

## *Mulubinba - Place of Sea Ferns*

6 – 30 May 2015

An exhibition held in association with the Wollotuka Institute, the University of Newcastle  
Curated by Amanda Kelly and Gilleen Shaw

Humans inhabited the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie landscape for thousands of years before European colonisation. The Indigenous name for the Newcastle area is *Mulubinba*, named by its Aboriginal inhabitants after the indigenous plant *mulubin*, and meaning “place of sea ferns.”

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Awabakal people were united through a common language and strong ties of kinship. They survived as skilled hunter–fisher–gatherers in family groups or clans scattered along the coastal area of the Mid North Coast region of New South Wales. Their traditional territory spreads from Wollombi in the south, to the Lower Hunter River near Newcastle and Lake Macquarie (Awaba). The area was known for its lush greenery and abundance of fish, other sea life and game. Thus activities around hunting and gathering, as well as methods that protected and nurtured their country, were important aspects of Aboriginal life on the land.

The history of Aboriginal people in the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie area, like in many other areas across Australia, is fraught with dispossession, cultural decimation and discrimination. What was once a large and thriving Indigenous population in the area became severely diminished by violent and careless acts over several generations. Despite this, it is also a history of survival, cultural endurance and regeneration: one that never loses sight of a deep connection to Country.

This exhibition is a snapshot of that history in images and artifacts, from the representation of local Aboriginal people in the early nineteenth century by European artists, to locally made ceremonial objects and hunting weapons, and representations of those significant to the contemporary local community. It is about connection to Country, and recognising the land and landscape from Indigenous perspectives. What history tells us is that there is an inherent difference in the way Aboriginal people and European-led perspectives look at and treat the land around them; for Aboriginal people, land ownership and tribal boundaries have nothing to do with fence lines or other man-made markers.

The exhibition also highlights the shared history of Mulubinba’s Aboriginal past. Without the co-operation of the local tribes with several perceptive colonial settlers, such as Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld or Joseph Lycett, and later, scholars such as Percy Haslam, vital knowledge about the history of Indigenous groups residing across the Newcastle region may have been lost. Here we recognise the strong and unceasing link Awabakal people have to their Country and its ancestors. Despite over 200 years of European occupation, they have an intimate knowledge of the land – a physical and spiritual connection – and feel an unwavering sense of belonging this this place, Mulubinba.

The exhibition will also include the launch of Professor John Maynard’s new book, *Callaghan, the University of Newcastle, Whose Traditional Land?* In his book Maynard studies the history of the Pambalong clan of the Awabakal people and their relationship to the present site of the University of Newcastle: Callaghan. Exploring Pambalong lifestyle and culture, as well as differences between Aboriginal and Western understandings of land tenure, Maynard reveals both their struggles in the wake of settlement and their ultimate survival.

Copies of John Maynard’s 2014 publication, *True Light and Shade: An aboriginal Perspective of Joseph Lycett’s Art*, published by the National Library of Australia, will also be available for purchase during the exhibition.



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## Full list of exhibition

### Joseph Lycett (ca.1775 – 1828)

#### Watercolours

Joseph Lycett was convicted of forgery and transported to Australia in 1814. As a British convict artist he depicted various aspects of the life and landscape of Australia during his time spent in the colony, particularly in Newcastle and wider New South Wales.

These watercolour sketches are part of an album of drawings painted in ca.1817, known as *The Lycett Album*, mostly describing the areas around Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens and Myall Lakes. They are considered important documentary records of the lifestyle and use of the land of Australia's Indigenous people during the early colonial period. Their engagement in daily activities is shown alongside the serene qualities of their Country: a relatively untouched Newcastle coastline and Lake Macquarie. Few artists were producing figurative works of this kind, and despite being somewhat picturesque, they provide insight into a distinct people and culture before the full impacts of British colonialism.

All images are courtesy of the National Library of Australia.



Joseph Lycett, *Aborigines resting by camp fire, near the mouth of the Hunter River, Newcastle, New South Wales, c.1817*, watercolour, 17.7 x 27.8 cm, from the Lycett Album, NLA.

