

Basic Detail Report



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Title

Wirriku Island

Date

1998

Primary Maker

Djalu Gurruwiwi

Medium

Natural pigments on bark

Dimensions

Overall: 2210 × 980 mm, 8.4 kg

Name

Bark painting

History

The Yolŋu people of Arnhem Land inhabit a landscape that was formed by the actions of ancestral beings, who can take both human and animal form. For instance water now flows where these creatures walked and hills have formed where they died. Ancestral time is not just in the past but also the present and future. In light of this the sacred landscape and stories of East Arnhem Land are central to the Yolŋu people's way of life and prominent themes in their bark paintings. The Saltwater Project was initiated in 1996 after an illegal fishing camp was discovered at Garranali, a sacred Aboriginal site in East Arnhem Land. This sacred area is home to the ancestral crocodile Bāru and found among the litter of the camp was the severed head of a crocodile. This discovery prompted the local Yolnu people to produce a series of bark paintings that expressed the rules, philosophies and stories of their region. The project culminated in the production of 80 barks that stressed the importance of Yolŋu land ownership, laws and codes of behaviour for those who interacted with the landscape. The Yolŋu have been involved in the land rights struggle since the 1960s. They are currently recognised as the traditional owners of northeast Arnhem Land under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. This act was passed in the Northern Territory in 1976 and is seen as the benchmark for the recognition of Aboriginal land ownership in Australia. Despite this the issues of Indigenous land ownership, rights, customs and law continue to be contentious in the Australian legal system and wider community.