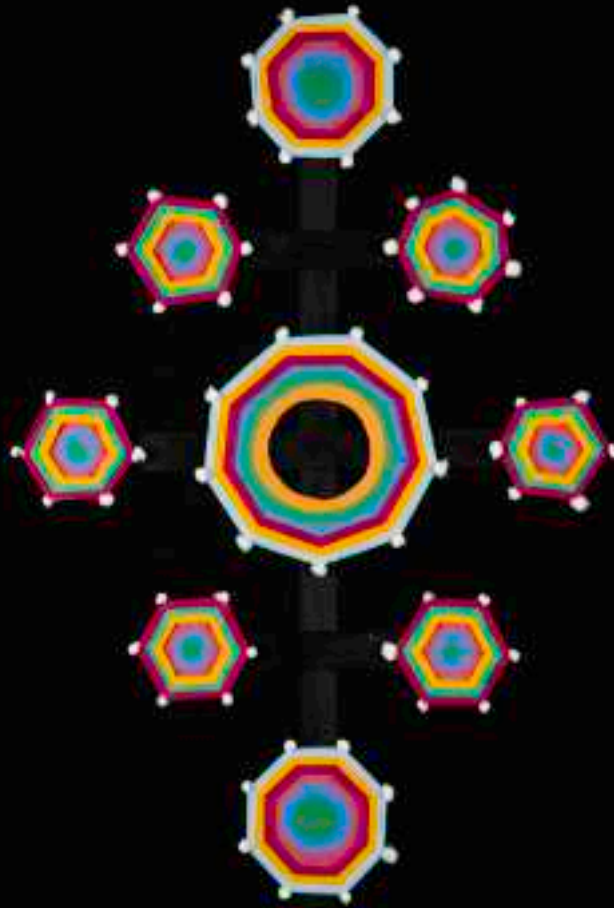


A SECONDARY EYE



ROY WIGGAN

**ILMA**



Catalogue to accompany the solo presentation of Roy Wiggan's work by A Secondary Eye at  
Sydney Contemporary (7 - 10 September 2023).

The exhibition and catalogue are produced with the support of the artist's daughter Elaine  
Wiggan and Emily Rohr from Short St Gallery, Broome (who represented and worked with Roy  
from 1998 until he passed away). Percentage of the sale proceeds will go the artist's family.

ROY WIGGAN

ILMA

A SECONDARY EYE



# INTRODUCTION

With their radically unique appearance, and occupying a liminal space between painting, sculpture and performance objects, Roy Wiggan's ilma are amongst the most original artworks made in Australia. Beautifully crafted using painted plywood, nails, thread and cotton, the ilma are rare hand-held objects that were used in traditional dances and ceremonies by the Bardi people in North-Western Australia. Roy Wiggan, an elder of his community and custodian of many sacred Bardi stories, decided to make create these beautiful objects for the market outside of their original ceremonial context for institutions and private collection as to preserve the ilma for future generations.

Roy Wiggan's ilma can depict physical objects or natural phenomena such as tides and rain, and embody more metaphysical concepts. Many of the stories are inspired by the Bardi's unique relationship with their country - and indeed with the sea, as they are a seafaring and salt water people with an intimate knowledge of tidal patterns and marine life.

Since Roy Wiggan passed away in 2015, this has left a void in the cultural landscape and indeed in the dissemination of the incredible aesthetic that the Bardi people have fostered over generations. Whilst some institutional efforts have recently been made to highlight the ilma (notably the Sydney Biennale in 2018 and the Art Gallery of New South Wales with the opening exhibition of Sydney Modern), these works deserve equally prominent presentation in the commercial realm, and in the country's most prestigious private collections.

A Secondary Eye has been invited by the organisers of Sydney Contemporary to present Wiggan's work as apart of Installation Contemporary. A selection of some of the largest work that the artist executed (twice the size of any work found in state institutions) will be prominently displayed in the entrance foyer of the art fair. The remaining work seen in this catalogue will exhibited with us at booth A02. Be sure to come by and say hello.



*The ilma used in a traditional Bardi ceremony*





# ROY (BUGGAI) WIGGAN

## Catalogue Essay by Emily Rohr

*Founder of Short St Gallery, Broome (who represented and worked with Roy from 1998 until he passed away)*

Roy (Buggai) Wiggan was born on Sunday Island, off One Arm Point on the Dampier Peninsula north of Broome, in circa 1930 and passed away in 2015. He was a Bardi elder and the son of Henry (Boy/Little) Wiggan (d. 1963) and Katie Wiggan, and was trained in law with his cousin Billy Ah Choo. These two men were keepers of the ilma-making tradition and its songs and dances for many years for the Bardi.

Sunday Island was a missionary outpost, off the tip of the Dampier Peninsula, but the missionaries would only visit occasionally so it was maintained as a place that was isolated, and culturally strong. The people hunted using traditional Galwa or Biel Biel (Bardi rafts) catching dugongs, turtle, crocodiles, and fish. The rafts are made from special mangrove wood, and pinned in with wooden pegs, a very elegant and stable design. They were efficiently designed one-man canoes. Every Bardi man made his own Galwa, and it was his means to provide for the community.

