



# ZHOU XIAOPING

The Cross Cultural Influences of Chinese and Indigenous Art

3 March – 21 April 2018

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



**JOHNNY BULUNBULUN 1948- 2010  
AND ZHOU XIAOPING 1981-  
*Portrait of Johnny Bulunbulun***

synthetic polymer and ochre on canvas  
200 x 147 cm

signed lower left: Johnny Bulunbulun

signed lower left: Xiaoping

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Aboriginal art then sweeping Australia and the world.<sup>3</sup>

Zhou's direct and positive engagement with these communities is reflected not only in his appointment as artist-in-residence in 1992 at the Maningrida Community School in Arnhem Land, but also in several remarkable artistic collaborations, including one with the Broome-based Walmajarril painter Jimmy Pike (c.1940-2002), that resulted in a joint exhibition of their work in 1996 in Zhou's own hometown of Hefei – thereby making Pike the first Australian Aboriginal artist to exhibit in China. Three years later, they were invited to hold another joint exhibition, this time at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.<sup>4</sup>

Zhou's next significant collaboration was with the renowned Ganalbingu artist from Central Arnhem Land, John Bulunbulun (1946-2010), whom he had first met in 1991. Zhou later recalled:

At the time ... [Bulunbulun] was working with the special materials used in bark painting, a traditional Australian Aboriginal form of painting being four natural pigments consisting of yellow and red, as well as white gesso and black charcoal. As he ground up the colours on the slab, it reminded me of the ink sticks and ink stones I frequently used in the past in Chinese calligraphy and painting. It inspired a sudden sense of warm familiarity in my memory. ... For the next few days I went to help Bulunbulun grind colours every day, it is an art that combines both time and patience. ... During this process I gained a deep understanding of the endurance and perseverance of Aboriginal painters.<sup>5</sup>

Zhou was struck by other parallels with traditional Chinese art, such as his realisation that Bulunbulun's sheet of bark was 'a type of artist supply unique to the Arnhem bush, much like Chinese Xuan paper, regarded as the ultimate representation of the culture.' He also observed with satisfaction that: 'I quickly adapted to life in the bush [with Bulunbulun], and no cultural difference got in the way of the rapport we developed'.<sup>6</sup>

That personal rapport is very evident in the striking *Portrait of Johnny Bulunbulun*, painted jointly by the artists in 2007, where Zhou's expressive but realistic depiction of his friend, shown with paint brushes in his shirt pocket, is imbued with a subtle but timeless authority by Bulunbulun's background, representing a traditional Aboriginal bark painting with cross-hatching and totem designs.

Two years later, in 2009, Zhou and Bulunbulun began work on an exhibition project examining the history of the longstanding but little-known trade in 'trepang' (or sea cucumber) that had flourished between the Aboriginal, Maricassan and Chinese peoples since the early eighteenth century. The theme allowed the artists to interweave their traditional art forms in a series of powerful 'shared images', which explored the ancient

## AFFINITY AND COLLABORATION: Zhou Xiaoping and the art of cultural exchange

One of the most intriguing contemporary artists to explore the complex yet rich creative and conceptual possibilities of cross-cultural collaboration is the Chinese Australian artist, Zhou Xiaoping.

Having lived in Aboriginal communities over a sustained period of time and forged important working relationships with various senior artists, Zhou has developed an original art practice that brings together elements from Chinese, Western and Australian Aboriginal cultural traditions. His work on certain key themes, such as the forgotten history of Australian and Chinese cultural exchanges, has also provided him with a fresh perspective on important and enduring questions concerning the nature of identity and belonging; the ties between people and place; and the 'renewal of

ancient cultures in today's world'.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty years ago, in 1988, the classically trained Chinese artist, Zhou Xiaoping first visited Australia to present his work at an exhibition in Melbourne and – in what would prove to be a career changing decision - elected to stay and learn more of the country.

Travelling to some of Australia's most remote locations, his encounters with these unique landscapes and communities made a lasting impression and he discovered in himself 'a strong affinity for the aesthetics of Aboriginal art'.<sup>2</sup>

Zhou devoted the next three years to experiencing traditional Aboriginal life and culture in Central Australia, Arnhem Land and in the Kimberley region, during a time when many of these remote art centres were at the forefront of the great wave of contemporary

trade route that linked the two cultures. This creative interplay began quite spontaneously, as Zhou explains:

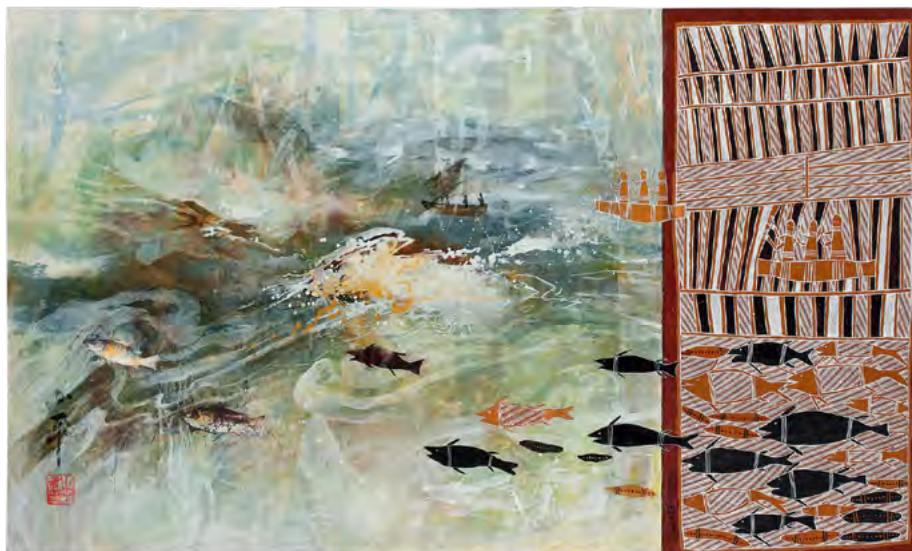
Johnny Bulunbulun and his family came to my studio in Melbourne to start preparing for the 'Trepang' exhibition ... I had the habit of spreading Xuan paper on the studio floor to paint on, and Bulunbulun would often sit next to it and scrutinise it ... One day, he took a Chinese brush, dipped it in ink and carefully drew a stroke in imitation of my painting. From then on, Bulunbulun's drawing would appear from time to time in my works, just as sometimes my drawings would appear on his bark surfaces. We developed a strong interest in one another's culture.<sup>7</sup>

This shared practice grew more ambitious over time and culminated in 2011 in the groundbreaking international touring exhibition, *Trepang: China & the story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade*, developed in association with Professor Marcia Langton, and held at the Capital Museum, Beijing and Museum Victoria, Melbourne, which placed their contemporary collaboration against a broader display of historic objects relating to the ancient trading route.

A number of the memorable joint works created for the Trepang project are present in the current exhibition, such as *From Art to Life* (2009) and *Discovery of Trading* (2009). Both works bring together two ancient artistic traditions in imaginative dialogue within a single panel. In the first, Bulunbulun treats the right-hand side as a bark painting with trepang and fish set below stylised figures in canoes, all in the primary colours of ochre and charcoal applied with fine cross-hatched strokes. Zhou playfully completes this narrative on the left-hand side in ink and acrylic, with his fluid wash and brush painting technique animating the frozen energy of the formal designs into swirling atmospheric life, in which canoes become sailing ships, and fish transform into Asian koi.

