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**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Welcome to the *Free Range* podcast. I'm your host, Mike Livermore. This episode is sponsored by the Program on Law, Communities, and the Environment at the University of Virginia School of Law. With me today is Henry Skerritt, curator of Indigenous Arts of Australia at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia, which is the only museum outside of Australia that is dedicated to the exhibition and study of Indigenous Australian art. Henry, thanks for joining me today.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Oh, it's a pleasure.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** So I thought we might start by introducing the Kluge-Ruhe 66 and the work that's there. Maybe just to get us started, what are we referring to when we talk about Indigenous Australian art? And how did Charlottesville, Virginia end up with this collection?

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Yeah, that's a great question. So the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection is one of the two museums at the University of Virginia. And it's the only museum outside of Australia that's dedicated to Aboriginal Australian art. So we have about a little bit over 3,000 works, and they cover everything from stone tools to video art. There's prints, there's photography, there's a lot of paintings. So it's a very big collection, and a lot of people ask, why do we have this here?

And there's really two answers to that question. And one answer is we have it here because it was donated by John Kluge in 1997. And Kluge had seen Aboriginal art in the 1980s at a point when all things Australia were very popular in the USA. The top grossing movie for 1987 I think was *Crocodile Dundee II*. And *Men At Work* were tearing up the charts. And Elle Macpherson was in *Sports Illustrated* and all that. So there was a lot of love for Australia.

And he saw an exhibition in New York called *Dreamings*, and he fell in love with the work. I think he smelled a bit of a bargain, and he hopped on his private jet straight to Australia, and he started buying with a budget and speed that really nobody could match in the world.

So when he donates this collection to the university, it's a massive resource. And people often ask-- when they ask "why do we have it," I mean, they're not really asking "how did it get here?" They're asking, what's the relevance of this collection? And there's a lot of answers to that question too.

Aboriginal Australian art really is the longest continuous artistic tradition in the world. Aboriginal Australians have inhabited the island continent of Australia for somewhere around 50,000 to 60,000 years. And they developed a range of very complicated and sophisticated artistic practices over that time. And then in the 20th century, they began to use those practices for political representation. They began to use those practices to assert themselves in the mainstream domains of law, of politics, of environmentalism in Australia.

And so in one way, it's a very specific, very ancient, very traditional artistic movement. But on the other hand, it's also really a very contemporary one. It's a movement that engages very deeply in the key issues of our time. And it's an art movement that really touches on a lot of the same issues that are so pressing to contemporary artists here in America, or in Europe, in Africa, or Asia, all around the world, those questions of, how do we engage with cultural difference, how do we think about modernity and tradition, how do we represent ourselves as different within larger nation states? All of these kinds of questions are the same questions that we see being tackled by artists everywhere, and yet in Australia we have them being tackled by these artists who are drawing on this extraordinary and beautiful long tradition.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah, that's really fascinating. And so thinking of that connection between art and politics in this particular kind of context of Australia maybe in the '80s and '90s, are there kind of particular moments or particular movements that will kind of stand out, or are transformative, or nicely illustrate the way that artists and activists and political actors were kind of interacting in a productive or interesting way?

**HENRY  
SKERRITT:** Absolutely. So I think right from the very beginning that Aboriginal art had a highly political dimension. I think that as early as the 19th century, artists were creating works that were designed to show these new colonial invaders who they were, where they were from, to assert their ownership of places and their continued presence in these burgeoning cities. But it does really reach ahead in the 20th century.

And at the moment, we're working with a group of artists from a community called Yirrkala in the northern tip of Australia. And for the last seven years, we've been working with them to curate an exhibition that tells the full story of their art. And I think that they've been one of the groups that's been most explicit and most successful, in some ways, at asserting their works into this political discourse.

Most famously, in 1962, the federal government of Australia granted permission for a Swiss company to create the largest ever bauxite mine and refinery on their land on the Gove Peninsula in northern Australia. And they did this without any consultation with the Indigenous people and just excised the land from the Aboriginal reserve without notice.

And so the Yolngu people banded together, and they produced two petitions on bark. And so they cut the bark from the eucalyptus tree and painted it with their traditional designs and, on it, pasted two typed petitions, which were written in both English and Yolngu Matha, their language.

