



Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford
(Indigenous Australian (Gija), 1922 - 2007)

Biography

Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford was born at Bedford Downs Station, a large cattle property in the remote East Kimberley of Western Australia. He belonged to the Gija people. His family history was marked by several brutal events resulting from clashes between white colonists and his indigenous ancestors.

He worked as a stockman around Warnum in the East Kimberley until precluded by injury. As a senior law man of his tribe, who determined proper customs and traditions, Paddy had engaged in traditional painting for ceremonial purposes, especially body-painting, from early manhood. It was only much later in life, in 1998, that he was encouraged to paint on canvas and later in gouache on paper. He soon joined the newly formed Jirrawun Arts group and became part of the East Kimberley/Turkey Creek movement led by Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie. Solo exhibitions in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and Darwin soon drew the praise of art critics and his work was recognized as groundbreaking.

In a short period of eight years Bedford built up a rich oeuvre and was to be regarded as one of the most important indigenous artists of Australia. His work has a unique distinctive style: very graphical, use of striking colors, and sparse but precisely placed lines, often delineated by white dots. His works depict the East Kimberley landscape where he lived and worked his whole life, in combination with the Dreamtime stories of the emu, turkey and black cockatoo associated with his family.

Also featured in his work are historical events, such as the Bedford Downs Massacre - the brutal murder of a group of family members in the early 20th century in retaliation for killing a bullock. Yet, central to his work is reconciliation, referred to as "two-way".

Paddy Bedford was one of eight Australian indigenous artists commissioned to deliver a permanent work for the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, for its opening in 2006. His work was honored later that year with a major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney that went on a national tour. An extraordinary achievement for an octogenarian, who only began his career as an artist less than a decade earlier.

Since his death in 2007, his reputation has increased. In 2013 the Australian Airline, Qantas, commissioned the external livery of a new Boeing 737-800 to reflect his work *Medicine Pocket* (2005). Moreover, his works are exhibited in Australia's major public galleries, as well as in private collections worldwide.

The subject matter of Bedford's paintings is drawn from two very different sources, the dramatic East Kimberley landscape and the historical events that occurred there. Central to both is the ever present Ngarranggarni or Aboriginal Dreaming, the parallel time dimension where the landscape, animals and plants were created and in which the laws determining behavior and tradition were established.

His paintings also present a dichotomy of imagery. Powerful bold forms reminiscent of physical features of East Kimberley are surrounded by expansive delicate washes of muted color. A contrast is created between powerful physicality and great sensitivity. Behind their simple composition lie complex underlying stories, such as the Emu, Bush Turkey and Cockatoo Dreamings of his family. His works evoke profound traditional authority. One of Australia's leading art critics, John McDonald, is often quoted at the time of Bedford's 2007 retrospective in Sydney's MCA as saying: "If one had to choose a single indigenous artist to represent the state of Aboriginal art, it would be hard to go past Paddy Bedford."

Selected Collections

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Lam Collection, University of San Antonio, Texas, USA
The Araluen Art Collection, Alice Springs, Australia
Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney, Australia
British Museum, London, United Kingdom
Metropolitan Museum of Art (MoMA), New York, USA
Private collections in Australia and internationally

Selected Exhibitions

2024

Art & This Place Tours, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation, Queensland, Australia

2023

Dreaming with your Eyes Open, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2021

The Kimberley, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2018

Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan & Levi collection, Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, USA

2016

Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, USA

2015

No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting, Perez Art Museum, Miami, USA
Signs and Traces. Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Zamek Culture Centre, Poznan, Poland
Global Art Exhibition, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2013

Vivid Memories - An Aboriginal Art History, Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, France

2010

Contemporary Aboriginal Painting from Australia, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA
Remembering Forward. Australian Aboriginal Painting since 1960. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany

2009

Solo: Paddy Bedford: Crossing Frontiers, Aboriginal Art Museum Utrecht (AAMU), Utrecht, The Netherlands

2008

The Other Thing - A Survey Show, Charles Darwin University Art Collection, Darwin, Australia
Ngurra Yurru Kulintjaku - Always Remembering Country, Cross Cultural Art Exchange (CCAEx) at Harriet Place, Darwin, Australia
Marrangku Yara Polyantjaku Ngurrangka - Making Strong Paintings at Home, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia

2006 - 2008

Solo: Paddy Bedford, Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo; University of Queensland Art Museum, Queensland, Australia

2006

Land Marks, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

2005

Jirrawun in the House: A Contemporary Vision from the East Kimberley, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia

2004

Talking about Abstraction, University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts, Sydney, Australia
Spirit and Vision - Aboriginal Art, Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg, Austria
Australian Culture Now, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

2003

Journey to Now: John Kaldor art projects and collection, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Solo: Walking on the Line, GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney, Australia

2002-2003

Blood on the Spinifex, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia

2002

Solo: Significant Paintings, GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney, Australia

2001

Solo: Paddy Bedford, Raft Artspace, Darwin, Australia

2000

Land Mark: Mirror Mark: Prints by Aboriginal artists from the collection of the Northern Territory, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia; Columbia State University, Clifton, USA; Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Aboriginal Art University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA

1999-2000

Mapping Our Countries, Djamu Gallery, Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia