



A crystal clear creek runs strongly through the broken sandstone landscape at Bulurr Berdno during the wet season and a number of deep rock pools last late into the dry season. Walking amongst the large sandstone slabs is like walking through a maze of narrow streets.

Although still slightly influenced anatomically by native animals, this picture is clearly of a domestic cat — most likely seen at the tin mines of Maranboy in the early to mid 20th century. Feral cats are now a major problem across the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area, inflicting heavy casualties on the native fauna.



Nature has provided a remarkable rock shelter at Bodbang Workwork. A section of sandstone karst through which water once ran underground has survived to stand as a discrete outlier. Sandstone pillars support a thick stone roof and enclose a series of large interconnected spaces with a sandy floor — an idea place to camp in wet weather. The roof of this shelter is stained dark from the soot of many campfires and a combination of soot and mould has made it hard to discern detail of the head of this clothed and booted shooter. He is shown in hunter's stance about to "take the shot" with one knee down and one knee up. A depiction of an exotic animal below left has survived in better condition and by a process of evidence and elimination we must conclude this is a pig. With more than 100km and perhaps a week's walk between the subject and the image, the recollection has warped the accuracy of depiction. While hooves, snout and ears clearly say "pig" the hind quarters show a kangaroo influence and the tail has lost its characteristic porcine curl. The big-eyed figure at bottom right remains an enigma — could the concentric circled eyes indicate round spectacles? Location: Bodbang Workwork.



Sadly the lower part of this picture has been lost to rubbing from animals and driven rain of the wet season. The body is shown within clothes. The x-ray style is often used to show the "outer layer" of Europeans. It is impossible to tell unequivocally the gender of the subject. It could however be a woman, wearing a wide brimmed hat, draped with a fly veil tied off around the neck with a scarf — a ladies bush outfit in the style we see in photographs of Daisy Bates.



Overlaying a faded picture of a kangaroo, which in turn lies over a what may be a spirit figure or an owl-like being, is a highly decorated shape that puzzles most people seeing it for the first time. It is an inverted bottle, with a narrowed waist and a concave base. The elaborate decoration may be an



attempt to convey the brilliance and reflectivity of a glass object. Flakes of glass are common finds at occupation sites on the plateau.

It is easy to recognize the clothed and booted figure as a European wearing a hat and smoking a pipe. But what is he doing? The enigmatic shape towards which he bends, or beside which he lies, defies interpretation. Without the commentary which no doubt accompanied the painting originally, the meaning is lost.



Until the mid 20th century a common product found in domestic laundries was a small muslin bag containing a hard mass — a laundry product most commonly known in Australia as Reckitt's Blue. Made of ultramarine and baking soda, the lumps, in their muslin bags, were swirled in rinse water until the water took on a blue tint. The blue tint was the original "blue brightener" producing "whiter whites" in washing. Paintings which use Reckitt's Blue as a pigment are found in Kakadu and Western Arnhem Land as well as elsewhere in Australia. The best known are the blue paintings of Nourlangie in Kakadu. This painting of a



barramundi is one of very few blue pigment paintings known from the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area. It is likely to date somewhere between the 1920s to the early 1960s, at the latest. Location: Bodbang Workwork.

This is another painting which clearly references a particular incident or observation and was once the visual prop to a tale told of travels to the frontier. The two riders are both shown with smoking pipes and riding bareback.



Warddeken's rock art projects seek to preserve and restore relationships as well as conserve images. Lachlan Jumbiri grew up at Manyallaluk near Katherine hearing stories of his country from his father, but was not able to visit his country until a trip sponsored by Warddeken in 2004. Lachlan's family history is like many from the Warddeken diaspora, people who left the plateau for various reasons but who through reasons of marriage or of health issues or indeed of the impossibility of getting access to 20th century essentials were unable to return. Moving back permanently to country remains too hard for many of their descendants today but Warddeken assists where it can in reconnecting country and people and in particular keeping new generations in touch with their heritage and management responsibilities. In March this year Lachlan brought his sons Seth and Oscar to see the art sites at Bodbang Workwork, Mako Bim and Bulurr Berdno.



