

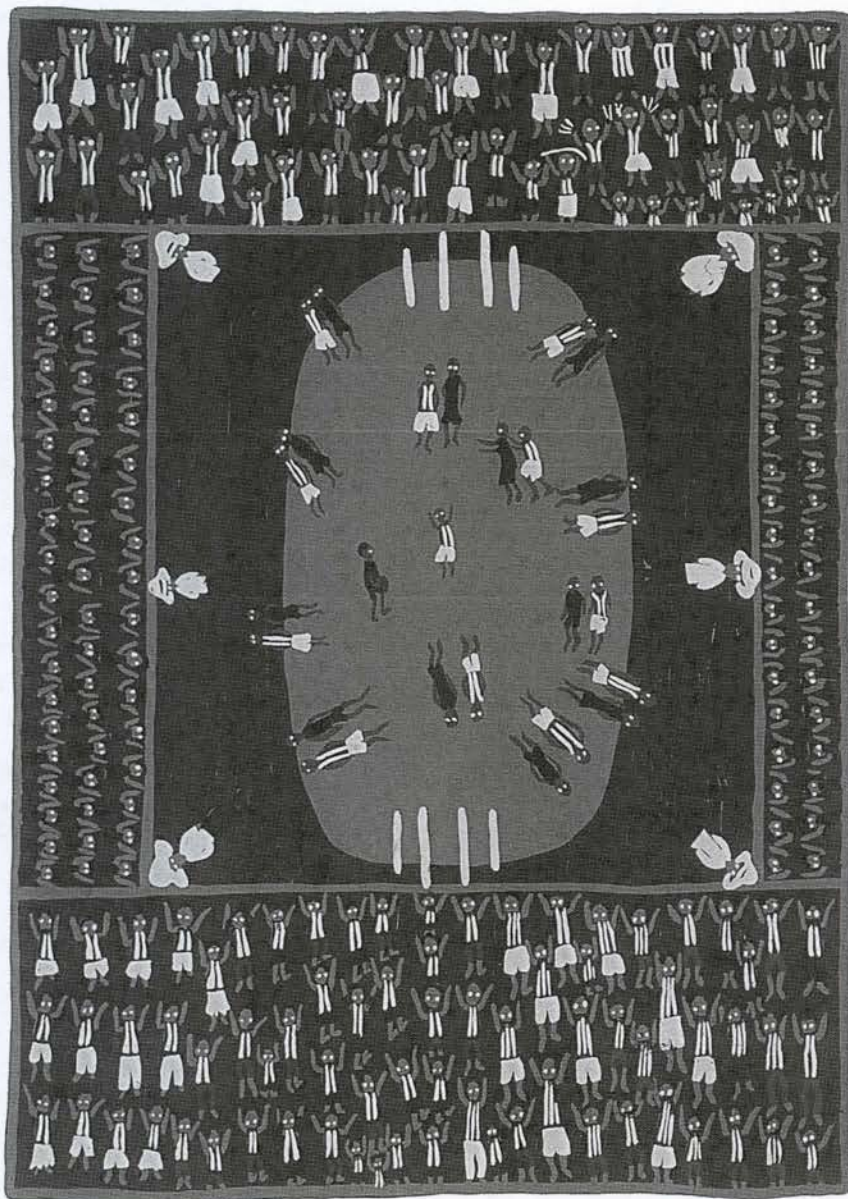
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Like painting like football

SUZANNE SPUNNER



Marnyula Munungurr, Michael Long, 2002, screenprint. Courtesy of the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, Yirrkala, and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

There are some old Aboriginal men who claim to know that story, to know a footy dreaming. They say it has a lot to do with why the kangaroo is on the Sherrin.

Simon Turner,
Arts Administrator Urapuntja Artists,
Utopia, and Coach of the Sandover
Football Team, July 2000.

