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Future Perfect: *The Pukumani Poles*

One room in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) has no equal. It features Australian art from the 1950s and 60s and revolves around one large work, the installation of 17 tutini called *Pukumani grave posts* (1958). Occupying nearly half the floor, it commands the space. Tutini is a Tiwi word for a decorated pole; roughly-hewn hardwood logs that have been carved and painted in abstract designs with natural ochres. Cut from tree trunks, tutini are the key props in traditional mortuary ceremonies of the Tiwi islanders in northern Australia.

The aesthetic presence of *Pukumani grave posts* has been well recognised since it was first displayed 60 years ago. Its scale, raw energy and brilliance has made it a signature artwork of the AGNSW, though the Gallery has made less of it as a branding device than the Louvre has of its signature work, the Mona Lisa, or the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) has of its, Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952). *Pukumani grave posts* also inspired the NGA's other signature artwork, *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1988) – a Yolngu installation of 200 grave posts. Branding cannot afford ambivalence. That neither the AGNSW or the NGA make as much of these two works in their branding is a legacy of the perceived incongruities around the categorisation Indigenous artworks such as these that disturb the Western art world's distinctions between ritualistic religious practices and secularised fine art practices. When the AGNSW originally bought the *Pukumani grave posts*, there was considerable debate between those who thought it belonged in an ethnographic museum, and those who defended its fine art qualities.

The 1960s was a period when some fine art museums began showing interest in collecting what was then categorised as 'primitive art' – of which the *Pukumani grave posts* was an early example. If this interest put pressure on the distinction between religious and secular aesthetic modes, the Western

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notion of primitivism – and what sometimes was called ‘primitive fine art’ – was a means to have it both ways. Even though Australian fine art museums dispensed with the category of primitive art in the 1980s, there remained the problem of how to include Indigenous art and its religious stories in the largely secularised story of national art – the latter being a primary function of state art galleries. The usual solution to this dilemma was to keep the stories separate, as the AGNSW did. However, when in 2012 *Pukumani grave posts* and other Indigenous art was included in the main Australian galleries, which tell a chronological history of Australian art from the early colonial period until the last decades of the twentieth century, the AGNSW was signalling a paradigmatic shift in the place of Indigenous art in discourses of the national tradition and Western art more generally.

However, in its Australian galleries, the AGNSW only includes Indigenous art in the final rooms that display art from the 1950s to the 80s. This raises two related questions: is the AGNSW asking us to consider *Pukumani grave posts* and the other Indigenous art in the room – large Yolngu bark paintings – as examples of the Australian modernism with which they are displayed? And, are the assumptions of the categorical difference between tribal and Western art this easily undone?

While the AGNSW curators clearly mean to challenge these assumptions, until this new transcultural narrative is extended to the other galleries, the challenge remains tentative. Hence, it would seem that the AGNSW is on the cusp of making a paradigm shift but is yet to fully commit – an observation that can be made of other Australian state art galleries. Such epistemic turbulence points to larger changes than art world fashion. When *Pukumani grave posts* entered the AGNSW collection in 1959, Indigenous Australians were not recognised in the nation state’s constitution as fully Australian citizens. This changed following a referendum in 1967, but some fifty years later curators and historians of Australian art are still searching for ways of including Indigenous art into a narrative of Australian art from which it had formerly been excluded.

Another legacy of this category problem is that *Pukumani grave posts* is a descriptive title connoting its instrumental purpose, not a proper name. While it’s not uncommon for artworks to have lost their names, art curators and historians go to great lengths to recover them, just as artists think deeply about the names they assign to their art. The name gives the work an identity and locates it in a genealogy and cultural context. Hence, each work on display has a text panel that includes the names of the artwork and its artist – as if the meaning and identity of the art is bound up in these names. Humans feel a duty to bestow proper names on artworks, as we do on our children, our pets and even inanimate things we own and value. It reveals how animist the human condition is; the human tendency to personify and fetishise those things in which a metaphysical presence is felt. A fine artwork is defined by its metaphysical intent not its instrumental purpose – unless its instrumental purpose serves metaphysical ends, as in much neo-avant-garde. Even *Untitled* or a

number can be a proper name if, as it often does in modern art, it signifies the painting's modernist or avant-gardist intent – which explains why, since the 1990s, many Indigenous art works have been sent to the contemporary art market titled *Untitled*.

Like a caption in a traditional ethnographic museum, *Pukumani grave posts* describes its use, like the titles 'spear' or 'fish trap'. *Pukumani grave posts* is intended to indicate the tutinis' use in the Pukumani mortuary ceremony. This ceremony replays the myth of the origin of human mortality. The first death on the Tiwi islands occurred when the baby boy Jinani died of sunstroke while his mother Wai-ai (Bima) was consorting with Tapparra, her lover and brother-in-law. Her husband Purukuparli refused Tapparra's offer to bring the child back to life, instead creating the first Pukumani ceremony to mourn the death of his son. He then took the child's body in his arms and overtaken by grief, walked into the ocean disappearing in a whirlpool, leaving the tutini behind as their surrogates and gifts.

