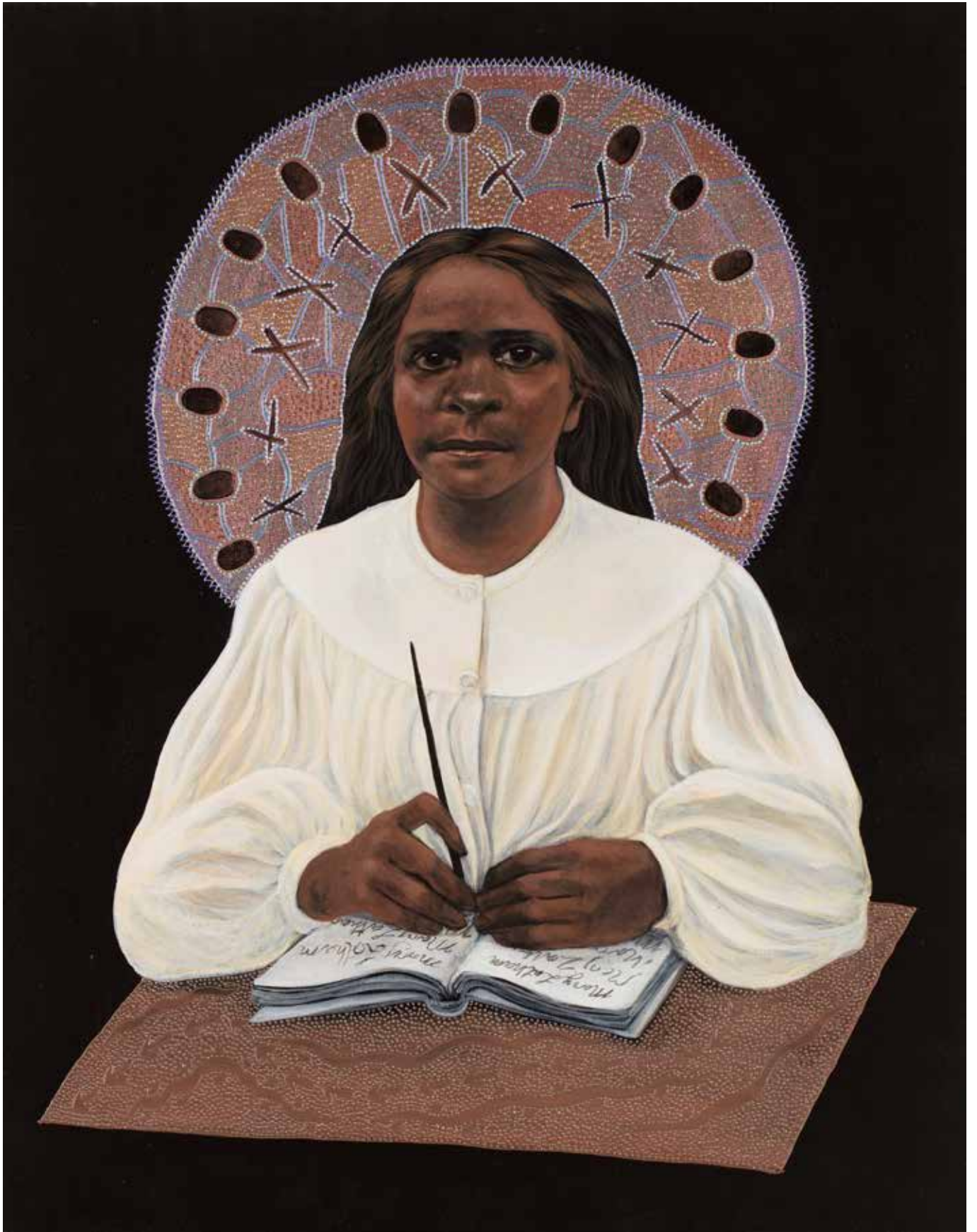




WA NOW | JULIE DOWLING
ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Babanyu (Friends for life)



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Carol Dowling

*“Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought,
an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities”*

Wade Davis (2005)¹

My twin sister, Julie and I have had a creative and supportive partnership since the womb. We experienced a shared childhood and adulthood lovingly challenging each other with knowledge and insight from our very different careers. We believe that there needs to be a fundamental shift in the dominant culture in Australia regarding us, as First Nations peoples. Stopping cultural and spiritual erasure of First Nations peoples' identity and spirit, specifically Badimia people, has been a longstanding goal. With a direct activism against racism, ignorance and white fragility/privilege, Julie and I work together to document our stories of survival so that we too, as a people, can survive.