In the Northern Territory the passion for Australian Rules football (AFL) knows no bounds.¹ Over the last three football seasons, Alcaston Gallery in Fitzroy,

Melbourne, has shown a series of football related works of art by Aboriginal artists. The first two exhibitions, *Footy stories* and *Finals fever*, came from the Central Australian community of Utopia and featured the work of young Urapuntja painters from the Sandover football team. Essendon legend Michael Long, an Aboriginal player originally recruited from the Northern Territory, also first showed his football paintings in *Footy stories*. The Sandover artists depict football at a community level in the Northern Territory and they also paint their AFL heroes. The third exhibition held last year was a

testimonial to Michael Long, and drew Aboriginal artists from all over the Territory as well as Gippsland, Mildura and Shepparton.

The Sandover football painters know the game inside out and from the ground up. They all play local football and they are aficionados of the great southern game and watch telecasts and repeats of AFL matches whenever they can. They depict something they love with accuracy and completeness, and either they and their countrymen are the heroes of the match, or it is a tribute to their favourite AFL team. No detail is overlooked, and every detail is invested with significance, but this is a depiction that is new, with no oldfellas to show them how it's been done before. In *Footy stories* the artists created their own 'Hall of Fame' – portraits of the greats, past and present – as well as paintings of particular local CAFL (Central Australian Football League) games, important AFL matches, and even paintings of the football itself.

The Sandover paintings of football games are particularly interesting because there is a unique fit in representational styles and devices drawn from aspects of traditional Western Desert ground painting. The games are depicted in planar perspective. The oval of the footy ground is the organising shape, the central roundel, and the centre of attention. There is no foreshortening, so that the goal posts at each end are seen from the centre at full size. In his discussion of Egyptian tomb painters who employed a similar perspective, Gombrich says that 'their method resembled that of the map maker'. The artists want to preserve their knowledge of the football game in the map of the ground and so everything – the ground, goal posts, and scoreboards – is shown in its canonical orientation. Such decisions about representation may have come from their knowledge of ground painting, from seeing the coach draw a mud map diagram on the ground or on the blackboard to show positions and the movement of players, from the graphics employed on television match replays to show particular passages of play, or more likely it's a combination of all these elements. What is important for the artists is to convey the speed and action of the game, the play of the play.

