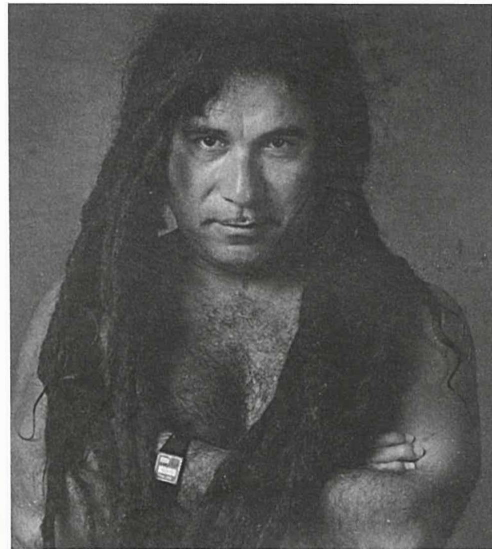
PROFILE: DJON MUNDINE

With a long career that encompasses curating, writing, artmaking activism and academia, Djon Mundine is an important figure in the Australian contemporary art scene. Rarely backwards in coming forward, Mundine speaks to Natalie King about his life, work and his thoughts on the future of Aboriginal art

INTERVIEW **NATALIE KING**

1.



A member of the Bandjalung people of northern New South Wales, Djon Mundine has had an extensive career as a curator, activist, writer and occasional artist. Renowned as the concept curator for the Aboriginal Memorial installation permanently exhibited at the National Gallery of Australia, he was awarded an OAM (Order of Australia, Medal for services to the visual arts) in 1992. He was Research Professor at Minpaku Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan during 2005-6, and is currently the Indigenous Curator of Contemporary Art at the Campbelltown Art Centre, Western Sydney.

What is your family background?
I was born in Grafton, and my father comes from an Aboriginal community called Baryugil along the Clarence River. There's a cattle station called Yugilbar which was started by a wealthy man named Olgilvie who commissioned Tom Roberts to paint his portrait. Yugilbar was taken over by the Street family – like Jessie Street, the activist and feminist. It was then inherited by the Myer family. The Aboriginal workers for that cattle station were well treated I'm told but, of course, we lost our land.

Is that where your father worked?
Yes, he worked as a stockman, but in the '50s they found asbestos in that area. Some of the people in the James Hardie case are my uncles who died from asbestos; some have got scars on their lungs from working in the mine.

How are you related to the boxing Mundines?
Tony Mundine's father and my father were brothers. Must've been about eight brothers in that family, and they worked as stockmen and also in the mine. They were all very athletic and really interesting men. My parents moved into Grafton from Baryugil and eventually my father was able to raise a loan to buy a little cottage.

And your mother's side?
She comes from Nambucca Heads. Her family, the Donovans, are no less athletic – they are famous for sprinting, boxing and football. My sisters got a scholarship to join the Rural Bank, which morphed into Westpac. The bank had a programme to diversify their staff and encourage people of non-English speaking background to join.

Did you grow up speaking your own language?
Two things – I never grew up and I never spoke my own language! My father could, but he never practiced because you have to have an ability to converse with people. Now you can learn Bandjalung at university. Both my parents are Aboriginal. In the '50s nearly all the people of Baryugil converted to Pentecostalism, which is a more charismatic religion. My parents thought that the rest of the family would do better if we moved to Sydney. If I had stayed in Grafton I would've been married with 200 kids by now!

Was education and scholarship important?
Yeah, there was a time in New South Wales where people were forward-looking. In the 1920s my maternal grandfather was involved with the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association. It's thought to be the first Aboriginal political organisation.

What led you to become a curator and art writer?
When I lived in Grafton I went to school with a non-Aboriginal boy whose father was an architect, and he encouraged me to draw. When I was about twelve my parents always thought that I'd become an artist. In Sydney we lived in Auburn, not Redfern. There was a television show – the forerunner of A Current Affair – called Seven Days that produced a one-hour program on the slums of Redfern. Some houses had one tap! People were really living tough. Not just Aboriginal people but white people and other immigrants. My sisters lived in Redfern but we bought this house – which again seems very small now, as I had seven brothers and three sisters.

What was the first exhibition that you curated?
It was about the Milingimbi people – The land, the Sea and our Culture – with anthropologists Dr Peter Lauer and Dr Lindy Allan at the University of Queensland in 1981. By the end of the '60s I'd left school and I went to university to study accounting. Even now I can do long division in my head very quickly! There was a great change when the Whitlam government formalised the Australia Council and the Aboriginal Arts Board by funding people at a community level to work as art advisors. These schemes lifted the profile of Aboriginal art. Artworks that you could've bought before for a carton of beer now cost you money.

