



Saltwater Dreaming

Nardaparli/Vida Brown

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Detail from Nardaparli/Vida Brown, Stingrays, celebrating the joint management of Bouderee National Park by the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community and Environment Australia 1995

“My culture tells me that I cannot turn my back on the saltwater”.

Nardaparli, Wreck Bay, Feb 22, 2017

Nardaparli was born in Berry Hospital, one of thirteen children to her namesake Vida Brown I and George Brown. On her mother’s side Vida is related to Agnes and Jimmy Johnston and her great grandfather and great grandmother were King Mickey Johnston¹ of the Illawarra and Queen Rosie of the Wadie Wadie community. The 1891 Census indicates that King Mickey and his family of eight were living in Kangaroo Valley which was Queen Rosie’s traditional lands. Nardaparli’s fathers family is from the Wallaga Lake community and is of equally strong and proud lineage.

Nardaparli began her education at the Wreck Bay Mission Primary School. She and her classmates were later removed to the Naval Base School at Jervis Bay. She later attended Nowra High School and completed two years towards a Bachelor of Health Science and Aboriginal Economic Development at the University of Sydney.

It was only in the 1990s when Nardaparli began a TAFE course in art and design that she started seriously painting. She felt a great “contentment” and “powerful energy” flowing through her into her paintings. She felt “the old people guiding her painting”.

It was from this time that Nardaparli began a series of paintings inspired by her saltwater visions “each one is guided by the old people and the mother itself”. These paintings seem

¹ Mickey is described as the most well known South Coast Aborigine of the 19th century. Michael Organ, Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770-1850, Aboriginal Education Unit, University of Wollongong, 1989, 649p.



Detail from Nardaparli seven sisters dreaming



Detail from Nardaparli/Vida Brown, *Stingrays*, celebrating the joint management of Booderee National Park by the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community and Environment Australia 1995

to shimmer with meaning and their great detail is something that has inspired and awed people from the first moment she started to paint.

The detail of Nardaparli's work is breath taking and often takes several concerted gazes to see its complexity and beauty. Viewers often spend many minutes looking at the works and it is as if they disappear into a great well of creativity that emerges from them.

Nardaparli's paintings have become an inspiration and point of great pride for the Aboriginal people of the South Coast. They have also become a source of pride and harmony for the wider community.

In 1995 Nardaparli completed the stingrays painting which celebrated the beginning of the joint management of Booderee National Park by the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community and Environment Australia².

This painting has become a famous image that unites the Aboriginal people of the South Coast and gives a spirit of belonging and welcome to visitors to the Jervis Bay area.

Nardaparli says "While painting the stingrays my memory was from my childhood swimming. I was looking down watching the the mother sting rays and their babies swimming below."

Another image from this period is of the seven sisters. Nardaparli painted this after a visit to Kings Canyon where the seven sisters began their journey. They were chased by a bad spirit and as each one was killed their spirits

² <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/6151450>

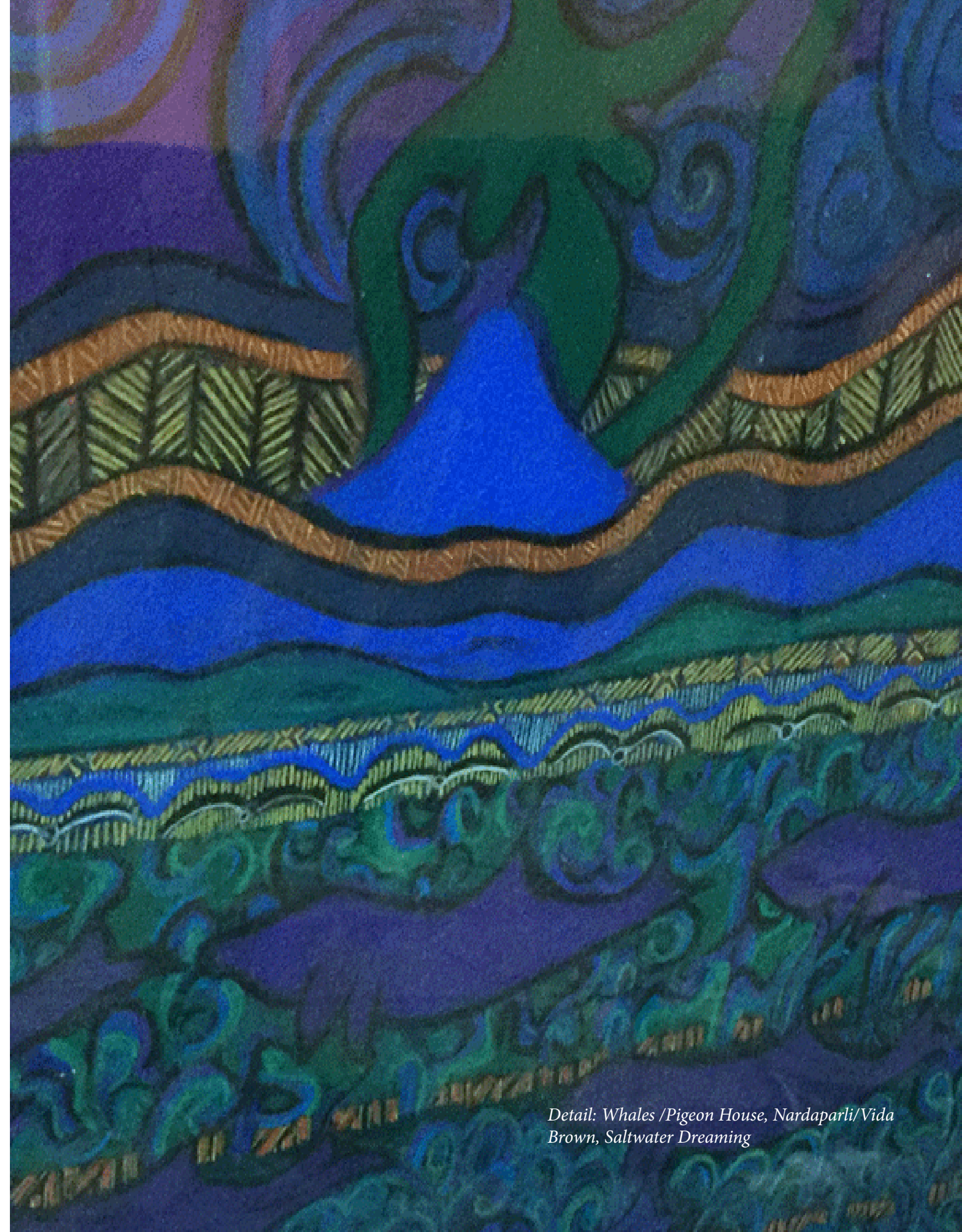
went into the galaxy and can be seen today as the pleiades constellation of stars.

