

## IN CAPTIVE By Adnan Begic, Curator

Traditional Aboriginal culture extends to a great number of distinct languages with complex linguistic devices and symbolic codes of communication. Alongside the visual language, dance and music these practices have been for centuries deeply engaged in Aboriginal domestic life and religious ceremonies.

The complexity of these languages, in particular when interconnected with spiritual meaning of the natural environment and significance of their own past; the collective memory consistently passed through oral history, seem to exceed an unchallenging interpretation of distinctive cultural codes.

In translating these languages and practices we tend to keep a superficial approach. By the use of established colloquialisms we identify Aboriginal art forms and its techniques as dot paintings, x-ray paintings, track painting, map painting, bark or pattern painting.

Aboriginal art works 'involve more than just ochres on bark; they represent a social history, an encyclopaedia of the environment; a place, a site, as season, a being, a song, a dance, a ritual ; an ancestral story and personal history'.<sup>1</sup>

In the same spirit the exhibition *In Captivity* brings out three selected Aboriginal artworks acquired by Dubbo Regional Gallery Collection - Bruce Nabegeyo's *Mimi s with Ngalkordoh (Brolga)* and *Namarnkol (Burrumundi Djang)* acquired in 2003 and Peggy Napangardi Jones' *White Bird* acquired in 2006.

Bruce Nabegeyo is a senior artist from Western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. His country is Namorkadaby and his language is Kunwinjku. Bruce is an important ceremony man and has gained national and international recognition for his work.

In the lithograph *Mimis with Ngalkordoh (Brolga)*, Brolga is the name of the bird represented here with curved neck and head, with x-rayed depiction of backbone neck, hatched body and visible internal organs.

*Mimis* are the magic spirits which talk the language of their own underworld, they surround the bird, playing with it and teasing it. We do not know if the bird is captivated or hunted down and what is the relationship between *Mimis* and the animal. We now that *Mimis* are good and happy spirits. When Aboriginal people first came to northern Australia, the Mimi taught them how to hunt and cook kangaroos and other animals.

The representation in the second lithograph seem to be more undeclared - *Namarnkol (Burrumundi Djang)* is the headless fish with X- ray backbone laying down in between two water plants on both sides.

Peggy Napangardi Jones uses her form of expression as a way of preserving stories that had been passed on her by her grandparents. *White Bird* attracts our attention by a nontraditional formal style articulated through a gestural approach in treatment of colour and depiction of the subject matter.

The selections and integration of these three particular Aboriginal artworks in *In Captivity* exhibition is the preference of different kind – the preference of language.

This selection reflects an arena of different knowledge, which by its nature deconstructs and disassembles *our captive language* of art representation and engages us in a story telling, the one we cannot fully comprehend.

<sup>1</sup> Dion Mundine, *The Native Born* , p.29 in *Native Born, Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, 2000.*

### BRUCE NABEGEYO

*Namarnkol (Burrumundi Djang)* 2003 (far left)  
Lithograph in one colour, printed from one aluminium plate on Magnani Aquerello 280gsm  
Drawn by the Artist at Injalak Arts and Crafts, Oenpelli, and printed by Martin King at the Australian Print Workshop  
Image: 65 x 44cm, paper: 76 x 56cm  
Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery

*Mimis with Ngalkordoh (Brolga)* 2003  
Lithograph in one colour, printed from one aluminium plate on Magnani Aquerello 280gsm  
Drawn by the Artist at Injalak Arts and Crafts, Oenpelli, and printed by Martin King at the Australian Print Workshop  
Image: 65 x 44cm, paper: 76 x 56cm  
Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery

PEGGY NAPANGARDI JONES  
*White Bird* 2004 (left)  
Acrylic on linen  
71 x 91cm  
Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cover: Beverly Veasey *Habitat #9 2008*. From *Habitats*. Lightjet print. 60 x 76cm. Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery.  
Purchased with funds donated by Friends of Western Plains Cultural Centre Inc 2008. Image © the artist

Dubbo Regional Gallery - The Armati Bequest  
is located at the Western Plains Cultural Centre,  
76 Wingewarra Street Dubbo NSW.

**Opening hours:**  
Wednesday - Monday 10.00am to 4.00pm  
Closed Tuesdays, Good Friday,  
Christmas Day and Boxing Day

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# IN CAPTIVITY

Animals in the Dubbo Regional Gallery Collection  
8 November 2008 – 29 March 2009

## IN CAPTIVITY In Conversation with Dubbo Regional Gallery's Collection

*In Captivity* is the first in a series of WPCC curated exhibitions that focus on the subject of animals. *The Animal in Art* theme has been a long-established framework and a focal point of the collecting policy for Dubbo Regional Gallery since its establishment in 1989.

