

## Kimberly Learning



*early version of Kimberly Learning in the McDaniels Shed  
“my whole world was my exhibition was written on the wall”*

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is a painting about the beach telling me to come out of my shell and learn about life? In this version you can see the hand of the beach beckoning me (the bubbles rising from the shell) to come out from my western world view.

In the mid 70's, as I was ambling past the Broome Court House two indigenous lawmen of high degree summonsed me across to “sitdown” with them in the red pindan earth. The sun reflected a pink shimmer that mingled with the boab tree limbs that shaded us. For me the Kimberly was a place for learning something new everyday. Sitting on my left was the late David Mowaljarlai. He has been a major influence on my philosophy and purpose as an artist.

*At the time I was teaching art at Nulungu College and made a 300-mile return motorbike ride to Derby to run classes in Adult Aboriginal Education each week. Inspired after doing some community development work in the Fitzroy Crossing fringe camps in the holiday break I established an arts-based employment scheme called the Broome Aboriginal Tourist Development Agency, the first of its kind. I managed the community business of twenty aspiring young people.*

*I knew of no other art teachers in the whole of the Kimberly Region at the time. There were no established cultural support and training systems. I felt both frustrated and fortunate to be able to embark on a journey into new cultural territory with little back up. It was a local well-respected nun, Sister Stella, who counselled me. "You are not painting with paint now, you are painting with people". It was sinking in. On the wall of my studio, where Kuckles, the band performing with Jimmy Chi in the first Bran Nue Dae concerts had practised, I wrote, "my whole world is my exhibition".*

*In the wet season, at night, on my short cut home from the Roebuck Hotel through the Court House grounds I'd occasionally climb palm trees and claim a coconut. One afternoon at his home nearby, the Court Magistrate the Hon Terry Siddal 'yarned' with me on his verandah profoundly articulating the similarities between Westminster Law and Aboriginal Customary Law. He used a string of English words, biblical metaphors, and references to Aboriginal mythology to help me understand his logic. He was telling his lore stories about his version of the LAW and how he was combining both in a new theatre of justice on the bench. The insight was a privilege.*

Under the courthouse boab tree, I was again a privileged receiver. Both Elders had known me since the 1973 Round Earth Company days when I was employed as a visual artist with a pioneering Multi Arts Expedition operating in remote Western and Northern Australia. They knew on the wind what I was doing with the Broome Aboriginal arts group I'd formed which was a committed follow up to those formative cultural exploits.

Their summons to me to sit down was formed with a Ngarinyin utterance, lip motion and a wave of the arm. On my right sat an Elder with a gentle authoritative presence. His wise, crystal clear and poetic words went through my ear and clung to my sense of enquiry like no other. This old man was the 'bus driver' of Kimberley cultural revival after the Wattie Creek walk off when the ramification of a stockman's right to equal pay forced many Aboriginal people off their tribal land on cattle stations and into the fringes of Kimberley towns, fracturing tribal connections, ties and belonging.

Both men were highly fluent in a handful of tribal languages. Communication wasn't just one string of words that relayed the message. Their lips, bodies, and law markings all gestured meaning as they endeavoured to transmit their issue story across cultures to me.

As a privileged receiver I already had some cultural background. I was attuned to some Broome Creole and the daily experiences with my working friends like Jimmy Chi who had primed me with a rich framework of references to aid my understanding.

The lawmen sat me down to talk about their secondment to the bench with the same Broome Magistrate Sidall. He had requested their help with task of the appropriate sentencing of some Mowanjam youths in trouble with the law. The elders said that they had gone 2,000 miles away from their law learning to Perth for schooling and had gotten into strife for taking some "material things".

Something in their body language conveyed a compelling concern that related to, but seemed to be something more than a comment about the innovation of helping the magistrate with making a just and more appropriate Westminster Law sentence.

Engagingly, one lawman drew a diagram in the pindan. It was a spiral. "This, he said pointing with his finger, is the womb part. As you come out from the womb alive, each minute, each day you grow". Aboriginal Law, as I understood them to say, was like a pattern to re-enforce and help one grow through life with meaning, - a spiral of life which he had marked in the ground. Explaining his concern further, he then turned the line back in on itself saying that if we punish our kids in western law and

lock them up inside four square walls away from traditional ways, they will have no law and no culture as a pattern to grow with (life structure). Blocked by four walls and separated behind bars, they wanted me to imagine these lives spiralling daily downwards with no pattern for learning about meaning, back in to where they were born. Referring to a moment of just being alive, yet having little or no life.