And that was the first time, with the tabling of those petitions into Australian parliament, that the assertion of Aboriginal land rights had been taken into the mainstream political domain of the Commonwealth of Australia.

So at the same time as this, the Yolngu people from Yirrkala took on the mining company, Nabalco. And they took them to the High Court of Australia in a case that would become known as *Milirrpum versus Nabalco*. That was the first time that Indigenous Australian land rights had been tried in the legal system in Australia.

And that case was ultimately unsuccessful, but what was really interesting in the judgment, the judge, Justice Blackwell, said that he recognized that Indigenous people have this strong and deep connection to their land, but that within the legal structures available to him, he could not rule in their favor.

And that set off a chain of events leading eventually to the ratification of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act in 1974, which did begin to return land to Indigenous Australians. So in a sense, those Yolngu were able to take their art and use their art, insert it into a political system that had created a lot of setbacks, a lot of roadblocks, but, in the end, won them their land back.

**MIKE** Yeah. Really, this is an amazing story. And so is this the same art tradition and group that you're working with  
**LIVERMORE:** right now in the collection that you're curating of bark paintings?

**HENRY** Yes, absolutely. So the point of this exhibition, which is called *Madayin-- Eight Decades of Aboriginal Australian*  
**SKERRITT:** *Bark Painting from Yirrkala*, is really to trace this story, this story which begins in 1935 of Yolngu engaging with outsiders in order to assert themselves politically and artistically.

And what's so fascinating about it as a story is that *Milirrpum versus Nabalco* was a great movement, but in the 1990s, this same group of artists, the next generation of these artists, including Milirrpum's son, [INAUDIBLE], do it again.

They head back into the courts, and they produce a large number of paintings in order to win sea rights, in order to win rights to their ancestral waters. And again, 1997, they're not initially successful, but in 2008, they are, in fact, granted their rights to the tidal basins of their bays in the case of *Gawirrin Gumana versus the Northern Territory*.

So it's an amazing continuing story of artists using the power of art to win their rights.

**MIKE** Yeah. Now, maybe we could actually even talk through some of these pieces. It's an interesting challenge to do  
**LIVERMORE:** this in the podcast format, because obviously we're voice only. But we do live in a technological age, so we can-- I'll put some links in the description, and maybe listeners who are interested can kind of follow us along just to kind of get a sense of your read and the way that you interact with some of these pieces and their history.

**HENRY** Yeah, that sounds great. So why don't we start with this painting, which is called *Djambarrpuyngu*, or *The Shark*  
**SKERRITT:** *of the Djambarrpuyngu Clan*, by the artist Wilson Manydjarri Ganambarr. All right. So what do you see in this painting, Mike?

**MIKE** Great. OK. Let's start with me. All right. Well, so I love all of this work. And part of what's so interesting about this  
**LIVERMORE:** is there's a tactile element that's hard to get online. So I'm sure when you're in person, this is a three-dimensional object, there's shape to it, there's a kind of a-- you're not going to be touching it, but I assume it's going to have some heft to it.

And then one of the things that I think is wonderful here, you have these repeating kind of geometric patterns with this abstract representation of a kind of abstract-- but it is a representation of a shark. And then are the geometric patterns representing waves? It's like there's a lot of motion happening there.

Up at the top-- I'm going to almost have to zoom in here to see. It looks like the bottom half of a human figure kind of embedded in, I want to say, like, an orca or something. That. But there's kind of this arrowhead-looking figure at the top that, again, incorporates some of the same geometric patterns and colors that are happening outside. So anyway, that's just a couple of quick impressions that I have.

**HENRY**

**SKERRITT:**

I love it. I mean, that's an A-plus in visual analysis there. Yeah. So look, I mean, I think that description is pretty great. So we've got a painting here, and it's divided into two halves. In the bottom half, you can see this shark. And that's pretty clear. I mean, it's a pretty clear figurative depiction of a shark. And if you look closely, you can see that the shark has been speared in his head with four spears. And so that's what we can see here.