The theme that was mostly examining the representation of animals in the Visual Arts has been since a guiding programming principle, an inspiration and direction for a range of exciting projects; not only through exhibition developments but also forums, education and public programs.

Following this thematic principle Dubbo Regional Gallery can be proud of having in its possession the works of Arthur Boyd, Michael Riley, Hayden Fowler, David Noonan, Simon Cuthbert, Heather B Swann and Noel McKenna, alongside many others offering unique depictions of the animal in history, other cultures and contemporary life.

Slightly different in approach, yet with animal in focus, is what distinguishes this new series. Not only that *In Conversation* series looks for broadening our understanding of traditional and contemporary representation of the animal in art context, it opens



## IMAGE, CAPTURED By Kent Buchanan, Assistant Curator

*The domestication of animals is the oldest documented keeping of animals in captivity. The result was habituation of wild animal species to survive in the company of, or by the labour of, human beings. Domesticated species are those whose behaviour, life cycle, or physiology has been altered as a result of their breeding and living conditions under human control for multiple generations. Probably the earliest known domestic animal has been the dog, likely as early as 15000 BC among hunter-gatherers in several locations.*

*Throughout history not only domestic animals as pets and livestock were kept in captivity and under human care, but also wild animals. Some were failed domestication attempts. Also, in past times, primarily the wealthy, aristocrats and kings collected wild animals for various reasons. Contrary to domestication, the ferociousness and natural behaviour of the wild animals were preserved and exhibited. Today's zoos claim other reasons for keeping animals under human care: conservation, education and science.<sup>1</sup>*

The DRG collection features a specific interest in the depiction of Animals. As such the ways in which artists have described animals are especially varied, and the closer you examine the collection, the range of perspectives deepens. Invariably animals are presented in two states – their natural habitats, or constructed environments. The former is under increasing threat by the spread of the urban behemoth, the latter becoming more and more sophisticated as a facsimile of the real.

One could argue that the moment an animal comes under the gaze of a human, they are held captive. Whilst ever we use, consume or domesticate them, they have fallen under our control. There are exceptions of course, those animals that still hold more power over us than we would like (see sharks, crocodiles, all venomous creatures). We demonise them and choose to depict them as dangerously wild and stubbornly un-tameable.

A collection of artworks is like a collection of animals (it's no surprise that a Zoo also employs *curators*). The gallery space is the cage, holding the

a door for crossexamining different and somewhat challenging relationships between natural and human in general.

Both, the consequences and implications of human - animal relationship within the entire ecosystem in which the animal world is one of two most dominant constituent open a vast area of conversations, contradicting questions and provocative discussions of mostly ethical nature: animal welfare and protection, animal treatment in farming and trade, animal industry and consumerism, organic farming and genetic engineering, animal extinction and zoo culture, and animal protection issues in general.

The exhibition *In Captivity* opens some of these conversations by showcasing a selection of artworks from Dubbo Regional Gallery's collection storage racks. The exhibition is developed through a series of interesting conversations about collecting and interpreting that is based on exceedingly specific subject such as Animal in and will be presented by WPCC Team.

Adnan Begic, Curator WPCC, October 2008

Veasey's three images depict constructed environments, yet the inhabitants of these spaces are curiously absent. Instead we are left with a shell, as if some enormous reptile has shed its skin and fled. The emptiness is aching to be filled by its owner, yet we are left to begin pondering its absurdity. The painted backdrops are a fascinating inclusion in many animal exhibits. For whose benefit do we render such kitsch wildlife scenes onto the surfaces of these environments? Is it purely our desire to wholly seal the illusion or do we think we can fool an animal into thinking it's a natural habitat?

Veasey reveals much about our treatment of animals by omitting the animal itself from the picture plane. Are these memorials to animals that have since passed? Or have the animals finally risen up, abandoning their bondage, and now lie in wait for us, somewhere, ready to exact revenge on us all for all those years we have kept them captive?

1 Ref: Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal\\_keeping](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_keeping)  
2 Beverly Veasey, Photofile 79, Summer 2007, pp57



## SYMPATHY By Jessica Moore, Collections Officer

*I know why the caged bird sings.  
Ah, me, when its wings are bruised and its bosom sore.  
It beats its bars and would be free.  
It's not a carol of joy or glee,  
but a prayer that it sends from its heart's deep core,  
a plea that upward to heaven it flings.  
I know why the caged bird sings.*

**SYMPATHY**1899 (excerpt)  
Paul Lawrence Dubar (1872- 1906)

As a society we tend to abhor the concept of captivity, freedom, literally and metaphorically is touted as the pinnacle of civilisation.