This striking watercolour depicts two Aboriginal groups resting in shelters, or temporary bark dwellings called *koe-keras*, near the mouth of the Hunter River. The moon shines on Nobby's Island in the background, known to Aboriginal groups as *Whibay-gamba*, and said to house an entombed ancestral kangaroo. The lighthouse and small building on the cliffs in the distance are the only indication of European presence in this tranquil setting.



Joseph Lycett, *Fishing by torchlight, other Aborigines beside camp fires cooking fish, c.1817*, watercolour, 17.7 x 27.9 cm, from the Lycett Album, NLA.

Here Aboriginal men and women are fishing by night on the calm waters of the lake (Lake Macquarie), surrounded by an untouched landscape. By the light of the moon and their fire torches, men catch fish from bark canoes, while others prepare the fire for the catch. Awabakal canoes were manufactured from river gum or Kurrajong bark, and each had anchors made from heavy stones tied to vines. The basket shown in the foreground may have been for carrying hooks, glue for gluing fishing spears, utensils and items for food.



**Joseph Lycett, *Corroboree around a camp fire*, c.1817, watercolour, 17.7 x 27.7 cm, from the Lycett Album, NLA.**

Lycett has painted a group performing an Aboriginal corroboree or ceremony. Another corroboree can be seen in the distance, suggesting a special occasion among more than one tribe. The men's bodies are painted in ochre with designs for ceremony. Another

man sits and taps his clap stick on his shield. A tame camp dog, or warikal, also watches the scene intently. While Lycett has clad the men in loincloths, it is unlikely that they wore coverings for ceremonies.



**Joseph Lycett, *Aborigines spearing fish, others diving for crayfish, a party seated beside a fire cooking fish*, c.1817, watercolour, 17.7 x 28cm, from the Lycett Album, NLA.**

Here Lycett has illustrated unclad Aboriginal men expertly spearing fish from the rocks, and women diving into the sea to catch crayfish. On the shore, one group sits around the fire

and cooks the fish while another group is on lookout above the cliff. A sturdy ocean-going canoe rests nearby, and to the right of the frame, a man collects fresh water from a stream. The location resembles part of the south Newcastle coastline, between Merewether and Redhead.



**Joseph Lycett, *Aborigines cooking and eating beached whales, Newcastle, New South Wales*, c.1817, watercolour, 17.7 x 27.9 cm, from the Lycett Album, NLA.**

The location of this scene is present-day Bar Beach, just south of Newcastle, with its distinctive cliffs on the left and rounded coastline. On a wind-swept day, several Aboriginal groups have gathered to share in the meat from a whale that has washed up on

shore. It is an indication of how local Indigenous groups communicated with each other in this kind of event, with other families travelling for days to the site to prepare and feast on this large quantity of meat.



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**Joseph Lycett, *Aborigines hunting waterbirds in the rushes*, ca. 1817, watercolour, 17.7 x 27.7 cm, from *Drawings of Aborigines and scenery, New South Wales*, ca. 1820, NLA.**

This image of Aboriginal men and boys hunting for waterbirds is yet another representation of expert game hunting skills in an area clearly rich in food and resources for Indigenous families. In the foreground a man has speared a fowl, while others in the background rush the birds with sticks and prepare a cooking fire. It is possible that the waterway in this image is within the boundaries of the Pambalong clan, their Country stretching from Newcastle West through to Buttai, to the foothills of Mount Sugarloaf and north of Lake Macquarie.

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**Joseph Lycett, *The Sugar Loaf Mountain, Near New Castle, New South Wales*, 1824, aquatint, from *Views in Australia*, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, NLA.**

Here Lycett captures a picturesque scene near Lake Macquarie, with Mount Sugarloaf (known to Awabakal people as *Keemba Keemba*) grandly situated in the background. Two Europeans and their running dogs can be seen walking on the shores of the lake, which was becoming a popular site for settlers. The Aboriginal family in the foreground are perhaps included to populate the location with “native” inhabitants, but are just as likely representations of the Pambalong clan, whose tribal lands reached the foothills of Mount Sugarloaf.

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The mountains around Lake Macquarie were and are sacred to local clans, being the home of *Koun*, an ancestral being who takes the form of an eagle-hawk. The remarkable beauty of the site painted by Lycett is evident in its lush and varied greenery, and pristine blue lake.