You can read the whole story of this painting, which we've got online, from Manydjarri. But put simply, this shark is swimming around, minding his own business, and he gets speared by an ancestral figure by the name of Murayana. And because this shark is a powerful ancestral shark-- it's not just any old shark-- it doesn't turn around and swim out to sea. It burrows into the land, and it creates the river system of the [INAUDIBLE] River. In its death throes, it flips backwards and forwards, creating this river.

And while this is happening and the shark's body is disintegrating, its fins go off and form rocks in the bay, and its skin flails up, and it forms the casuarina trees along the banks of the river. And while it's doing that, its body is emanating these designs, these patterns that are depicted all around the shark on this bark.

And so one way of looking at this painting is a sort of before and after. Here's Mana being speared at the bottom, but then at the top, he's disintegrating, becoming part of that landscape.

Now, if you asked Manydjarri, he would tell you that if you went to this spot, [INAUDIBLE], and you looked at the ways in which the sun sparkled on the waters or the ways in which the wind shuffled through the trees, those would be the evidence of Mana's presence in that place.

And so it makes you realize that these patterns are very, very powerful, because they were laid down in the earth the very moment that the Earth was created by this ancestral being. They're not just made up designs, but they're the designs that manifest the ancestral power of Mana.

And so in ceremony, these designs would be painted on the chests of young boys. And those boys would be wearing those designs not to disguise them, but rather to reveal their inner essence as an ancestor of Mana. It's a very powerful idea.

**MIKE**

**LIVERMORE:**

Yeah, that's really wonderful. One question that comes to mind is maybe somewhat more general, but the relationship between these traditional stories and a work like this that you're describing, which was produced in 1996, so it's a relatively contemporary work of art, do you see this as-- I guess I just want to dig into that relationship between the traditional stories and the contemporary art.

Is this object, say, something that would have been produced 100 or 200 years ago? Is it similar to works that were around at that time, or is this something where what we're looking at here is very much of a contemporary moment in an interpretation of an older story?

**HENRY**

**SKERRITT:**

Yeah. That's a really great question. And there's a little bit of controversy around the answer to that, because obviously, we can't know with any certainty. And I've heard Yolngu argue both sides of this question.

But put simply, I don't think a painting like this, of this kind of complexity and sacredness, would necessarily have been painted on bark in the precolonial times. These designs are very much the designs that would have been painted on the body. And they might have been painted on bark every so often if somebody was trying to kind of illustrate what those designs looked like, show somebody, this is the design.

But in a general sense, I think they were mostly painted on the body during ceremony. Now, that really changes in the 1930s and '40s. And one of the things that's great about this exhibition is we've been able to bring some of these works from the '30s and '40s to the United States from Australia.

And seeing as this is a semi-legal podcast, I'll tell you that there's a good story with this, because it was actually against the law for these works to leave the country under the Removal of Cultural Heritage Act. But cultural material of this age could not actually leave the country.

And we were working on this big show, which was curated by a group of Yolngu who were the direct descendants of these painters. And they were really upset that-- you know, I had this moment where one of the curators, Wonggu Mununggurr, was saying, what do you mean my father's paintings can't be in the exhibition? They have to be in the exhibition. And so thanks to their lobbying, we were actually able to get the legislation changed in federal parliament in order to allow these works to temporarily leave the country for the exhibition.

But what happens in the 1930s? Again, it's a really interesting political story, because in the 1930s, there are quite a number of Japanese fishing crews coming to northern Australia to harvest sea cucumber or trepang. And in 1932, there's a bit of a sort of skirmish between one of these fishing crews and the Yolngu at Caledon Bay. And the fishing crew disrespect one of the elders, Wonggu Mununggurr, and are massacred by the Yolngu.

So these five Japanese fishermen are killed, and this causes a bit of a diplomatic crisis, because the Japanese government is not at all pleased. And they're putting a lot of pressure on the Australian government to send what they would call a dispersal party, which essentially means, go and massacre the Aboriginal people.

But in the 1930s, that notion of wholesale massacring is beginning to be a bit politically on the nose because of the foundation of a number of organizations such as the Friends of the Aborigines and so on. And so the government is really looking for other options than just wiping these people out. And part of this-- it's a very long story, but as part of it, they send an anthropologist up by the name of Donald Thomson.

