

# *Earth, Wind + Fire*

Curated by Juan Bolivar and Jennifer Guerrini Maraldi

**Griffin**  
Gallery





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## *And we will live together*

by Juan Bolivar

There are probably two main reasons why in London in 2017, an exhibition could be titled *Earth Wind & Fire*. Fans of disco will of course remember this as a group from Chicago, Illinois, who had hits such as 'Fantasy' and 'Boogie Wonderland'. Those more interested in esoteric matters, will associate the exhibition's title with the classical elements or substances believed to be the building blocks of all matter in the universe. The likelihood is that the former reason might illicit more answers as 'water' is omitted from this list of elements thus by process of elimination favouring the 70s group. So why then title in this way an exhibition bringing together the work of six Indigenous Australian artists, alongside seven British artists?

In the 1970's the band 'Earth, Wind & Fire' combined musical styles from both African and African-American genres - from disco, soul, gospel, rock, funk,

jazz and R&B. Their music celebrated the collective union of these genres, and acted as a catalyst in the evolution of pop music by bridging a gap that until then had separated the musical audiences of black and white America.

The band's name derives from Maurice White's interest in astrology, choosing to select his astrological sign's *primary* elemental quality - 'Fire' - alongside the *secondary* seasonal qualities of his sign Sagittarius - 'Earth' and 'Air' - to name the group, hence the omission of 'Water' (the fourth classical element) in the band's name.

Maurice White, the band's founder, wanted to reflect the way American society was coming out of a decade of "*experimentation, mind expansion and cosmic awareness*". His aim was to eclectically mix genres in a non-hierarchical way synthesising ideas circulating in 60's America to a

fantastical point of singularity. In this way, rock, pop, jazz and disco meet spirituality, psychedelia, new age, civil rights and science-fiction in a giant melting pot of re-appropriation. Some readers of the exhibition's title might also start to draw connections between the problematics of Australian post-colonial history *vis a vis* its Indigenous people and the disputed rights over land going back to 1606 since the arrival of the first Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon, and secondly by the British in 1788 to establish penal colonies (but being no expert in these matters I shall decline to comment further other than to say they could be right).

The exhibition *Earth Wind & Fire* focuses mainly on the painting practices of artists from two very different cultural platforms, brought together as an eclectic 'mix-tape' which has been recorded for personal enjoyment. It is not an anthology or critique of the problematics

of painting, but has in the process found shared similarities, albeit tangential, in the stylistic conventions, themes and relationship to materials employed by these artists.

Historically artists have looked to the past and other cultures for inspiration. Between 1906 to 1909, Picasso was heavily influenced by African sculpture, brought to Paris during the French Empire's expansion into Africa. Recently *Picasso Primitif* organized by the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, in collaboration with the Musée National Picasso-Paris, presented works by Picasso, which according to the museum's website explore his "*relationship born of admiration, respect and fear...*" to non-Western art; in particular African Art.

By contrast to Picasso, Matisse's idyllic memories of his travels to Tahiti in the 1930s served to inspire many of his late

‘cut-out’ works; with pools of colours and faux-naïve shapes of fruits and flowers adorning paintings such as *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* (1952) and *Memory of Oceania* (1952-53). Closer to our times, the British artist John Walker made works reflecting on his time spent in Australia; acknowledging the legacy of European contact with Indigenous people in his painting *Oceania – my dilemma* (1983), combining elements from Oceanic and Aboriginal art, alongside a totemic figure inspired by Goya’s *Dutches of Alba*. Stuart Hall from the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and the American theorist Homi K. Bhabha, although not specifically art theorists, provide a lens through which to re-examine these works, and the power relationships (of dominant/hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional positions) inherent in the ‘hybridity’ of post-colonial cultures. *Primitivism* – the movement describing artists who have borrowed from non-Western or

pre-historic times – is a problematised area and (for me at least) its name alone feels heavy-handed today. As a period in the late 19th and early 20th century it sits awkwardly on top of philosophical cannons and ideas of beauty and philosophy developed in the 19th century as a culmination of 18th century’s Age of Enlightenment, and *Primitivism’s* desire to look elsewhere favouring the ‘exotic’ over ‘this enlightenment’, whilst well-meaning, is loaded with much deeper connotations. It would be fair to say that this enlighten project carried by the West for 500 years begins in the Renaissance with Michelangelo’s grand mission statement for Christianity; *The Sistine Chapel* (1508-12), which when confronted in the flesh is difficult to argue against. It is colossal.

In Philip Guston’s late work, *Pantheon* he sums up Western painting history in a beautiful rendition of ‘greatest artists’ whose names he has scribbled in this



Philip Guston  
*Pantheon*  
1973  
© The Estate of Philip Guston  
courtesy Hauser & Wirth



small panel painted in 1973: Masaccio, Piero, Giotto, Tiepolo and de Chirico – the names surrounding what looks like a small canvas on an easel lit by an oversized light bulb. The painting is made with such innocence that it beguiles the enormity of the history he grabs in one fell swoop. Many ideas in painting today stem from these artists: Masaccio is attributed with ideas of ‘tone as colour’ which precede Cezanne, Piero de la Francesca developed ‘perspective’ before Leonardo, and Giotto introduced ideas of ‘emotion’ which we now take for granted in painting. Guston – as if to engulf the enormity of these accomplishments – simply scores their names in an empty artist’s studio we can all momentarily inhabit.

Paintings like this demonstrate a love for painting and visual language we have developed as artisans and craftsmen over hundreds of years. It is a simple concept like the love for music in its many forms.

The artist Ben Cove who sadly passed away in 2016, loved music as much as he loved making his beautiful works. I so wish he could be here to see this mismatch of styles and slightly wonky conceptual rationale. I imagine him smiling and telling me not to worry, we are just like musicians coming together for a ‘jam’.

