SYDNEY, 22 June 2018] The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) is delighted to present the first major survey of works by one of Australia’s leading contemporary artists – master bark painter John Mawurndjul from Friday 6 July until Sunday 23 September. Developed and co-presented by the MCA and Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), in association with Maningrida Arts & Culture, this landmark exhibition includes over 160 works, spanning forty years of the artist’s practice.

John Mawurndjul AM is celebrated for his mastery of rarrk (cross-hatching) and his depiction of djang (sacred sites), a tradition shared by generations of Kuninjku artists. Bark paintings and sculptures drawn from private and public collections across the world tell the stories of Kuninjku culture and the significant locations surrounding the artist’s home in central north Arnhem Land. Click here to view the microsite.

Born in 1952, Mawurndjul lives and works in Milmilngkan in western Arnhem Land and Maningrida in central north Arnhem Land. Since his first exhibition in 1980, he has become one of Australia’s most widely recognised artists. In 1989 his work was included in the ground-breaking exhibition Magiciens de la Terre at the Centre Georges Pompidou and Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris, and his works have been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Australia, America, Germany and Japan. He was the recipient of the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award in 2003, has received the Bark Painting Award at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory four times, and in 2010 was awarded an Order of Australia. In 2018 he received the highly prestigious Red Ochre Award at the Australia Council for the Arts, National Indigenous Art Awards, for his outstanding lifetime achievement in the arts.

John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new is co-curated by Clothilde Bullen (Curator, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Collections and Exhibitions, MCA), Natasha Bullock (Senior Curator, MCA), Nici Cumpston (Artistic Director, TARNANTHI Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art) and Dr Lisa Slade (Co-acting Director, Art Gallery of South Australia), with Keith Munro (Curator, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Programs, MCA) as lead Cultural Advisor; in close collaboration with John Mawurndjul AM, Kay Lindjuwanga, Ananais Jawulba and Maningrida Arts & Culture staff: Michelle Culpitt, Zebedee Bonson and Derek Carter; and interpreter/translator Dr Murray Garde.

The collections of the MCA and Art Gallery of South Australia form the genesis of the exhibition. Two barks - Nawarramulmul (Shooting Star Spirit) and Ngalyod (Female Rainbow Serpent) (both 1988) were the first artworks accessioned into the newly-incorporated MCA Collection in 1989; and Namanjwarre, Saltwater Crocodile (also from 1988) is a cornerstone piece from the Art Gallery of South Australia Collection, representing a watershed moment in the evolution of the artist’s aesthetic.
In close collaboration with the MCA and Art Gallery of South Australia curatorial teams, John Mawurndjul led curatorial decisions and assisted in selecting the most significant artworks from his career. He was instrumental in determining the exhibition structure, which is grouped by places – or kunred – then animals and spirits, mimih, lorrkon and etchings. The concept of kunred informs the artist’s practice, both in the materials used such as the bark of the tree, natural earth pigments and charcoal, and in the representation of ideas critical to an understanding of Kuninjku culture.

Language is an important component of this presentation, with bilingual texts embedded throughout the exhibition design – from the didactics and labels available in Kuninjku, to translated texts featured in the catalogue and on the website.

MCA Director, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor OBE said: “This exhibition will be a revelation. It recognises John Mawurndjul as one of Australia’s most important artists, and his contribution to the history of art and painting. The MCA has had a long-standing relationship with the artist, and we are very proud to have collaborated with the Art Gallery of South Australia to develop this landmark exhibition.”

Art Gallery of South Australia and MCA curators Nici Cumpston, Dr Lisa Slade, Natasha Bullock and Clothilde Bullen added: “This artist-led exhibition has been an extraordinary journey across country and culture, with multiple voices working closely together to support and facilitate the artist’s vision. We hope that through the beauty of Mawurndjul’s art, and the extensive research that went into this exhibition, audiences will gain a deep understanding of the living history and culture of the Kuninjku people and their country.”

