

## ***Jean Baptiste Akuatimi***

**Language: Tiwi**

Jean Baptiste Akuatimi, or Pulukatu as she was named by her father, was born at Pirlangimpi (Garden Point) on Melville Island in 1940. Her skin group is Japijapunga and her dance is Buffalo; both of which are intrinsic to Akuatimi's social and cultural identity. In her teens she married Declan Akuatimi, with whom she shared a family and, eventually, a love of art. In collaboration with and under the tutelage of Declan, who was a pre-eminent artist of his time, Jean learnt to carve and paint. Their union marked the beginnings of her illustrious painting career, which now spans more than twenty years.

Akuatimi is one of the most senior artists of the Tiwi Islands. Although her first exhibition was in 1991 in Melbourne, it was not until 1997 that she became a full-time artist and expert in various media. While she has produced etchings and screen prints, she is best known for her natural ochre paintings on canvas, paper and bark and for her carvings.

Not only are her paintings extraordinarily beautiful and personal, they also conform with the conventions of Tiwi art. They move between figurative forms (depicting pukumani poles and other ceremonial (objects) and jilamara (ceremonial body painting designs) represented by vertical lines decorated with minga (lines) and pwanga (dots), which sit within other geometric shapes such as squares and triangles that cover the canvas. Figurative or geometric, Akuatimi's paintings are filled with her own personal interpretations of jilamara gifted to her by her late husband on his passing, as well as her own unique interpretations and visual representations of Tiwi culture and ceremonial life.

Jilamara is unique to Tiwi art and culture. It is made up of a highly personalised sequence of minga and pwanga that are used to signify and express individual identities and skin groups on bodies, poles and tunga(baskets) and in paintings representative of ceremony. The jilamara and various designs that Akuatimi inherited from her husband, such as jirtaka (sawfish) and parlini jilamara (body painting from the creation period), are still an important part of her visual language. However, her interpretation and adaptation of these have seen her move away from his more tightly arranged style of horizontal and vertical lines to a much looser composition, her primary lines tending to be further spaced apart and more fluid. Often in the form of arcs and curves, the lines also fluently bring the background and negative space to greater prominence. Her use of negative space and looser composition, as well as enlargement or magnification of earlier inherited designs such as jirtaka, are the essence of what is uniquely her own style. Jilamara is, however, always present.

Akuatimi has exhibited extensively both in Australia and overseas, and her work is represented in major private and public collections nationally and internationally, including the Kluge-Ruhe Collection and National Museum of

Women in the Arts in the United States of America. In 2007 she was selected to participate in the inaugural National Indigenous Art Triennial: Culture Warriors at the National Gallery of Australia, where she was acknowledged as one of the five **CEBig Guns**<sup>1</sup> who deserved particular mention for their achievements and roles as custodians of culture.

(Authors: Carly Lane with Tiwi Design)