Nardaparli paints as if she is in the stars looking down on the Australian continent. It is an extraordinary work that not only provides us with a unique perspective on this ancient story but in a modern sense re-connects song lines between the South Coast of NSW and the desert communities of the centre of Australia.

But it is the saltwater and the memories she has looking out the window of her mothers house at Wreck Bay that most inspire her and which she wants to continue to paint. Nardaparli lives on a disability pension and her works have never been collected and shown. Whenever there is a public mural or poster to help the community or the national park she is quick to lend a hand but she lacks the means to complete the paintings she has in her minds eye.

The paintings she has done of the migration of whales and dolphins along the south coast overshadowed by Pigeon House mountains take many hours of thinking and planning before they emerge on canvas. These designs have a perfect form and a continuity of vision that flows through her works

Wreck Bay fisherman are renowned and the Ardlers, Browns, Mc Leods, Moores and other Aboriginal families provided the Sydney fish markets with some of its finest produce for many decades. At the turn of the century there were several Aboriginal fishing companies at Wreck Bay and



Detail: Whales /Pigeon House, Nardaparli/Vida Brown, Saltwater Dreaming



*Detail from Nardaparli Crabs, Saltwater Dreaming
Series of paintings*

the community is intimately connected with the ocean. In a time honoured ritual families know the saltwater seasons and when salmon, mullet and tailor are starting to run. In years gone by the catch would be caught and then kept in the estuary nearby then gathered up and taken by horse and cart to Bomaderry Railway Station and then transported to the Sydney Fish markets. It was an extraordinary land based fishing community and the tradition still continues.

Nardaparli's paintings provide a unique view of this past. Her crabs paintings pay tribute to the cleaners and workers of the sea shore. "When I was a little girl the men used to bring in great catches of fish and there was always these clean sand crabs doing their work. My painting has the woman's womb. The mothers and children they cleaned the water and the sand."

There are two further paintings that are in Nardaparli's mind. She wants to paint an image she has of the sacred sun fish that lives in the sea near Wreck Bay. "I saw a sunfish from Mary's Hill. It was bigger than a house. I thought it was a shark. But its fin was flapping."

The second painting is of a memory she also has as a little girl. "One day my mother called me and I looked out on Summercloud bay and all I could see was tails flapping. 90 pilot whales had beached themselves on the sand. We walked up to them and looked them in the eye and told them. 'You will be all right, you're coming home now'. My mother told me. The whales have come in to walk on the land. It's the old people coming home. My mother was always standing there, smoking

and looking outside to the bay.” There is a lot more deep meaning to all of Nardaparli’s paintings. But even the surface story is of great depth. “The stench of the dead whales came through the whole community. It was a real overpowering smell. They had to be buried. This was a time when the community was run by white managers and we were not allowed to leave the mission. We used to swim in the creek behind the beach. For many years we walked from the creek to the sea and we could feel the spirits of those whales and you could hear those whales. We were not allowed to walk where those whales were buried out of respect. We would wash ourselves in the saltwater and our parents would ask us where have you been walking and they were glad that we washed the smell of the creek from us. That saltwater has cleansed you and made you pure.”

Nardaparli has recently finished a mural at the Wreck Bay Primary School and kindergarten. The story is of the gift of three cycles of hunting, life and prosperity: “Bee-wingmurrungoo (Sea eagle) watches over the minjeke (skyes) and Gupo (waters) ,being carried by Goorama the(Winds) Looking for Ngjullie (Foods) Hunting Ghundinjar(Whales) Traveling their Ngjullie (Feeding) trails through the Gupo (Oceans Waters) keeping the song lines moving with Nature Sharing the it. Respect for Life. Murrum(Fish) Cleaning the Gupo (Oceans) Floors and Sea Beds that Help make all Life Happy and Well. Look After Your Ocean Gardens, for You are the Gate Keepers YU-GRANG NGULLA, MOTHERS HEART BEAT.”

The NSW Aboriginal Regional Arts Fund grant will be dedicated to three things:

- 1) Completing two further paintings in the Saltwater Dreaming series: sacred sunfish and the story of the mickey whales beaching at Summercloud Bay
- 2) Making 500 signed prints of each of Ngardaparli’s saltwater paintings
- 3) Creating a permanent Ngardaparli website focuses on the saltwater dreaming series and other paintings
- 4) Having an exhibition of Nardaparli’s saltwater paintings in 2018.