John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new is on display from July 6 until September 23, 2018 at the MCA and from October 26, 2018 until January 28, 2019 at Art Gallery of South Australia, as part of TARNANTHI.

A smaller version of the exhibition will then tour regionally to eight locations across Australia until 2020:

- Murray Art Museum Albury (NSW): 14 March – 9 June 2019
- Glasshouse Port Macquarie (NSW): 26 July – 22 September 2019
- Drill Hall Gallery, ANU (ACT): 4 October – 24 November 2019
- Blue Mountains Cultural Centre (NSW): 7 December 2019 – 19 January 2020
- Cairns Regional Gallery (QLD): 7 February – 29 March 2020
- Charles Darwin University Art Gallery (NT): 17 April – 28 June 2020
- Tweed Regional Gallery (NSW): 10 July – 20 September 2020
- Bunjil Place Gallery (VIC): 2 October – 29 November 2020

This touring project has been assisted by the Australian Government’s Visions of Australia program.
EXHIBITION CATALOGUE
The richly illustrated 400-page book contains a comprehensive overview of John Mawurndjul's practice by one of Australia's great scholars of Aboriginal art, Hetti Perkins; a detailed and illustrated biographical history by writer Genevieve O'Callaghan; a new interview between the artist and linguist Dr Murray Garde; and other essays by a range of experts in the field. The book has been designed and developed by the MCA Design Studio in collaboration with the artist and mirrors the structure of the exhibition with over 160 full colour image plates grouped by place, along with rarely seen images of the artist. The book celebrates language and is punctuated with the artist's words in Kuninjku, translated into English. The book is available for $59.95 from the MCA Store.

MICROSITE
The exhibition is supported by a microsite, johnmawurndjul.com. The site features an exhibition guide for the MCA and Art Gallery of South Australia exhibition spaces and an extensive video with the artist, recorded in Arnhem Land, in which Mawurndjul speaks in greater detail about his art practice and history, including rarrk paintings and the ancestral rock paintings found on the Kurulk clan lands. The microsite also features online learning resources, an explanation of place names and their significance to the exhibition, audio recordings of linguist and anthropologist Murray Garde on language, and a glossary, accompanied by recordings of Kuninjku language by John Mawurndjul and his family.

MCA PUBLIC PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

OPENING WEEKEND
Friday 6 July (12.30 – 2pm, FREE, drop in)
Curator’s Insights: Clothilde Bullen, Natasha Bullock, Nici Cumpston and Dr Lisa Slade

Saturday 7 July (11am – 12.30pm, ticketed, booking recommended)
Artist in Conversation: John Mawurndjul in conversation with Keith Munro and translator/interpreter Murray Garde

Saturday 7 July (1.30 – 3.30pm, ticketed, booking recommended)
Panel Discussion with special guests of the artist

Sunday 8 July (all day, some activities free drop-in, others ticketed)
Family Day: a family-focused event which includes a Welcome to Country by Uncle Ray Davison, a Contemporary Kids program, singing and book readings in the galleries and more.

CONTEMPORARY KIDS - SCHOOL HOLIDAYS PROGRAM
8-13 July (10.30am – 4pm, ticketed, drop-in)
Celebrate the work of John Mawurndjul with the whole family. Flap your tail like a barramundi, weave your way through the exhibition, look out for animals hiding in artworks and learn their names in Kuninjku. Make a mobile in the creative studios that connects you and your family to your own special piece of country. Drop in multiple times with your family ticket.

GENEXT
Sunday 15 July (6 – 9pm, free, ticketed)
Three hours of art, live music and performance, after-hours at the MCA for 12–18 year olds. The July edition is inspired by John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new. GENEXT is programmed and run by the MCA Youth Committee, with support from our Artist Educators and Young Creatives Coordinator.

