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LIN ONUS 1948 - 1996

Birrikala Djini Bunnarong Bugaja (Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest) 1993

synthetic polymer on canvas

240 x 240 cm

signed lower right: Lin Onus

Provenance:

the artist's estate

Exhibited:

Urban Dingo The Art of Lin Onus 1948 - 1996, Queensland Art Gallery, 24 Nov 2000 - 4 March 2001, and touring Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney, 11 Aug - 30 Oct 2000, Melbourne Museum 6 April - 29 July 2001

On loan, National Museum of Victoria, c.1994 - 2014

Literature:

Neale, Margo, *Urban Dingo The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948 -1996*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 2000, pp. 103, 137, col. illus. pl.51

Related work:

Sherbrooke Forest 1974 synthetic polymer on canvas on composition board 71 x 55 cm
Collection of National Gallery of Victoria

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Sherbrooke Forest was a significant place to Lin Onus. It was there that his father Bill Onus opened his shop, Aboriginal Enterprises and where Lin Onus led an important land rights claim for the Bunnerong in the early 1970s. Onus' early paintings were of tree ferns and he revisited this imagery in many of his later works.

Born in 1948 the only child of Yorta Yorta activist Bill Onus and a Scottish mother, Lin Onus grew up imbued with a strong sense of cultural identity and political consciousness. In an extraordinary artistic career spanning three decades, Onus spearheaded the formation of a new contemporary Aboriginal artistic expression. In keeping with other 'urban' Aboriginal artists relegated to outside status Onus sought to explore the duality of his Aboriginal and European heritage. His intention was 'that history may see me as some sort of bridge...between...cultures.'¹

Growing up in Melbourne Onus was encouraged to follow the political activism of his parents and throughout his life he remained committed to the political struggles of his people. If initially Onus's political conscience took the form of direct action, subsequently Onus used his art as a powerful means of communication forcing audiences to confront wider political issues. Arguably, one of Onus's earliest and most important protests took place in 1971 when he led a Bunwurrung (Kulin) land rights claim in the Sherbrook Forest of the Dandenong Ranges. This event highlights the symbolic importance of Sherbrook Forest as a major site-of-significance and a recurring subject in Onus's art. Throughout his career Onus continually made reference to wider political issues such as land rights, the stolen generations and Maralinga and he painted many portraits of Aboriginal people of significance including tribal elders, political activists and cultural icons like Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter.

Onus grew up in a culturally rich environment encouraged both by his father's enterprise in setting up a workshop for Aboriginal art in Belgrave and by the inspiration provided by an earlier generation of Aboriginal artists working in the landscape genre: Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira, Gurnai artist Ronald Bull and Nyoongah artist Revel Cooper. Onus was determined however to broaden his cultural experience and in 1986 he had the opportunity to visit Maningrida where he met traditional elder Jack Wunuwun who became his adopted father and mentor and his extended family. The impact was extraordinary. Through his extended relationship with Wunuwun and other elders, Onus gained a deeper spirituality and a sense of belonging and he developed a new visual iconography using Aboriginal narratives and clan designs painted with *rarrk* (cross hatching) to convey 'inside' meanings. The present painting, *Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest* (1993), reveals this radically new perspective.

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During his career Onus explored variations of this 'jigsaw motif' as a symbol of 'the fragmented histories and degradation of identity and environment' that he had inherited.ⁱⁱ In *Barmah Forest* for example, which won the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award for 1994, the jigsaw pieces are made explicit disrupting the panorama of the realistic landscape.

In *Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest* the delicate butterflies are transformed by traditional ochre colours and *rarrk* patterns reminiscent of central Arnhem Land. Looping through the filtered light of the rain forest and the tracery of tree ferns they unsettle the illusion of seamless realism. In the process the landscape becomes indigenised. Such a wonderful painting with its many cross cultural meanings epitomises Onus's desire to create an inclusive art that, in the words of curator Margo Neale, acknowledges 'divergent and multiple Aboriginal identities...with sources drawn from intersecting, parallel worlds' of Aboriginal traditions and Australian modernism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sylvia Kleinert, 2016



(Detail, LIN ONUS 1948 – 1996 *Birrikala Djini Bunnarong Bugaja (Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest)*)

ⁱ Margo Neale, 'Urban Dingo,' in *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane 2000, p.21.

ⁱⁱ Neale, 2000, p. 15

ⁱⁱⁱ Neale, 2000, p.1