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BLANTON MUSEUM TO EXHIBIT ‘ANCESTRAL MODERN: AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ART FROM THE KAPLAN & LEVI COLLECTION’

Exhibition of painting and sculpture explores the flourishing of contemporary Australian Aboriginal art

AUSTIN, Texas—April 17, 2018—The Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin presents Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan & Levi Collection, an exhibition that explores the vibrant development of contemporary Australian Aboriginal art from the 1960s to the present. Ancestral Modern will be on view in the Blanton’s Butler Gallery from June 3 – September 9, 2018. Featuring 50 paintings and sculptures by Australian Aboriginal artists, Ancestral Modern celebrates a renaissance in the world’s oldest continuous artistic tradition. The exhibition was curated by Pamela McClusky, Curator of Art of Africa and Oceania at the Seattle Art Museum and was organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Seattle Art Museum.

“Ancestral Modern offers an opportunity for many museum visitors to experience this extraordinary and innovative work for the first time,” said Blanton Director Simone Wicha. “These are captivating works of art that also provide a window into the richness of Aboriginal culture and beliefs.”

The increased power and visibility indigenous Australians gained in the late 1960s after decades of grassroots activism also sparked an artistic revolution. Drawing from a visual lexicon dating back over 50,000 years, contemporary Aboriginal artists began adapting traditional art and ritual practices such as rock and body painting to portable materials and media as a way of gaining recognition and respect for their culture.
Highlighting this spectacular era in Aboriginal artistic creation, *Ancestral Modern* includes paintings on bark strips, hollow logs, and canvases as well as sculptures, organized both geographically and thematically. Although the large, colorful canvases and intricately patterned bark paintings may initially appear abstract, they are encoded with symbols specific to the Aboriginal groups that created them. These artworks communicate beliefs and histories, laws and rituals, and a profound connection to the land.

Common symbols in the works allude to the Australian landscape’s flora, fauna, and natural features such as bodies of water—conveying Aboriginal groups’ stewardship of the land. For example, the dense background dotting in Ngilpirr Spider Snell’s *Kurtal* indicates an abundance of bush foods and the central blue figure suggests a desert spring. Aboriginal art is also deeply tied to spiritual beliefs and rituals; in this painting the snake figure represents the powerful spirit Kurtal, creator and resident of waterways, who is invoked in Wangkajunga cultural practices that celebrate the presence of water.

*Ancestral Modern* features a number of works by women artists who began painting as rules allowing only men to create art loosened in the 1980s. An early section of the exhibition highlights women painters from Utopia, a desert community in the central part of Australia’s Northern Territory. Emily Kam Kngwarray’s *Anooralya (Wild Yam Dreaming)* evokes the vibrant root network of a wild yam plant, a food central to desert life, and an area of traditional knowledge of which Kngwarray was a senior custodian. While stories or knowledge derived from the Dreaming, a deep ancestral past, may be accessible only to certain individuals, kinship groups, or peoples, the artists in this exhibition have adapted visual languages and art forms to arrive at representations that are appropriate for sharing with outside audiences.
“The paintings and sculpture that Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi have collected that make up this exhibition are not only beautiful, they contain a wealth of information: about culture, environment, history, and beliefs,” said Claire Howard, the Blanton’s Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art and the exhibition’s managing curator. “They are powerful testaments to indigenous Australians’ resilience and reflect the contemporary resonance of their millennia-old artistic traditions.”

This exhibition is organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Seattle Art Museum.

It was made possible by the generosity of Mrs. Donald M. Cox, the Wolfensohn Family Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

Support for this exhibition at the Blanton is provided in part by Ellen and David Berman.

Public Programs:

Thursday, June 21, 6:30pm – Ten Canoes, the first-ever film made using indigenous Australian languages and winner of the jury prize at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival
Thursday, July 19, 6:30pm – Walkabout, Nicolas Roeg’s classic 1971 film tells the story of two children stranded in the Australian Outback

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About the American Federation of Arts
The American Federation of Arts is the leader in traveling exhibitions internationally. A nonprofit organization founded in 1909, the AFA is dedicated to enriching the public’s experience and
understanding of the visual arts through organizing and touring art exhibitions for presentation in museums around the world, publishing exhibition catalogues featuring important scholarly research, and developing educational programs.

About the Blanton Museum of Art
Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with nearly 18,000 objects. Recognized for its modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and encyclopedic collection of prints and drawings, the Blanton offers thought provoking, visually arresting, and personally moving encounters with art.

The museum is located at the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Congress Avenue and is open Tuesday through Friday from 10–5, Saturday from 11–5, and Sunday from 1–5. Thursdays are free admission days and every third Thursday the museum is open until 9. Admission Prices: Adults $9, Kids 12 and under FREE, Seniors (65+) $7, Youth/College Students (13–21) $5. Admission is free to members, all current UT ID holders. For additional information call (512) 471–7324 or visit blantonmuseum.org

Image captions:
Tommy Mitchell
*Walu*, 2008
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
40 x 60 in.
Promised gift of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan to the Seattle Art Museum
© Tommy Mitchell
Courtesy American Federation of Arts

Ngilpirr Spider Snell
*Kurtal*, 2005
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
83 7/8 x 59 13/16 in.
Promised gift of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan to the Seattle Art Museum
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Courtesy American Federation of Arts

Emily Kam Kngwarray
*Anoooralya (Wild Yam Dreaming)*, 1995
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
59 13/16 x 48 ⅞ 16 in.
Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan
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