



# BOOMALLI 20 YEARS ON

AUSTRALIAN COLLECTION FOCUS ROOM  
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES 22 AUGUST – 28 OCTOBER 2007

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

Urban Aboriginal culture, problematic in its definition, was notionally conceived by the dispossession of the Eora people from their traditional homelands with the establishment of the British colony in Sydney in 1788, only footsteps from the present day location of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Survivors of the colonial abuse, trained in the school of hard knocks, translated their cultural identity and knowledge to become bi-cultural participants.

Woollarawarre Bennelong is just one example of these cultural players. Quickly becoming one of Sydney's cultural icons he was known for working the system. Bennelong, after being abducted and held hostage by the colonial forces, politically aligned himself with the colony's first Governor, Arthur Phillip, eventually referring to him as beanga (father) and in turn was called durung (son) within an act of binding kinship. This turbulent relationship and others that Bennelong and his peers formed, often on their terms, were part of a new cultural emergence, that of an urbanised Aboriginal agenda, one sadly underpinned and all too often driven by survival.

Artists from the local La Perouse community, formally established as a mission settlement in 1895, continued this cross cultural dialogue with the production of cultural objects for tourists in the early twentieth century, including boomerangs, shields, flower and shell work. Traditional practices of carving and assemblage were translated for new cultural outcomes. Today, descendants, including the Timbery and Simms families, still sell their goods at the 'loop' at La Perouse maintaining their unique cultural practices in an ever changing urban landscape. This ability to successfully function within the mainstream community is often met with ill informed notions of 'culture dilution'.

Appropriately Sydney has become the axis for this new movement coined 'urban Aboriginal culture', not only being the point of origin but also the destination for waves of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander migrations. People coming to Sydney, often seeking a better life from their rural hardships, have added to the

development of the urban cultural milieu and in turn have been the catalyst for the establishment of the Aboriginal community of Redfern located in the heart of the city. Relocating from one's homeland generates a new sense of identity and an assertion of belonging within the adopted community. This profound sense of community led to the formation of many Black institutions that have championed Indigenous rights throughout the country including the Aboriginal Medical Service, the Black Theatre, the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Aboriginal Housing Company, and in turn giving rise to urban Aboriginal culture's feared political edge.

However, urban Aboriginal culture has largely been seen as illegitimate, not the exciting culmination of bi-culturalism but as the bastard half-caste with the only perceived redeeming feature being that of assimilation. It is this lack of acknowledgment, this constant assault, and the notion that urban Aboriginal culture is not authentic or traditional that led to the formation of one of Australia's longest running, Black or white, artists co-operatives. Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative (originally Ko-operative) was founded in 1987 by what could only be described as Sydney's Black avant-garde, the ten founding members included Brenda L Croft, Bronwyn Bancroft, Euphemia Bostock, Fiona Foley, Fernanda Martins, Arone Raymond Meeks, Avril Quail, Jeffery Samuels and cultural mavericks Michael Riley and Tracey Moffatt. Earlier that year Moffatt was arrested in Portsmouth, England, while protesting at the Launch of the First Fleet to commemorate the Bicentenary. This pioneering group of artists had largely met while undertaking tertiary art education or exhibiting together in forerunning projects such as *Contemporary Aboriginal art* in 1983, *Koorie art '84*, *NADOC '86 Exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander Photographers and Urban Koories* in 1986.

Plagued by the perpetual issues of recognition and acknowledgment that have dogged Australia's history, these ten artists set out to provide a platform for the long over looked urban

## BOOMALLI 'TO MAKE A MARK'

visual culture. In doing so Boomalli confronted head-on the lack of representation of urban Aboriginal art within the wider art scene and stereotyped notions of Aboriginal culture created through lack of knowledge and the harvesting of historically based preconceived ideas. Boomalli means 'to strike back', 'to make a mark', 'to light up' in the languages of Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri and Bundjalung. Since its inception the organisation and its artists have continued to live up to its name. Originally working towards providing studio space and peer support Boomalli's inaugural exhibition *Boomalli au-go-go* in 1997 heralded a new cultural era and set a benchmark by acknowledging the reality of urban Aboriginal culture. Critical to its establishment was the funding support of the then Aboriginal art Board of the Australia Council. Finally having a physical presence within the urban heartland of Redfern/Chippendale on Meagher Street, urban Aboriginal artists had a destination, a rallying point. Michael Riley captured the dynamic energy of these early years in his film *Boomalli: Five Koorie artists*, commissioned by Film Australia in 1988.