**Joseph Lycett, *Newcastle, New South Wales*, 1824, hand coloured aquatint, plate mark 23.5 x 33 cm, from *Views in Australia*, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia.**

This image by Lycett has become iconic as a view of Newcastle in the early colonial period. Unlike his drawings of the natural landscape and its Indigenous inhabitants, this aquatint captures the small but well-ordered European presence on the mainland near the mouth of the Hunter River. On the far left of the image is the original Christ Church, while other buildings include the government store, barracks, hospital and government house.

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Port Stephens can be seen in the far distance, and in the centre of the image sits Nobby’s Island, known to local Aboriginal groups as Whibay-gamba, an important landmark relating to the story of an ancestral kangaroo. The breakwater between the island and the mainland had not yet been built, but would be a desecration of this sacred site.





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**Biraban (McGill), c.1839, engraved by Charles Wilkes from original drawing by Alfred T. Agate. From *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition, 1845.* Image courtesy of University of Newcastle Library Cultural Collections.**

Biraban (– d.1846), also known as John M’Gill [McGill], was an Indigenous leader of the Awabakal people in and around Lake Macquarie. A significant historical figure in the Newcastle region, Biraban is known for assisting the missionary Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld in his studies of Indigenous languages in the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie areas. His name is shown variously as Barabahn, Bi-ra-bán, and Birabān, meaning "eaglehawk" in the Awabakal language.

The original drawing of this engraving by Alfred T. Agate was made during an US exploring expedition that passed through Newcastle and Lake Macquarie in 1839. Agate stated: *‘It was very evident that M’Gill was*

*accustomed to teach his native language, for when he was asked the name of anything; he pronounced the word very distinctly, syllable by syllable, so that it was impossible to mistake it. ... [Biraban] is always a prominent leader in corrobories (sic) and other assemblies.’*



**Corrobboree or dance of the natives of New South Wales, 1821, engraved by W. Preston from drawings taken on the spot by Captain James Wallis. From James Wallis, *An historical account of the colony of New South Wales, 1821.***

Image courtesy of University of Newcastle Library Cultural Collections.

This engraving depicts an evening Aboriginal corroboree in Newcastle in the early nineteenth century. It was engraved from an original drawing in 1818 by Captain James Wallis, or possibly from a painting by convict artist, Joseph Lycett. Burigon (also known as Long Jack), was the leader of the Newcastle tribe at the time: he can be seen smiling at the lower left of the image.

Captain Wallis provides a valuable description of the scene: *‘The preparation for their dance is striking and curious. They assemble in groups, and commence marking their arms, legs, and bodies, in various directions, with pipe-clay and a kind of red ochre... Their musician, who is generally an elderly man, sings a monotonous tune, in which they all join, striking in regular time the shield with a club or waddy. Each dancer carries a green bough in his hand.’*



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## Awabakal Artefacts from the Percy Haslam Collection

University of Newcastle Library Cultural Collections



*Hand Shield (Kori-el/ Hylliman), hind wood*  
*Woman's Digging Stick (Wy-Yong-Toong), myrtle*  
*Hunting Boomerang (Tummara-Ta-Tetti), gidgee (Acacia cambagei)*  
*Ceremonial Spear (Wairai/Kirri), cane, onyx, animal skin with clay and wattle gum*  
*Woomera (Yummeri), Myrtle*  
*Combined Hunting and Fighting Club (Bun-Bula-Barn/Nulla), Black Wattle - Awabakal / Wonarua*  
*Gooseneck Throwing Club (Kot-ir-ra or Kyrлие), River or Water Gum*  
*Ceremonial Boomerang (Tummara-Koa-Yirri), Myrtle*  
*Returning Boomerang (Tummara-Ka-Oowarlin), River or Gum*

These Awabakal implements and weapons originated from the western side of Lake Macquarie. Much preparation was involved in their manufacture; weeks, months and even years were spent precision carving, refining spearheads and stones for axes, and decorating ceremonial items. The wood was preserved by being rubbed with possum or wallaby fat. These culturally significant objects are a vital resource for research and insight into the cultural practices of Aboriginal people throughout local history. Other similar items have been unearthed in Newcastle in recent years; equally testament to the proficient tool-making skills and industry of the Awabakal people in pre-colonial times.