And I think Donald Thomson was sent on a bit of a suicide mission, to be honest. But he befriends Wonggu. And in return, Wonggu and his sons paint some of the most extraordinary paintings, really, of the 20th century. And these paintings are painted for the absolute purpose of showing Thomson, so that Thomson can take these paintings down to Canberra and show that they are the rightful owners of these places, that they were defending their place, that they are the owners, that they have the cultural knowledge of these places.

And that's really, I think, the first time that you see these very sacred designs being painted on bark. And some of the ones that we have in this exhibition are, you will see, they're very literal facsimiles of what's painted on the body to the extent that, on the bark, you will see sort of sections that are meant to be painted on the thighs and shoulders of the initiates in the ceremony.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Wow. And it's a fascinating, really interesting, incredible story. And the interaction between the claim to property rights and then the relationship of the stories and the art to the landscape and to the stories, it's just such a fascinating nexus.

So one question that comes to mind-- this is just kind of a point-of-fact kind of question. How widely shared are these stories that we're talking about here? For example, for this image that we're looking at, this is the shark with a particular river system that is presumably very geographically located. Are these the kind of motifs that continue to reappear?

Or obviously, Australia is a huge country with lots of different cultures, basically, is what I'm getting at. And so how broadly shared are these across the various precolonial cultures that existed or today as well? Or are we really talking about different cultural traditions that are quite distinct from each other, maybe with some shared elements or some resonances, but really a lot of distinctiveness as well?

**HENRY  
SKERRITT:**

Yeah, that's a great question. So when Captain Cook arrives in Australia in April of 1770, there's believed to be about half a million people living on the continent and speaking around about 250 different languages. But when we say that, I mean, obviously, people who are living side by side will often have similar languages in the way that we think about the difference between the many European languages-- you know, Swiss, and German, and Belgian are not all that different, but they are distinct languages.

But what's really interesting when you think about these ancestral narratives, the term that Aboriginal people will often use for them is "songlines," because although we're looking at a painting, this painting would have an accompanying song. And these songs can be hundreds of stanzas long. And what the songs will tell is not just the story of Mana the shark at one place, but it will tell the story of the shark's travels. And what those travels will do is they will connect one place to another place, and that place to another place.

And what that does is it connects people from different clans and people from different countries. And so in order to perform a particular ceremony, a lot of negotiation goes on to work out who owns which part of the chain of the song. So who owns which part of the chain of the song? Now, some of these narratives do, in fact, cover thousands of miles. But like any narrative, they shift and they change as they move.

But I think if you wanted to, perhaps this would be challenging today, but I think in the precolonial times, if somebody had wanted to, I think they probably could have created a map of the songlines that looked a lot like the New York subway map connecting every point as ancestors move across the country and intersect with other ancestors and meet. And one song line ends and another song line takes off and all that sort of thing.

So in one way, these songlines are the kind of world's most poetic and beautiful GPS system. But they're also a lot more. They're also really ways of talking about ownership, and belonging to places, and a whole cosmology that is really quite extraordinary.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah. Well, maybe we could take a look at another one of these pieces that are in the upcoming collection.

**HENRY  
SKERRITT:**

Yeah, let's. Well, let's look at this one by Djambawa Marawili, because I think this one takes us in a really different direction. So John and Mira really came to Charlottesville in 2015 as part of an Australia Council residency, and he was really excited to see the collection here.

And in fact, one of the major works in our collection is a painting of Djambawa that was from 1996. And Djambawa looked through the whole collection, and he said to us, this is really good, but what I want is an exhibition that tells the whole story of Yolngu bark painting from 1935 to the present. And he wanted it to tour all around the United States. And he sent us this challenge, to which we-- well, when Djambawa Marawili tells you to do something, you kind of have to. You don't really have a choice.

So we've been on this folk journey with Djambawa. And a really important part of the journey for Djambawa was that it engaged the artists working today, in part because he's really made it an important mission of his to make sure that young artists are painting, that they're painting properly, that they're placing significance on these designs and ancestral narratives.

Anyway, so he suggested that we commission works from all the new artists. So we'd been undertaking a commission. We undertook a commission and we commissioned 33 works from 27 artists who are the leading artists working at Yirrkala today.

