

Obituary (by Chips MacKinolty for Sydney Morning Herald)

**Gela Nga-Mirraitja Fordham\***

**Painter, sculptor, story teller**

**Born, Bamdibu, c.1935 – Died Katherine, Northern Territory, June 2006**

It was a long way from his birthplace of Bamdibu in central Arnhem Land, but the visit to Sydney Harbour was an epiphany for Fordham. It was the unlikely site of his Rembarrnga people's account of the time before and after the coming of the white man to Australia. The Sydney Harbour Bridge.

It was an odd conjunction. Fordham was in Sydney for the first showing at the Sydney Biennale of *The Aboriginal Memorial*, a collection of 200 log coffins that was to become a central display at the National Gallery of Australia, and which commemorated 200 years of occupation of Australia. An explicit political event at which he sang mortuary songs.

At the same time he was witnessing a mythic bridge, constructed by "the old Captain Cook ... before Adam and Eve", and seeing the place where, according to his people, the old Captain Cook had successfully battled with Satan. He was standing at a site which according to Rembarrnga tradition, preceded the coming of the "new Captain Cooks": the age of the white man.

Gela Nga-Mirraitja Fordham, born around 1935, was a prolific Aboriginal painter, artist and storyteller who came to public attention relatively late in life. It was not until 1983 that he produced his first major bark paintings. His death last month marked the end of a unique flowering of talent which traversed shared and disparate visions of black and white Australian history and knowledge.

His early years were spent growing up with his parents and siblings in remote bush land, though he remembered taking the three week "foot walk" to the tin mining settlement of Maranboy, near Katherine, three or four times during the war years before his family settled at Tandangal near present day Barunga. It was a time remembered with great affection, living a traditional life. On bush trips many years later he would remark, on crossing the border, "we're leaving the Territory now, away from government land, this is Arnhem Land", as if it were a completely different domain. And in so many ways, it was.

In his teens he took up life of a stockman, working cattle stations south to Newcastle Waters and west to the VRD, taking the English name "Fordham" from the family that ran Gorrie Station at the time. In the 1960s and '70s he spent most of his time at Maningrida on the Arnhem coast, working as a grader driver and helping build Guyun, one of the first outstations in the region. In the late 1970s he moved to Beswick, 100 km east of Katherine, unsuccessfully trying to establish an outstation at his birthplace.

From apparently nowhere, Fordham began painting for sale in 1983: a sudden efflorescence of bold ochres on bark, uncluttered by the fine cross hatching often thought

to typify Arnhem Land art. And the subject matter was something else again, more reminiscent of animation story boards than Aboriginal iconography. Very rarely did he paint ritualised images of “dreamings”: his was a cosmos that embraced histories such as the bombing of Darwin, or the murderous 1903 cattle drives through Arnhem Land by the Eastern and African Cold Storage Company. Others would tell of the coming of Christianity, and its melding with traditional Aboriginal law. Others more didactic: combining a taxonomy of birds of his homelands, with the clan groups and country names that each species belonged to. And then of course there was the story of Captain Cook – the “good” Captain Cook – who preceded the guns and killings of the “new Captain Cooks”, a painting documented by Penny McDonald in the 1988 film, *Too Many Captain Cooks*.

Sadly, many of these early paintings were destroyed in the 1998 Katherine floods.

However, Fordham’s output from the late 1980s was extraordinary, having moved into Katherine around this time. From log coffins he branched out to exquisite sculptures: Mimi figures and tricksters such as Balangjarlŋgalayn spirits. Further into the 1990s works on canvas and paper exhibited and collected nationally and internationally: bold, stark images on plain pipeclay or ochre grounds.

But above all, Fordham was a storyteller and teacher. He was fond of a drink, and I have vivid memories of him at the club at Beswick at sundown, bringing in his latest bark painting wrapped in an old sheet. He would tell, declaim – even preach – his latest stories. It would be a performance for all, with laughter and good humour, and with catcalls, disagreements and elaborations from his countrymen. At times in song, at others spoken in a mixture of Rembarrnga, Kriol and English, his stories were lyrical reflections of his homelands. As he said once of the call of a bird found only near his birth place: “it sings out, ‘baidjadjabobok, baidjadjabobok ... baidjadjabobok, baidjadjabobok’, he’s calling right out into the country, like a shanghai ...”

Fordham took his storytelling to many parts of Australia, often as a dancer with the Bamyili dancers, as well as through his art. They were stories worth telling to us all. He is survived by his wife and extended family.

\* At his family’s request, and according to tradition, the given names and photograph of the late artist have not been published. Gela Nga-Mirraitja refers to his skin and clan names respectively.

Michael Bolton Fine Art wishes to thank Chips MacKinolty for this exhibition article.