The Asian water buffalo was introduced into North Australia from 1824 and quickly spread along coastal plains. However, we have it on the authority of the venerable Lofty Nadjamerrek that buffalo did not move up into the sandstone plateau that is now the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area until the mid 20th century. It is not surprising that travellers returning from the lowlands had tales to tell and illustrations to make to share their awe of such powerful and dangerous beasts. Lofty Nadjamerrek's son Keith poses with a buffalo image that encapsulates all we might say about the fragility of these first impressions. The white pigment is powdery and soft, easily washed thinner by rain and at the smallest scale now able to be dislodged by wind. The rock joint above the image leaks during the wet season and has washed away much of the image around the neck. The moist areas have encouraged growth of mould. Termites have tracked across the image to occupy the crack above — indeed the termites may be helping to hold back the seepage of water. The head of the buffalo is styled remarkably: the horns and ears have been drawn in plan view, from above. The x-ray image of bones and teeth and jaws have been drawn in side elevation. The teeth seem to have originally to been drawn recurved, as the teeth of a python, or indeed the rainbow serpent, are conventionally drawn.



At the head of Narrolombun Creek, halfway up a rocky slope is a remarkable rock art gallery where a European historic record and indigenous reportage align perfectly. In October 1883 the surveyor David Lindsay and his party were struggling to cross the plateau from north to south at the end of a six-month exploration on horseback. They had been looking for good cattle country in what is now Arnhem Land. His men and horses were exhausted and on 15 October they rested for several days about four kilometres from a cave at Narrolombun. Lindsay wrote: "...we lightened our packs by throwing away two packsaddles, the fish net, some rope, a great deal of rifle and revolver ammunition and all the clothes we could spare". Although Lindsay says he did not see Aboriginal people, they keenly observed his travels. Several artists, each with a different style, recorded the actions and objects of his

party as they passed. The rolled up fish net is obvious in the painted record, as are two saddle packs (rather than packsaddles, as Lindsay described them). Men smoking pipes are pictured hunting. There are around 50 depictions of guns of various kinds in the gallery and a faded and partly overpainted image of a horse and rider. A number of images of Lindsay's party are overpainted with kangaroos as life returned to normal. The gallery, hidden amongst rocks and trees became lost, even to its traditional owners. The venerable Lofty Nadjamerrek, a great expert on rock art across the plateau, was surprised when Ian Munro from Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation came across the site in 2005. Since then the site has been recorded extensively by indigenous rangers from the landowning family and archaeologist Daryl Wesley.



A crouching hunter, fully clothed with hat and boots, stalks his breakfast which Lindsay's journal indicates was often "stewed parrot".



Unlike the other hunter, this figure (above right) is shown barefoot. Perhaps this is "Jacky", the young Larrakia man who was a member of the party.

It is clear that the artist who began, but failed to complete, this picture of a water buffalo wanted to emphasise the size and power of the lumbering beasts that had become common on the flood plains but which came late to the rocky uplands. Using a highly prized white pigment with only a few sources on the plateau the artist began his task on a large overhanging ceiling next to the long waterhole and rocky gorge at Djabidj Bakalloi in Mok Country. What is most remarkable is that he was able to draw the outline so accurately while standing right under the drawing on an uneven and small platform. In order to step back and see his work as a whole meant climbing down about 10 metres and stepping back into the forest. We can only imagine why the painting is not finished, but one plausible theory is that he ran out of white pigment — the nearest source is 60km distant. Pictured: Landowner Keith Nadjamerrek.



Like the hidden chamber at Narrolombun it is possible to walk within metres of this extensively painted cave to the north of Kabulwarnamyo Creek at Yukyuk without seeing it. The vertical frieze has dozens of human figures — one group are ranged in a circle of dancers led by a didgeridoo and clapstick player. Elsewhere many thin, stylized men stand with spears and two guns have later been added in white over this group. Again the fragility of memory has failed to preserve the historic context of these images but it is clearly a place where quite a large family group could remain unseen.



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FRAGILE FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A THREATENED ARCHIVE OF INDIGENOUS REPORTAGE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID HANCOCK

CURATED BY WARDDEKEN LAND MANAGEMENT

Asked why the people of the Arnhem Plateau painted in rock shelters, the venerable artist and indigenous leader Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek AO explained: "Barribimnani wanjh barridjanganhmi bim, barridjanganhmi bedberre wurdurd. Barriyimeng "Kanmarnebimbun!" Barridjareni mulewani wurdurd bedberre."