As lonely outpost of urban Aboriginal art, Boomalli focused on its development and promotion. As such most urban Black artists from around Australia have been touched or in some way linked to this cultural institution and become part of its growing community. Being an urban art centre and not bound geographically by region, Boomalli's responsibilities encompass and engage with large parts of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community including inmates, gay/lesbian, rural and remote artists along with international indigenous artists and artists of colour engaged through dialogue, exchange and exhibitions. Formative exhibitions included the pairing of two great narrative painters who lived within rural communities in *Ian Abdulla (Ngarrindjeri) & Harry Wedge (Wiradjuri)* and the women's exhibition *Kudjeris* with Brenda L Croft and the then emerging artists Destiny Deacon and Lisa Bellea, both curated by Fiona Foley in 1991.

Later that year under the curatorship of Hetti Perkins and Avril Quail, Boomalli collaborated with the Art Gallery of New South Wales to celebrate the Sydney festival *Dissonance: Feminism and the arts* with the *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*. Partnerships such as this are an important part of Boomalli's program, creating new audiences and tour possibilities. Other partners have included Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney Opera House, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Bangarra Dance Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company and The Performance Space, who temporarily housed Boomalli on Cleveland Street. Under the auspice of The Performance Space, Brenda L Croft opened her standout exhibition *Strange Fruit* in 1994 that focussed on the 'icon' of the urban black woman.

From 1992 to 1995 Boomalli entered its most progressive years under the leadership of Brenda L Croft and Hetti Perkins, this ongoing collaboration saw a number of programs initiated including the international touring exhibition *True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists raise the flag*, one of the first international exhibitions of urban art in collaboration with INIVA (Institute for New International Visual Arts).

In 1992 Boomalli opened its new space on Abercrombie Street with HJ Wedge's arresting solo exhibition *Wiradjuri Spirit Man* that instigated a monograph on the artist's work. Publications were fast becoming part of Boomalli's agenda and often working in conjunction with the New South Wales Board of Studies printing essential readers on the previously unknown for school curriculum. It was on this site in Chippendale that HJ Wedge later painted his signature mural that partly survives on the building today. Over time new generations of artists have joined the forces of Boomalli, many of which have come from TAFE's Eora Arts Centre in Redfern, artists such as Elaine Russell and r e a. This continued regeneration of Boomalli has ensured its success along with the ongoing support of established artists who have maintained strong connections with the organisation.

## BOOMALLI 'TO STRIKE'

During 1994–95 Daphne Wallace, then curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales added to the Gallery's collection of urban Aboriginal art that curator in the field Djon Mundine and curator Hetti Perkins had established, by commissioning and purchasing a number of major works from Boomalli in the lead up to the opening of the Yiribana gallery, including works by r e a, Elaine Russell, and Brenda L Croft. Boomalli, an Aboriginal initiative, an example of self determination, has developed substantially in not only supporting artists but in the professional development of Indigenous arts workers with many becoming key players within the industry. Of the founding members, Avril Quail worked at the National Gallery of Australia then Queensland Art Gallery, while Brenda L Croft worked at the Art Gallery of Western Australian and is currently senior curator at the National Gallery of Australia.

Boomalli remains a key art institution yet it has specifically turned its attention to the growing Aboriginal community within western suburbs of Sydney. First taking temporary space on Parramatta Road, Annandale, with Brad Webb as curator, Boomalli now resides in Leichhardt in its own building, responding to the movement of the community. During this time we have seen key exhibitions such as Michael Riley's *Fly blown* and *Empire* in 1999 and the *Mum Shirl: the Sacred Trust of Memory Exhibition* in 2000. Curator Tracey Duncan and current curator Mathew Poll have each added to the organisation's strength and development and overseen this exciting yet turbulent transition.