It is in this spirit that art can cross all boundaries in a mutual feeling of kinship within the common wealth of painting, and the naive optimism and belief that our voices will ring forever as one, that seven British artists have been brought together to present their work alongside six artists from the Contemporary School of Indigenous Australian art, who belong to a tradition in the visual arts spanning a little over 80,000 years.

## *The Art of Aeons*

by Jennifer Guerrini Maraldi

Australian Aboriginal art is known to be the oldest, unbroken art tradition in the world, with a history dating as far back as 80,000 years.

Today, the Australian contemporary indigenous art movement draws directly from an ancient culture.

Indigenous Australians deep identification with country originates in their traditional stories of creation, which in the Central Desert is known as *Tjukurrpa*, in English the *Dreaming* or *Dreamtime* is confusing because it has nothing to do with dreaming nor with a specific point in time. For the Aboriginal people the *Tjukurrpa* is a way of life and ongoing, everywhere and all the time.

Aborigines consider themselves direct descendants of mythological beings that created earth, and this can explain their deep relationship to certain characteristics of the landscape and to

certain plants or animals. The *Tjukurrpa* or The Law defines their spirituality.

I am blessed that my own experience across vast Australia, interacting with its first people, and particularly artists, over so many years, is a unique experience which has enriched my understanding of an extraordinary human spirit and the *Dreaming*.

Traditionally, Aboriginal painting was not permanent, but executed either in the sand or on the skin for ceremony. More permanent paintings were made on rocks and later on vessels and other utilitarian articles.

Natural earth pigments were used (ochres) as well as coal, so the colours of traditional paintings were earth tones of red, brown and yellow with white and black.

Just over forty years ago, modern western

materials including acrylic paint and stretched canvases were introduced, the ways and means is most certainly another story!

The main themes or motifs in desert art, depicted mostly from an aerial view, stem from the *Tjukurrpa* (story of creation) lore. Topographical maps also feature in their paintings, replicating the character of the landscape as created by the ancestral spirits.

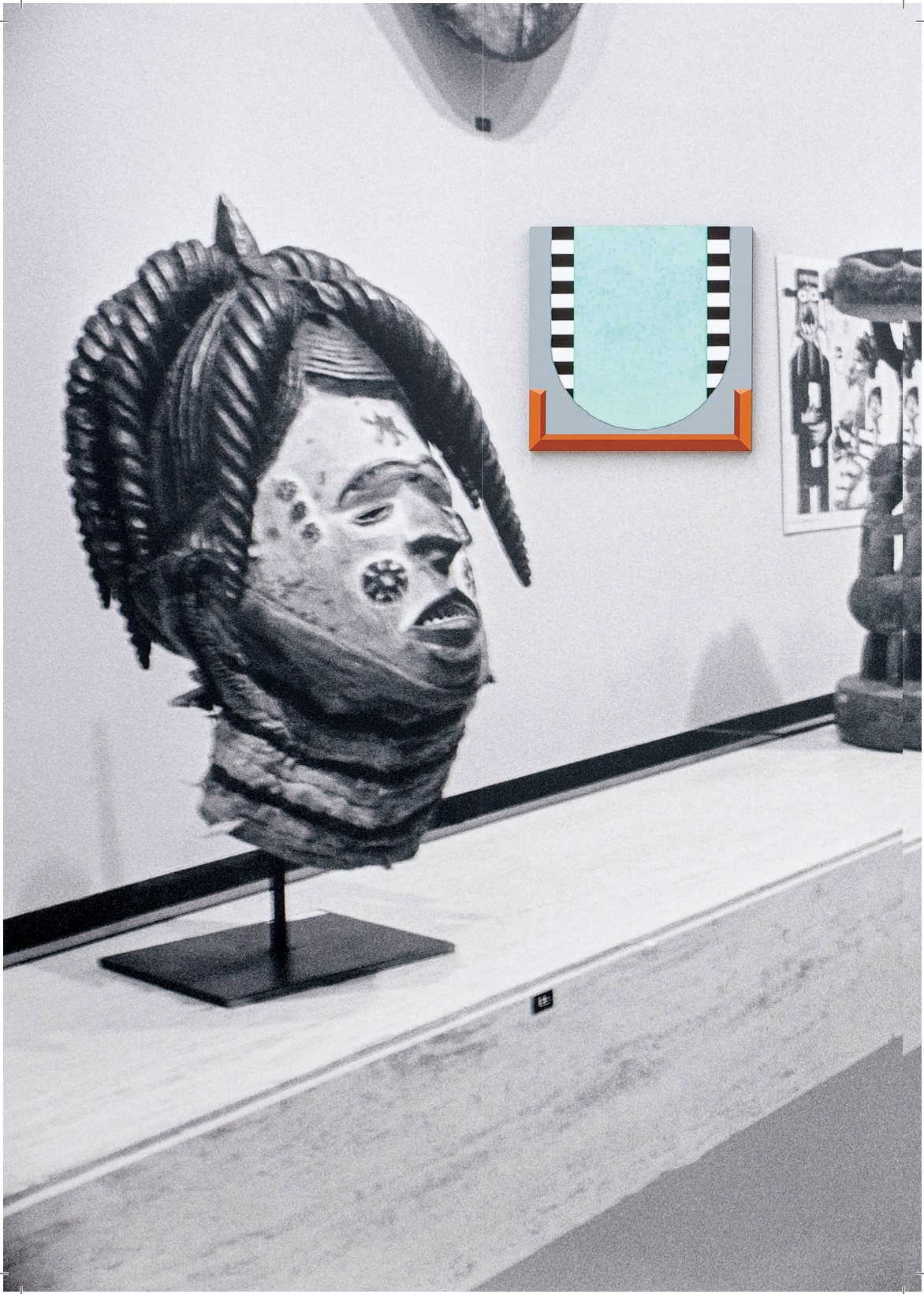
The individual regions developed their own unique styles and techniques and differ frequently in their choice of colour, with a definite trend in recent years for an artist to manifest his characteristic signature style rather than his origins.