I write about my sister as a First Nations academic with great satisfaction. I would first like to state that with every painting, Julie gives ownership to our communities with every story told within them. Julie has focused on healing and acknowledgement of how truly resilient and strong our people are despite all that has happened to us. Many stories are told to Julie so that they are recorded forever. Together, we often consider how these stories will impact upon future generations including my three sons — James, Curtis and Tyrone. In every sense, this exhibition is about family and community ownership, and the links² that connect us for life.

Having personally witnessed their creation, I remember, along with Julie, what was happening in our lives. We view this exhibition with much nostalgia and pride. These paintings are friends coming back to visit. There are a few that stand out to us. The work entitled *Is it ok to be two things at once?* (1996) is a very early work whereby

Julie wanted to highlight the conflicting and challenging reality we have always faced as fair-skinned Badimia women. It pulls the viewer into an internal debate and hypothesis. Our experience has always been one of having to assert and fight for our identity. Over the years, Julie and I feel very strong in who we are, and this stability was hard fought. Such is not always the reality for many of our community who have been culturally dispossessed or disenfranchised.

Julie has always delved into the lives of our ancestors to strengthen our collective identity. It is not just about her personal journey but for her entire family. In the work *Making Her Mark* (2003), Julie represents our great-grandmother, Mary Latham (née Oliver). Stories of “Granny” were passed to us by our mother who dearly loved her maternal grandmother. In this work, Julie depicts Granny learning to write her name which never really happened. Throughout her life, Granny Latham had to ask more literate people to write for her. As a Badimia woman, she was considered by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in our Country as a truly remarkable woman. She could muster horses and cattle for long distances. She could track lost children and identify poisonous plants killing the stock of the white squatters. For Badimia people, she was a healer, a mid-wife, a spiritual custodian or as our mother referred to her, a shaman. Granny could speak several First Nations languages as well as English. Yet, her children (our grandmother Mollie and great-aunt Dorothy) were stolen from her. Without the ability to write, she was limited in her capacity to stop the officially sanctioned abduction of her two youngest children.

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It is then in the confronting painting *The Runaway* (1993) that Julie paints an elder embracing his grandson who has run away from a mission or orphanage. The power of the old man's direct gaze cannot be dismissed. It calls to us all about the injustice of those policies to forcibly remove our children as a way to break our culture, our language, our capacity to love and our future. Today, Western Australia has one of the highest rates of First Nations children in out-of-home care. This is a contemporary injustice happening to our families. We must all realise that these children must be brought up knowing their families and the importance of their culture. Our families need our children to heal.

The painting entitled *Yalgoo* (2002) was created at a time when Julie was named Australia's most collectable artist by *Australian Art Collector* magazine. In addition to such accolades, works such as this painting are important as they honour our elders. Our grandmother, Mollie Dowling (née Latham) holds the hands of her older brother, Uncle George Latham across their Country in a place named Yalgoo. In the painting, a small deteriorating form of a railway siding can be seen in the centre, as both a relic and reminder of the gold rush that happened in this area. The Badimia translation for Yalgoo is goanna fat. When local people were asked what they thought of gold nuggets, they responded stating that it resembled the fat found inside a goanna before it was eaten. Julie wanted to represent the longevity of our elders and the transitional nature of economic forces.

Finally, another particularly important work is *The Protest* (1999). This work is a study of the many people in our community, starting with: the young vocal youth justifiably angry and brave as a young urban warrior; the nursing mother and protective father, who warmly centre the picture; the plump children and confident toddler; and the quiet resilient grandmother directly calling-out your

stance in this protest. Such a study is a very poignant way of educating the non-Aboriginal viewer of what our community looks like. Many non-Aboriginal people have never physically met a First Nations person in this country³. The only figure remaining to be acknowledged is the cowboy in the top centre of the piece. This rural character is enjoying the experience of seeing his people speak up in unity. For many of our people such organised political agitation is a relatively new experience. Protest is important for our people and such an expression should continue as a human right.