For 20 years now Boomalli has been at the coal face of the development and education of urban Aboriginal culture, not only acting as a gallery but as an vehicle for social reform, constantly challenging preconceptions and stereotypes held by mainstream community and becoming one Australia's most important cultural establishments. Perhaps the hesitation and misunderstanding surrounding the definition of urban Aboriginal art by the mainstream

is generated by the fact that it has not been sufficient opportunity to reach its full potential. Faced with the constantly struggle for funding Boomalli is still confronted with such notions that not only have serious implications for contemporary Aboriginal communities but all of Australia. However it is these setbacks that not only define Boomalli's identity but ensure its successes that of one working in-between spaces, of pushing the boundaries, of striking back, of making a mark and lighting the fire.

Jonathan Jones, Coordinator Aboriginal Programs

#### FURTHER READING

*One sun one moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007

*Tradition Today: Indigenous Art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007

Croft, Brenda L 'Boomalli: from little things big things grow' in Taylor, L. (ed.), *Painting the Land Story*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, ACT, 1999, pp 95–119

[www.boomalli.org.au](http://www.boomalli.org.au)

Boomalli: 20 years on  
Australian Collection Focus Room  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
22 August – 28 October 2007

cover: Michael Riley *Maria* 1985  
© Michael Riley Foundation

## BOOMALLI 'TO LIGHT UP'

### BRONWYN BANCROFT

is a Bundjalung artist from northern NSW who is now based in Sydney. Bancroft was interested in art from a young age and after graduating from Canberra School of Art in 1980, established the company Designer Aboriginals to market her unique textiles, jewellery and fashion. Bancroft is also recognised for her paintings and illustrations. Featuring photographs the artist, *You don't even look Aboriginal* 1991 is a personal condemnation of ethnographic stereotypes, which insult many Aboriginal people by inferring that their assertion of Aboriginal identity is fraudulent. As Bancroft has said, 'Once we were punished for being black, now we're punished for not being black enough'.

### BRENDA L CROFT

has been equally successful as an artist and curator. A member of the Gurindji and Mutpurra communities of the Northern Territory, Croft first exhibited her highly personal photographs in the landmark 1986 exhibition *Contemporary Aboriginal and Islander photography* at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney. She has since been awarded numerous overseas exchanges, residencies and awards. Her work was included in *Mistaken identities* at Africus '95, the first Johannesburg Biennale, and *The boundary rider*, the 9th Biennale of Sydney, in 1992, where she collaborated with African-American artist Adrian Piper. Croft is a founding member of Boomalli and was its general manager from 1990 to 1996. She later worked at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, and is now the senior curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

### FIONA FOLEY

explores history, memory and politics in her work, mapping the many layers of contemporary Indigenous experience in Australia. A graduate of Sydney College of the Arts, Foley initially worked with prints, collage and photography. More recently she has created large sculptural installations and a number of public artworks, including *Witnessing to silence* 2004 for the new Magistrates Court in Brisbane. She has travelled widely and the Men's business drawings were inspired by a visit to Arnhem Land. With Djon Mundine, Foley co-curated *Tyerabarrowaryaou (I shall never become a white man) I and II*, for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in 1992 and the Havana Biennial, Cuba, in 1994. Foley curated some of the first and groundbreaking exhibitions at Boomalli. In 2003 she was appointed adjunct professor at Griffith University's Queensland College of Art.

### ARONE RAYMOND MEEKS

is a Kokomidiji artist from the East Cape region of far north Queensland, around Laura. His first name, Arone, refers to the black crane and was given to him by the renowned Aboriginal ceramicist Thanakupi. Meeks studied at Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education and City Art Institute, Sydney. He began his work in printmaking after meeting Theo Tremblay at Canberra School of Art. In 1989 Meeks was awarded a residency at Cité des Arts in Paris and in 1992 received the Ezra Jack Keats UNICEF Best International Children's Book Award for his book *Enora: the black crane*. Meeks now lives in north Queensland.