It is through this contemporary school of indigenous art and a greater knowledge of a culture as ancient as it is modern, where the earth, wind and fire; the night sky and water; sacred ceremony

and belief in the order of the natural world underpins some amazing artwork that today and stands happily beside contemporary art from a wider world.

Some art styles are reminiscent of western modern and postmodern abstract painting although indigenous art developed far away from any such influence.









## *Areas Between Is and Was*

by Barry Schwabsky

Painting seems to be in a constant crisis. As a critic who's shown a particular interest in that art over the years, I can't keep track of how many panels and symposia I get invited to, whose titles all seem to be politer variations on "What's Your Excuse for Painting After Modernism?" It's as if painting were a patient in the critical ward – we're constantly taking its temperature and checking its EKG in hope against hope that it still stands a chance of surviving.

The problem, perhaps, is that painting no longer has a generally agreed-on social purpose. Its "content is a glimpse," as Willem de Kooning once put it, and one can never be quite sure that glimpse was of anything more than a will-o'-the-wisp.<sup>1</sup> Periodically the painter is likely to feel that, in pursuit of this seductive vision, he or she has walked off the edge of a cliff without noticing it and

remains floating in mid-air like Wile E. Coyote in the old Roadrunner cartoons – until noticing the predicament and plummeting straight down to earth.

Actually, painting today is more like a *saute dans le vide* (à la Yves Klein) than a walk off the cliff: an act at once desperate, calculated, and sometimes – depending on an incalculable combination of skill, luck, and circumstance – survivable. But each painter, it seems, must survive it in a unique manner. *Sauve qui peut!*

On the face of it, the predicament I've just described is a distinctly Eurocentric issue, the result of a centuries-long historical process whose roots lie in the Enlightenment and the concomitant decline of authority or the outright disappearance of institutions whose sponsorship gave painting its legitimacy (the church and aristocracy) as much as

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with David Sylvester, "Content is a Glimpse," Location 1, no. 1 (Spring 1963): 45-52. See [www.dekooning.org/documentation/words/content-is-a-glimpse](http://www.dekooning.org/documentation/words/content-is-a-glimpse).



of “local” issues like the rise of competing cultural modalities such as conceptual art, performance, and installations in Europe and the Americas. In that sense, one might assume it to be of little relevance to contemporary Australian aboriginal painting, which is the product of an entirely different history.

But not so fast. Painters in New York, Berlin, or (in the present instance) London may have more in common with – and, I would add, more to learn from – their Australian sisters and brothers than might be at first apparent. The idea that contemporary western art “presupposes a break with the past,” as Nikos Papastergiadis would have it in distinguishing indigenous Australian art from other contemporary forms, is one that few if any painters would take seriously; all of them feel themselves to be involved – as Australian aboriginal

painters are admitted to be – in “a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity.”<sup>2</sup> Or, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, a “flickering / In the area between is and was.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, it’s true that Australian aboriginal painting seems to have a continuing basis in a complex system of culturally sustained (and sustaining) discourses – the famous Dreamings – that lend it an unassailable significance within the milieu of its making, quite different from the distinctly eccentric relation of most western painting to the surrounding consensus culture, now conditioned by neoliberal atomization, to which its makers also simultaneously belong.

But aboriginal painting is not made for aboriginal people only – far from it. It is made for the world. Its consistent attachment to place – or rather, because here it would be better to be less abstract,

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<sup>2</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, “The Limits of Cultural Translation,” in *From Here: Context and Internationalization*, ed. by Gerardo Mosquera (Madrid: PhotoEspaña/La Fábrica, 2012), p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, corrected edition (New York: Vintage, 2015), p. 500.



to specific places and the deep meanings they possess and that they warrant for the beings rooted in them – is addressed as well to a world of people, ourselves, already displaced and for whom a rationalized and alienable space (“property”) is the only assured milieu.

In that sense, contemporary aboriginal painting is inherently allegorical in the way it layers or correlates distinct and perhaps even incommensurable meanings. An aboriginal painting may have an “inside” and an “outside” significance – one for the artist and anyone else who is privy to the relevant Dreaming, fellow initiates, and another for everyone else. Craig Owens famously claimed to detect an “allegorical impulse” at the heart of what in 1980 he called postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> My understanding of allegory is not identical to his, which was articulated by way of Walter

Benjamin’s use of the term in his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, which is alluringly eccentric and wildly fertile but historically narrow. But Owens’s intuition of the allegorical nature of contemporary art – that it functions by way of contingently or even arbitrarily juxtaposed meanings – seems percipient.

Owens’s postmodernism (like Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* or “mourning play”) is an art of ruins, of desolation. It condemns the contemporaneity it represents. Aboriginal art teaches us the saving truth that what Owens called “the distance between an object and its significance”<sup>5</sup> is just where transcendent meaning can be conserved while putting it in communication with the secular world of modernity so that, through the veil of latter, it becomes possible to glimpse – in Benjamin’s words – “a past charged with now-time.”<sup>6</sup> No wonder that an artist

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* ed. by Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 315-28; first published in October 12 (Spring, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Owens, p. 328.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Philosophy of History,” *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 395.