Linguist Murray Garde translated his reply: "...they would be asked by their children to paint illustrations of stories or animals. The children would say 'paint it for me!'. Parents wanted to explain things to their children".

The vast majority of the tens of thousands of images across the Warddeken Indigenous Area are not sacred paintings in the sense of being set apart from everyday life.

They are, as Lofty Nadjamerrek has said, story paintings and many of these are stories from travels, related to the folks who stayed at home on the traveller's return from the frontier. They are essentially an indigenous body of reportage.

Imagine the loss of information reading a lavishly illustrated magazine in which all the text is redacted. Watch a news report with the sound turned off.

Without the oral narrative the images are puzzles, with only the "what" left from the journalistic dictum of "who, what, when, where and why".

When people continue to live with their paintings the stories have some resilience. But with such profound demographic shifts as there were from the Arnhem Plateau to buffalo camps, mines and missions in the late 19th Century, and through to the mid 20th century, historic detail and semantic connections are lost.

As the plateau diaspora reconnects with country and this forgotten archive re-emerges, we must look for clues embedded in imagery that can fill the gaps in these stories of fragile first impressions.

While many rock paintings have survived thousands of years, ironically, it is the most recent paintings that are critically endangered — the soft, ephemeral pigments of the most recent paintings are also the most fragile — vulnerable to wind, water, the rubbing of feral animals, fire and the brushing of vegetation now growing in what were once the homes and galleries of the story-tellers.

The indigenous rangers of the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area can deal effectively with some problems. They exclude feral animals with fencing, or remove vegetation and keep fire fuel loads under control, but wind and water inexorably wear away these precious pictures from the past.



Above: A horse and rider from the party of surveyor David Lindsay, Narrolombun Creek site, painted in 1883 and rediscovered in 2005.

Faced with conservation issues of such difficulty and at such scale, recording paintings in high definition photography is a strategic priority to ensure future generations can see images at least preserved as they are found.

The work of finding, surveying, photographing and otherwise conserving contact art is a huge and costly task. The Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area occupies 13,500 square kilometres abutting Kakadu National Park and very little is accessible by vehicle. Many sites are discovered during other management work, such as reinstating traditional patterns of landscape burning using incendiaries and helicopters. Helicopters are needed to take rangers and traditional owners to new site complexes for the work of recording and conservation.

For young and even middle-aged indigenous rangers and landowners this is a deeply meaningful and life-affirming reconnection with cultural identity.

The work of connection and conservation will be ongoing -- subject only to finding the necessary funding to continue caring for this vast and globally important archive of art and history.

Warddeken and its landowners are proud to share this glimpse of the hidden stories from the northern frontier.

THIS EXHIBITION IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF LOFTY BARDAYAL NADJAMERREK AO, KIM MCKENZIE, GEORGE CHALOUPKA OAM AND JIMMY KALARIYA.



Australian Government



NOTES ON THE IMAGES

Late in 1845 Ludwig Leichhardt and his party were nearing the end of their epic exploration from Moreton Bay in Queensland to the struggling settlement of Victoria in Port Essington. Traditional owner Jennifer Hunter is pictured with an image located in the East Alligator River valley which is believed to depict Leichhardt and his horse. Leichhardt had lost his hat early in the expedition and was wearing a canvas bag as a head covering. The headwear in this image does not conform to usual ways of drawing European hats and the painting is not far from the route travelled by the expedition. The artist has chosen to show the horse, a mare, urinating — which explains the odd, stiff-legged stance.



At Kabanderri, east of the Liverpool River, Sam Namundja stands proudly next to an exceptionally detailed and well preserved painting of a horse and pipe-smoking European rider. The rider's body is shown within his clothes in x-ray style. The horse carries a bag slung about its neck and the front legs are painted over an image of a rifle. Like many "first impressions" of horses the artist conflates equine anatomy with that of a kangaroo, emphasizing a large rump and powerful hindquarters but narrowing the body to the chest proportions of a kangaroo. The earliest experience of horses on the Liverpool River was in May 1867 when Captain Francis Cadell landed 20 horses from the SS Firefly to conduct a three month exploration for a suitable place for a capital for the north Australian colony. Cadell notes in his journal of 5 May 1867: "the natives who had come down on our arrival were much alarmed at the horses". Some local people became more accustomed to the exotic visitors and their beasts as the weeks went by, but many other groups fled in terror when disturbed by the horses and riders.