If *From Art to Life* presents cultural exchange as an invigorating and expansive experience, the *Discovery of Trading* reminds us that ancient cultures are also alike in enshrining certain values and practices. On the right of this composition, Bulunbulun depicts the collecting and exchange of trepang in Arnhem Land using designs from traditional clan paintings, while Zhou's section on the trade suggests the similarities between the cultures, ranging from the continuity of symbolic forms (such as archaic inscriptions on seals set alongside rarrk designs) to the parallels in belief systems (with a mythical Chinese dragon partially entwined with a rainbow serpent). To reinforce this idea of human connection across distant cultures, one of Bulunbulun's trepang figures is shown within Zhou's side of the composition carrying traditional Chinese hand-held scales, from which dried sea cucumbers are being weighed.

The idea of a shared practice that underpins the trepang project is also exemplified in works in a different medium – the series of blue and white porcelain bowls and vases that Zhou produced in 2010 with decoration based on Bulunbulun's bark paintings. Blue and white export porcelain is perhaps the most famous expression of China's dominance of global trade from the seventeenth century onwards.



**JOHNNY BULUNBULUN 1948-2010  
AND ZHOU XIAOPING 1981-  
From Art to Life 2009**

ink, synthetic polymer and ochre  
on rice paper on canvas  
170 x 285 cm

signed lower left: Xiaoping

signed lower centre: Johnny Bulunbulun

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According to Dr Jessica De Lary Healy, these vessels are decorated with representations of Macassan figures involved in the trepang trade, as reflected in the presence of common items of exchange like knives, axes, tobacco pipes and alcohol.<sup>8</sup> Zhou again delights in aligning symbolic forms from different cultures, placing Bulunbulun's triangular clan designs, which stand for cumulus clouds at the start of the wet season, on the neck of the vase below the stylised curling outlines that represent clouds in Chinese art.

Blue and white porcelain also appears in paintings, such as the hanging scroll, *Dissolve* (2010), in which Zhou's calligraphic brushstrokes create two overlapping images of seated Aboriginal women, while in the background are smaller figure studies, mainly of women making coil pots. The dramatic shifts in scale, and flattened forms of the women evokes the ambiguous floating space of Chinese scroll painting, while a dreamlike note is introduced by the literal depiction of two flowers near the composition's centre, whose tangible presence only increases the insubstantial quality of the women's outlines.

Following his lengthy collaboration with John Bulunbulun on the trepang project, which sadly ended with that artist's death in 2010, Zhou continued to work closely with Aboriginal communities, and recently returned to the Central Australian community of Mutitjulu, near Uluru, where his ongoing fascination with rock art was also renewed. The artist's sense of connection with this ancient art form can be traced back to his first years in Australia, when Aboriginal cave paintings near Maningrida reminded him of rock art in China's Ningxia Province.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, Zhou's latest work, painted on rice paper laid down on canvas, include a number of richly coloured and abstracted compositions reminiscent of landscape or

rock art surfaces, such as the series *Cultural Introductions* of 2017. Here Zhou further develops his shifting, layered perspective in which his own Chinese and Western interpretations of Australia's ancient land are intertwined with an Aboriginal visual vocabulary of dotted lines and concentric circles. This multi-layered amalgam reflects both the artist's insights from thirty years of cross-cultural engagement and his respectful acknowledgement of the essential ties of Aboriginal people to their country and the extraordinary aesthetic power of their culture.

**Alison Inglis**

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1 *Dialogues with the Dreaming: the art of Zhou Xiaoping in Australia*, exhibition catalogue, Australian Conservation of Asian Cultural Material, 2017, p. 23.

2 Zhou Xiaoping, 'Collaboration with Johnny Bulunbulun', in *Dialogues with the Dreaming*, 2017, p.113.

3 During this period, Zhou visited the Aboriginal communities of Yuendumu, Maningrida, Ramingining, Oenpelli, Yirrkala, Balgo, One Arm Point, and Fitzroy Crossing. For further details, see *Dialogues with the Dreaming*, 2017.

4 The first joint exhibition of Zhou and Pike was held in Jiu Lu Mi Gallery in Hefei in 1996. The second exhibition, *Through the Eyes of Two Cultures: Zhou Xiaoping & Jimmy Pike*, was held at the Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo and the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, in 1999.

