition effort and encouragement of women, Maningrida has also worked on other means of promoting sculpture. There have been major meetings with artists to emphasise the importance of correct seasoning of wood to prevent splitting and to encourage slow and careful work. A freezer has been installed to prevent borer damage. While bark for painting is hard to obtain during the late dry season because the sap is not running in the trees, wood for sculpture is readily available. In this respect the production of sculpture has become strongly seasonal and accomplished bark painters also move to sculptural work as part of the seasonal round.

While Kuningbal was the only artist recorded to be producing *mimih* carvings in 1980, currently at Maningrida there are about 45 Kuninjku artists (27 men and fifteen women in 1999) producing sculptures of *mimih*. There are another 55 artists from other language groups who produce similar spirit figures at Maningrida. It is clear that carving is a relatively lucrative art form and teaching the skill has become an important means of exchange for Kuninjku. While Maningrida is not their homeland, Kuninjku have taught carving skills to their Gunabidji, Gun-artpa and Gurgoni neighbours with whom they co-reside when visiting Maningrida. Exchange of carving skills is thus a form of broader alliance making focused around a key form of Indigenous intellectual property. Sculpture comprised 19 per cent of the total purchases from artists in 1998–99 and 30 per cent in 1999–2000 (Maningrida Arts and Culture 1999, 2000). In 1999–2000 the new arts adviser Fiona Salmon established five commercial exhibitions in southern galleries that featured sculpture (Maningrida Arts and Culture 2000). Artists were also encouraged in the production of smaller sculptures particularly to cater for the tourist market in the lead up to the Olympic games (Maningrida Arts and Culture 2000).

Divergence in form

By 2000 Owen Yalandja was regularly producing larger sculptures directed specifically at the fine art market with all of his 39 works being purchased for more than \$200 and five works receiving more than \$1000 each. That Yalandja and Kurddal should pursue a carving tradition commenced by their father reifies a long-standing principle of cultural transmission among Kuninjku. These men see it as their responsibility to maintain their father's patrimony of artistic inspiration. They remain custodians and frequent residents of Barrihdjowkkeng

outstation, a camp established by their father near a waterhole created by the original Dreaming of their clan. In addition, the artist's widow the late Lena Kuriniya, who lived at Barrihdjowkkeng, was the most prominent female carver in the region. Lena Kuriniya was the top earning Kuninjku sculptor in 1999 and she was able to establish this position primarily through regular production of smaller works with the occasional major fine art production with nine works out of 85 being purchased by MAC for more than \$200.

Examination of their work over time also reveals how these artists have developed their own innovations. For example, Yalandja started using black as the base colour for his works which immediately signalled the unique identity of his works from those of other family members. In the early 1990s he also drew upon his knowledge of the creation stories of his own clan lands to create a new sculptural representation of the Yawkyawk or young girl Ancestor. By contrast, his brother Kurddal tends to stick with producing *mimih* figures coloured red.

Barrihdjowkkeng outstation is adjacent to a billabong which is a Yirridjdja moiety sacred site associated with the Yawkyawk or young girl spirits. Kuninjku believe that these spirits live in the water and that you can occasionally see their shadows as they flee the smell of humans who approach the water. They are imagined to have been girls who transformed into mermaid type figures with fish tails. Kuningbal used to sing the Yawkyawk song and is known to have painted them in bark paintings in his characteristic dotting style.

Yalandja carves innovative sculptures with bodies much like that of the standard *mimih* but with a tapering lower body that ends with a forked fish tail (Fig. 2). The patterning on the tail also changes into a scaly appearance. In the early 1990s Yalandja experimented with the patterns of dots taught to him by his father and created new arrangements; first in arcs to suggest scales, but later he developed small v-shaped marks to suggest individual scales. This graphic innovation captures the scaly sheen of the watery being. Yalandja's innovative works have become very popular with the fine art market and Yalandja is now able to specialise in producing larger fine art pieces. Recent innovations include the selection of more curvilinear tree trunks to give these figures a sinuous appearance. Very thin and waving trunks provide an even more attenuated form. These innovations in 3-D form are appropriate to the meaning of the figure, capturing as they do the sinuous movements of the Yawkyawk's fishy form.



