

**JGM Gallery London**

# **Old Way, New Road**

6 May to 19 June 2026

A group exhibition of works by Indigenous contemporary artists.



Phyllis Thomas, *Gemerre*, 2008, natural ochre on board, 100cm x 80cm. Image courtesy of Ben Deakin.

**LONDON, 6 May, 2026** – JGM Gallery presents *Old Way, New Road*, an exhibition of works by Indigenous contemporary artists focused on the use of natural mediums, including ochre pigments, bark and wood.

*Old Way, New Road* explores how the exhibiting artists have adapted natural mediums from their use in ceremonial and initiatory contexts to contemporary art. Bringing together painters and sculptors from Arnhem Land, Melville Island, the Kimberley and Cape York, this exhibition compares the different uses of natural mediums across various cultural and individual artistic practices.

Ground and rock ochre, feathers, ashes, wooden carvings and plant fibres have long been used by First Nations Australians as devices in ceremonial and initiatory contexts. In Arnhem Land, hollow log coffins are used by the Yolngu in burial rites. In Cape York, sculpture carved from *yuk thanchal* (milk wood) depicting totemic figures are used by the Wik peoples as aids in ritual ceremonies. Across Australia, body painting and adornment for ceremony using natural materials is a common practice among many First Nations groups. *Old Way, New Road* examines how these practices have been maintained and developed through contemporary art.

In the early twentieth century, a number of anthropologists were commissioning ochre pigment paintings on portable bark supports from Indigenous artists in the northernmost region of the Northern Territory for study collections (Caruana, 2019). Later on in the 1970s, at a similar time to the beginnings of the Western Desert painting movement in the community of Papunya (1971-72), interest in bark painting from the commercial art market surged. In both the Western Desert and Arnhem Land, transposing “revelatory” cultural knowledge onto portable mediums for non-Indigenous viewership presented Indigenous artists with new challenges and possibilities for their aesthetics and narrative techniques (Myers, 2013). Nevertheless, in both synthetic and natural mediums, artists’ work remained imbued with the stories and knowledge which had been passed down to them verbally over tens of millennia. Now, the vibrant colours of acrylic paints, motif-driven compositions and dotting have become synonymous with Indigenous contemporary art. However, works made using natural mediums – particularly bark painting and wooden sculpture – are perceived by many through a more conservative lens, perhaps regarding their likeness to ritual objects.

The exhibiting artists of *Old Way, New Road* often use forms or motifs that retain significance in Indigenous cultures to convey sensory, place- and movement-based experiences in their work. In Phyllis Thomas’ (Gija) *Gemerre* (2008), for example, the artist makes sweeping, drybrush marks of blue ochre paint horizontally across a rich, black backdrop. These parallel lines are more gestural than precise, intoned with smooth swoops and curves. The dryness of the blue pigment picks out the grain of the black paint beneath, which emphasises the layering of the work’s composition. Thomas’ scraping marks and her layering of pigments relates to the painting’s subject. *Gemerre* depicts the scarification which Gija people received for protection and as a marker of identity. These initiation scars were cut across Gija peoples’ bodies, including Thomas’ own chest, and filled with ashes to accentuate the incision while it healed. The manner in which Thomas represents this subject matter suggests a body in motion and the texture of ageing scars, sitting raised against unmarked skin. Thomas paints subjects inspired by Gija ceremonial activity, using elements of these cultural events and practices to inform her work’s minimalist aesthetic. *Gemerre*’s sense of

immediacy and movement brings the viewer closer to Thomas' experience of Gija cultural practices and their significance.

A preference for acrylic painting is perhaps indicative of the distancing of Indigenous art from anthropological classification and its re-evaluation as contemporary art. Works made using natural mediums bear associations with the contexts of ceremony where the practice of using these mediums originates. However, works using synthetic mediums bear closer resemblance to the art of international modernism, such as Abstract Expressionism. *Old Way, New Road* addresses the binary approach to these mediums, conveying that innovation can still occur within the perpetuation of a tradition (Perkins, 2007). Using natural mediums to make art is a contemporary practice and remains relevant to how First Nations artists are shaping their visual cultures and identities.

Exhibiting artists: Arthur John Cowell, Loretta Davis, Luke Djalgararra, Dora Griffiths, Peggy Griffiths, Malaluba Gumana, Manini Gumana, Kittey Malarvie, Leigh Namponan, Kenan Namunjdja, Pamela Namunjdja, Alison Puruntameri, Carol Puruntameri, Christine Puruntameri, Lucinda Puruntameri, Mary Umagarri Teresa Taylor, Phyllis Thomas, Delores Tipuamantumirri, Keith Wikmunea, Mulkun Wirrpanda, Apphia Wurrkidj and Russell Ngadiyali Wanapuyngu.

## About JGM Gallery

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JGM Gallery was founded in 2017 by Australian-born Jennifer Guerrini Maraldi, one of the United Kingdom's leading specialists in Indigenous contemporary art. Guerrini Maraldi has more than 20 years experience in collecting, dealing and promoting the work of First Nations artists from across Australia.

Through its exhibition programme, JGM Gallery provides a platform for the histories and contemporary art forms of First Nations artists, with a focus on the uses of traditional materials and techniques, innovation and social commentary. The gallery seeks to counter the pervasive and misplaced perception that Indigenous contemporary art is homogenous. Instead, it emphasises the genre's plurality of styles, materials, techniques, themes and content. In the words of Guerrini Maraldi, "The styles of this movement's leading figures are as varied, complex and sophisticated as any in the Western canon."

In addition to championing First Nations contemporary artists, the gallery has a roster of British and global contemporary artists. These artists further reflect contemporary art's multifaceted and fluid nature. Since its inception, JGM Gallery has promoted and placed the work of these artists in significant private and institutional collections.

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For further information and press enquiries, please contact the gallery at [info@jmgallery.com](mailto:info@jmgallery.com) or + 44 (0) 20 7228 6027.

### Opening Reception:

Wednesday, 6 May, 6:30pm - 8:30pm  
24 Howie Street,  
London SW11 4AY

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