Peter Paul Rubens  
*Descent From The Cross*  
1612-14



such as John Stark can speak of his work in terms of a “hermetic labyrinth where the dead stuff of paint becomes charged, like hosts such as bread or wine becoming sacred through ritual blessing or blood becoming paint on sacrificial totems”<sup>7</sup>; John Greenwood talks, less grandiloquently, of “a hiatus hinting at a level of existence.”<sup>8</sup>

Ian McLean suggests in an outstanding essay on Aboriginal modernism that “If modernity has many phenotypes – of which Aboriginal modernity is one – there is one shared genotype or consciousness that organizes its myriad forms.... What prevails is the form or structure of knowing, rather than its content.”<sup>9</sup> I would also add: rather than any determinate stylistic features or formal syntax, as evidenced by the seemingly conflicting appearance of the works, British or Australian, in

this exhibition, which has clearly *not* been organized in terms of the striking but ultimately superficial resemblance between Australian aboriginal painting and certain forms of American and European modernist painting, which was important to its first international reception about twenty-five years ago, and which culminated in the stunning revelation of the then-recently deceased Emily Kame Kngwarreye in Venice in 1997.

Whenever this “form of structure of knowing” modernity is articulated via painting, an art whose roots are everywhere and anywhere pre-modern, there’s a score to be settled with history. It will always be accountable as a “neo-traditionalism” – to borrow McLean’s term for what he considers “a dominant characteristic of Aboriginal modernism,”<sup>10</sup> namely its “alliance with the ancestors”

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<sup>7</sup> John Stark, artist’s statement in *Dawnbreakers*, ed. by Juan Bolivar and Adrian Hunt (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 2010), p. 47.

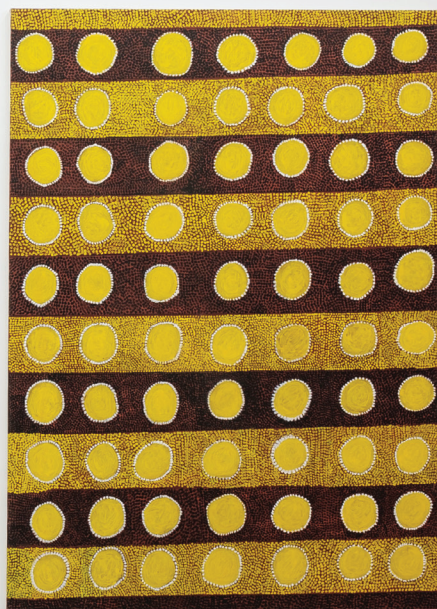
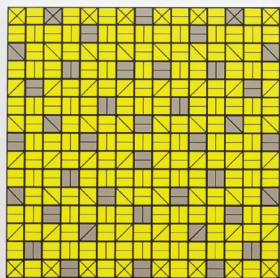
<sup>8</sup> “Juan Bolivar in Conversation with John Greenwood,” *Turps Banana* 15 (n.d.), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ian McLean, “Aboriginal Modernism in Central Australia,” in *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers*, ed. by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2008), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> McLean, pp. 84-85.

– in comparison with work in modes invented *after* the onset of modernity. Contemporary painting, in other words – and this true equally of a painter based in London as of one living in, say Fitzroy Crossing (Ngarralja Tommy May) or Kununurra (Kittey Malarvie) in Western Australia – depends on formal inventiveness *and* the longing for connection to the past in which the art is rooted. The Australians' past may go much deeper – their pictorial tradition is thousands of years old, though it only began to emerge in the medium of acrylic on canvas a few decades ago; by comparison, a lineage beginning with, say, Giotto is a johnny-come-lately. A more important distinction is that an indigenous Australian painter may be just as attached to the way of life that her painting evokes as to its pictorial character, whereas a contemporary Western admirer of Rubens – Ralph

Anderson has painted a triptych inspired by the Flemish painter's *Descent from the Cross* (1612-14), and the fact that viewers would be unlikely to recognize this without being told is entirely to the allegorical point – does not thereby encompass a wish to return to the age of absolutism and the reactionary religious doctrines of the Counter-Reformation. History is always difficult. Art is a way of negotiating what of the past can help us make our way into the future. But its testing of these possibilities is by way of their aesthetic power. And *that*, to go back to the question posed at the beginning of this essay, is the excuse.











## Ralph Anderson

*Looking at the World From a  
Human Point of View*

2017

Acrylic on aluminium

60 × 80 cm

Courtesy of the artist





*Night Vision*  
2017  
Acrylic on aluminium  
80 × 60 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*Lucid Relief*  
2017  
Acrylic on aluminium  
60 × 40 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