And all along the way, we were saying to Djambawa, well, Djambawa, you've got to create a work for this. And he kept saying, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. So we got 32 commissions in. And we're like, Djambawa, what's happening, what's happening, where's your painting? And we got this great call. And Djambawa was at the Art Center. And it was from the manager at the Art Center, Will Stubbs, and he said, look, I'm about to show you this painting. And I said, well, is it any good? And he said, it's quite bespoke. And he said, and I think if you don't like it, the whole project is probably off.

But he unveiled this painting, and it's really quite extraordinary. So tell me what you see in this one.

**MIKE** Right. OK, great. So this is-- and the title of this is *Journey to America*, right?

**LIVERMORE:**

**HENRY** Yeah, that's right.

**SKERRITT:**

**MIKE** And so at the top, this might be the Statue of Liberty. And maybe-- again, you're not in person, right? So I suspect when you're really close-- what are the dimensions of this, by the way?

**LIVERMORE:**

**HENRY** Well, this is huge. I mean, this is 106 inches tall.

**SKERRITT:**

**MIKE** Great. So it's really big. So it's the stuff that, on the screen, looks kind of smallish is going to be a good size. So I'm almost imagining if that's Monticello or not. That might be my location in Charlottesville having something to do with that. But then just to kind of expand that, there's, again, kind of repeating geometric patterns, different colors here.

**LIVERMORE:**

We've got these kind of reds and oranges and kind of almost like a desert-y kind of color palette. And then figuratively, again, at the top there's what maybe is the Statue of Liberty there. On the bottom, it looks like almost an insignia, like a house insignia. Maybe that's a kangaroo on the left. Again, this is-- I'm guessing a little bit.

**HENRY** No, you doing great.

**SKERRITT:**

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** And then what really dominates the image, or the painting, is kind of this oblong, lined-- I'm not sure if that's an object, if that's representing a landscape, or it's representing a plant that's coming up from a landscape. But those are the two things that come to mind is either it's an island that's surrounded by, again, maybe waves, maybe a desert landscape, or it's like a plant that's coming up out of the landscape. So anyway, those are a couple of quick impressions that I have.

**HENRY**  
**SKERRITT:** I love it. I mean, that's a brilliant analysis. No desert. Remember, these are seafaring-- these are seaside people. So I mean, this painting, *Journey to America*, or *America* [INAUDIBLE], as it's said in Yolngu Matha, it's fascinating. You're right. At the top of it is the Statue of Liberty. At the base, which is really hard to see, in the center of the base is a crocodile man. Crocodile man, man Baru, the crocodile man.

So Baru was a man, and he was sitting at the beach at a place called Yathikpa. And he has a fight with his wife. And he goes to bed very angry, and his wife's very angry. And she goes and sets fire to his hut. And Baru comes running out on fire, and he dives into the waters at Yathikpa. And a number of things happen.

And the first thing that happens is he's transformed into a crocodile. He gets scarred with all these diamond patterns that you can see down the middle of the painting. But as he stands up, he's transformed into the crocodile. And he stands up with his Fire Sticks, and he brings this ancestral fire, this powerful flame into the world, and he puts it into the waters at Yathikpa, where it flows onto all these other clans.

And so what's really interesting in this painting is at the base, you've got Baru doing that in the center. To the left, he's put the crest of Australia, the Australian crest, the kangaroo and emu holding a shield. But these flames are firing up the bark, right, and they're crossing all these waters. These designs on the sides are the rolling, deep waters of the ocean currents.

But this fire is charging its way across. And at the top, it's meeting the Statue of Liberty. There's a great mirroring here, because if you look at the base, Baru is holding up his two torches just like the Statue of Liberty is holding up her torch.

And so the message of a painting like this is it's really like, what is Djambawa trying to achieve in the exhibition *Madayin*? And what is he trying to achieve in his art? And it's taking that fire to the world.

Often, when people talk about Indigenous arts, they often talk about it with this kind of what we'd call a salvage mentality, right, this preservation mentality, that, oh, it's so important, we've got to keep these things, because the traditions are dying, or the people are dying, or whatever. But what Djambawa is saying in this is the exact opposite. He's saying, here we have this power, this ancestral power that comes from Baru. And it's by sharing that with the world that we get strength.