Djurray, in Johnny Reid's Wurnkomku Clan country, is near the headwaters of the Katherine River — 150km from the sea. The large painted shelter is protected from rain by a rocky overhang but nevertheless is so open it can be seen from a helicopter. Saltwater images dominate. As well as a number of images of European boats there are two very large paintings of saltwater species — one showing a Fiddler Ray — a species that can grow to 3m — and another more difficult to identify, but possibly a whale. The large vessel here has a sunshade canopy protecting the behatted, pipe-smoking Europeans from the tropic sun. The canopy sits between triangular sails fore and aft and the vessel has an anchor chain. The boat may be early 20th century or as early as the 1870s. Box shapes may be deck cargo for a coastal community or superstructure. Unlike images from caves on Grootte Eylandt none of these craft have features associated with the vessels of Macassan trepangers from eastern Indonesia.



A much smaller image shows a whaleboat sized craft with a triangular sail and nine people aboard. Two are shown with paddles, which are uncharacteristic for a whale boat, but perhaps are visual misreadings of an upraised oar seen from a distance. The craft appears to be connected by a line to a more distant, but larger, three-masted vessel, also with figures on deck. No other clues to interpretation are visible.

A second image of a small craft, again with a triangular sail and a paddler fore and aft could be another representation of the boat attached to the larger three-master. It has eight people on board but seems smaller and more canoe-like than the attached boat image.

At the base of the vertical rock face is a very washed-out image of a three-masted boat. Manipulation of the digital image does show what appear to be horizontal yards on the main mast and this suggests a boat from an earlier period than the other vessels. A partly square-rigged three-masted boat could be from the mid nineteenth century.

The landscape photograph with smoke shows Djurray after a visit from landowner Johnny Reid in March this year. Caring for the Arnhem Plateau's rich rock art heritage includes protecting galleries from wildfire by burning off fuel loads early in the dry season, at least as often as every two years.

To the right of this group of images is a photograph showing pictures of watercraft overlaid on the left by a giant Fiddler Ray and on the right by the lower legs of two female figures. The canoe, with triangular sail and man at the rear with a long rope connecting to what is probably an anchor, is not part of the composition in the background layer. The craft at the back has a European (or perhaps Japanese) person standing on deck of a large craft with internal compartments, a wheelhouse with a window, two masts and possible air vents or a hatch cover. The vessel is likely to be a pearling lugger and the dotted patterning possibly piles of pearl shell stacked on deck and inside the craft. The small boat could be a tender, possibly used for free-diving for shell. A date from late 19th century to mid 20th century is possible.

This gallery, dominated by two near-lifesize images of horses was found by chance from a helicopter only two years ago. Wasps and termites have caused some damage but the wide overhanging roof in the shelter has provided good protection from the annual monsoon rains. Both horse images are drawn in kangaroo-like motion and with a general kangaroo-like anatomy, demonstrating that these are indeed first impressions of exotic animals. Just as some European artists' first impressions of Australian fauna unconsciously incorporated visual templates based on foxes and other English animals, so too the indigenous artist has drawn the European foreigner in a likeness of the antipodean familiar. The anatomical distortion also suggests that the equine encounters were brief glimpses, rather than extended observations. Two opportunities for early indigenous interaction with horses are known in central Arnhem Land history. In May 1867 Captain Francis Cadell landed 20 horses of the SS Firefly on the east bank of the Liverpool River. In July Cadell's party explored west of the Liverpool guided by a local man, Calilly, who had become comfortably attached to the explorers. On July 5, far from their riverside camp they "met with a section of Calilly's tribe who much wondered at our horses," says Cadell in his journal. "At Calilly's request one of them was made to show paces and gallop; the stockman suddenly wheeling his horse, charged towards the natives, which scattered them in all directions, first to their great fear and afterwards to their infinite amusement". It might be that this highly keyed event is commemorated



at this site and in particular with the horse and rider at the western end of the site.