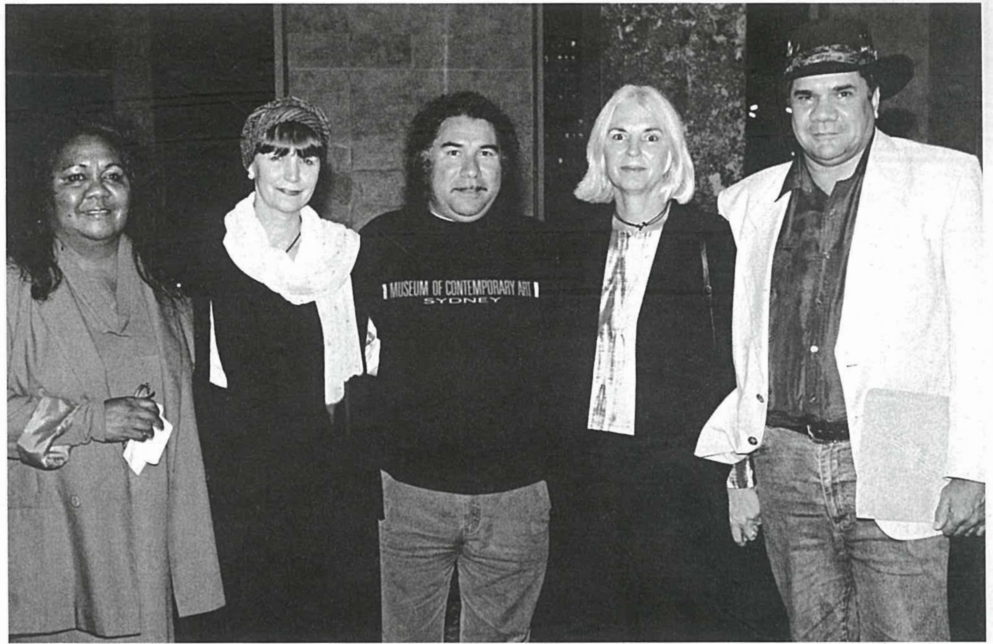
What was a key early professional experience?
I got a job in Sydney at Aboriginal Arts & Craft Pty Ltd who put on thematic exhibitions from individual communities. Eventually there was an opportunity to work at Milingimbi in the middle of the Crocodile Islands in Arnhem Land. I went from Sydney seemingly to the middle of nowhere with no infrastructure. There was a council, teachers who weren't Aboriginal, a mechanic, a garbage collector and an art advisor. There was only one telephone.

I've seen you refer to yourself not as a "carpet-bagger" but as a "linoleum-bagger"...
Yeah, that's right – a lino-bagger because I didn't have the money or the panache for the other! That's how most Aboriginal art was sold. The latest paintings would arrive from Milingimbi packed in waxed boxes that had been used to catch crabs and fish.

There were limited resources and limited communication, but the industry was starting to change and evolve...
There were American collectors who came out in the '60s and '70s, and Tony Tuckson started to collect for the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The other big thing, of course, was the Papunya Tula movement.
Is this when you went to Ramingining?
I moved from Milingimbi to Ramingining in the early

1. **Michael Riley** John [Djon] 1990 gelatin silver photograph 22.6 x 21.1 cm
2. Natalie King interviews Djon Mundine at the Campbelltown Regional Gallery, Sydney 2009. Photograph by Stephen Oxenbury
3. Fay Nelson, Bernice Murphy, Djon Mundine, Toni Bauman and Mick Dodson at the opening of The Native Born exhibition 1996. Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photograph by PaulGreen.

3.



'80s. The industry was turning around as we'd all decided to have more say rather than just being public servants who shuffle paper.

Is that where the impetus came for your curatorial work to incorporate a political element?
It was definitely a political thing. At the end of the '70s two things happened: the Northern Territory Land Rights Act was passed – this meant that Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory actually owned their traditional lands through an act of parliament. The other was the battle about uranium mining in Kakadu National Park. I saw very clearly that art was a form of political expression about a relationship to land, and to a way of life that was inconsistent with mining. I ended up staying at Ramingining for five years. I became involved with the cycle of religious ceremonies and I set up projects around outstations with each language group. It was curating by projects of ideas and concepts, not conveyor belt production. I'd go to this group of families and ask: "Do you want to say something? This year you can have the opportunity to express yourself". I had three people, who were brothers in a classificatory sense, and I got them to dictate a story – a short comment about each painting in broken English – and then I put the story on the wall with the artwork. I was trying to break down the barrier that they were mythical elderly men out in the wilderness who didn't speak English and couldn't communicate.