Fig. 2. Yawkyawk figures by Owen Yalandja from 1999. Note the forked fish tail on the lower part of the body. Collection of Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney. Photo courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Another senior Kuniŋjku artist, Mawurndjul, now produces sculptures of his own sites. Mawurndjul was initiated to the Mardayin ceremony when he was young and Mardayin themes of land creation are increasingly incorporated in his bark painting and sculpture. The cross-hatched designs on the body of the figures refer to the use of body paintings and painted wooden sculptures in the Mardayin ceremony (Kupka 1972; Taylor 1996). In the context of the ceremony the designs mark the wearer with the designs for their country that were originally worn by the Ancestors during their own creative travels. However, Mawurndjul, along with a number of other artists in this region, is using cross-hatching in a new way. Rather than restricting themselves to the ordered patterns used in ceremony they are experimenting with new colour combinations and decorative effects. This experimentation contributes considerable visual dynamism to the sculptural work.

Mawurndjul is known to have produced sculptures of Mardayin subjects such as freshwater turtle during the 1980s. More recently he has worked on sculptures of a Duwa moiety female creator being called Buluwana from a site near Kudjarngal in his own clan lands. Mawurndjul's bark paintings of geometric Mardayin designs are highly prized collector's items and his sculptural works of human figures comprise an extension of this popular theme.

Close kin of Mawurndjul create sculptures in a very similar way yet, to differentiate themselves as independent artists, each is actively developing an individual style. Mawurndjul's sister, Susan Marawarr, also carves the Buluwana figure and she produced many *mimih* sculptures with cross-hatched decoration. However, she regularly changes the style of cross-hatching in her sculptures. This way of varying the infill of her works emphasises the way that Kuniŋjku art is currently diverging from the art of eastern Arnhem Land. In eastern Arnhem Land cross-hatching elements are closely integrated with clan design elements that artists are constrained not to change. In the west, cross-hatching has become a decorative element and variations in patterns are one of a number of ways that artists lend vitality to their work. Like her brother Mawurndjul, Marawarr has travelled overseas with the arts adviser Fiona Salmon and visited a number of the world's most prestigious galleries and she has a strong sense of her personal identity as an artist. Recently she has investigated the potential of sculpture in bronze through collaboration on an installation at Sydney airport with Judy Watson and Urban Art Projects based in Brisbane.



Fig. 3. Wayarra spirit figure by Charlie Nangukwirk from 2001. Private Collection, Canberra. Maningrida Arts Centre. Photo Luke Taylor.

Charlie Nangukwirrk belongs to the same clan as Mawurndjul and Marawarr, and assists them in performances of Mamurrng, although his sculptural work differs markedly from their cross-hatched styles. He has specialised in developing figures with a more ghost-like appearance using splatters of white paint derived from the iconography of body paintings used in the Mamurrng where dancers representing wayarra are painted white (Fig. 3). In addition, Kuninjku say that the representation of little pin-like teeth are appropriate to representations of these dead body spirits. Nangukwirrk shows these little teeth in the mouths of his carvings of these spirits.

Innovation and cultural expansion

Kuninjku identify themselves as people who carve *mimih*, as distinct from other language groups who carve other subjects, and all of the artists discussed above participate together in the performance of Mamurrng ceremonies that promote this identification in a regional context. Indeed the *mimih* dancers have taken the Mamurrng overseas to promote their unique ghostly dances. The influence of Kuningbal can be traced through the work of all these subsequent sculptors, particularly in respect to the relatively simplified body form of his figures as it was developed through the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, on closer inspection '*mimih*' is often used as a term that glosses a range of different spirits that have similar connotations in Kuninjku belief, and more recently artists are carving representations of Ancestral Beings that highlight their identification with particular sites. While the skills of carving have been shared across a broad group often as a feature of networks of co-residence, when we look particularly at the painted features of these sculptures it becomes clear that individual artists are elaborating different ways of interpreting the subjects.

These artists are now experienced at travelling to exhibitions of their work both in Australia and increasingly overseas. They have a strong sense of their personal standing in a competitive art market. As Bourdieu (1984), and recently Myers (2002) in the Australian context, have shown, the fine art market is characterised by the activity of experts who are involved in processes that emphasise the distinctions between artistic creations, work to restrict the number of objects that circulate in this realm and work to restrict the number of 'star' artists. This activity of identifying distinctiveness is essential to the creation of value in the fine art realm. There is competition among collectors for

the best and unique works and competition among artists to achieve the recognition that will lead to the offer of exhibition representation and higher prices for their works. On the one hand there is potential advantage in convincing the local arts adviser of the distinct merit of an individual's work and indeed in drawing the adviser into close personal relationships or ceremonial networks of reciprocal obligation. On the other hand, some of these artists have experimented in using private dealers as opposed to Maningrida Arts and Culture as a means of achieving greater personal recognition.