Between the images of horses is a human figure drawn in white, bent at the waist and wearing clothes, including a hat. The pointed nose indicates a European and the stance suggests a man perhaps skinning a buffalo. The protruding half circle behind the waist could be a pistol holster. The rifle below is difficult to identify — it lacks a trigger guard and a forestock is not clearly defined but there is a suggestion of a hammer. At the lower right in this image is another exotic animal interpreted through a macropod mental template. The animal with horns and whiskers is clearly a billy goat. The goat is most likely to have been encountered about 100k westward at what is now called Oenpelli (or Kunbarlanja) where frontier entrepreneur Paddy Cahill established his dairy farm and horticultural enterprise about 100 years ago. Above the contact layers subsequent imagery depicted kangaroos and emus.

Despite the protection of the large overhanging roof, the horses and other images at this site show the effects of processes of ongoing damage — from wasps and termite nests and from animals rubbing against the ochred surfaces. Warddeken rangers have now erected a steel barrier to prevent buffalo and pigs going into the site.



The low angle of this photograph accentuates the kangaroo referencing in the horses anatomy. Is this perhaps a picture that aligns with Cadell's journal entry of the pandemonium which ensued in the encounter with Calilly's people? The rider stands in the stirrups, bent forward at the waist as a rider at the gallop. It is easy to imagine this image as a backdrop to lively verbal indigenous reportage of the event to families camped in this large shelter in subsequent years. In 1883 another party on horseback came riding by, not far from this site. This was the party led by surveyor David Lindsay whose southward transect of the plateau is recorded elsewhere, on the Mankungdjang estate of the Mok Clan.

While it is not possible to conclusively identify the provenance of this rifle, it is shown with seven cartridges like the .50 calibre Spencer carbines carried by Cadell's party. The cartridges were delivered to the breech from a tube inside the stock. The rifle does not show the distinctive hammer of the Spencer Carbine designed in 1860, but the positioning and shape of the trigger guard are correct for a Spencer carbine.



This image of a buffalo leg at 1:1 scale was recorded for the first time during a survey in the Kunbambuk estate in March this year. The back leg, with bones and joints shown in x-ray style, overlays a figure which may be a human or a mimi spirit. The buffalo image is in the uppermost layer at the site, suggesting a prompt subsequent end of occupation with a movement off country down to the buffalo camps and ready availability of highly prized protein...and tobacco. The image may mark the arrival of reports, augmented by illustration, of the lowland buffalo camps of the late 19th and early 20th century that prompted the profound demographic shift from this and other estates.



The survey at Kunbambuk documented 16 rock art sites within an area of about 1 square kilometre, ranging in age from paintings tens of thousands of years old to the buffalo leg above. The patri-line of the original landowning clan, the Barradj, is now extinct and the last living Barradj person bestowed ownership and custodial responsibility on Dean Yibarbuk, a former chair of Warddeken Land Management and a leader of indigenous land management in Western Arnhem Land. Part of this custodial responsibility involves protecting the heritage of Barradj artworks. The fires seen burning here are an expression of that custodianship. Without regular clearing and burning off, spinifex and other material may accumulate and cause serious damage to rock art — in some known cases wildfire has caused painted rock surfaces to explode.

Dean Yibarbuk has brought his family on a week-long trip to begin taking up their responsibility for the Barradj art sites. In the late afternoon they return from a day of locating sites and clearing away spinifex and other fuel. The only practical way of accessing the sites is by helicopter, as the plateau's rugged terrain constrains vehicle access. As an expert in indigenous fire management, Dean Yibarbuk supervises the protective burning work.



Young Warddeken ranger Gavin Phillips photographs the buffalo leg painting at Kunbambuk. Warddeken's indigenous rangers assist landowners with the recording of their rock art sites for digital archiving in Warddeken's Bidwern Information Management System. High definition photography may be the only way to ensure future generations can see artworks "looking their best".



