

John Mawurndjul & Danie Mellor

BY LEON PAROISSIEN



(Left)
JOHN MAWURNDJUL, *Nawarramulmul (Shooting Star Spirit)*, 1988, ochres and synthetic polymer on bark, 219.4 x 95 x 8.5 cm. Copyright the artist. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Courtesy the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

(Right)
DANIE MELLOR, *Paradise in the Sun*, 2010, pastel, pencil, crayon and wash with Swarovski crystal and glitter on paper, 192.5 x 153.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Courtesy the artist.

The inaugural issue of *ArtAsiaPacific* included a survey of Australian Indigenous art by Vivien Johnson describing the “vitality and fluidity” of its current practice. At the time, John Mawurndjul, a Kuninjku artist born in Western Arnhem Land in Australia’s far north, was winning his community’s respect for his inherited knowledge of clans and country heightened through ceremonial life, and wider regard for his increasingly original artistic practice. Unlike many Indigenous artists, he adhered to tradition, applying white pigment and ochres, with acrylic as a binding medium, to stringy bark and hollow-log bone coffins, or as surface decoration to sculpted spirit figures.

Mawurndjul’s *Nawarramulmul (Shooting Star Spirit)* of 1988 was shown in the paradigm-challenging “Magiciens de la Terre” show at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris in 1989, and was the first work registered in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. In 1993, he was represented in “Aratjara: Art of the First Australians,” a traveling survey in Europe, and in 2005 carried out a major commission for the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, before his 2006 solo show at the Museum Tinguely, Basel.

As a young man, Mawurndjul had been praised for his extremely fine application of *rarrk*, or cross-hatching, derived from ceremonial body painting. The delicacy and visual brilliance of this fine-lined technique form the basis of Mawurndjul’s highly distinctive paintings and sculpture, but he has spoken of his commitment to “keep finding new ways, new styles for my paintings” while working within his inherited traditions. His visits to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and other institutions since 1983 have, for instance, contributed to his use of much larger sheets of bark in order to give his work the scale that he has experienced in museums.

Danie Mellor, an urban Australian artist of Indigenous heritage, has gained a national reputation over the last decade. His mother’s Indigenous heritage emanates from the rainforest area of north

Queensland, and the iconography of men’s shields from this region provided strong sources for his early work. Although it is not directly evident in his later development, Mellor acknowledges the influence of Mawurndjul’s paintings, especially the latter’s engagement with traditional knowledge and its innovative transmission, and his remarkable draftsmanship. Mellor is also interested in the older artist’s visual elaboration of his clan- and country-related knowledge, appreciating the sanctions that guard strands of this knowledge and iconography as secret and “inside” his work, while other aspects are sacred yet “outside,” available for a wider audience to experience.

Mellor’s recent work draws on sources uncovered through acute contemporary observation and historical research. It incorporates landscapes, artifacts and Australian animals, including kitsch tourist representations that are an inseparable part of the history of representation of Australian Indigenous heritage, interconnected as this heritage is with the visual traditions of a settler society. He also draws on the transfer-printed images used to decorate blue-and-white tableware in colonial times, highlighting the 18th-century English adaptation of Chinese ceramics that overlapped chronologically with the European settlement of Australia. Such plates found their way to colonial Australia as family china, and the color blue itself appeared in Indigenous art only after the arrival of European settlers. In *Paradise in the Sun* (2010), Mellor layers these multiple strands of imagery, synthesizing them as a gold-framed antipodean tableau in which vignettes of Indigenous people, birds and animals in “natural” colors are composed in a reimagined “Edenic” landscape braced by a vertically compact blue-and-white spatial plane. An overlaid panel below depicts the arrival of settlers, ships and buildings.

Mawurndjul and Mellor span two generations of Indigenous art practice. Both are striking reinterpreters of tradition, while their differences encompass the rich diversity of Australian Indigenous Art.

Wu Shanzhuan & Sun Xun

BY SUSAN ACRET

The art of Wu Shanzhuan and that of Sun Xun ostensibly have little in common. Wu was born in 1960 in Zhoushan; Sun in 1980 in the coal city of Fuxin. The formative years of Wu’s career in the 1980s coincided with Sun’s childhood. Each artist works in multiple mediums, but in different ways: Wu in painting, installation, video, drawing, performance and photography; Sun in film and animation—often utilizing woodblock printing, drawing and cut paper—as well as in murals and installation. I don’t know whether Sun has been influenced by Wu, but I see in their respective practices an aesthetic and a philosophy that reveal the fabric of recent Chinese society.

Both are preoccupied by history—political, personal, national. For Sun, it is the “lie of history” that concerns him. Several of his works feature a magician, the only sanctioned liar, whose role as deceiver is ordained and expected. Sun has said: “We had existed in a world with no specific time so that we had lived in nothingness. This was a world of confounding right and wrong! There was no law, no rules, governed entirely by deceit! Here were none but swindlers and victims.”

Wu lived in this world. His ongoing series “Today No Water” (2000–) mirrors this bewilderment in its co-opting of the words of a Chinese government notice posted on the front of apartment blocks in the 1980s to notify residents that the water supply had been cut. An arbitrary, meaningless statement in itself, it had a huge practical impact on the population of China. It is obtuse, yet immensely telling of a society that was tightly controlled and of a regime not inclined to explanation.

Sun’s animated film *Some Actions Which Haven’t Been Defined Yet in the Revolution* (2011) takes up this idea of a reality beset

by surreal, unseen forces. The work depicts a dark, Kafkaesque world teeming with predatory figures—humans, animals and insects. Brutal, apocalyptic images remind the viewer of old black-and-white propaganda films, of all that is unspeakable—the concentration camp, ethnic cleansing and genocide—and possibly also of revolution. Sun’s use of traditional Chinese media such as the woodblock print and ink on paper as the raw materials for his animations provides his moving images with a depth of meaning; they give birth to Chinese history, making it alive and contemporary.

Both artists use a personal iconography to express ideas. Wu’s graffiti-like works on canvas and paper are his private worldview made graphic. Many of Wu’s works use seemingly meaningless language or deconstructed characters to convey disjuncture between the private and the public, and to highlight his belief that the nonsensical is present in everyday life. His art is highly conceptual. His ongoing series with Icelandic artist Inga Svala Þórsdóttir, “Thing’s Right(s)” (1994–), replaces the idea of human rights with that of the rights of things. The concept makes complete sense once you accept the artists’ premise. Like many of Wu’s works, the series draws attention to the absurdity of the status quo. Wu’s practice is one of interruption—his art forces the viewer to look deeper.

The contemporary Chinese artist of 2013 is a figure at great remove from the contemporary Chinese artist of 1985. Today’s young artist has all the opportunities in the world: publicity, money, access, labor. The avant-garde artists of the 1980s had nothing but their ideas. They broke away from a state-sanctioned history of art and made the individual possible. As Wu says, “Anyone has the right to refuse to be Wu Shanzhuan.”



WU SHANZHUAN, *Today No Water*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, set of eight, 100 x 140 cm each. Courtesy the artist, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, and Long March Space, Beijing.



SUN XUN, *Some Actions Which Haven’t Been Defined Yet in the Revolution*, 2011, single-channel animation, 12 min 22 sec. Courtesy the artist and ShangART Gallery, Beijing.