The Percy Haslam Collection forms the foundation of the University of Newcastle's Aboriginal research collections and its content is varied and diverse. Haslam was appointed the University's visiting convocation scholar in residence in 1977, researching Aboriginal dreaming, history, culture and language. As a noted journalist and scholar, he had a long, continued and significant association with Aboriginal peoples within the Newcastle and Hunter Valley regions.



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**Bernadette Drabsch**

*A series of drawings of Awabakal artifacts held in the Percy Haslam Collection, Cultural Collections, University of Newcastle*

**2014**

All text and images below © and courtesy Bernadette Drabsch

This collection of graphite drawings were produced at the end of 2014 as commissioned pieces for Professor John Maynard and the Wollotuka Institute. We decided to exhibit some of the local Awabakal artefacts held in the Cultural Collections of the University of Newcastle. I photographed all of the pieces that had been collected by Percy Haslam, which had subsequently been donated to the University. The more time I spent drawing the artefacts the more my appreciation grew for the original craftsman and I came to love the story and individual character of each piece.

It was a pleasure to work alongside the University of Newcastle's Wollotuka Institute and Cultural Collections to visually record these beautiful and important artifacts.



**Bernadette Drabsch, *Awabakal hunter with headpiece*, 2014, graphite on Stonehenge paper, 81.5 x 102cm.**

This work depicts a local Aboriginal hunter wearing the very distinctive conical headpiece of this area. His body also shows traditional scarification marks that were part of initiation ceremonies. My representation of the figure was influenced by textual references and early sketches of the Awabakal men provided by the Wollotuka institute, such as a pencil and wash drawing by an unknown artist entitled *Ca la watum Ba - a native of the Coal River*, c.1819, as well as by paintings produced by convict artist, Joseph Lycett.

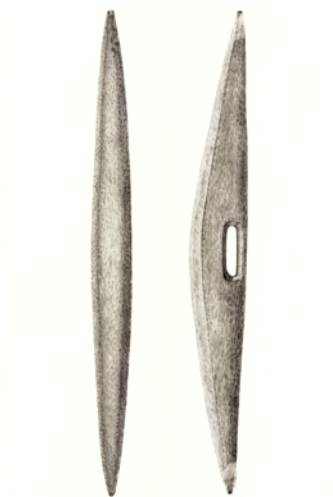


**Bernadette Drabsch, *Digging stick*, graphite on Stonehenge paper, 81.5 x 102cm.**

The smooth and well-worn surface of the digging stick was evidence to long hours of use in the hands of a local woman or young girl. I asked Cheryl Newton from the Wollotuka Institute to hold the stick for the drawing, as I wanted to include the role of the human agent, to add life and meaning to the piece. I don't know how many hands have held this simple piece of timber, or how many stories have been told while the women sat together digging, chatting, gossiping and providing food for their families - but it was nice to also hold it in my hands and feel connected to those women.



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Bernadette Drabsch, part a series of drawings of Awabakal artifacts held in the Percy Haslam Collection, Cultural Collections, University of Newcastle: *Hand shield*, graphite on Stonehenge paper, 81.5 x 102cm.

Whilst working on the hand shield I grew to love the unusual texture of the hind wood, a material that I had never heard of, and was intrigued by the high level of technical skill needed to carve out the smooth and comfortable handle. The two ends had different wear marks to the body and I wondered whether the shield had also been used for digging or hammering, making it a very convenient multi-purpose tool!



Bernadette Drabsch, part a series of drawings of Awabakal artifacts held in the Percy Haslam Collection, Cultural Collections, University of Newcastle: *Hunting Boomerang*, graphite on Stonehenge paper, 81.5 x 102cm.

The individual manufacturing marks still evident on the hunting boomerang intrigued me. I could see how the original craftsman had cut, sanded and manipulated the timber to create a very practical and very effective weapon. The way that the angles of the leading and trailing edges seamlessly blended together at the elbow to create aerodynamic wings fascinated me and I wondered how many years of experience and passed down knowledge was reflected in the creation of such a deceptively simple piece. The evidence of organic substances remaining on the surface of the Ring Gidgee timber made me wonder about what animals or people it might have hit!



Bernadette Drabsch, part a series of drawings of Awabakal artifacts held in the Percy Haslam Collection, Cultural Collections, University of Newcastle: *Ceremonial spear*, graphite on Stonehenge paper, 81.5 x 102cm.