From the story drawn into the pindan, it seemed that the purpose of their Law in 'governing' tribal society was different to an alive or dead existence, as they saw it presented in the new dominant Law culture. The redeeming value of active life behaviour improvement aspired to through traditional law and culture practices seemed simplistically subordinated by the new Law and it's popular creed of - do the crime do the time.

What I understood from the elders was that traditional punishment requires an appropriate social adjustment based on their Law story for triggering improved behavioural change to enable one to learn to grow through life for the benefit of society. This Law spiral pattern embraces a learning commitment deemed primary in maintaining the flow of life through the moment of birth onto the pindan earth and onwards.

The societal knowledge and compulsion to help youth to learn to change may be why these respected elders were asked to help the aware magistrate pass sentence in the first place. It seemed that the dilemma for these lawmen of high degree was on one level how to fairly assist the magistrate and his law system, yet, avoid the dire consequences of 'prison box' sentencing if it caused the young accused to be trapped by a 'back inward spiral' state in which being alive and having no life is worse than death.

After the 'sitdown' under the Boab tree in the Broome Court I painted and mapped my recollections about this mind stretching experience with painted spiral lines of law pattern that cut in and out of the pindan earth coloured picture surface. The 'back inward spiral' became a trumpet shell image.

I had initially contemplated how to respectfully integrate a Wandjina figure in to help tell the story of this new work that represented a new paradigm in my thinking.

In 1976 I had the first main painting exhibition at the Praxis Experimental Gallery in Perth. The exhibition integrated music performances, films and involved showing Kimberley traditional culture on slides loaned from the WA Museum. The powerful Law image was ever present.

I thought I'd ride up and get permission to paint the Wandjina into the story . On arrival at Old Mowanjun I caught up again with the Elders in their 'third world' displacement conditions on the fringe of Derby. We talked about my art activities in Broome and things in general. I went quiet about my initial reason for being there, and felt stupid in my self for even contemplating the appropriation of the Wandjina image. I let the thought disappear and just sat in their company.

The Elder turned to me out of the blue and said, ... "you're an artist, we send our kids away from us on the bus into town where they teach art in school." He floated this questioning type of open statement and stopped talking.

*Sitting and thinking about this, my mind's eye deviated in my brain and saw an array of their kid's paintings hanging on four walls of a school. The kids' pictures were commonly plopped with bright basic colours. There were the square houses with two curtained grid windows, centred door, triangle roof, chimney, lollypop green tree and a sun straddling the top right corner.*

*Prompted by this, I questioned the purpose of my chosen profession, and the difference in function between that of an artist as teacher, and an artist as learner. The fledgling art school I had attended (now Curtin Uni) was more about learning by example, than by set and directed art teaching lectures.*

*Thoughts returned to my childhood classroom and the art appreciation words of the time like - isn't that pretty, clever, lovely, special, nice ?.. etc. Then I asked myself, what would the traditional indigenous visual 'learning' words be that affirm talent in children? I thought they would more likely be engagement words that encourage observation, meaning, exploration, mapping, and tracking. In comparison, I thought children's appraisal in a school would more likely use commentary words that refer to degrees of cleverness and prettiness. I turned in my mind to the Wandjina I had wished to include in the painting and contemplated the words that might be associated with this icon of profound visual meaning.*

*Today, fine art is generally accepted as being separate from activities like economics, science, marketing, politics etc.,. Further separations are made into categories of painting, drawing, craft, mapping, industrial design etc. By this comparison Aboriginal culture is integrative.*

*The differently framed purpose of doing and even teaching visual art in both societies seems not unlike the cultural differentiation and similarities explained by the magistrate about the functioning of Westminster and Customary practices in administering Law.*

In the lull I also reflected on the story in painting of the 'sitdown' dilemma of land connected cultural practices versus the isolating prison box system, and the rights, responsibilities and obligations in sentencing traditional people away from a law pattern of life behind western walls.

The live contact of the 'sitdowns' under the boab tree had brought my scattered and transformed understanding into a richer state. The privileged learning experience propelled me to consider a potential intermediary role in communicating change issues across time and cultural divides. This would be a more expansive and pervasive communication role than that which I was schooled in. It was to show off my picture painting ability and compete for a livelihood with other artists in the cultural marketplace. This new open-ended option seemed to be the *raison d'être* that I was seeking to find since leaving art school.

These thoughts also affected the emerging painting that I had ridden to Old Mowanjum to validate and illuminate.

Thinking anew about the role of artist as communicator in relation to my visual 'higher education' qualification, I saw the difference between engagement and commentary (replicated in the pattern of cultural distinction between the two Law systems) as the clue as to what for?, why? and how I? might use my visual media capabilities in the future.