5 Zhou Xiaoping, 'Turtle', in Marcia Langton et al., *Trepang: China & the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade*, exhibition catalogue, Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, The University of Melbourne, 2011, p.133.

6 Zhou Xiaoping, 'Collaboration with Johnny Bulunbulun', in *Dialogues with the Dreaming*, 2017, p.113.

7 Zhou Xiaoping, 'Collaboration with Johnny Bulunbulun', in *Dialogues with the Dreaming*, 2017, p. 113.

8 Jessica De Lary Healy, 'From Art to Life and back: Zhou Xiaoping's creative encounters in Aboriginal Australia', in *Dialogues with the Dreaming*, 2017, p. 69.

9 Jeremy Eccles, 'Insights: Zhou Xiaoping's artistic explorations in Aboriginal Australia', in *Dialogues with the Dreaming*, 2017, p. 57.



***Dissolve 2010***  
scroll  
215 x 73 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



***Landscape 2017***  
ink, oil on rice paper on canvas  
137 x 135 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



***Couple 2015***  
oil on canvas  
137 x 69 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



**Reggie Uluru 2015**

oil on canvas

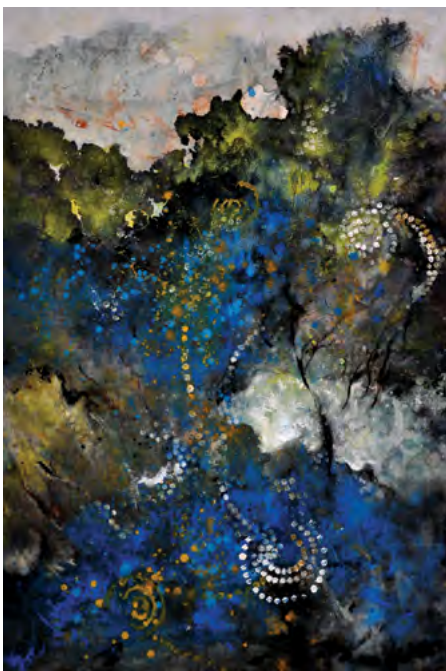
195 x 157 cm

signed lower right: Xiaoping 15



**Father and Son 2008**

synthetic polymer on canvas  
165 x 230 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



**Cultural Introduction 3 2017**

ink, synthetic polymer on rice paper on canvas  
100 x 68 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



**The Source of Life 2010**

synthetic polymer on canvas  
165 x 230 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



**Blue and White Bottle 2010**  
Features design from painting  
by Johnny Bulunbulun 2010  
Height: 37 cm  
signed base: 6/20 Xiaoping



**Blue and White Bowl 2010**  
Features design from painting  
by Johnny Bulunbulun  
Diameter: 19 cm  
signed base: 46/50 Xiaoping



**Laurie Maarbuduc 2012**  
oil on canvas  
177 x 177 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



**Two Worlds 2017**  
ink, synthetic polymer, oil on  
rice paper on canvas  
95 x 126 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping



**Our Country 2017**  
ink, oil on rice paper on canvas  
130 x 95 cm  
signed lower right: Xiaoping 17



**JOHNNY BULUNBULUN 1948-2010**

**AND ZHOU XIAOPING 1981-**

***Discovery of Trading 2009***

synthetic polymer and ochre on canvas

232 x 168 cm

signed lower left: Xiaoping

signed upper centre: Johnny Bulunbulun

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Catalogue design: Anton Banulski



***Shopping 2015***

oil on canvas

139 x 70 cm

signed lower left: Xiaoping



***Red Country 2017***

ink, oil on rice paper on canvas

120 x 69 cm

signed lower right: Xiaoping

**COVER**

***Back to Back 1998***

***Portrait of Jimmy and Xiaoping***

synthetic polymer on rice paper

on board

207 x 154 cm

signed lower right: Xiaoping 98

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Gallery Exhibition Hours:  
Tues - Fri 10am – 6pm, Sat 1pm – 5pm