In the time span of works in this exhibition, many changes in my sister's style and technique can be seen. There is always the symbolic memetic style of using First Nation symbolisms such as dots and line. These are bedrock homage to animal tracks, water courses, land formations and meeting places. Influenced by the middle to late Flemish and Renaissance style of portrait painting, Julie has decolonised her works with fanciful mediums such as glitter, metallic paint and plastic found objects. There are also poignant examples of chiaroscuro or painting portraits with a black background. Further still, there are icons created to honour the Stolen Generations that incorporate Orthodox Roman Catholic and Russian treasures savoured by families as transportable wealth.

We are also made to bear witness to the past, or more pointedly to the irreverence and dehumanising practices that took place. The *unknown* series of paintings, including those in the show, have been reproduced using colour depictions of original monochrome photos. These photographs number in the thousands and can be found in the drawers of libraries and museums. They are "unknown" early First Nation subjects positioned for Western culture's curious gaze. Even the original photographer was seldom recorded, nor any detail of the location noted. They are unclaimed photos of unnamed

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ancestors. Fortunately, there is now an active project throughout the world to reunify people and photographs with their communities. The activism Julie undertook in this series was to acknowledge the creation of the First Nation 'other', beginning with our own great great-grandmother, Melbin, who was taken to England as an exhibit. Such a journey, for Aboriginal people today, is about searching for family, to reclaim them long after their bodies have returned to the earth. These journeys are acts of decolonisation.

Other elements depicted in these works include totemic connection to honour our ancestors and current elders. There are contemporary issues presented to challenge including the high removal of First Nations children into state care, the world's highest statistics for Indigenous women and children incarcerated, homelessness, protest, suburbia, and the urbanisation/marginalisation of First Nations people in this continent. There is also a reclaiming of our historical reality, and an emphasis on the oral histories of our people, including resistance fighters such as Yagan. The historic slavery of First Nations people in the pastoral industry and the pearling fleets sit alongside the stories relayed by cooks, shearers, station hands, domestic servants and jillaroos. These stories educate non-Indigenous audiences and, in the telling, validate our lived reality as First Nations peoples.

Then there are the self-portraits which are a frame for how Julie sees herself at many stages of her life. Self-portraits are supposed to be a demonstration of an artist's accomplishment and prowess. They have never ceased to surprise me and her family for their manifest complexity.

There is much reference in Julie's work to religious iconography and symbolism. Her icons reflect the holy corona or halo or spirit. She has used bible stories and

texts directly from literature as well as directly from oral histories. Such exploration is about the role of religion in colonisation. They are a quest to find out what it means to be a Badimia woman today and in the past.

Our reality, as Badimia women, is about fighting our way out of dispossession. It is about finding family and strengthening connection to Country. We are community people helping where we can to tackle economic disadvantage and the devastation of our language created by racist policies and practices. Along with our family and friends, we value our Badimia language. It is classified now as endangered and, as a foundation of our culture, we know that it is the right way to see the world. Our philosophy and worldview are entrenched in our language. These paintings are about our language and they honour our survival.

Carol Dowling 2018

This essay was produced for the exhibition WA NOW | Julie Dowling, Babanyu (Friends for life), 3 February - 13 August 2018

(Endnotes)