The ceremonial spear was certainly the most unusual piece in the collection. I'm not sure what the original makers intended, but the intricate black and white designs on both the front and back of the handle reminded me of faces, with large unblinking eyes watching over the unfolding events. The time spent making such a beautiful ceremonial piece is clearly evident and would have demonstrated the prestige of its owner for all to see. To me, this piece holds incredible intrinsic value; it encapsulates the cultural identity and traditions of the Awabakal tribe.





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Ronald S. Mendelsohn.

Images of Platt's Estate in 1938

These small images were taken by Dr. Ronald S. Mendelsohn and are held in the University of Newcastle Library Cultural Collections. Donated by J. Docherty, RSSS, Australian National University, Canberra.

Images courtesy of the University of Newcastle Library Cultural Collections

The first free settler in the Lower Hunter River, mining prospector John Platt, claimed the Waratah land once called Platt's Estate. The Pambalong tribe had traditional ownership of this land and they suffered greatly from the seizure and occupation of their territory, as well as efforts to forcibly remove them. From the mid-1800s, the land was sold to both government and private residents. Part of the land is now integrated into the University of Newcastle Callaghan campus.

During the Depression of the 1930s, Platt's Estate was the home of Newcastle's many unemployed and poverty stricken residents, including several local Aboriginal families. Groups camped and resided in rough shacks and humpies made of metal scraps. These small images, taken in 1938, show several of the shanty buildings throughout the estate.





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**Ron Morrison**

### **Images of Platt's Estate in 1960**

Since the 1940s attempts were made by the local Council to remove Aboriginal families living in areas of the old Platt's Estate. For many families – both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal – squatting on the estate was a legacy of the Depression era and lack of suitable housing during World War II. For the small Indigenous population living there, it was very likely part of their own traditional land, or a safe place to stay in the face of generations of dispossession.

As late as the 1960s Aboriginal families were found living in humpies in the area. 17 people were removed to begin construction of what is now the University of Newcastle. Ron Morrison has photographed one of the buildings made from corrugated metal. A checked curtain hangs inside the makeshift window, with little else to suggest it is a permanent home for residents. Morrison's other image shows a young and smiling Aboriginal family living on the estate.

After working as a cadet photographer for the Newcastle Morning Herald from 1949, Ron Morrison started a press photographic agency in 1959. He later taught photography in the National Art School and was Head of Department in the School of Fine Arts at the NCAE (now the University of Newcastle).