## ARTISTS

### TRACEY MOFFATT

is one of Australia's most acclaimed artists, both nationally and internationally. A filmmaker as well as photographer, Moffatt grew up in Brisbane and after studying at Queensland College of Art, moved to Sydney to further her career. Preferring to work independently, Moffatt left Boomalli shortly after the cooperative was founded yet continued to support its activities. Moffatt held her first major solo exhibition, which included the iconic series *Something more*, at the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, in 1989. She has since held around 100 solo exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Australia, including the major survey exhibition *Free falling* at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York, in 1998. A number of monographs have been published on Moffatt's work. She now divides her time between Australia and her base in New York.

### MICHAEL RILEY

was a photographer and filmmaker with a rare sensibility. After leaving his hometown of Dubbo, NSW, Riley enrolled in a photographic course at the University of Sydney's Tin Sheds, and was soon employed as a darkroom technician at Sydney College of the Arts. Riley's works, including *Maria* 1985, were included in the significant exhibition *Contemporary Aboriginal and Islander photography* held in 1986 at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney. His first film, *Boomalli: five Koorie artists* 1987 was made during his time at Film Australia. Following his success in Australia, Riley was included in the significant international exhibitions, *Photographica Australis* at ARCO in Spain, the Istanbul Biennale 2003 and in 2004 he was awarded one of three grand prizes at the 11th Asian Art Biennale, Bangladesh. Riley is one of eight artists featured in the Australian Indigenous Art Commission for the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, in 2006. Also in 2006 the National Gallery of Australia opened the retrospective of Riley's work, *Michael Riley: sights unseen*.

### JEFFREY SAMUELS

was born in Bourke, NSW, and following the tragic death of his mother grew up with a white foster family. Samuels received an Aboriginal study grant to study art at both the National Art School and Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education, where he was awarded a Diploma in Art in 1978. He then completed a Bachelor of Visual Art in 1984 through the City Art Institute, Sydney. Since joining Boomalli as a founding member, Samuels has continued to play an active role in the organisation as an artist and member of staff. He is its current chairperson.

**BRONWYN BANCROFT** b1958

Bundjalung, Sydney, South-east region

**You don't even look Aboriginal** 1991

gouache and collage on paper

Mollie Gowing Acquisition Fund for Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1993