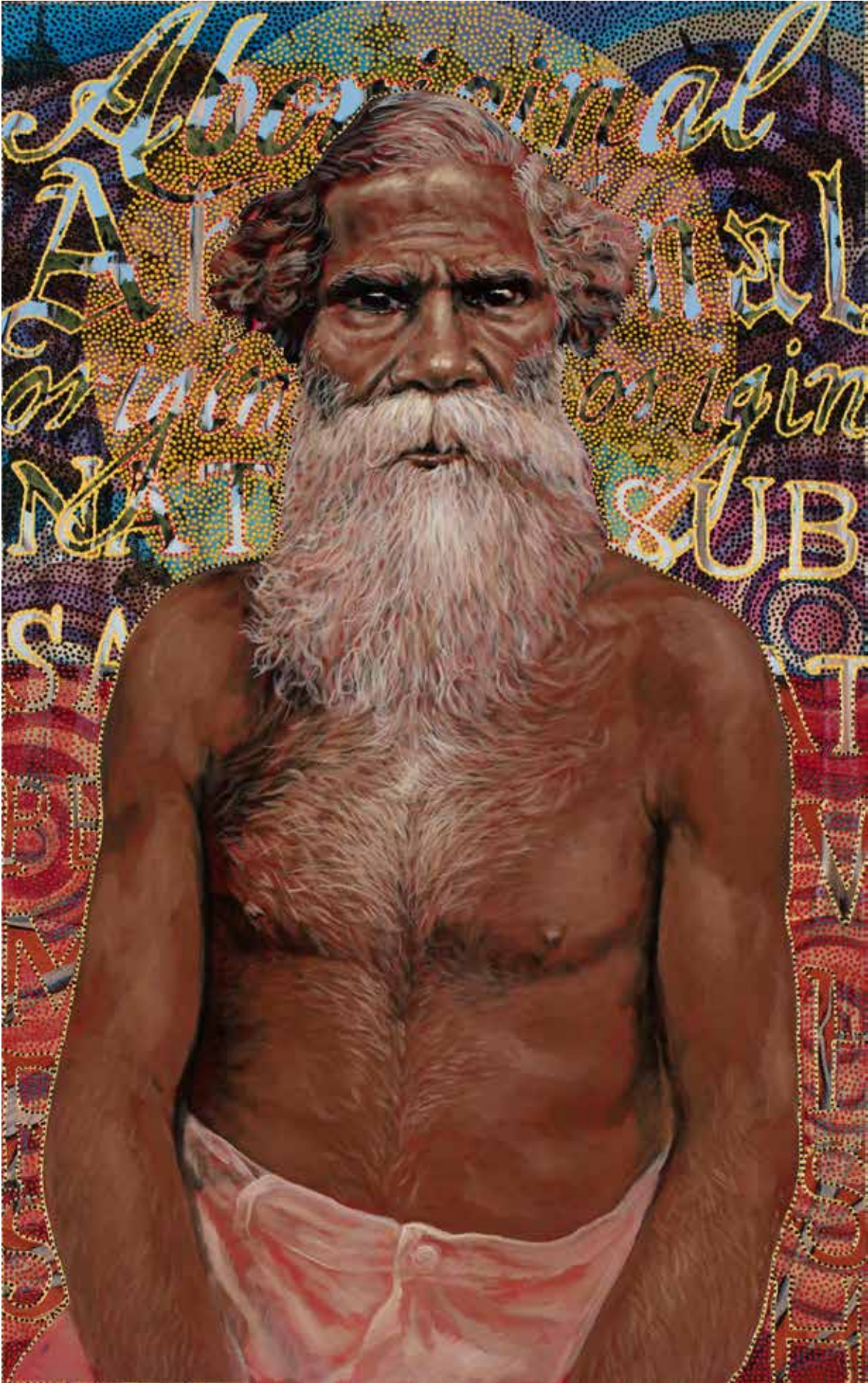
- 1 <http://www.ethnosproject.org/wade-davis-dreams-from-endangered-cultures/>
- 2 Some of these links include bloodlines, language, culture, spirit and friendship. Shared histories and experiences unite us too.
- 3 <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/11/29/6-10-white-australians-claim-they-have-never-met-indigenous-person-so-what>