## Ben Cove

*Freeloader*

2014

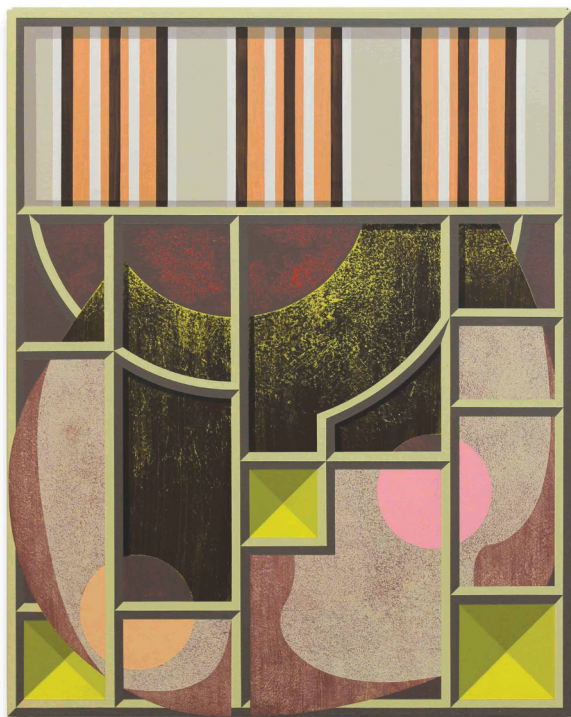
Acrylic on panel

40 × 40 cm

Courtesy of the Ben Cove Estate







*Interloper*

2014

Acrylic on panel

62.5 × 50 cm

Courtesy of the Ben Cove Estate

*Head Construct 5*

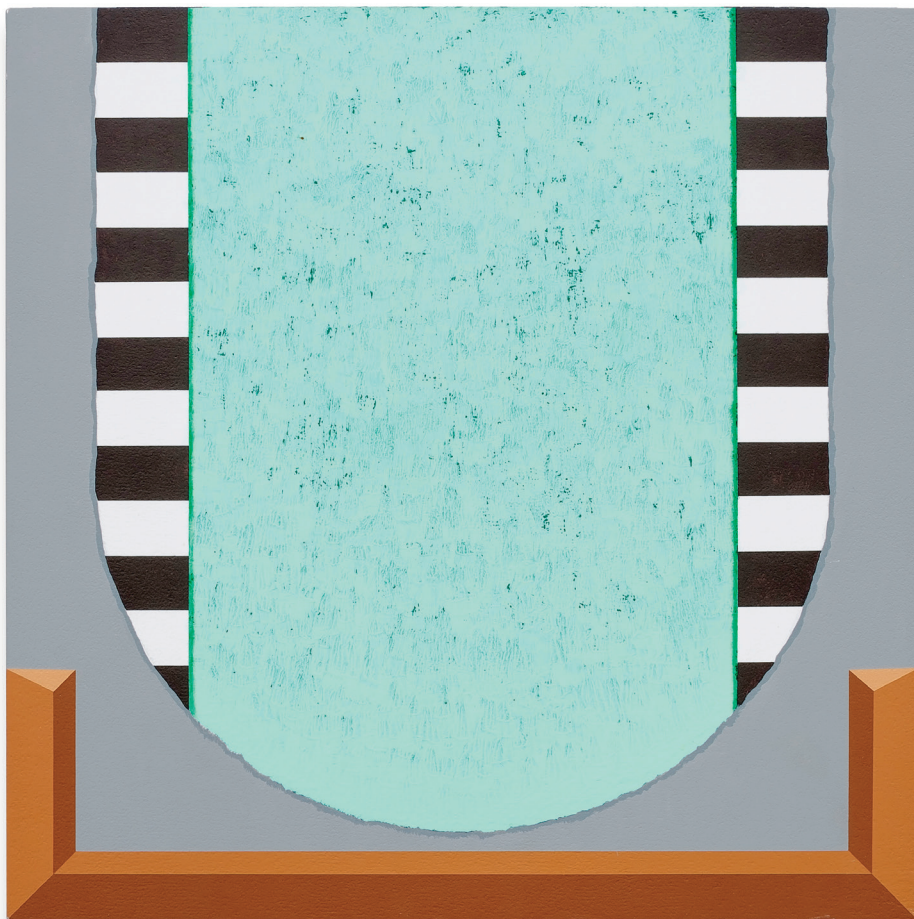
2014

Acrylic on panel

40 × 40 cm

Courtesy of the Ben Cove Estate





## John Greenwood

*Another Singularity*  
2017  
Oil on canvas  
35 × 31 cm  
Courtesy of the artist





*Living Room*  
2016  
Oil on canvas  
30 × 35 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*High 'n Mighty*  
2017  
Oil on board  
47 × 30 cm  
Courtesy of the artist





## Sigrid Holmwood

*Back from work we come*

2016

Ink and gesso, on calico mordant  
printed and dyed with cochineal,  
dyer's broom, madder, and  
buckthorn berries, on board

110.5 × 196.5 cm

Courtesy of Annely Juda Gallery



*Off to work we go*

2016

Ink and gesso, on calico mordant  
printed and dyed with cochineal,  
madder, dyer's broom, and  
buckthorn berries, on board

110.5 × 178 cm

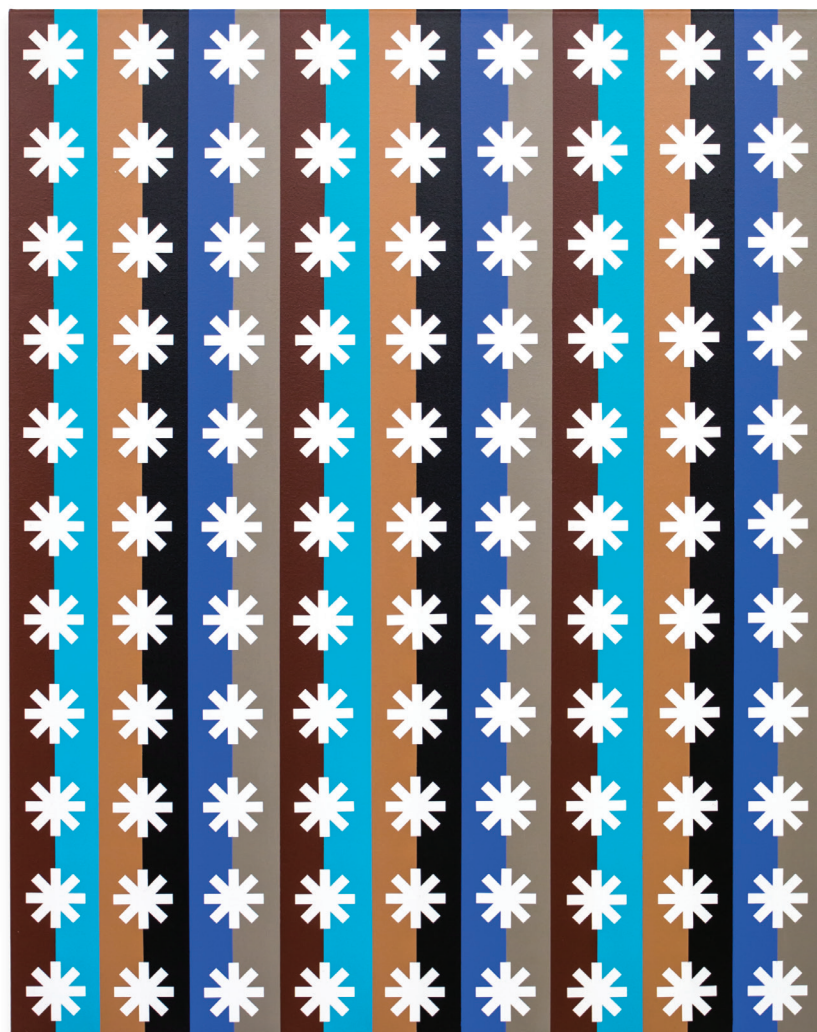
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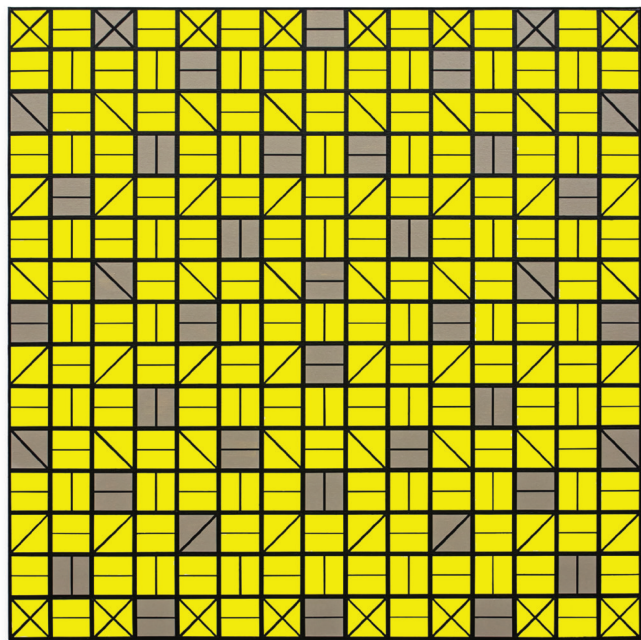