Individual virtuosity is something that is admired in the local context and Kuninjku are receptive to the creation of new ceremonial components, particularly in the context of public performances such as Mamurrng. Where Kuningbal was able to achieve fame within the local regional context for his outstanding performances it is also apparent that during his lifetime the opportunities for broader cultural expansion were not yet in place. His sculptures were appreciated in a local context and purchased to a limited extent by collectors seeking examples of a representative western Arnhem Land style. However, during his lifetime the art market was constrained by concepts of primitivism, the identification of small sculptures as 'craft' and probably also by a general lack of information and tenuous market linkages.

Kuningbal's sons and indeed his widow have been advantaged by the developing market and by some very specific interventions to establish Aboriginal sculpture as an important form of contemporary Australian art. Crucial market interventions such as the Aboriginal Memorial project in 1988, local arts adviser support, the National Gallery of Victoria's purchase of the entire *Carvings from Maningrida* exhibition in 1991 and Gabrielle Pizzi's support of sculpture exhibitions from Maningrida helped to educate audiences and establish these sculptures as 'art'. This fits with a broader picture of major cultural institutions, particularly the National Gallery of Australia, taking the lead in developing the Aboriginal art and craft market in the 1980s.

Elsewhere (Taylor 1996) I have suggested that it is inappropriate to consider western Arnhem Land bark painting to be closely reflective of clan identification in the same way as the art of the Yolngu. Among bark painters it is apparent that bark paintings evoke the life courses of individuals, their journeys to learn about the creation stories of places they have visited and their associations with other people who have taught them how to paint particular subjects. Certainly Kuninjku recount the clan identification of sites and on ceremonial occasions clan

identification is often brought to the fore. However, in painting for the market artists draw upon other resources of personal affiliation and identification to develop a repertoire of subject matter. In particular, non-secret subject matter such as *mimih* provide themes for elaboration that avoid the restrictions that would normally apply to more important subject matter. Similarly with the carving of *mimih*, many new sculptors feel free to interpret this subject and there has been a relative boom in production over the last five years.

In producing sculpture artists draw inspiration from lively beliefs relating to spirit beings that inhabit Kuninjku lands, as well as from knowledge of the Ancestral associations of powerful creation sites. In essence these sculptures bring these beings into the mainstream of contemporary life, they have become a central focus. The Art Centre situated in the centre of Maningrida now bristles with a forest of spirit beings. The town and increasingly the art market is colonised by Kuninjku visions of their distinctive spirit world. In many respects the sculptures are an index of Kuninjku cultural expansion, through the art centre into the town and through the art market to the world.

While the art world may enhance opportunities for self-aggrandisement, innovation is constrained in some senses too. There is a tendency for close kin to share innovations; for husbands and wives to share patterns; and for children to continue with the forms used by their parents. Maintenance of similar forms are a way of cherishing, respecting and expressing particularly close personal relationships. Such distinctiveness is respected by others and in some sense divergence of form becomes a means for new artists to avoid copying the work of families whose intellectual property is well established. Because of the emergence of women as important collaborators and sculptors in their own right, the nuclear family appears to be emerging as a strong unit for the circulation of artistic ideas. There are strong economic advantages for families that work together in producing art. While kin based exchanges restrict the ability of families to acquire wealth, more broadly there appears to be an increasing sense of nuclear family independence which is supported by a strongly expressed desire for single families to establish small outstations that break away from the larger camps established in the 1970–80s. The establishment of these outstations close to important sites goes hand in hand with a focus on the elaboration of representations of the Ancestral stories of these places.

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Notes

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2. Kuninjku say that in earlier days they made *kunwaral* out of paperbark bound with bush string. Figures collected by the Berndts in the National Museum of Australia are approximately 1 m high and show features such as arms, legs and penis. Facial features are indicated through the addition of paint.
3. Kuninbal [sic] is recorded as Member 48 of Donald Thompson's detachment formed in 1942 to organise guerilla fighting and for reconnaissance and scouting. He was issued with an axe (Thomson 1983:123). It is likely that the carving of wooden figures as opposed to woven paperbark forms was facilitated by the access to metal tools that the mission experience provided.