ART BABY
26 & 31 July (various times, ticketed)
Led by one of the MCA’s Artist Educators, this friendly 45-minute gallery tour invites the grown-ups to experience the exhibition John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new before the smaller art lovers enjoy a 30-minute tummy time session on Sydney artist Liam Benson’s incredible multi-sensory art blanket.

MCA ARTBAR
Friday 24 August (7 – 11pm, ticketed)
Explore the MCA after-hours at ARTBAR with live performances, visual art and music transforming all four levels of the Museum. The August edition of ARTBAR includes complementary after-hours access to John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new. It is curated by Get to Work, a collaborative practice between Tracy Quan, Georgia Taia and Paris Taia which focuses on the body, dance and performance to playfully explore quirks of contemporary living.
MCA PRESENTS A MAJOR SURVEY BY BARK PAINTER JOHN MAWURNDJUL
JOHN MAWURNDJUL: I AM THE OLD AND THE NEW

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

John (Balang) Mawurndjul AM was born near Mumeka on the Mann River in 1952, an important camping site for members of the Kurulk clan. The site lies some 50 kilometres south of Maningrida, a remote community in central north Arnhem Land, approximately 500 kilometres east of Darwin in the Northern Territory.

Painting on bark is a relatively recent phenomenon, adapted from body painting. Mawurndjul was initially taught to paint by his father, the esteemed painter and weaver Anchor Kulunba, his uncle Peter Marralwanga, and elder brother Jimmy Njiminjuma. He has mastered the skill of bark painting over four decades of practice. His early explorations on bark in the late 1970s yielded to the conventions of bark painting at that time: figurative work depicting images of the Ngalyod (an ancestral Rainbow Serpent), Namarrkon (the female lightning spirit) and depictions of the rich resources found on his country – turtles, fish (particularly the Saratoga, barramundi and Grunter), crocodile and other creatures.

Mawurndjul's work has been included in exhibitions since 1980. In 1988, Mawurndjul won the Rothman's Foundation Award for best painting at the 5th annual National Aboriginal Art Awards at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, and was included in the group exhibition Dreamings, in New York that same year. The following year, his work was included in the landmark exhibition Magiciens de la Terre at the Centre Georges Pompidou and Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris, which played an important role in changing the way his work was appreciated.

In 1991 Mawurndjul held his first solo show at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne. During the 1990s, his work began to shift in style, and he started to address the significant sites of his custodial country. The artist also began to make a concentrated body of sculptural work, including the hollow log coffins, or lorrkon, and representations of the mimih spirit beings. More recently, Mawurndjul's practice has developed to reflect in more detail the Mardayin ceremony; shimmering geometric grids of rarrk (cross-hatching), and djang (a sacred site or totemic emblem) in a complete mastery of bark painting that borders on abstraction.

Mawurndjul exhibited his work in Crossroads in Japan in 1992, in the Sydney Biennale in 2000, and in Aratjara: Art of the First Australians in Germany and the UK and In the Heart of Arnhem Land in France in 2001. In 2004, his work was included in the landmark survey exhibition Crossing Country, the Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and in 2005 was honoured with a major retrospective of his work at the Musee Jean Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland. Mawurndjul created work for the Musee du Quai Branly's Australian Indigenous Art Commission in 2004, being one of only eight Aboriginal artists included.

He was the recipient of the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award in 2003, and has been awarded the Bark Painting Award at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 1988, 1999, 2002 and 2016. In 2018, he was awarded the highly prestigious Red Ochre Award at the Australia Council for the Arts, National Indigenous Art Awards, for his outstanding lifetime achievement in the arts.

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JOHN MAWURNDJUL: I AM THE OLD AND THE NEW

Image: John Mawurndjul, Ngalyod (Female rainbow serpent), 1988, earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus tetrodonta), Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds donated by Mr and Mr Jim Bain, 1989, © John Mawurndjul, licensed by Copyright Agency 2018, photograph: Jessica Maurer.