If I were to pursue this, it would require me to formalise a shift in approach. The emphasis would change from the 'competing for attention' world of art to embrace an art with an engagement aspiration, where art was pervasively flowing throughout life, and not prescribed to particular subsets of society.

The "Elders' multi-modal sitdown" (lips, words, diagrams..etc) was the trigger to formalise a shift in my approach to life as an artist. It was the origin of community and corporate cultural mapping practices in the visionbuilding structure created for the purpose of dealing with the complexities in circumstances of societal behavioural change. It is designed to be a comprehensive social engagement system that is responsive to it's origin, the understanding that Aboriginal Law is a cohesive pattern structure to help one grow through life.

*In questioning the role of artist, I remembered another stay over at Old Mowanjum, when the Elder who had sat on my left, David Mowaljarlai, asked me to teach him the use of colour as he only used ochres and charcoal. I had been free to wander his place and closely observe him paint. I could see a universal array of mannerisms in the way he worked that I had similarly seen in those of a regarded English artist Bob Bourne, a mentor with whom I had once shared a studio in Perth.*

*Mowaljarlai told me the essence of the way he painted. He would weave up to five cultural threads of symbol stories onto a bark, working them into a creative state where they evoked the right meaning, in balance.*

*Like being confronted with a new paradigm for the first time Mowaljarlai had access to new acrylic colours. He wanted some tutoring to get the variety of effects they made into a balance relationship as he had traditionally done with his stories on the page (this seeking of a balance of emphases is ultimately what drives most contemporary painting). When remembering observations and exchanges with Bob Bourne as he worked, the result afforded a glimpse into universal mannerisms in the make up of artists as communicators, across cultures.*

Out of this sitting, talking, thinking and questioning at Old Mowanjum, a message was emerging about my role as an artist that posed a fundamental question – ***is the reason why you are alive is to learn about life?***

The Elder had ‘massaged’ the message with a pattern of relationships that re-enforced the subject of the ‘sitdown’ dilemma. It triggered in me a questioning of a reason for being that I had never been near to doing, or able to understand via western education. At the time I could have gone to the university library and not find this guidance message explicitly written in a book. However, in Broome, I was able to learn from a composite of verbal and nonverbal undertakings. It is easier to receive a message than send one. I revere the convoluted lengths they went to in posing and impressing it upon me.

*For a while the question - “**is the reason why you are alive to learn about life?**” became the title of the painting. It progressed over a decade of constant visual tuning and adjustment in getting my mind around their issue story. It was completed across the continent at Maroota on the northwestern outskirts of Sydney.*

*In 1994 on a visit to Maroota, Mowaljarlai wandered in through the front door and slipped past my outstretched greeting hands to quietly stand for fifteen minutes soaking in the completed Kimberley Learning painting hanging in the lounge room. Nonplussed and out of notice, I would move back and forth with my hands in expectation of our normal shake to have them warmly clasped when he turned and said – “got a lot of spirit that one”. What was most affirming to me was that he had not known I had started this story painting based on the ‘sitdown’ under the boab tree and it contained no Wandjina imagery.*

*In the painting, a new figure representing the beach appeared cut into the pindan ground of the picture plane. I metaphorically put myself in the picture as if I was both of, and in the trumpet shell. Seen emerging from the shell are my air bubbles. The beach figure that replaced the Wandjina insertion idea was beckoning me to free up from the very frustration occupying me when I was summonsed to the ‘sitdown’. The beach was telling me to come out of my shell and learn about life.*

Back then in Broome, I had found that the only way to cope with the stress of pioneering an arts employment scheme with no back up was to run and run and run along Cable beach at dusk. Run and run until I was of the world, and at one with the world. I then felt freer to manage the enterprise in a culturally richer way. It was like the beach was also sending messages from the courthouse grounds and Old Mowanjum.

I would run because it was possible to run. In that state I was free to be.

With this reason for being, I felt I could also come out of my shell of western art conditioning to paint anything and everything outside constraints of the fashion of the day. I could transcend the convention of artist as a competitor, selling by the square centimetre, and be free to explore the pervasive role of

the artist as co-operator and interactivist in the societal media like a modern day cave painter, producing effects not unlike the writing marked on the wall of my Broome studio... *"my whole world is my exhibition"*. This marking projects a reason for being that has propelled me to participatively grow the mapping and engagement structures as an artist/visionbuilder so that we might share an option to come out of our shells and learn about life.

*These were the 70's, at the beginning of the discussions about deaths in custody. After all the legal word enquiries, the heart of the issue has not been communicated well enough via the legal/government channels to the public. The precise, segmented, sequenced verbal format that is the primary mode of communication in our adversarial legal system may not be the most effective vehicle for sharing culturally complex patterns of information.*