## Richard Kirwan

*Clear Day*  
2017  
Acrylic on canvas  
125 × 95 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

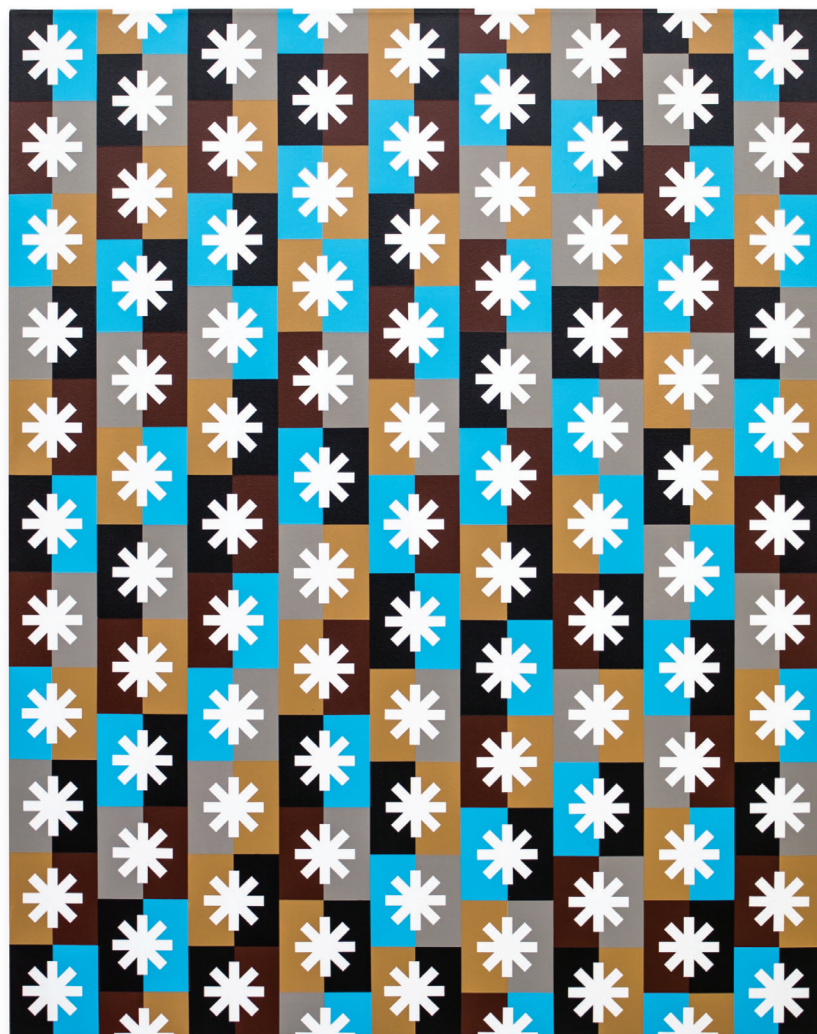




*Yellow Kelly*  
2016  
Acrylic on canvas  
95 × 95 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*Prime Standard*  
2016  
Acrylic on canvas  
125 × 95 cm  
Courtesy of the artist











Kittey Malarvie



*Milkwater*  
2016  
Natural Ochre on canvas  
185 × 285 cm  
Courtesy of JGM Gallery