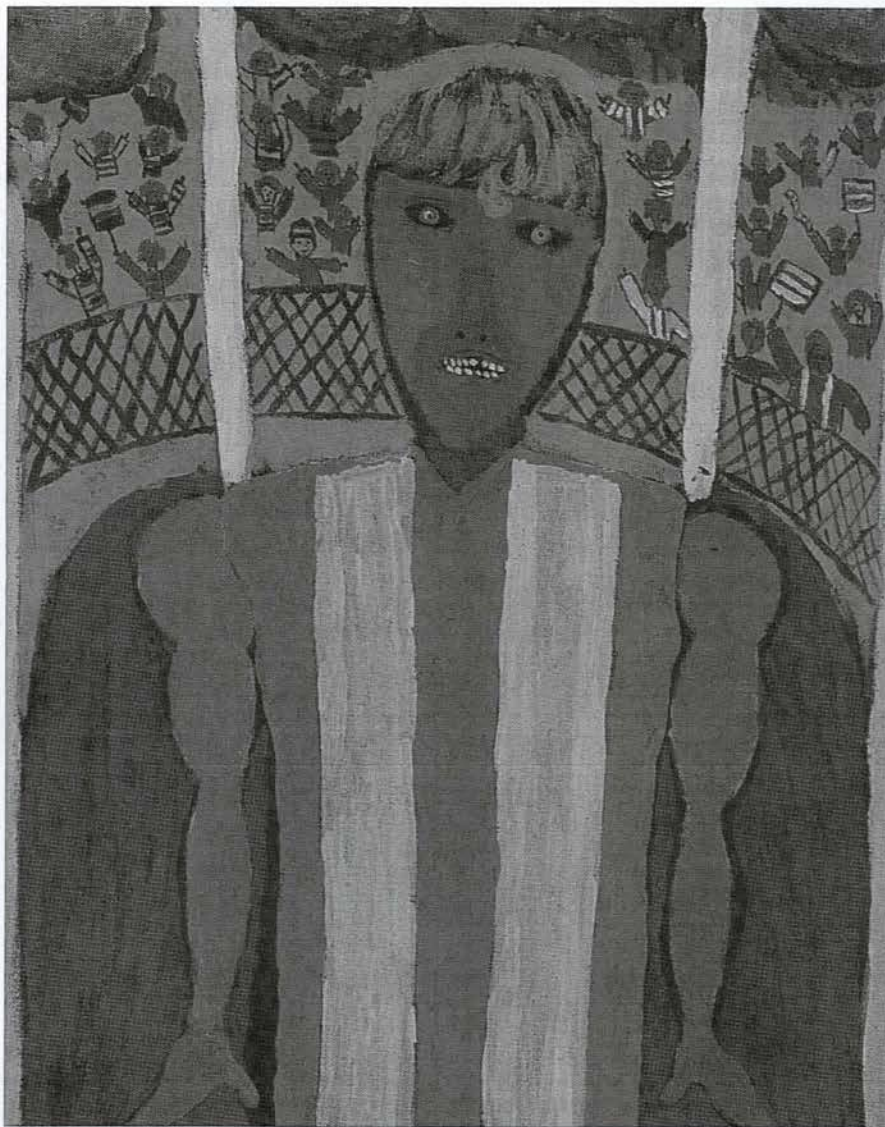
Some artists have adopted rudimentary or elaborated stick figures, but if shown they are splayed out on the field aligned along the closest sector boundary, so that each player is seen from the perspective of the centre of the ground, where the game starts when the ball is bounced by the umpire. The artist is a player; he is not outside the game looking at it, but is in the ideal spot to see everybody and everything. In this schema colour is important, the artist aims for clarity and contrast and tries to stay within the bounds of reality. The problem is that the desert ground is red-brown, so white is best to mark out the sectors of the playing field. The football is shown as vivid red and outlined in white to stand out against the red brown ground. There is a conflict in the representation of the umpire who wears white, so often in the

paintings the umpires are dressed in black suits to stand out against the goal posts and boundary lines.

Instead of stick figures, many of the artists employ the conventional Western Desert fat 'U' shape to denote a person (sitting on the ground), and so show the players and the spectators in this way, striping them in team colours like fat caterpillars. Others rank the representational forms employing the stick figure for the players, and generalise the spectators with the fat 'U's. All the artists fill the area outside the football ground with spectators, and some divide it into regular sections, each radiating from the centre and allocated in turn to supporters from the two teams, thus creating a strong overall pattern that replicates the structure of a ground painting. Teams are conventionally delineated with appropriately coloured stripes, and the spectators' allegiances are indicated by the relevant striped marking, like body painting, offering the artist the opportunity to pattern the entire surface of the work.

Rhythm and dynamism of pattern is a priority for the artists, and much is made of stripes, and horizontals, verticals, diagonals and chevrons complete the patterns. If the artists depict the spectators as figures they are shown cheering, with their arms raised, thus enhancing the effects of the pattern. The passion for pattern is evident in Calvert Foster's frieze of footballers where the entire Sandover team is shown in two long narrow panels lined up as if on the boundary. The horizontal stripes of the team's jumpers and socks are echoed by a striping of their facial features, so that the players' eyes form another horizontal band. Each block of horizontal stripes is joined to the next by a brown diagonal cross formed by the linked arms of the players and the design of horizontals and diagonals is finely set off by the tiny verticals of the spikes on each player's boots.