In the modern funeral ritual, the deceased's body is buried immediately after death with a hybrid Tiwi-Christian service, if possible, in the bush in the direction of their clan country. Several months afterwards, appropriate family and clan members are commissioned to make the tutini, a process which involves exchange gifts and delegation of ritual duties such as song, dance and painting the mourners. The ochre body paint, pwoja, is intended to disguise the living from the spirit of the deceased, like protective camouflage. Each pole is made to represent a particular aspect of the deceased's life – the multiple personas, inheritances, relations and responsibilities that had made the deceased the individual he or she was, much as modern secular funerals often include a PowerPoint presentation of different aspects of the life-lived.

Small figurative carvings of the deceased and sometimes close relatives are often displayed amongst the tutini on the gravesite. Heads would occasionally be carved on the tutini, which had the further function of providing the spirit of the deceased with company so that it will not bother the living or refresh the relatives' grief. For the same reason, the name of the deceased becomes taboo. In Tiwi tradition, a name is bestowed by the father and had to be original (i.e. not of the dead). Pukumani is the proxy name that refers to the deceased. Thus, tutini grave posts do have a proper name: it is Pukumani. However, *Pukumani grave posts* are not grave posts; it was not made (or ever used) to commemorate a deceased person but was the first tutini commissioned as fine art works for a public national art gallery.

Along with the patron Dr Stuart Scougall, Tony Tuckson is generally regarded as the institutional 'father' of the 17 tutini at the AGNSW, and probably named the installation *Pukumani grave posts* when cataloguing it. An abstract expressionist painter and then Deputy-Director of the AGNSW,

Tuckson commissioned the work and took a special interest in Aboriginal and Melanesian art. Interestingly, in the neo-avant-garde fashion of the day, Tuckson gave his own paintings descriptive titles such as *Untitled – Yellow* and *Five white lines (Vertical) black ground*. The latter has hung in the same room as *Pukumani grave posts*. However, it's unlikely that he intended the name *Pukumani grave posts* to signify the avant-garde nature of the tutini – which Tuckson believed to be primitive art of a fast disappearing tradition.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, fine art by any other name would smell as sweet. Thus, the aesthetic qualities that many people feel in *Pukumani grave posts* produce a metaphysical presence, as if the tutini are spirit figures. It takes little imagination to regard the 17 lean upright embellished logs, most slightly taller and so more elevated than the average human (their height ranges from 150 cm to 275 cm, with most around the 200 cm) as special persons or spirits. While each is deliberately differentiated, and a keen eye will notice the hands of half a dozen artists, we don't perceive them as 17 separate poles that happen to have been arranged just for this occasion but as a singular collaborative installation. There is a sense of belonging between these tutini, as if made to be a collective, a team. However, these are not grave posts; they do not represent the multiple personas of a deceased person but the spirit and skill of the artists – whom Scougall had especially sought out for the commission: Laurie Nelson Mungatopi, Bob One Apuatimi, Jack Yarunga, Don Burakmadjua, Charlie Quiet Kwangdini and an unknown artist.

Unlike funerary labour obligations, in which appropriate relatives of the deceased are called upon to make the tutini, this commission called for 'artists' only – a concept Tiwi do recognise. An individual's aesthetic innovations, technical skill and design sense are admired in the statement 'pumpuni jilamara' (good design). Tiwi artists gain prestige for the quality of their practice and each tutini is attributed to its maker, as in modern art galleries where viewers often identify an artwork by the artist's name. Thus, the traditional Tiwi gravesite is in some respects also a group exhibition, encouraging a competitive spirit between the artists; and all of this can be felt in the liveliness of the production of the secular *Pukumani grave posts*. Even though they were not used in funerary rites, their destination as fine art objects in an art gallery is not entirely out of keeping with their traditional manufacture. From early on Indigenous artists readily even eagerly entered the Western art market without the sense of inauthenticity that worried the Western art world. By the 1920s Western ethnographic museums had largely ceased purchasing Australian Indigenous art because they feared it had been made for the secular art market and not for ritualistic purposes, but this didn't bother Tuckson or Scougall.

