Los Angeles—The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *Aboriginal Screen-Printed Textiles from Australia’s Top End*, the first US exhibition devoted to the work of contemporary textile artists from Aboriginal-owned and operated art centers in northern Australia, known as the “Top End.” Since the 1960s, screen-printing has become a vital form of Indigenous expression, perpetuating traditional knowledge and reinvigorating its visual manifestations. Artists who work at the art centers are custodians of their land, language, and inherited ancestral stories. Their textiles draw on 65,000 years of continued cultural practices in the Northern Territory, and provide a sustainable income for those living “on Country.”

More than 70 textiles and seven videos on view convey the significance of flora, fauna, ceremonies, and ancestral stories to Aboriginal artists. Indigenous designs have long been traced in sand; painted on bodies and rock outcrops; and carved, incised, or applied to culturally resonant objects made from wood, bark, shell, or fiber. Textile artists transfer these motifs to cotton, silk, and linen cloth; augment the customary palette of muted ochres with vivid modern inks; and add layers of complexity with the use of multiple screens, offset “shadow” printing, and ombré or colorwave techniques.
Indigenous artists from five art centers—Tiwi Design, Jilamara Arts and Crafts, Injalak Arts and Crafts Aboriginal Corporation, Båbbarra Women's Centre, and Merrepen Arts, Culture and Language Corporation—played an active role in shaping this exhibition. While their textiles are increasingly circulating as garments, high-fashion apparel, housewares, interior furnishings, and collectibles among wider public in Australia and abroad, the artists’ voices and perspectives are crucial to understanding and appreciating their work.

**About the Exhibition**

The exhibition is organized around the five art centers chosen for their formative and contemporary textile practices, as well as their cultural and linguistic diversity.

- **Tiwi Design**, located on Bathurst Island and formed in 1969, is one of Australia’s oldest Aboriginal art centers. Its textiles have been influenced by Tiwi burial poles (tutini) and geometric patterns (jilamara) applied as body painting for important ceremonies. Colorwave printing, in which two or three colors of ink are blended on the screen, has become a signature of Tiwi Design’s vivid, large-format, repeat textiles.

- **Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association**, situated on the nearby Melville Island and established in 1985, is a cultural hub for 60 practicing Tiwi artists. In the 1990s, Jilamara was the only art center screen-printing silk lengths with fiber-reactive dyes, which yield a vibrant image on both sides of the fabric. Recently, bold and colorful Jilamara fabrics have gained popularity in the Australian fashion industry.
• **Injalak Arts and Crafts Aboriginal Corporation**, formed in 1984, is located near the rock art site of Injalak Hill in Western Arnhem Land. This area has been continuously occupied by humans for 65,000 years and is home to the Kunwinjku people. In 2011, Injalak Arts artists shifted away from their earlier technique of cutting Rubylith film to create stencils; instead, they began to hand-paint images onto transparencies and transfer them to mesh screens. This light-sensitive, photo-emulsion-transfer process allows artists to use their customary *rarrk* (hatching) to render more complex effects, such as the so-called “X-ray” silhouettes of animal skeletons and internal organs.

• **Bábbarrá Women’s Centre** was founded in 1983 in Maningrida in Central Arnhem Land—the largest Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory and home to internationally known artists working in a variety of media. Wind, fog, plants, animals, water spirits, and sacred Ancestor beings are depicted with permission from the custodial manager of each clan. Cultural protocols determine what knowledge may be displayed publicly or “outside” and what must be kept secret and “inside.” Crosshatched *rarrk* lines can reveal or obscure sacred meanings.

• **Merrepen Arts, Culture and Language**, established in 1986, supports Ngen’giwumirri and Ngan’gikurunggurr artists of the Daly River region. Printing takes place at the art center, except for complex designs requiring four or five screens, which are sent to Publisher Textiles, a bespoke printing studio in Sydney. The textiles of Merrepen Arts reimagine local billabongs and landscapes whose colors and textures change with the dramatic and extreme Top End seasons.
In addition to the five sections focused on the art centers, smaller exhibition modules address the introduction of cloth to the Top End in the 18th century through trade with South Sulawesi fishermen from Indonesia; the use of printed textiles within Aboriginal communities for attire and ceremonial activity; and the incorporation of Indigenous fabrics into mainstream Australian fashion and interior decoration. Short videos show artists printing; community members conducting activities that offer glimpses of Aboriginal cultures and life in the remote Top End; techniques of large-format screen printing; and garments made from Aboriginal textiles presented at the annual From Country to Couture fashion events.

Publication
A richly illustrated volume accompanies the exhibition. It includes the featured textiles and contextualizes them through essays written by 25 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, print-makers, art center managers, curators, and scholars. Edited by exhibition curator Joanna Barrkman, the book details the history and role of textiles at each art center; the production process and collaborative nature of screen-printing; product development initiatives; the ecological knowledge informing the fabrics; and the role of this relatively new art form in asserting both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal identity.

This publication received the R.L. Shep Ethnic Textiles Book Award, presented annually to the best book in the field of ethnic textile studies by the Textile Society of America.
Credits

Aboriginal Screen-Printed Textiles from Australia’s Top End is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Joanna Barrkman, Senior Curator of Southeast Asian and Pacific Arts.

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About the Fowler

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu
Parking in UCLA Lot 4, 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd, $3/hr or $14 max/day
Rideshare drop-off address: 305 Charles E Young Dr N, Los Angeles, CA 90024

Hours: Thu–Sun, 11am–6pm
Admission to the Fowler is free
Complete guidelines are listed at fowler.ucla.edu/visit

CAPTIONS

Page 1: Deborah Wurrkidj (b. 1971) of Bábbarra Women’s Centre, Yawkyawk dja Wayuk (Young woman spirit and water lily), designed 2007, printed ca. 2017; screen print, three stencils, linen and ink; Fowler Museum at UCLA X2018.15.3; Museum purchase with Fowler Textile Council funds; © Deborah Wurrkidj / Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2020

Page 2: Susan Marawarr (b. 1967) of Bábbarra Women’s Centre, Mandjabu (Fish trap), designed 2017, printed 2019; screen print, three stencils, cotton and ink; Fowler Museum at UCLA X2019.35.3; Museum purchase with Fowler Textile Council funds; © Susan Marawarr / Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2020