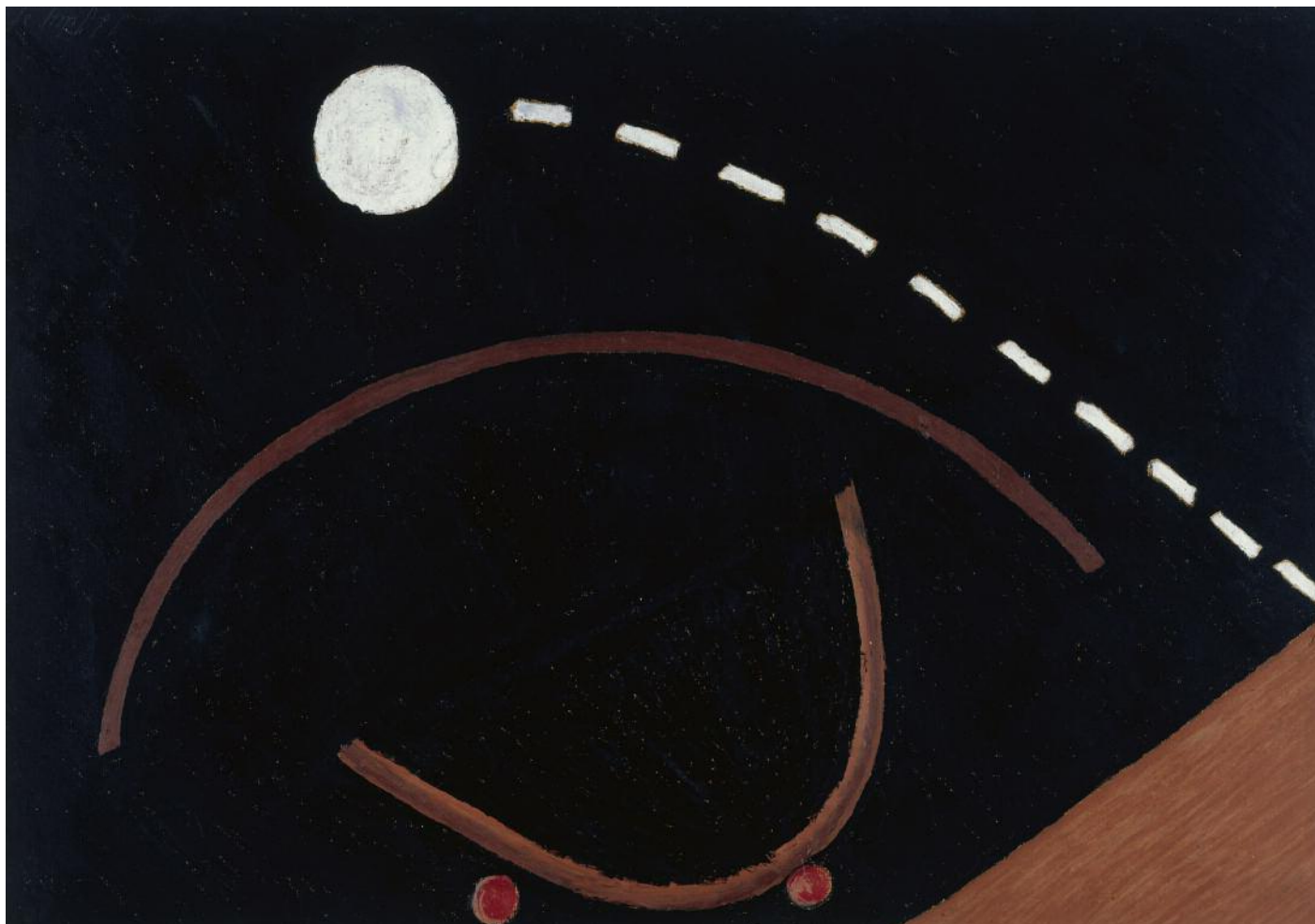
© Bronwyn Bancroft



**FIONA FOLEY** b1964  
Batjala, Brisbane, North-east region  
**Men's business** 1987  
crayon and charcoal on paper  
Purchased 1988  
© Fiona Foley



**FIONA FOLEY** b1964  
Batjala, Brisbane, North-east region  
**Men's business** 1987  
crayon and charcoal on paper  
Purchased 1988  
© Fiona Foley



**TRACEY MOFFATT** b1960  
Brisbane, North-east region/New York

**Something More 2** 1989

cibachrome photograph

Hallmark Cards Australian Photography Collection Fund 1989. Commissioned by the Albury Regional Arts Centre with assistance from the Visual/Craft Board of the Australia Council, the NSW Ministry for the Arts, and the Regional Galleries Association of NSW Exhibitions Development Fund. © Tracey Moffatt, courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery



**MICHAEL RILEY** 1960–2004

Wiradjuri, Southern Riverine region/Kamilaroi,  
Northern Riverine region, Sydney, South-east region

**Maria** 1985

gelatin silver photograph  
Mollie Gowing Acquisition Fund for Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1999  
© Michael Riley Foundation