That's been the kind of MO of the Yolngu artists over the last 90 years-- has been this, if we put our art out into the world, that gives us power. It gives us presence. It gives us political representation to put our law, the Yolngu law alongside the law of the Australian government, the law of the American republic. And so I think this is a pretty special work.



**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah. It's really something. It's really something else. And the dueling torches or the-- I don't know if "dueling" is the right word, but the juxtaposition of the two torches. And then the colors make-- in the context of the story, the reds and the oranges are kind of representing these flames reflecting off the water. Or at least, that's what I'm kind of seeing there.

**HENRY**  
**SKERRITT:** Yeah.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah, it's really fantastic. I mean, that raises all kinds of interesting questions. I mean, one, the interaction of these communities or these communities' arts and kind of the global art conversation or the global political conversation, and kind of-- I think it'd be interesting to just return to the theme you were just mentioning of maybe the relationship between kind of political representation versus something like an appropriation, which I think is another idea that's out there that people worry about just returning back to the Cultural Objects Act or the law that you were referring to that was intended to keep certain works in the country that were deemed to be culturally important.

I mean, obviously, there's a long history of pulling of colonial-- pulling art out of countries, ex-appropriating important historical or cultural objects, expropriating or appropriating even artistic motifs and throwing them on IKEA-- I don't want to say "IKEA." That sounds accusatory. I have no idea whether IKEA has done this.

**HENRY**  
**SKERRITT:** No, no, no. But actually, it's funny you say that, right, because one of the artists in this exhibition, [INAUDIBLE], was the first Australian artist to have his copyright granted in a legal case, because one of his designs was appropriated for a carpet. So yeah. I mean, look, that's a problem and a problem that Indigenous artists are still grappling with in Australia.

I think in Australia, one of the successes has been really that with communities taking the front foot on that. So right now, whilst a place like Yirrkala, the artists are working on bark with natural pigments. In other communities, there are big drives to produce licensed materials, silk-screened works, that sort of thing. So taking the front foot on that. But it's still a major problem.

But I'll tackle that from a slightly different angle, because it reminds me of something that Djambawa said while he was here, and he was talking to my students in the Art History department. And he was looking at a painting very similar to this and he said, look, look at those diamonds.

And he says, see, in those diamonds you can see Baru the crocodile, and you can see the flames, and you can see the waters crashing over. And he stopped in this kind of big, barrel-chested laugh. He was like, [LAUGHS] and he's like, that's just the kids' story, right?

And he said, underneath that are layers and layers and layers of meaning that only I get to know as an initiated [INAUDIBLE] man. And so one of the things about working, say, on a project like this is that it's also-- these designs will have what they call kind of like a surface story, like the surface of the water. But underneath that are layers that are not meant to be shared, that are not meant to be put out into the public domain.

And so part of a project like this is really about building trust to make sure that everybody feels comfortable with what is being put out, because that knowledge is often considered to be very sacred, very dangerous, very valuable.

So there's appropriation but there's also questions about giving people the power, and the authority, and the ability to control which parts of the narrative are shared.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Because it always struck me that there's an interesting, and difficult, and important tension between that kind of respect that you're talking about and also engaging, right? That's a sign of respect is to engage with work that's happening all over the place and to not kind of cordon some of these artists or some of this conversation off to some kind of mystical, in the past, doesn't kind of engage with the contemporary art conversation or political conversation.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** No, I think that's right. But it's quite funny. So we've published a quite major catalog for this exhibition, and it's a catalog that's bilingual. It's in English and Yolngu Matha. And I suspect it's the first time that a bilingual catalog in an Australian language has been published in the USA.

But throughout it, that kind of concern is raised repeatedly and repeatedly by elders about making sure that Yolngu control the limits of how much is shared. But I tell you, like, this book is, like, 300 and whatever, 48 pages, 348 pages, and it has so much in it. I've been working on Indigenous Australian art for 20 years, and I feel like I didn't know one one-millionth of it.

And so I think a lot of the concern-- what I think is kind of-- these senior men and women, their heads are-- they're like the Alexandria library of information and knowledge. And honestly, I think even if every humanities scholar in the world was trying to mine it, they would still only scratch the surface.

