

SAN ANTONIO MUSEUM of ART

***Of Country and Culture: The Lam Collection of Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art* Will Premiere at San Antonio Museum of Art**

Exhibition Follows Major Gift of Works From May and Victor Lam Family, Making the Museum A Center for Aboriginal Art in the US

San Antonio, TX—December 7, 2016—On February 24, 2017, the San Antonio Museum of Art will present an exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art, drawn from a collection gifted to the Museum earlier this year by long-time supporters May and Victor Lam. Titled *Of Country and Culture*, the exhibition explores the contemporary application of a range of Aboriginal artistic traditions—from sand paintings, to body painting, to grave poles—to reveal the intricacy and diversity of these works, as well as how the subject matter is intimately connected with people's daily lives. With approximately 75 works on view, the exhibition also expands our understanding of the indigenous people of Australia, each with distinct languages and cultures, but all of whom share a profound connection to the land. In particular, the collection includes a significant number of works by women artists, demonstrating their contributions to contemporary Aboriginal art and representing a relatively recent change from their historical exclusion from the contemporary painting movement in Australia. The exhibition will be on view through May 14, 2017, and will include a number of additional works on loan from the Lam family.

The Lams' enthusiasm for contemporary Aboriginal art began when they visited the traveling exhibition *Spirit Country* at the Museum in 2000. Originally organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the exhibition showcased The Gantner Myer Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art. These works inspired May Lam (a founding Museum board member) and her daughter Dorothy to travel to Australia to visit Aboriginal communities across the continent. On their trip, they amassed an outstanding collection representative of contemporary indigenous art-making throughout Australia. The works range from the mid-1990s through 2007.

"These works challenge our assumption that 'art' is something cultures create but don't need," said Katherine Crawford Luber, the Kelso Director of the San Antonio Museum of Art. "With bold colors and materials, these works are made to be beautiful, but also to speak to people about communal history and events. It is also fitting that this gift from the Lam family comes as a result of their having been inspired by seeing similar works at the Museum years ago. We are incredibly grateful for their generosity and for launching us into a new area of collecting, furthering our ability to connect more deeply with other cultures and art historical periods."

The contemporary works featured in *Of Country and Culture* reveal Aboriginal peoples' strong ties to land, community, and heritage, combined with many millennia of commitment to visual communication and expression as important elements of culture. Traditional ceremonial sand paintings become vibrant acrylic abstractions on canvas, while designs usually applied to the

human body are instead painted onto eucalyptus bark, allowing the tree's vertical form to become a stand-in for the body. Aboriginal cultures also include a tradition of carving tall poles as figurative sculptures, to place by the gravesites of loved ones. Typically carved in ironwood and painted with natural ochres, the sculptures are not removed after the burial ceremony, but left to the elements: the surface decorations and form of the works poetically disappear over time. While demonstrating innovative approaches to material and form, the works in this exhibition also show that Aboriginal artists share many of the same concerns as their international contemporary colleagues, including how art reflects individual and communal identity, using art as a form of activism, and the role of abstraction in conveying ideas and emotions.

“Collecting these works was a process of love without the labor, a deeply energizing experience that taught me so much about Aboriginal culture, both past and present,” said May Lam. “These works opened my eyes to new ways of seeing how artists create. Along with my family, I felt it was important that our community have a similar opportunity, and I am thrilled that the San Antonio Museum of Art has taken our gift and created this new exhibition.”

Central to Aboriginal life and art is the Dreaming, a worldview that connects all objects, lands, and beings but transcends temporal designations of past, present, and future. The Dreaming begins with the creation period when ancestral beings emerged from the earth. These beings laid the foundations for Aboriginal law, formed the natural characteristics of the land, established ceremonies, and identified sacred sites. Artistic expressions—including body painting, sculpture, sand and ground paintings, dancing, and singing—are crucial elements of Dreaming stories, along with their role in a wide range of other ancestral ceremonies and traditions.