Images © and courtesy of Ron Morrison, held in Newcastle City Council Library



**Ronald John Morrison, *Residents of Platt's Estate, Waratah, 1960***



**Ronald John Morrison, *Platt's Estate, Waratah, 1960***

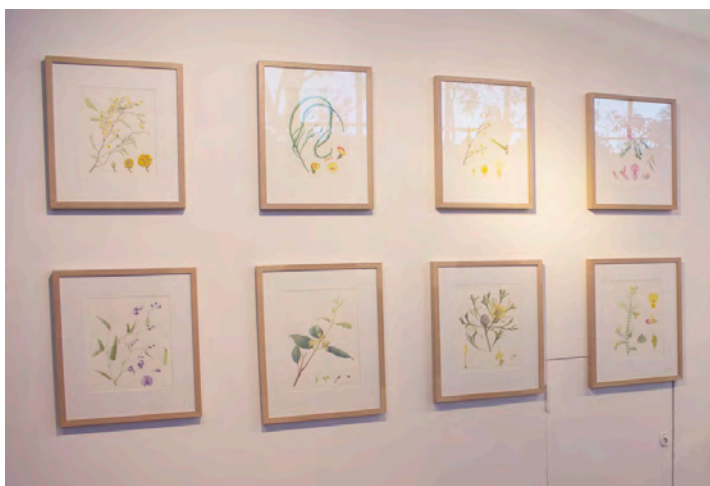


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## The Don McNair Herbarium

### Native Australian flora illustrations, watercolour on paper University of Newcastle Natural History Illustration

Michael Backman, *FABOIDEAE Bossiaea ensata (Sword Bossiaea)*, 2012  
Emily Brown, *MIMOSACEAE Acacia stricta (Hop Wattle)*, 2012  
Linda Dunn, *FABOIDEAE Pultenaea spinosa (Spiny Bush Pea)*, 2012  
Kate Simpson, *FABOIDEAE Hardenberga violacea (Purple Coral Pea)*, 2012  
Skye Harris, *FABOIDEAE Ingigofera Australis (Austral Indigo)*, 2012  
Esther Bolz, *MIMOSACEAE Acacia brownie (Heath Wattle/Prickly Moses)*, 2012  
Candice Rogers, *MYRTACEAE Eucalyptus robusta (Swamp Mahogany)*, 2010  
Cher Shoenfelder, *PROTEACEAE Isopogon anemonifolius (Broad-leaf Drumsticks)*, 2011



#### Mounted specimens:

*MORACEAE Ficus coronate*; *MORACEAE Ficus fraseri*;  
*DIOSCOREACEAE Dioscorea transversa (Native Yam)*;  
*SAPOTACEAE Planchonella australia (Black Apple)*

#### Bulk specimens:

*PROTEACEAE Banksia integrifolia (Coastal Banksia)*;  
*PROTEACEAE Banksia spinulosaa*; Collection of  
uncatalogued capsules (Fruits)

For thousands of years Aboriginal people have adapted to dramatic changes in the natural environment. The landscape around Newcastle is known for its wetlands and recent history of densely populated fern forests – their buried foliage gradually building up coal deposits in the area over time. Local Aboriginal groups also tended the land and used techniques such as fire burning to generate new plant growth in the native species.

These natural history illustrations and local plant specimens are from the Don McNair Herbarium. Driven by his fascination with local botany, local Whitebridge resident Don McNair collected plant specimens across the Hunter region and Australia for over five decades. He donated his entire collection – over 12,000 plant samples – to the University of Newcastle in order to share this vital history of flora with students and staff.

**This exhibition also included a group of native Australian fauna from the Natural History Collection.**



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## Wollotuka Institute Elders in Residence

### Portraits, 2015

The University of Newcastle Wollotuka Institute's *Nguraki* (Awabakal word meaning Elder, Wise Person, Cultural Mentor) are responsible for guiding the teaching of lore passed down through the Dreaming and play a pivotal role in the governance structures and leadership within Indigenous education at the University. They know that Indigenous culture is at the heart of our governance systems. Their wisdom and teachings are essential to the cultural fabric of 'ways of doing'. Staff, students and the community regularly seek their guidance.

Nguraki appointments span across various Aboriginal nations bringing numerous cultural and spiritual customs and beliefs adding to the vibrancy of cultures open to staff and students at the University.

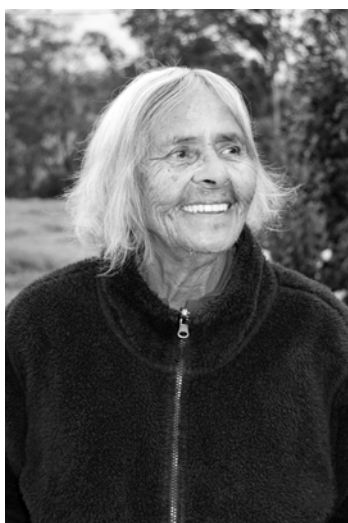
*The role and the contributions of Elders, Cultural Mentors and knowledge keepers are honoured and respected.*



Aunty June Rose (Awabakal)



Aunty Bronwyn Chambers (Darkinung)



Aunty Sandra Griffin (Awabakal)



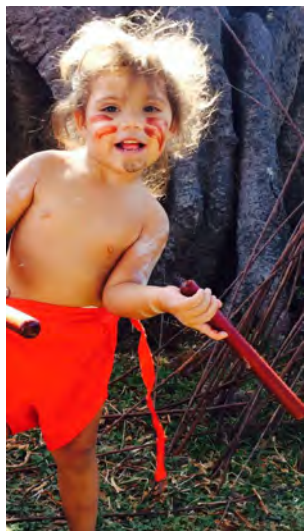
Aunty Colleen Perry (Worimi)





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Community children portraits



L – R: *Portrait of Justice Freeburn, 2015; Portrait of Prestan Dargin, 2015; Portrait of Tyson Faulkner, 2015*



*Portrait of Eva Moylan, Jarrah Young, Narlii Dowd and Karlanie Hooper, 2015*