So there's a funny part to this, which is that people who say they want to get the deep story, the full story, I mean, there's so much of the surface story that hasn't been recorded that isn't widely available or known that, that I don't think anyone should fear that they're not getting enough information.

It's like, learn what you're-- you know, you've got to learn all the kids' stories before-- you've got to learn to walk before you can run.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right, right. Yeah. So I think we have time for one more. So let's maybe talk through one more piece, if we can.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Yeah, let's. So this is another new one. And this one here by Nonggirnga Marawili. So Nonggirnga is one of the oldest painters working today. She was born in 1937. She didn't come into the mission at Yirrkala until the 1950s. So she really did spend most of her formative time living traditionally with her father, the great warrior Mundukul Marawili.

And so that's kind of an amazing thing to think about, because this week, the Tate Modern just announced that they were acquiring one of her works.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Oh, wow.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Or they've just acquired one of her works. So you've got an artist here who grew up in a traditional setting who has work in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Tate Modern, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Australia, and all these important collections. But Nonggirnga, senior lady, huge amount of knowledge. Probably as much knowledge as anybody.

But in 2015 she started doing these kind of very unusual paintings like this one. And it really does bring up some of these questions of tradition and innovation that we were talking about, because Nonggirnga starts painting these works with these kind of incredible sort of flashes of lightning across them. You can see all these great, white lightning bolts running across.

And you can see in the negative space, she's sort of creating these incredible diamond patterns, which really allude to those diamonds that we were looking at before of coming from Baru's fire.

But if you asked Nonggirnga, she'll tell you-- she'll say, oh, no, no, no, no, I'm not painting those sacred designs, I'm just writing my own idea, just the ideas of the waters, and I'm just making it up. And it's so interesting because she keeps saying that, but these designs have this extremely uncanny resemblance to those traditional designs.

And so I was talking to Djambawa about this, and I said, you know what, why do you think her designs look so much like these clan designs? And Djambawa, we were sitting in the Art Center, and he said, well, look at her painting. He says, and now look at mine. And he's like, and look at her painting, and look at mine, and look at hers, and look at mine, and now squint a bit. And he said, you know, she's not painting the designs. It's just that the country is speaking through her.

And so he was making this incredible metaphor, which is that, try as she might, her understanding of place is so embedded in this system and so embodied in these ancestral designs that even if she was trying her hardest not to paint them, they would still unconsciously or subconsciously come through in her paintings. The country's speaking through her, because she's such a part of that country.

I mean, that's a beautiful, poetic account, but I think there's a bit more to it as well, which is that in traditional Yolngu culture, the men are the custodians of these painted designs. And so it was only in the 1960s and '70s that women really started to paint and were given, for want of a better word, permission to paint these ancestral designs.

But what's really interesting in Nonggirnga is that around 2012, 2013, she started moving away from those sacred designs to these designs that are much more fluid, and much more individual, and much more inventive, in many respects. And what I think is really fascinating about it is that she will tell you, oh, no, I'm doing that because I don't want to trespass on the men's domain, and I'm respecting the men. But she's also building up this immense amount of power by her ability to engage with the art market and engage with the contemporary art world.

So here you have a very traditional lady very steeped in ancestral knowledge, but she's painting these works that grab the attention of the contemporary art world, because they're so inventive. And at the same time, she's keeping all of these allusions to the ancestral designs because that's how she shows her power in the community.

So here you've got an artist who's playing this very complicated double game, where they're trying to speak to two very different audiences at the same time. They're trying to speak to a Yolngu audience and they're trying to speak to a contemporary art audience in the metropolitan contemporary art audience, and doing it in the most kind of wonderful, inventive, explosive fashion.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. No, that's really wonderful. And that's just a fascinating idea of creating a work like this that, literally, it's like-- if you could imagine a text that you read one way in one language and another way in another language or something like that. It, like, literally just means two different things to two different communities depending on the knowledge that they bring, and their perspectives, and so on. So that's a really fascinating thing.