And how does that compare with your experience working with the city-based Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative?
At the Koori '84 exhibition I met local Aboriginal people who went to art schools. The previous generation was different: for example, Trevor Nickolls became an art teacher rather than being an artist. Lin Onus was a panel beater – he used to do car art and photo-realist stuff. Michael Riley came from Dubbo to train as a carpenter apprentice. Fiona Foley trained as an artist but then she ended up coming to Sydney. Her parents basically said they didn't like the racism in Queensland...

How did Boomalli evolve, and what was your role?
My involvement was on the periphery. That generation – Fiona, Michael, Bronwyn Bancroft, Jeffrey Samuels and Tracey Moffatt – had funding through Abstudy for tertiary education. By the time they graduated in the mid to late-'80s they decided, as a political act, to form a cooperative. Fiona, Avril Quail, Tracey and Michael had been to Ramingining and they wanted to start an artists' cooperative like the ones in the Northern Territory. Other members included Brenda L. Croft, Euphemia 'Phemie' Bostock, Arone Raymond Meeks and Fernanda Martens.

So Boomalli was partly inspired by the model of Ramingining?
Yes, but Fiona had also been to Bathurst Island and Tracey had been to Yirrkala and Maningrida. The biggest resistance was ATSIC, who just couldn't accept that these people were worth funding. The Aboriginal funding bodies weren't run by Aboriginal people...

Wasn't Gary Foley part of the Aboriginal Arts Board?
By the mid-'80s Foley had become the director of the Aboriginal Arts Board and they were very sympathetic, of course. Also, the rise of post-colonial theory set up an environment for the acceptance of non-traditional art.

What post-colonial theories were you reading at this time?
I was reading a lot of anthropology, especially A Black Civilisation by the American sociologist W. Lloyd Warner who'd come to Milingimbi in the '20s. He collected information about the way people lived and their ceremonies. Another anthropologist, Donald Thomson, did his key work at Ramingining in the swamp where the film Ten Canoes was shot. In fact, the film comes from one of his photos. He took incredible glass plate photographs of people's lifestyles and activities in the 1930s. This is an austere society in many ways – very structured, with food taboos and avoidance relationships. For example, you don't talk to your mother-in-law, you don't talk to your sister... I was also reading a lot of black power books from the United States.

How did you develop those key early international exhibitions such as the Havana Biennial and Native Born?
I don't think you can go and learn from a book to be a curator, and I don't think you can learn from a book to be a writer. You have to experience it and live it. Ramingining was the first Aboriginal community to be in the Biennale of Sydney in 1979. One day I drifted in to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and said: "Do you have an Aboriginal curator?" and they said they didn't. In many ways I just happened to be in the right place at the right time and I met people of like mind.

That was very bold of you!
I took part in a major exhibition of 200 bark paintings as an advisor. I was flown down to be the black face for the exhibition opening at the AGNSW. Leon Paroissien and Bernice Murphy moved to the Power Institute as co-directors and they asked me to put together the first exhibition from Ramingining. In 1983 Bernice selected a number of bark paintings from David Malangi, who lodged a sea closure claim – the sea one kilometre past low tide was being claimed. He produced paintings of sacred sites and a major painting mapping the area in a form of pars proto. Bernice then put the work into Perspecta as contemporary Australian art. I was reading the work of John Rudder, who was teaching environmental science and writing up a taxonomy based on the way in which Aboriginal people classified and named plants, animals and the environment that eventually formed what he called a cosmology of associations. I started to think about taxonomy, and that became the Native Born exhibition. I didn't think of a name. I couldn't read and write. The only song that I'd ever known about an Aboriginal artist was Archie Roach's song Native Born about Albert Namatjira and how he painted white gum trees – the ghost gum. I thought two things: it's about an Aboriginal artist but it's also about the relationship to the environment and to natural species and totemism. I started forever after to use words from songs as exhibition titles, because that's poetry. To be a curator you have three principles: one is you must never leave the artist unexplained – i.e. you must never allow the artist to look bad; the second is to leave a legacy after the exhibition such as film footage, a review or a catalogue; the third is to extend that legacy by buying something for the collection. It can be a token gesture but the relationship between you, the institution and the artist is a social relationship.

ALL ARTWORK COURTESY THE ARTISTS, 1 IMAGE COURTESY THE MICHAEL RILEY FOUNDATION, NATIONAL GALLERY FO AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA AND VISCOPY, AUSTRALIA. 3 IMAGE COURTESY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY.

This bloke held my hair and said: "You can't cut your hair until you leave here – until you leave us." So I never cut my hair after that...

If you buy something, no matter how small, then it enters the history of that institution.