Community football is also a popular subject for Aboriginal artists. Stevie Loy Akemarr and Laurence Jones Apetyarr put it all down: the perspective is aerial and canonical with a mountain range on the horizon; the roads leading into the community have gates and cattle grids; around the perimeter of the footy ground there is a line up of four wheel drives and troopies; spectators are sitting on benches; the police divvie van and the ambulance stand ready. Life is as busy and full off the field as on it. Around the ground there are houses, a water tank on a tall stand, barking dogs, kids playing on swings and throwing boomerangs, someone fixing a car, and abandoned cars in the distance. The earth is rust red, the oval bright red, the players a mix of black and grey, the



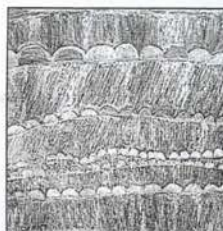
Stevie Loy Akemarr, Wayne Carey, 2000, acrylic on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Urapuntja Artists, Utopia, and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

policeman is green and the spectators are black and yellow.

Each portrait in the 'Hall of Fame' is accompanied by the artist's commendation. Stevie Loy Akemarr says Wayne Carey 'makes a strong mark, makes good play. He's got good moves and is strong on the ball'. Carey is depicted with the blue and white stripes of his jumper making powerful organising verticals, and two long pink muscly arms so shapely they look like sexy stockings legs. Roley Long Akemarr's *Michael Long* is well observed – the ears stick out and the distinctive widow's peak hairline is faithfully rendered. His *Coach of the century – Kevin Sheedy* is a brilliant distillation of Sheedy's manic determination, in the brick red face, the road-

runner hair and the beady eyes that miss nothing. 'He trains that team hard and tells them how to play. When the game is on he shouts and goes red in the face'. All the portraits are from the jumper up, and Graham Long Knwarrey's *'God' Gary Ablett* is as wide as the frame. Patrick Tilmouth Akemarr's *Glen Archer* is a pink angel with blond curly hair framed by the goal posts around his head, a brilliant blue sky and fluffy white clouds, while Jamie Loy Akemarr's *Steven Silvagni* looks like a Renaissance prince.

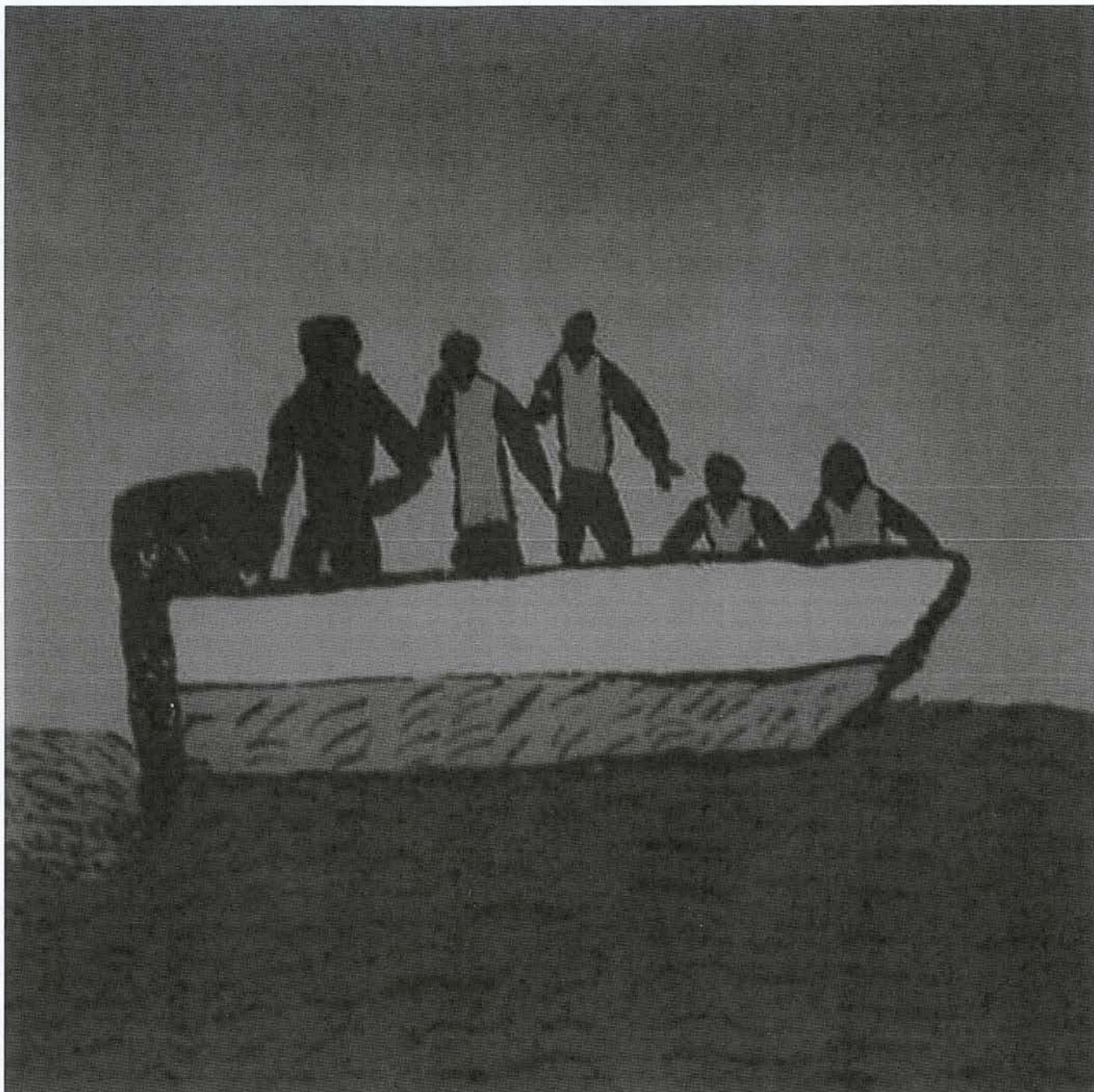
Sandover artists make various representations of footballs. Motorbike Paddy Ngal made night and day footballs from bundles of paperbark bound with string and twine, and painted red for day and yellow with red ends