Is that something that's special to this community, and this group, and this art tradition? Or do you see that as something that maybe is broader in the world of art? And maybe it's kind of illustrated and well encapsulated by this group and some of these works? But maybe that's something that actually does exist in a bigger way.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Yeah. I think it's the driving force of a lot of the best Aboriginal Australian art. But I would also say it's the driving force of all of the best contemporary art being produced in the world today, because I think that for artists to engage with the world today, they've got to be engaging with a globally connected world. There are no people who live in a vacuum anymore.

Nonggirnga Marawili grew up living nomadically in Northeast Arnhem Land, but today she exists in a world where she's sitting with curators from the Tate Modern even though she doesn't speak any English. Right, we are all connected.

And so the challenge of great art today is to express both the particularity, who we are, where we're coming from, but also how we're connected. So every great artwork has to be doing this double thing at the moment of speaking both to its place and to the world.

And I think that's what makes Aboriginal artists so compelling is that Aboriginal artists are not sacrificing any of their own unique identity, but they're producing these works that so seamlessly cross cultural and geographic boundaries, that insert their identities into these larger dialogues of art, and politics, and environmentalism without giving up any of the power of where they're coming from. We see that in Djambawa's work. We saw that in Manyjarri's work. It's very present in Nonggirnga's work.

But that's the same as you would say for artists like El Anatsui or artists like Ai Weiwei. These are artists who are coming from very particular places, expressing very particular cultural traditions, but doing it in a way that also is able to speak globally to the important issues of our day.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah, it seems like this is not just an issue in art, or the world of art is kind of reflecting and incorporating just kind of, as you were kind of noticing, the reality of modern existence and, really, the challenge-- it's like a deep challenge that we face. I mean, when I think of environmental issues, we have interconnection is the hallmark of contemporary environmental issues like climate change, but others as well.

But I think in some sense, what we have had a hard time doing is understanding how to think about these global issues while also kind of respecting or cultivating kind of a healthy kind of localism maybe would be the way of describing it or something like that, where I think there's a sense in which, essentially, thinking globally, it can be threatening to people's affinities and identities.

And then there are kind of movements that take advantage of those types of concerns. And so figuring out how to be respectful of tradition and be respectful of affinities and identities while still doing that in kind of an engaged way, where change is also possible, is just a very tricky balance to strike.

And I wonder if you think there are particular lessons for the rest of the world, as we all negotiate similar challenges, that you think this particular community, which has been under so much profound stress for so long, but still manages to be so vital in its art and in many other ways as well, lessons that you've seen or perspectives that you've seen that you think are particularly useful or illuminating?

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Oh, 100%. I mean, I think the whole movement is an extraordinary cross-cultural gift. As you said, I mean, these are people who've been uprooted, massacred, prejudiced against, continually denigrated by mainstream Australia, and yet their response is to continue to give this incredible aesthetic gift to the world.

What is the lesson? I mean, that's a hard question, but I think a lot of the lesson is that there are ways in which we can communicate. Just because we don't understand each other perfectly-- maybe we don't speak the same language, we don't belong to the same tradition, there are still ways that we can speak to each other.

And that's what I think this work is doing. I think Nonggirnga, she's such an extraordinary and strong woman. And she is communicating her work, communicating who she is in her work. She's communicating where she comes from with all of these complexes of knowledge and wisdom.

But I think that the lesson that comes in here is that Nonggirnga is probably as different from me and you as anybody on the planet. But through her art, she's finding ways to communicate and she's finding ways to find our common ground. And I think that's the real lesson here.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right. Well, it's a wonderful sentiment. It's wonderful work that you do. And the artists have really-- as you said, it's an incredible gift that we all benefit from. So thanks so much for bringing this to us and for chatting with me today.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Oh, thank you, and I should say that the exhibition, *Madayin-- Eight Decades of Aboriginal Australian Painting from Yirrkala* will be opening at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth in September of 2022.

And then it travels to Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Charlottesville, and New York City. So there's lots of opportunities for Americans to see it. And so I'd really recommend that they do.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Great. Wonderful. How long will the exhibition be showing in the States for?

**HENRY SKERRITT:** It will be showing from September '22 through to January 2025, so there's a good period of time to catch it.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Great. Wonderful. Well, I hope many people-- I'm sure many people will. I hope many listeners do. I certainly will be. And yeah, it's been great chatting with you.

**HENRY SKERRITT:** Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]