**BRENDA L CROFT** b1964

Gurindji/Mutpurra, Fitzmaurice region, Canberra, South-east region

**Mary Mumbulla and Murri Craigie** 1993

R3 colour photograph

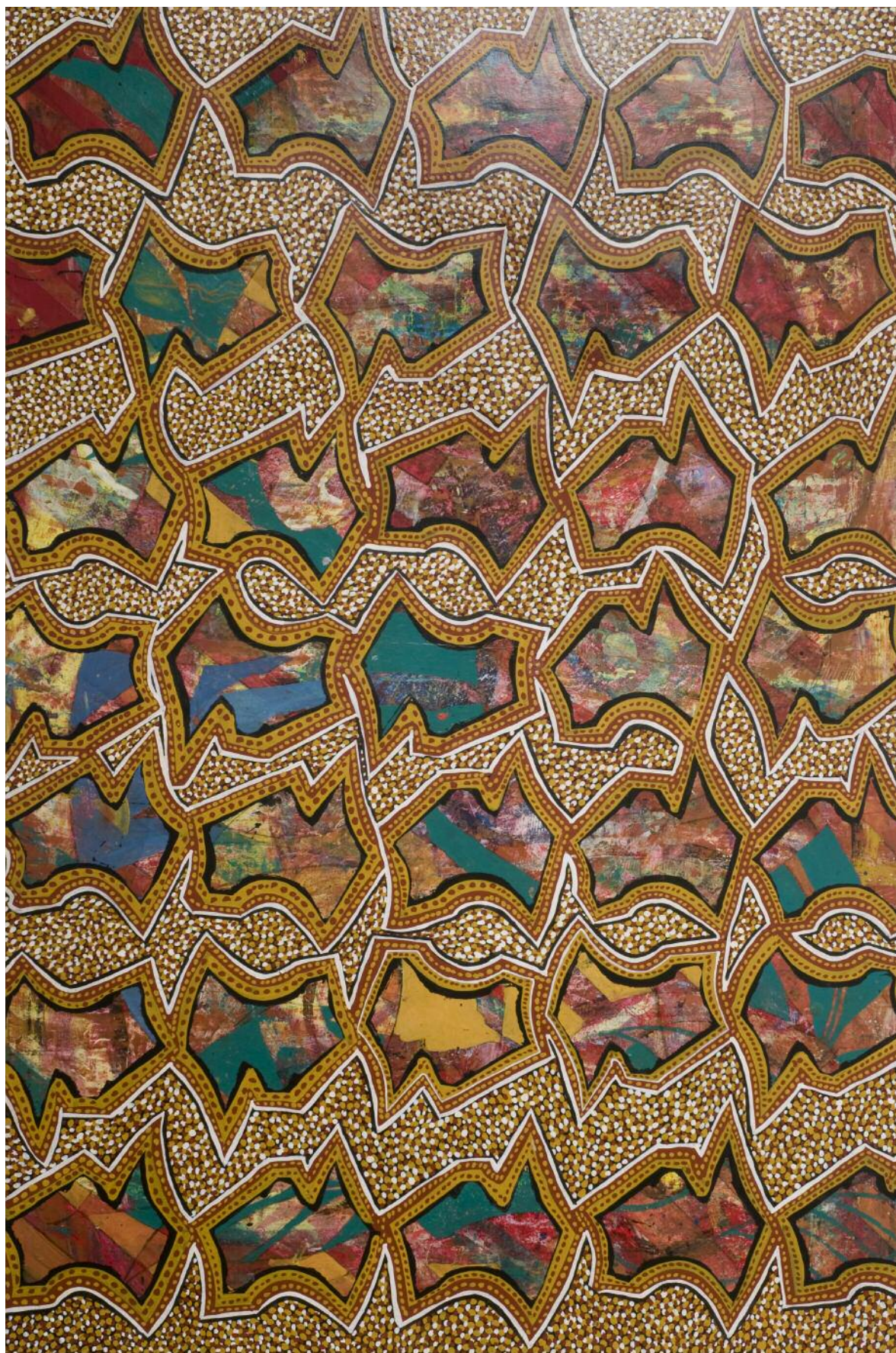
Purchased 1993

© Brenda L Croft



**JEFFREY SAMUELS** b1956  
Sydney, South-east region

**A changing continent** c1986  
oil on hardboard  
Purchased 1986  
© Jeffrey Samuels



**ARONE RAYMOND MEEKS** b1957

Kokomidiji, Laura, East Cape region

**'Argoonie Doowi' – The catching of the dream** 1987

lithograph

Purchased 1988

© Arone Raymond Meeks