Dinny McDiunny, 2003, *Wet Season* (detail)

Theresa Lemon, 2003, *Mirneli*

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Jimmy Orsto, Footy team off to the game, etching, printed by Northern Editions, Northern Territory University, Darwin. Courtesy of the artist and Munupi Arts and Crafts, Pularumpi, Melville Island.

for night, compounding the legend that football has indigenous origins, rather than something imported from the playing fields of England to Melbourne. In Steven Martin Apetyar's painting *Sherrin*, the big red ball

fills the picture frame. It's as if the ball is the football ground – the stitching marks out the boundaries, and the laces stand up straight like goal posts – but this is a footy dreaming, and there is only one player: the rampant kangaroo leaping for a mark. Outside the people sit on the ordinary earth and watch him perform on the sacred dance ground.

These are not the first paintings of football by aboriginal artists. The late Ginger Riley painted a pair, *Wul-gori-yi-mar (Aboriginal way)* and *Munangg (White Fella way)* in 1996, which were shown in his retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997. Riley depicted the football ground as a mandala with stripes of colour, a force field of energy where tiny ant-like figures do battle. In the sky above Riley's totemic figures the sea eagle

and the snake reign amongst storm clouds. Kimberley artist, the late Queenie McKenzie painted *St George and Manly – the Finalists* also in 1996, after she saw her first rugby league match in Sydney. McKenzie included her distinctive mountain range in the background and did not portray the players or essay any figures; rather the protagonists are the clubs' symbols, crosses and shields. But of course she was not painting Australian Rules!

The *Michael Long Testimonial Art Award* was part of a series of testimonial events held for Long last year. The Director of Alcaston Gallery, Beverley Knight, is also a Director of Essendon Football Club, and a mentor for the player, and so was uniquely placed to foster such an exhibition. Among the highlights

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was Hermannsburg potter Irene Entata's work showing an Essendon Hawthorn match around the body of a pot. It is a delightful work, the colourful backs and heads of the spectators forming a wide multi-coloured mosaic band that seems to support the base of the pot. Above them is the footy ground and the game in full flight. Entata has placed Michael Long in the centre looking at us with players from both teams on either side of him.

The continuous olive green band representing the ground is punctuated by a brighter green sector where the artist has placed the umpires in their white hats and coats. Above the footy ground, in a tight space left at the top marked off by a white fence, there are the excited faces of other spectators on the far side of the ground. There is something pleasing about the relationship between the full oval of the pot itself and the oval of the ground. On the top of the pot is the figure is the man himself, Michael Long, about to kick the ball in his distinctive style.

Yirrkala artist, Marrnyula Mununggurr has made a screenprint of a match that suggests a bark painting, and is organised in segments of infill pattern framing the football field. Her players have the fluid movement of dancing figures. Djambu Barra Barra from Ngukurr re-jigged his *Devil devil* sculpture by painting the legs in red and black stripes in tribute to the Bombers' star player. Local football can also be the site of miracles, as in Rhonda Plummer's version of a Bomber fan's dreamtime painting of Michael Long coming to Tennant Creek and playing with the Tennant Creek Eagles and kicking the winning goal. Everything else is firmly locally placed: the footy ground is framed by advertisements for community businesses including Julalikari Council.

Tiwi artist Jimmy Orsto's bold etching *Footy team off to the game*, is a surprising and vivid take on the subject. It shows four men in their footy jumpers in a tinnie (an aluminium dinghy), two standing up like warriors off to battle, with a fifth man throttling the outboard. The trip across the Apsley Strait from Melville Island to Bathurst Island is a regular part of the game for Tiwi players, and Michael Long's father grew up on Melville Island Mission and played for and coached the Imalu Tigers. The Tiwi Islands

are renowned for producing many gifted footballers who learnt to play barefoot and later were drafted for the AFL. In the tropical Top End Australian Rules football is played in the Wet, the hottest time of the year, and Orsto's etching evokes these seasonal contradictions. If you didn't know the real story you might think they were just going fishing. Football is serious business in the Territory. Today the *Tiwi Grand Final*,² which is a highlight of Northern Territory football, is advertised as an opportunity for mainland Territorians, interstate visitors and football talents scouts to select great players and maybe some Tiwi art as well.

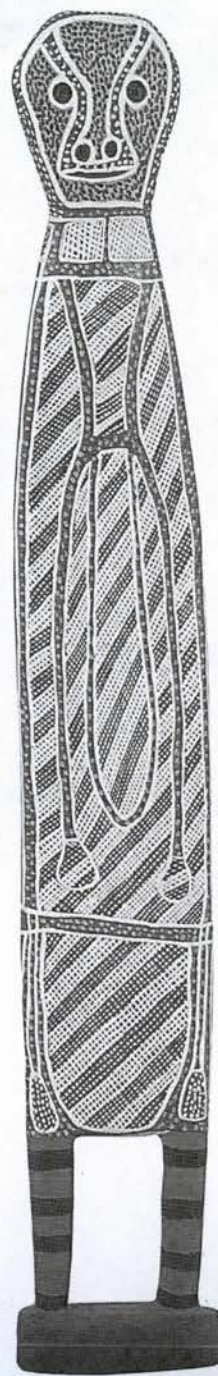
Notes

1 'For if the AFL seems significant in Melbourne, this is nothing compared with its place in the Top End', Nicholas Rothwell, *The Australian*, February 2003.

2 There are eight teams in the Tiwi Football League competing over the wet season from October to March.

Footy stories from the Sandover was at Alcaston Gallery, Fitzroy, Melbourne, from August to September 2000; Finals fever: The art of Football was at Alcaston Gallery from September to October 2001; The Michael Long Testimonial Art Award was at Alcaston Gallery from September to October 2002.

Suzanne Spinner is a playwright based in Melbourne, who lived in Darwin for ten years until 1996. She is currently writing a book on art in the Northern Territory since Aboriginal Land Rights.



Djambu Barra Barra, *Devil devil*, 2002, acrylic on wood. Courtesy of the artist and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.