## Ngarralja Tommy May

*All the Jumu*

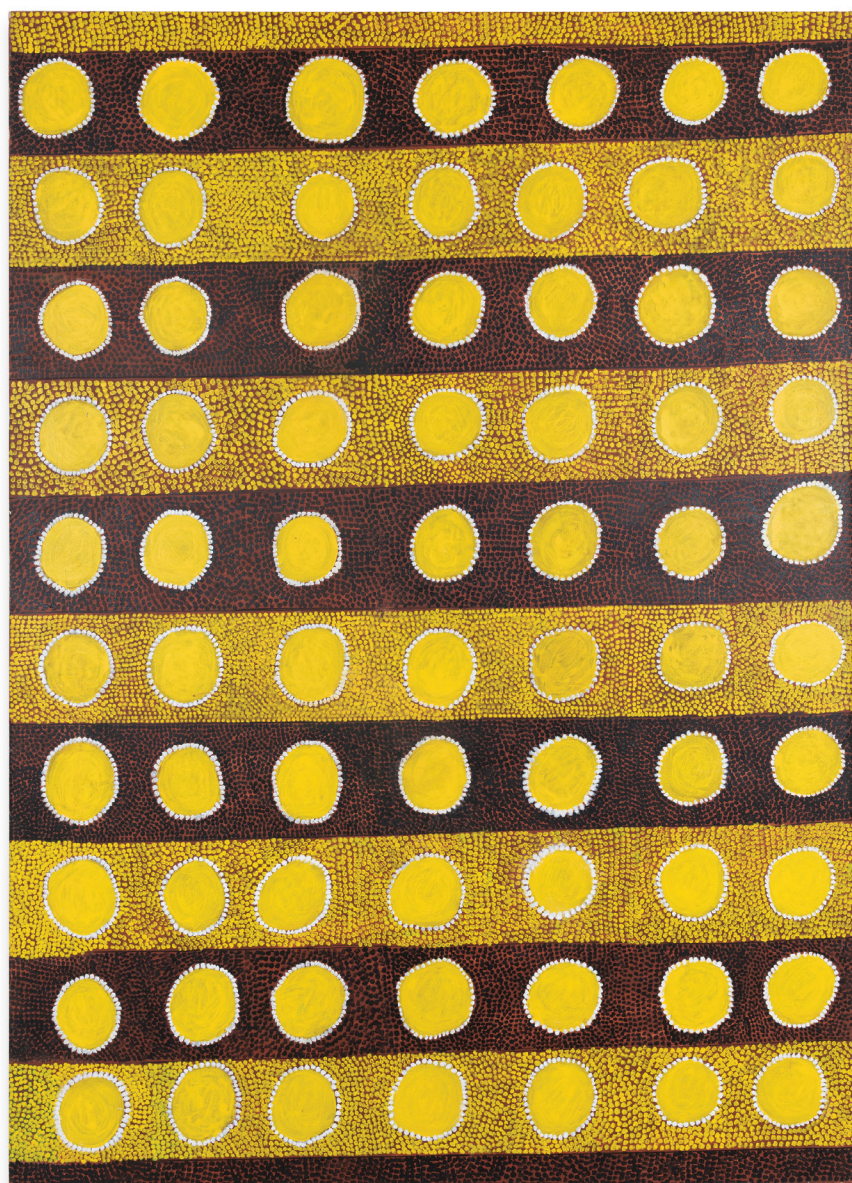
2005

Acrylic on canvas

210 cm × 150 cm

Courtesy of JGM Gallery





## Mawukura Jimmy Nerrimah

*Millinjinang and Willi*  
2007  
Acrylic on canvas  
120 × 90 cm  
Courtesy of JGM Gallery





Lily Hargraves Nungarrayi



*Turkey Dreaming*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
200 × 300 cm  
Courtesy of JGM Gallery





## John Stark

*The Cradle*

2017

Oil on wood panel

22 × 30 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Charlie Smith London