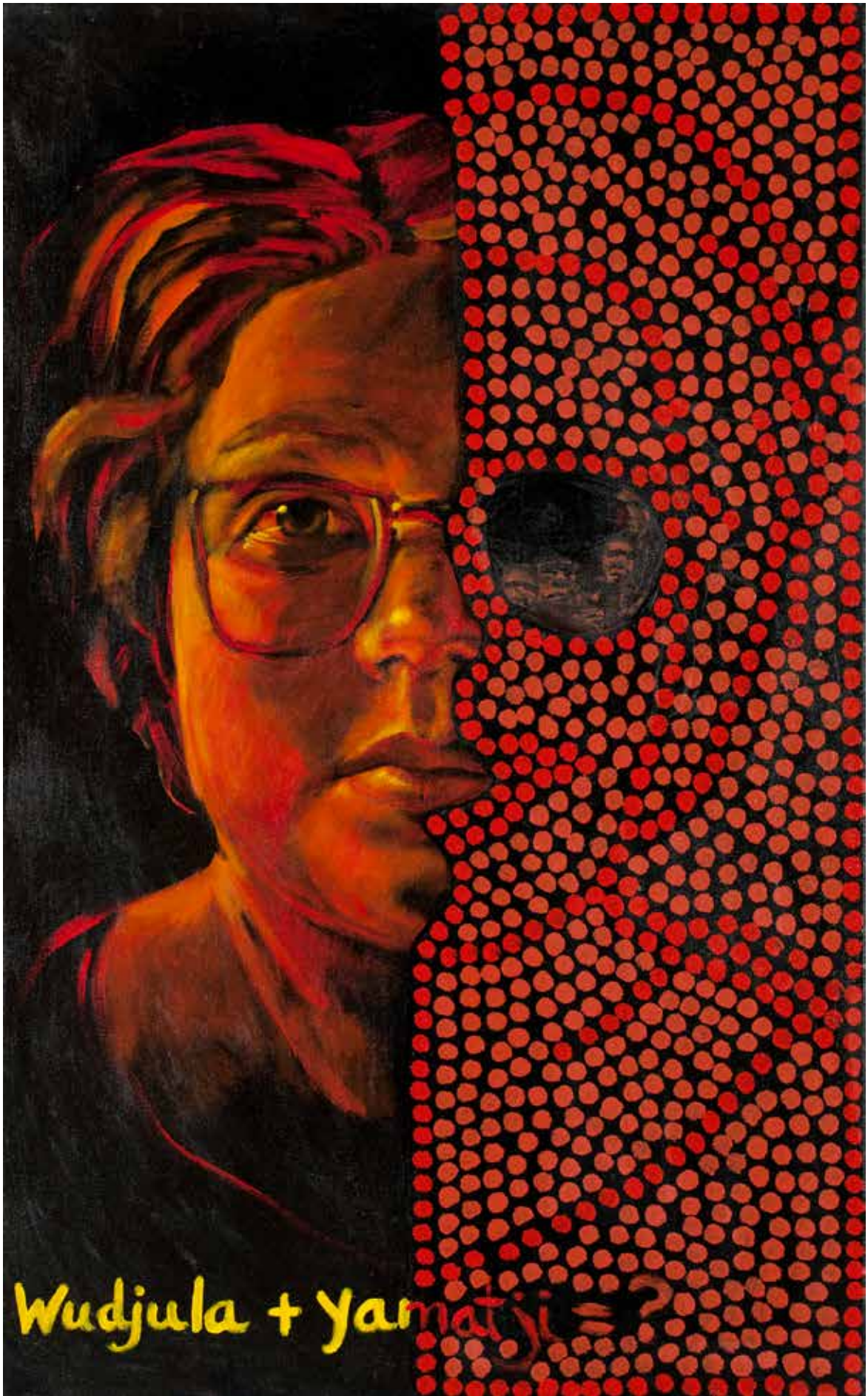












WA NOW | JULIE DOWLING

3 February – 13 August 2018 | Art Gallery of Western Australia

Coordinating curator: Carly Lane, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art

Illustrated Works

Note to the reader

All works are from the State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia.

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Julie Dowling

Making Her Mark 2003

synthetic polymer paint, red ochre, glitter and metallic paint on canvas

83.5 x 65.8 cm

Gift of Brigitte Braun, 2017

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Julie Dowling

The Runaway 1993

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

93.3 x 94.5 cm

Gift of Brigitte Braun, 2017

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Julie Dowling

Yalgoo 2002

synthetic polymer paint, oil and red ochre on canvas

120.0 x 150.3 cm

Gift of Brigitte Braun, 2017

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Julie Dowling

The Protest 1999

synthetic polymer paint, red ochre and metallic paint on canvas

100.0 x 120.0 cm

Gift of Brigitte Braun, 2017

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Julie Dowling

Unknown Woman And Baby 1 2005

synthetic polymer paint, red ochre, glitter and metallic paint on canvas

91.0 x 71.0 cm

Gift of Brigitte Braun, 2017

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Julie Dowling

Unidentified: Aboriginal New South Wales 2003

synthetic polymer paint, red ochre, glitter and metallic paint on canvas

80.0 x 50.0 cm

Gift of Brigitte Braun, 2017

Page 12 (plus cover)

Julie Dowling

Is it ok to be two things at once 1996

synthetic polymer paint, red ochre and blood on canvas

104.0 x 65.0 cm

Purchased 1996

The Art Gallery of Western Australia gratefully acknowledges the participation of Julie Dowling in the Gallery's WA NOW 2018 Program.