For many of us the bird is the embodiment of freedom, existing in a physical space unreachable by humans. Bound not to the earth, they have, more than any other creature the capacity to travel the globe, to exert a freedom many of us can only dream of.

Yet of all the creatures on earth, birds are the ones that we have few qualms about caging. We stifle and challenge their freedom, often in cages that not only seek to prevent their escape, but also prevent them from the very act that is unique to them and that we admire most – flight.

But is the idea of captivity as simple as black and white, good and evil? Certainly there are benefits to the enclosure of some animals – from public safety to conservation. Yet the works selected here highlight that the concept of Captivity is multifarious and in many ways subjective, one person's captivity is another's protection.

All the birds depicted are captive in the physical sense, wether in a cage, a zoo or the picture plane, and yet they also highlight a secondary idea of captivity. In Ben Quilty's *Beast*, the vivid almost lurid colours highlight that the Budgerigar is an animal that has been adapted to a domestic environment. Bred in captivity since the 1850s, Breeders have worked to produce a wide range of colour, pattern and feather mutations, the budgie is widely acknowledged as the most common pet parrot in the world and possibly the most common cage bird. A somewhat kitsch symbol of Australia, the Budgerigar is a bird so identified with captivity, few of us will ever experience them in the wild. We experience the

SIMON CUTHBERT  
**Animal Enclosure** 2004  
(prev page left)  
Type-c print from a digital file  
84 x 104cm

**Call of the Wild** 2004  
(prev page centre)  
Type-c print from a digital file  
84 x 104cm

**Zebra Flip (Subway Scene 3)**  
2004 (previous page right)  
Type-c print from a digital file  
84 x 104cm

All works Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery. Purchased with funds donated by the Dubbo Regional Gallery Advisory Board 2006

BEVERLY VEASEY  
**Habitat #7** 2008  
Lightjet print  
60 x 76cm

**Habitat #9** 2008 (front cover)  
Lightjet print  
60 x 76cm

**Habitat #12** 2008  
Lightjet print  
60 x 76cm

All works Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery. Purchased with funds donated by Friends of Western Plains Cultural Centre Inc 2008

HAYDEN FOWLER  
**Hunger** 2007  
digital video, 2 channel  
15 min, 40 sec (infinite loop)

Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery. Purchased with funds donated by Friends of Western Plains Cultural Centre Inc 2008

Budgerigar as cultural construction removed completely from any idea of the natural, captive in its role as pet rather than ever being seen as a wild animal.

In David Noonan's we have an example of the most common and most legitimate form of captivity, within a zoological context. Filmed at Melbourne Zoo the work is an interesting dialogue between two disparate ideas Biology and Symbolism. In cinema and literature the owl has often been associated with the supernatural or is the foreboder of evil. Symbolic meanings that have been built up from folk-tales and gothic fiction are commonly associated with the owl. By filming the creature within a zoological framework these cultural constructs are put into sharp relief. Can animals in captivity really symbolise anything or does their role as specimens in a zoo negate there symbolic or metaphorical role in culture.

The works by Nick Devlin and Hayden Fowler ask us to look at birds in a different context, by augmenting the way we experience images of birds we are able to see how unnatural the confinement is. Trapped in man made environments the artists are making us think about the extent of human interference with nature on a wider scale. By placing these birds in the captivity of the picture surface we are able to think about how we are placing increasing restrictions on these creatures in the wild.

Each of these birds have their own unique song, captured by the artists, they have give them a chance to sing in spite of their captivity.

NICK DEVLIN  
**Word Cage** 2005 (above left)  
Mixed media  
12.5 x 16.5 x 13cm  
Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery. Gift of the Dubbo & District Australian Decorative & Fine Arts Society 2006

DAVID NOONAN  
**Owl** 2004 (above centre)  
DVD from Super 8 (Edition 3/9)  
3min (infinite loop)  
Collection Dubbo Regional Gallery. Purchased with funds donated by Friends of Dubbo Regional Gallery Inc 2006

HAYDEN FOWLER  
**Biosphere 1A** 2004-2005 (above right)  
Multi channel digital video  
11min (infinite loop)  
Collection Dubbo Regional Galler. Purchased with funds donated by Friends of Dubbo Regional Gallery Inc 2006