People from the Djorrolom, Mok and other clans of the plateau actively occupied the site complex of Manamnam until at least the Second World War. In bright and vibrant colours they painted the animals and spirits of their country and also illustrated stories of experiences from the lowlands — stories from the mines at Maranboy or the buffalo camps in what is now Kakadu. Those who were bold enough to step outside an exclusively Aboriginal domain returned to relate their experiences to those who were too infirm or who were too frightened of white people to travel. Mary Nadjamerrek, who was a girl before the War, says there were indeed people who stayed on the plateau for fear of white people. Although there are no reports of massacres or brutal interaction on the plateau there was a period in the late 19th century when mounted gun thugs from the Eastern and African Cold Storage Company's Arafura station, about 100km east, pursued and shot people resisting the takeover of their country for pastoralism. Such memories linger. The firearm pictured here with a barramundi with its head pulled back seems to be a shotgun, possibly a double-barreled shotgun with twin hammers. The ammunition is flat-ended like a shotgun cartridge. Aboriginal people who attached themselves to buffalo camps and became trusted workers may have been given use of shotguns to hunt for the camp — but high powered rifles rarely left the hands of the non-Aboriginal bosses.



Amongst the fish and kangaroos at Manamnam is a brilliantly drawn shotgun with nine cartridges, including one in the breech. The painting is likely to be from the mid-20th century and a time of the generation who were older men when Bardayal Nadjamerrek was first setting out to explore the world of white people. Bardayal made a number of journeys where he worked for a time for white people in mines at Maranboy and later during World War II, unloading trucks for the army at Mataranka. At the end of work seasons he returned to his elders with tobacco, usually carried in bottles, and other exotic wares such as fish hooks, fishing lines and axes.



A "Dali-esque" picture of a rifle is the topmost layer in this section on ceiling at the Mako Bim complex. The red figure beside the gun is unusual in that a red base has been decorated with white hatching and other patterns.

As well as their tools of trade at the tin mines at Maranboy, at least some miners had kitchen gardens and domestic animals, fascinating to the plateau people seeing these things for the first time. As time went on small market gardens were established to supply the miners. At Bulurr Berdno in Djorrolom clan country an artist has illustrated a story of his encounter with a billy-goat, most likely around the Maranboy tin mines in the early to mid 20th century.



An illustration perhaps to go with a detailed description of personal items of European material culture. The horizontal orientation of the figure is most likely just an incident of available space. There is nothing to indicate whether this is a miner, a buffalo shooter or indeed of any trade or occupation. However the picture provides extensive generic detail of European kit. He wears a hat, smokes a pipe, has a bandanna



tied rakishly around his neck, wears a shirt and trousers and boots. His rifle is however not rendered as accurately as the owner — the trigger guard is one side of the gun and the forestock at the other. Location: Mako Bim

The original name of this site is lost but it has been given a new name in keeping with the story it presents. Mako Bim (translating as Gun Pictures) reflects at least one man's obsession with firearms and a desire to accurately illustrate his observations at the lowland frontier to the west and south-west. The gallery has pictures of 13 guns or rifles, four handguns, and a number of European style smoking pipes. As well as several shotguns of indeterminate brand the gallery has at least one Winchester Rifle, a Martini Henry rifle, a Webley revolver and a Colt revolver. One revolver is drawn in a holster and another has a lanyard attached. Location: Mako Bim.



While firearms dominate this gallery in terms of numbers of images, a brightly coloured iconic depiction of Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent floats proudly above the gun collection, spanning more than four metres of the ceiling. Ngalyod is painted in very different ochres from those used on the guns. Nothing indicates which comes first in time, the guns or Ngalyod, but perhaps the stunning Ngalyod is a rejoinder from another artist, affirming the power of traditional belief against foreign technology. Location: Mako Bim on Djorrolom country.



Despite a relatively exposed location this brilliantly composed picture of a axe-bearing European and an apprehensive rooster has survived in remarkable condition over at least seven decades. It is hard to look at this picture without hearing the laughter of an audience echoing down the decades as the tale is told and the illustration rendered. The novel and unusual use of perspective adds to the idea that this is indeed a "rooster's eye view" of an incident of life and death on the frontier. Location: Bulurr Berdno on Djorrolom country.

As the image of man and fowl is humorous, on first impression the image below is very dark. But the images of woman and gun are certainly not connected in time — they have been painted on quite separate occasions, as the different colours of the ochres used shows. The juxtaposition does not imply a semantic link, just competition for painting space and an artistic tradition in which overpainting is OK.