The exhibition is organized around four thematic sections: “Ancestral Beings and Stories,” “The Land,” “Ceremony,” and “Mortality.” Highlights of the exhibition include many works that address these themes:

- Tess Tipungwuti's *Bima* (2006) is a figurative sculpture that exemplifies the unique artistic tradition of the Tiwi Islands (the Melville and Bathurst Islands located on the northern coast of Australia in the Timor Sea). Bima, the woman represented, is an important ancestor to the Tiwi people. During the creation period Bima left her baby boy out in the sun for too long, causing the first death among Tiwi people. Covered in abstract designs that mirror those used in ceremonial body paintings, *Bima* represents Tiwi grief and mourning.
- *Purnululu* (2007), a painting by Betty Carrington, depicts the 350 million-year-old striped quartz sandstone domes that comprise the Bungle Bungle Range in Purnululu National Park (a World Heritage site). These striking, beehive-shaped forms are the result of many layers of sediment with different clay compositions, hence their banded appearance. Carrington is an artist known for her sensitivity to color and mastery of traditional Aboriginal pigments. The subject matter and the natural ochres used to create it illustrate the artist's connection to her land, as does the title, *Purnululu*—the Gija

Aboriginal word for sandstone and a reference to the artist's grandmother's ancestral country.

- Seymour Wulida's work, including *Ngalyod at Milmilngkan* (2007), are painted on bark from a eucalyptus tree. The bark is peeled in a sheet from the tree, flattened over fire, and sanded before paint is applied. Bark painting is typical of Wulida's homeland and often features rarrk, a delicate cross-hatching technique. The subject of the painting is Ngalyod, or the Rainbow Serpent, a powerful, pervasive ancestral spirit associated with both destruction and rebirth. Ngalyod first appeared in artists' representations in Australia over 8,000 years ago.
- The exhibition also features abstract paintings by the artists Linda Syddick Napaltjarri and Ningura Napurrula. Napaltjarri, who won the prestigious TELSTRA National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2006, and Napurrula, whose work is permanently installed at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, create acrylic paintings on linen depicting stories of ancestral men and women in brilliantly abstracted designs.

Aboriginal peoples' presence in Australia dates back at least 50,000 years, making them one of the earliest civilizations. Art has always played an integral role in Aboriginal society and is intimately linked to daily life. The oldest surviving examples of Aboriginal art are cave paintings and rock engravings that are 40,000 years old, predating the cave paintings at Lascaux (present-day France) and Altamira (present-day Spain). Both subject matter and iconography from ancient precedents inform the practices of contemporary Aboriginal artists, who are thus working in the oldest continuous cultural tradition.

Since 1788, when Europeans colonized Australia, Aboriginal Australians have suffered devastating displacement, dispossession, and marginalization. A staggeringly diverse Aboriginal population of 500,000 people—whose groups spoke over 600 unique languages and dialects at the time of colonization—was quickly reduced through violent conflicts, environmental imbalances and diseases, and discrimination. At its lowest point, Aboriginal populations decreased to a mere 100,000 people. Government-sponsored assimilation programs, which removed indigenous people from their homelands and children from their families (known as the Stolen Generations), attempted to eradicate Aboriginal culture. These operated until the 1960s before governmental restitution policies were adopted to grant rights and citizenship to Aboriginal Australians.

Despite this tumultuous history, contemporary Aboriginal art has flourished in recent decades. Beginning with the Western Desert Painting Movement at Papunya Tula in the early 1970s, community-operated art centers across the continent have given Aboriginal artists the resources and platforms to create artwork and sell it in an international market. In combining designs and subjects depicted by their ancestors with present-day materials, contemporary Aboriginal artists reclaim their rights to the land and preserve their culture for future generations.

About the San Antonio Museum of Art:

The San Antonio Museum of Art serves as a vibrant forum to explore and connect with art that spans the world's geographies, artistic periods, genres, and cultures. An encyclopedic institution, its collection contains nearly 30,000 works representing 5,000 years of history. Housed in the historic Lone Star Brewery on the Museum Reach of San Antonio's famed Riverwalk, the San Antonio Museum of Art is committed to promoting the rich cultural heritage and life of the city. The Museum hosts hundreds of events and public programs each year, including concerts, performances, tours, lectures, symposia, and interactive experiences. As an active civic leader, the Museum is dedicated to enriching the cultural life of the city and the region, and to supporting its creative community.

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