*Balcony Beach*

2013

Oil on panel

38 × 50 cm

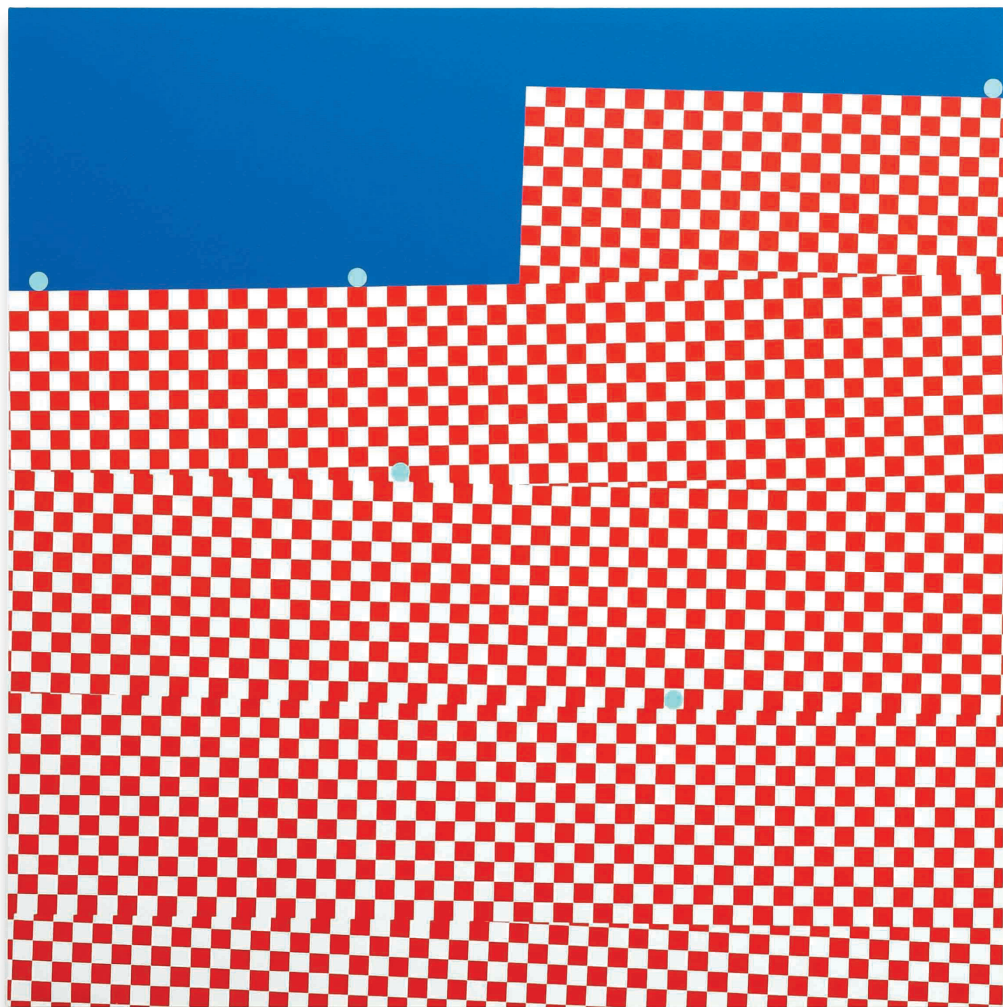
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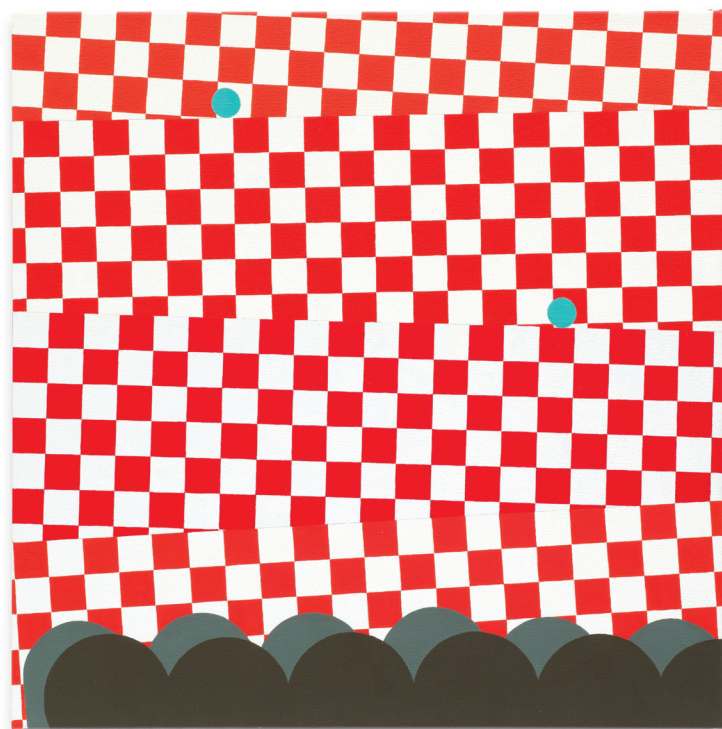
Charlie Smith London



## Daniel Sturgis

*All or Nothing*  
2013  
Acrylic on canvas  
183 × 183 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

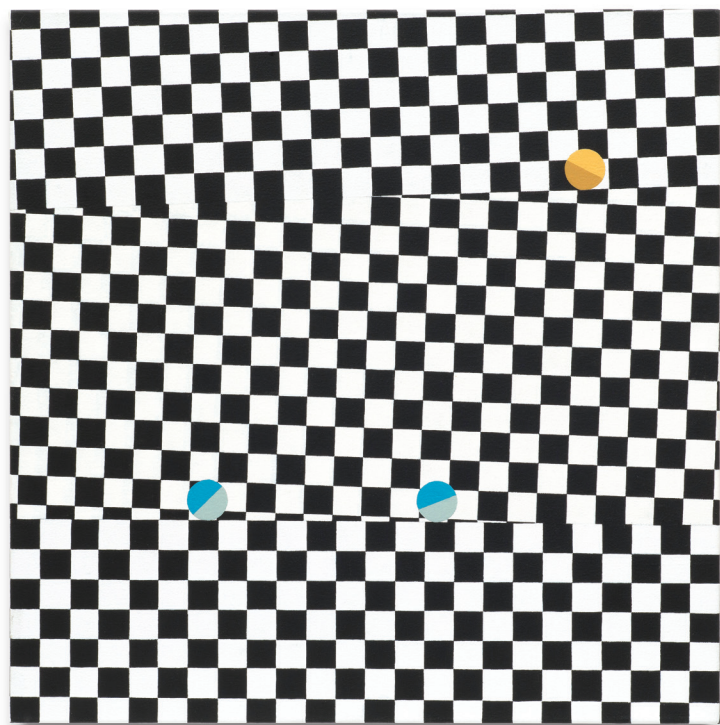




*Completely, Utterly*  
 2016  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 61 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist

*Inexact, Precise*  
 2015  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 61 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist





## Freddie Timms

*Pipe Creek Plain*  
2011  
Natural Ochre on canvas  
140 × 100 cm  
Courtesy of JGM Gallery

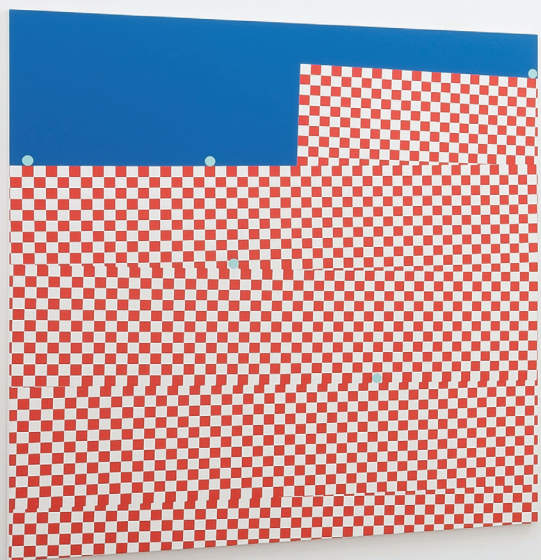


## Keturah Nangala Zimran

*Puli Puli - Stones*  
2014  
Acrylic on canvas  
180 × 100 cm  
Courtesy of JGM Gallery











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