You've worked across different institutions like the Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Museum of Australia, Queensland Art Gallery, the National Gallery of Australia and now you're based at Campbelltown. Have you been able to maintain your philosophy across different institutions?

I've only been sacked once. I find it very frustrating when people and institutions won't buy something. In the end, that might be the most important piece of work in the collection. It's enduring, it's surviving – that's the principle. It's funny... people and institutions never seem to take the advice they pay for.

You have a strong thematic dimension to your curatorial practice, so how did you go about developing the Havana Biennial exhibition?

We picked six artists, including Tommy McRae – one from every state. We wanted to make it as political as possible. When researching the site on which the MCA is built I discovered the story about a young Aboriginal girl called Patyegarang who lived with William Dawes, the astronomer and surveyor. She was his ward, maybe his mistress. One day she was having a bath and he was watching her and said: "If you scrub hard enough you'll scrub the black off you", and she told him: "I shall never become a white man". He wrote that phrase down – Tyerabarbowarryaou – that became the title of the show.

And what language is that?

That's in Eora or Gadigal language, the local traditional landowners of inner Sydney. Havana was a poverty stricken place but it was exciting to be there, despite real food shortages. We all chipped in money and bought beer and rum for a reception. People loved the title – I shall never become a white man. You just felt like you were really involved in something, which is most probably how Biennales are really supposed to happen. Nowadays Biennales are the other way round. You're trying to avoid people and you have little cliques. I think they are becoming too big and too removed from the community.

It's reminds me of Destiny Deacon's comment that Biennales are like the "Who's who in the zoo". And with all this travel you've been named the "Roving ambassador of Aboriginal art". In fact, we re-met at Destiny's survey exhibition that I curated for the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. What is your impression of the reception of Aboriginal art internationally?

I think what Frantz Fanon talks about in Black Skin, White Masks has universal repercussions. In Australia there was a policy of assimilation – that you became white, except your skin was black. You wear this mask of white western-ness whereas in fact you're playing this shadow existence. By the 1960s people were trying to resist assimilation – we wanted our own identity represented and acknowledged. Fanon's idea of a colonised nation is about three stages. The first is where everyone in that colonised society tries to imitate the colonising power. You adopt everything, including painting styles or artistic styles. The second phase normally happened in a post-colonial situation where you throw off the yoke of colonial power and revert back to your own historical past. The third phase is where you actually rationalise your use of western technology and accoutrements to reach a more truthful, confident existence. Nowadays, Aboriginal art has become appropriated by the State as a symbol of Australia.

How do you feel about that?

We don't want this to be a foreign affairs business, tied to government, to a national image that isn't our image, to an agenda that isn't our agenda and to a meaning that isn't our meaning. Gary Foley said at the end of his time at the Aboriginal Arts Board in the Australia Council that we're not going to take part in the Bicentenary celebrations. What we're going to do is put these exhibitions together and tour them overseas to publicise our own point of view.

What is your favourite artwork?

Most probably Rover Thomas' paintings. It's a toss-up between Cyclone Tracy (1991) and Night Sky (1995). Another very close contender is Tracey Moffatt's film Love (2003).

I want to finish with your distinctive dreadlocks. You've said that they're like a coat of arms but they disarm people as well.

I lived at Milingimbi and I used to go to Darwin every few months to go shopping and get a haircut. The people next door said to me: "Oh, what will you do there?" and I said: "Most probably have a beer (because it was a dry community where I lived) and most probably go to the barber shop and have a haircut". This bloke held my hair and said: "You can't cut your hair until you leave here – until you leave us". So I never cut my hair after that...

Finally, what do you think is the future of Aboriginal art?

A lot of people ask me about the future of the industry or marketplace for Aboriginal art. They're not talking about Aboriginal art and cultural practice that has been going on for 40,000 years. The biggest threat is the intervention. At an Emily Kngwarreye conference at the National Museum of Australia someone asked if there were any final comments. I said; "The serious thing is not whether Emily is a modernist or a postmodernist. It's really about the fact that where she lived – Utopia – is actually 16 outstations which the government is trying to close down". This dispersal of blacks is a very real threat to Aboriginal art. Not the marketplace dying or a whole set of dealers taking a hiding. This is the biggest threat to Aboriginal art and to Aboriginal society.

1. **Installation view:** The Native Born exhibition 1996, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photograph by Heidrun Lohr
2. Belinda Scott and Djon Mundine c. 1989 Ramingining. Photograph by Peter MacKenzie.
3. Belinda Scott, Djon Mundine (gathering heart of Palm) and Michael Riley c. 1989 Ramingining. Photograph by Peter MacKenzie.

ALL IMAGES COURTESY DJON MUNDINE 1 - 4. IMAGE COURTESY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY