

COOPER & MARAWILI

Review Laura Fisher

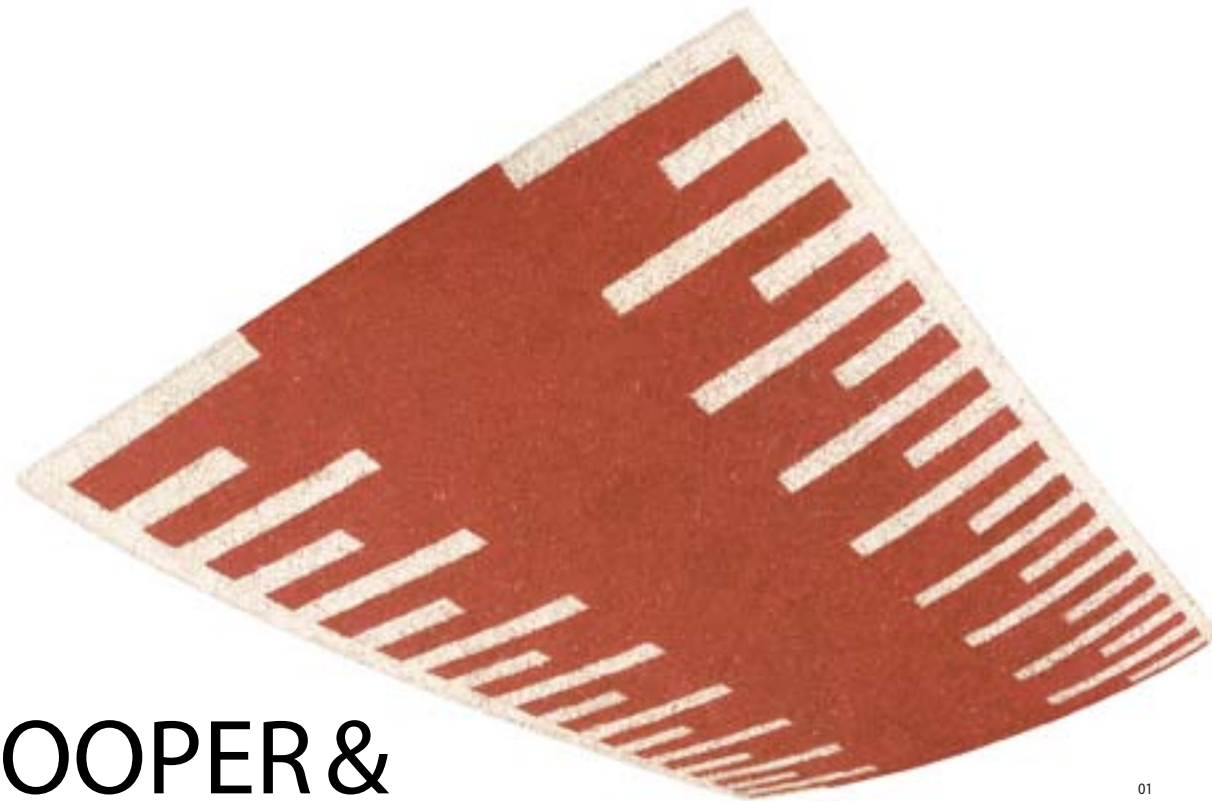
Annandale Galleries' recent showing of Charles Cooper's "Peak Oil Paintings" and a series of barks and ceremonial poles by Yolngu sisters Yalmakany and Gurrundul Marawili was one of those rare exhibitions that made possible a stimulating conversation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artworks. Yalmakany and Gurrundul work from Buku-Larrngay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala, where their brother Djambawa Marawili and Gurrundul's husband Wanyubi Marika have set a precedent for remarkable innovation in recent years. Their works in this show for the most part depict Gurrtpji, the stingray which is hunted at Blue Mud Bay and a Madarpa clan totem. Gurrtpji forged a creation path at Bäniyala, a site adjacent to Blue Mud Bay. He journeyed into the bush along the route of a tidal creek, where he bit into the land to create several billabongs, before travelling out to the point Lulumu to become a white rock surrounded by tidal flows.

Cooper's works depict roadway markings such as pedestrian crossings and speed humps. They continue a longstanding interest in geometric painting and the signs and symbols through which we communicate and organise our spaces. The Marawili sisters no doubt know little or nothing of Cooper's work, but Cooper is familiar with and admiring of Yirrkala barks as well as other types of Aboriginal art. Indeed, Aboriginal art's emergence in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with a shift away from conventional, front-on landscape painting in Cooper's practice. Aboriginal art resonated with his interest in symbology and the effects achieved by different types of mark-making. Furthermore, as the son of a map-maker he was predisposed to appreciate topographical methods of representing the environment. All the works in this show are iconoclastic with respect to the western canonical lynchpin of the rectangular canvas, and importantly their supports are intrinsic to the impact of the imagery that adorns them. In the case of Gurrundul's and

Yalmakany's works, the irregularities in the bark echo the watery undulations rendered on the bark's surface. With the exception of two orb-shaped pieces, Coopers' works are painted on canvases that have been stretched over irregular quadrilateral frames, as well as on similarly shaped wood panels taken from a desk. Their shapes authenticate the gentle convexes and acute, tilting perspectives that Cooper has achieved through pictorial techniques, and one can't help checking that the works are not in fact three-dimensional.

In the Gurrtpji paintings, bands of hatched line-work and stripes of dotting are overlaid in plait-like formation. They describe the ripples of water that radiate from Gurrtpji as he glides through the water and furrows the land on his creation path, as well as the tides that surge around his resting place. In Yalmakany's work the stingray form is subtly delineated amidst the wavy striations, and sometimes obscured by the reflected sunlight that marks the water's surface. Variations in colour and pattern, and a favouring of multiple forms bring a more distinguished figure/ground relationship to Gurrundul's compositions, in which trails of bubbles appear to slide over Gurrtpji's back.

Unlike the Futurists who sought to evoke movement by attending to the activity of the subject, Cooper captures the slanting shapes that we glimpse as we rush through urban environments. Like scaled-up reproductions of innocuous cut-outs from magazine car advertisements, they create the sense that we are racing at vertiginous angles through surreal urban scenes. The roughened and cracked surfaces of road markings are conveyed by Cooper's careful hatching of the painted surface while wet, his scraping of white into grey, bus-lane red into white. Flecks of orange and purple emerge from the ground, and a thin, dark glaze deepens the tones. Up close, a lively textured field is created, but from afar we see a uniformly worn and gravelly patch of road.



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The work of all three artists is characterised by a strong conceptual approach to the subject which is reflected in their precise workmanship and evocation of a many-layered landscape. Coopers' works invite us to experience our mundane surroundings with fresh eyes, but they also carry a playful injunction that should inform our interpretation of Yalmakany's and Gurrundul's paintings. We are accustomed to seeing Aboriginal art as exotic: as being dense with symbols and iconography that must be decoded, and this habit positions it as being far removed from what western, secular beings create. The message in Cooper's paintings is that we are all surrounded by and responsive to signs and symbols that are contingent upon a particular world view. The complementarities between these artists' works encourage us to reach past the romance and trepidation that comes with apprehending cultural difference. We are asked simply to admire three artists who have portrayed environments that are richly invested with meaning, and to identify, even if briefly, with their world views. ■

17 March - 17 April 2010
Annandale Galleries, 110 Trafalgar Street, Annandale, Sydney
www.annandalegalleries.com.au

01 Charles Cooper, Brierly, 2010, ochre on bark, 332 x 209cm
02 Gurrundul Marawili, Gurrtpji, 2009, ochre on bark, 97 x 75cm
03 Yalmakany Marawili, Gurrtpji, 2009, ochre on bark, 143 x 46cm
Courtesy the artists and Annandale Galleries



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