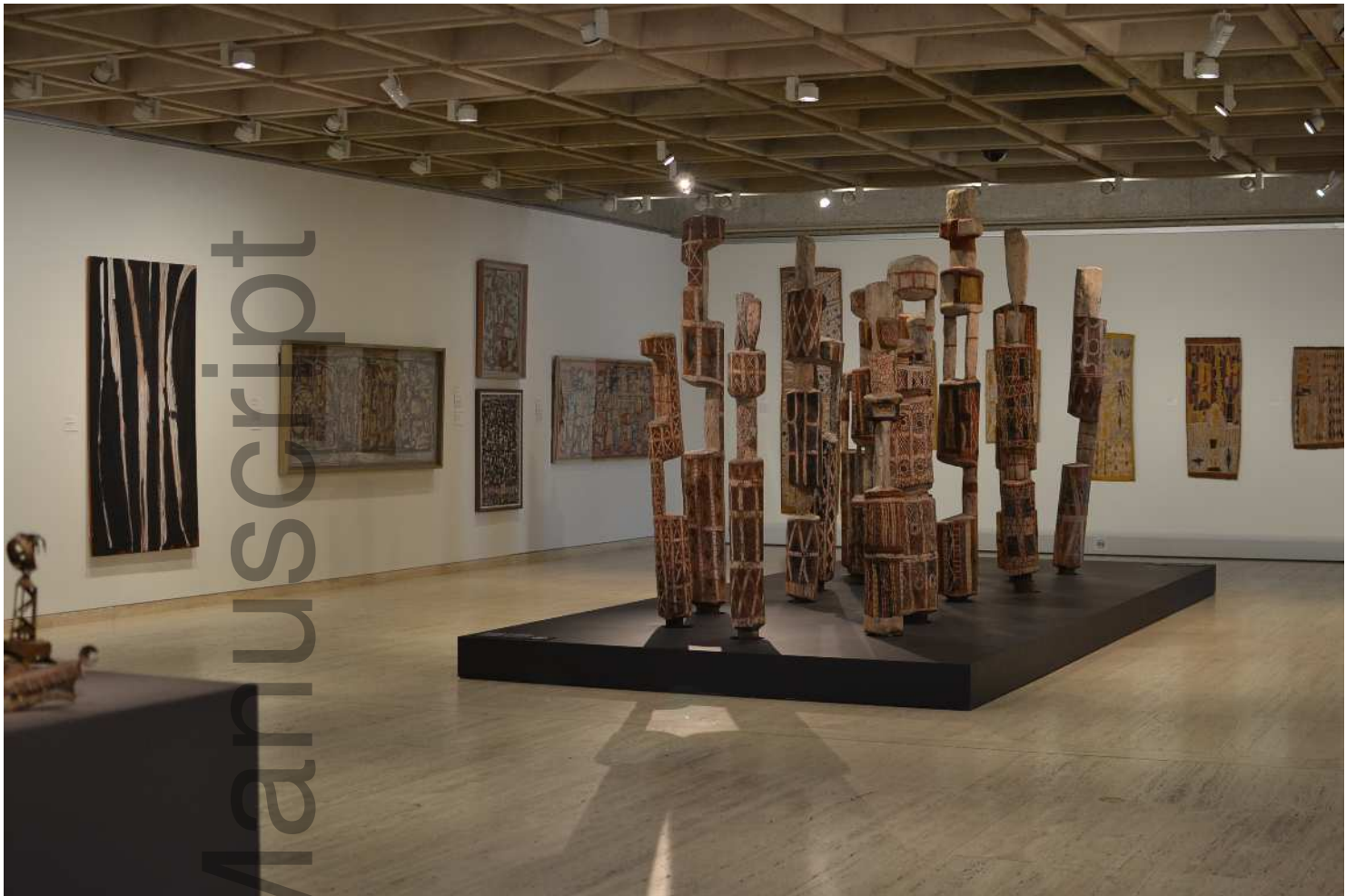
If Indigenous artists generally insist on the authenticity and power of their art made for the art market, like the Western art world they also distinguish it from ritualistic art. As with the

secularisation of Western art, secular Indigenous art became more portable and its artists developed individual styles as personal aesthetic brands. Another means of distinction is the use of ironwood for fine art tutini rather than the traditional bloodwood – a distinction that the *Pukumani grave posts* inaugurated and continues to this day. As well funerary tutini are left outdoors to decay, whereas fine art tutini are carefully conserved in the art gallery, where they join other art works in a different ceremonial performance, reverential in its own way.

The room's power owes much to the formal presence of *Pukumani grave posts*, and also to it acting as a portal for experiencing the whole room and all the art in it. This is felt in the tutini's spacing, which opens partial sightlines to other works, as if navigating an open forest. What makes this one of the great gallery rooms – as great as any you will experience – is the larger cross-cultural conversations ricocheting between the artworks. Thus, the tutini room reveals a truth that is often overlooked in writing about artworks: an artwork is much more than an image; it's a relational object, which means it exists in space with other things, and its aesthetic power derives as much from these relations as from its own formal integrity. This is clearly intentional, as the curators have expertly established a thick network of formal relations.

The appeal of these cross-cultural conversations is not just their richness and formal power; they are a provocation that addresses the longing amongst contemporary Australians for a greater rapport between Indigenous and Western traditions. In this respect, the display is not true to the historical moment of the works' making; rather, like the future perfect tense, it reveals a potential that already existed at this time, but which is yet to eventuate. Thus, the room has in it an air of promise and prophecy. Whether this is retained when the viewers leave, and lights are turned off, is something for philosophers to mull over.

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