They would travel to all the islands around Sunday Island, King Sound and the Buccaneer Archipelago, fishing, hunting dugong and collecting turtle eggs, also different types of pearl shell, coral and wood for making traditional objects. At night the community would gather to dance with the ilma and sing the songs of their ancestors. Roy used to say our TV was our dances and songs which we did every night, by firelight. When performed by moonlight, with dancers painted in white ochre, the ilma, floating in the blackness, take on an ethereal, esoteric, mystical appearance, just like the spirits who bring the new songs to each generation.

Roy was a senior law man, who had an intimate knowledge of his country and culture. He was a proud black man as he would repeatedly tell everyone: “I was born black and I will die black and that means something.” He was a man of great power and understanding of his culture and law. He was a stickler for these traditions, and repeatedly insisted on keeping the culture alive while living in two worlds. He often burst into song. He had an extraordinary

memory. The elders came to Roy in 1945 and told him that he would be trained up with his cousin in ilma making and had been chosen to be the boss of this practise and the keeper of the songs. When he was young he was a “top singer” and he felt he was chosen because of this. Although I believe it was also his connection to the spirit world.

Ilma are essentially memory triggers, which are made from things at hand - the original objet trouvé. They have been made from coral dyes, hair strings, bush cotton, painted tin, carved wood and feather down, to what Roy used in most of his works produced as artworks, ply, coloured string, acrylic paint, wire and cotton wool, on wooden struts.

Ilma are pictorial representations of a song, which are usually connected to ancestral stories, and cultural knowledge of place, i.e. whirlpools, navigation, hunting, and traditional law practices. Interestingly, stringed objects are part of traditional law and culture from the Pilbara up to the Northern Territory, although the ilma are unique to the peninsula north of Broome.

Some ilma are associated with songs passed on to younger generations about the past or as lessons in navigating the sea in treacherous conditions or about seasonal changes in the land, and knowing when things are right to eat. These are taught to children so they can remember their history and place.

When you are chosen, as Roy was, to be a custodian for this practice, it is often because you have a special gift to see and speak with spirits. There is the Ingarrda, and the Rai (little people) spirits who bring songs and ilma in dreams or in quiet moments. For Roy many of his ilma were bought to him in such a manner, particularly the ilma associated with his fathers’ miraculous survival in a big storm out at sea.

These songs and ilma tell the story of Boy or Little Wiggan being swept out to sea, on a galwa (raft) and thinking he would die, and he was presumed dead. He was very thirsty with no water, and then rain came - the rain that is heavy and fills a vessel for water. He then caught some fish. He started to follow the sea birds to find his way back.

On the way he hits a sand bar, he is walking on it and treads on a law object. This is a significant sign, and felt it had some magic in it, he started to feel hope. He then headed back out, he saw the smoke signal the community had lit and finally saw a light house and made it back to shore. He had been presumed dead, and everyone rejoiced at his safe return. This story has songs and ilma associated with it - many are in this exhibition.



There is the Janjala ilma (cat. no. 8) which refers to the type of storm that took Roy's father out to sea. The rainbow shape is the cloud, the small circle represents the wind spinning. Under the circle the cloud starts to break apart. The top cloud doesn't move - it stays steady while the other clouds start to break apart with the rain. This Janjala is travelling over water and when the clouds break apart, it sucks up the water and makes a waterspout. These are represented on the bottom of the clouds.

The Mayargrangballa ilma (cat. no. 12) also refers to Little Wiggan's story: Mayargranballa is a passage, or tidal rip. When the tide comes in it is referred to as Milimillo, when the tide goes out it is referred to as Mayargrangballa. The oval shape depicts on the top (Mayargrangballa) and Gardardin (on the bottom). The outgoing tide meets at the top. Incoming tide meets at the bottom. "Dad was taken by Mayargrangballa". The half circles represent whirlpools. The rip causes these whirlpools to have the shape of a half circle. The other two are whirlpool, created by the two outside ones (the half circles) . They are called Booay Booay. These whirlpools often start small and then become very big: "you can feel it when you're in your raft or catamaran or dingey."

Roy said, that when at sea around the coast and King Sound area, "you can see hundreds and hundreds of white frothy circles, then you get close and you see they are little whirlpools, fighting against each other, these are called 'galol'." Roy's father was taken by a very strong wind, made by the storm. He was dragged out to sea by the Mayargrangballa passage.

There is also the Rain Drop ilma (cat. no. 17) which in the words of the song "I am out in the open sea, not knowing whether I am going to get home, but I am cleansed and feed by the drop of rain." In Bardi, there is not just one word for rain. There are many different words, and each describes a different type of rain. This ilma refers to the heavy solid rain drops that fill a cup with water. When Little Wiggan (Roy's father) was lost at sea, he was very thirsty and just when he thought he may die from thirst this type of rain fell and saved his life.

Other ilma in the exhibition represent more generic songs such as the Magabala ilma (cat. no. 15) which is about the magabala or bush banana which grows all around Broome and the peninsula. It is a popular native food. The One Arm Point community dance and sing to the magabala using this ilma, to make sure there is plenty of magabala for the coming season. The circles around the edge represent the flower on the magabala vine, while the small oval shapes in the bottom circle is the young fruit and the large central half circle is the fully grown fruit. The top circle is the seeds. There is also the caterpillar ilma (cat. no. 23) which is sung to fatten the caterpillars, so they are plentiful and good eating.

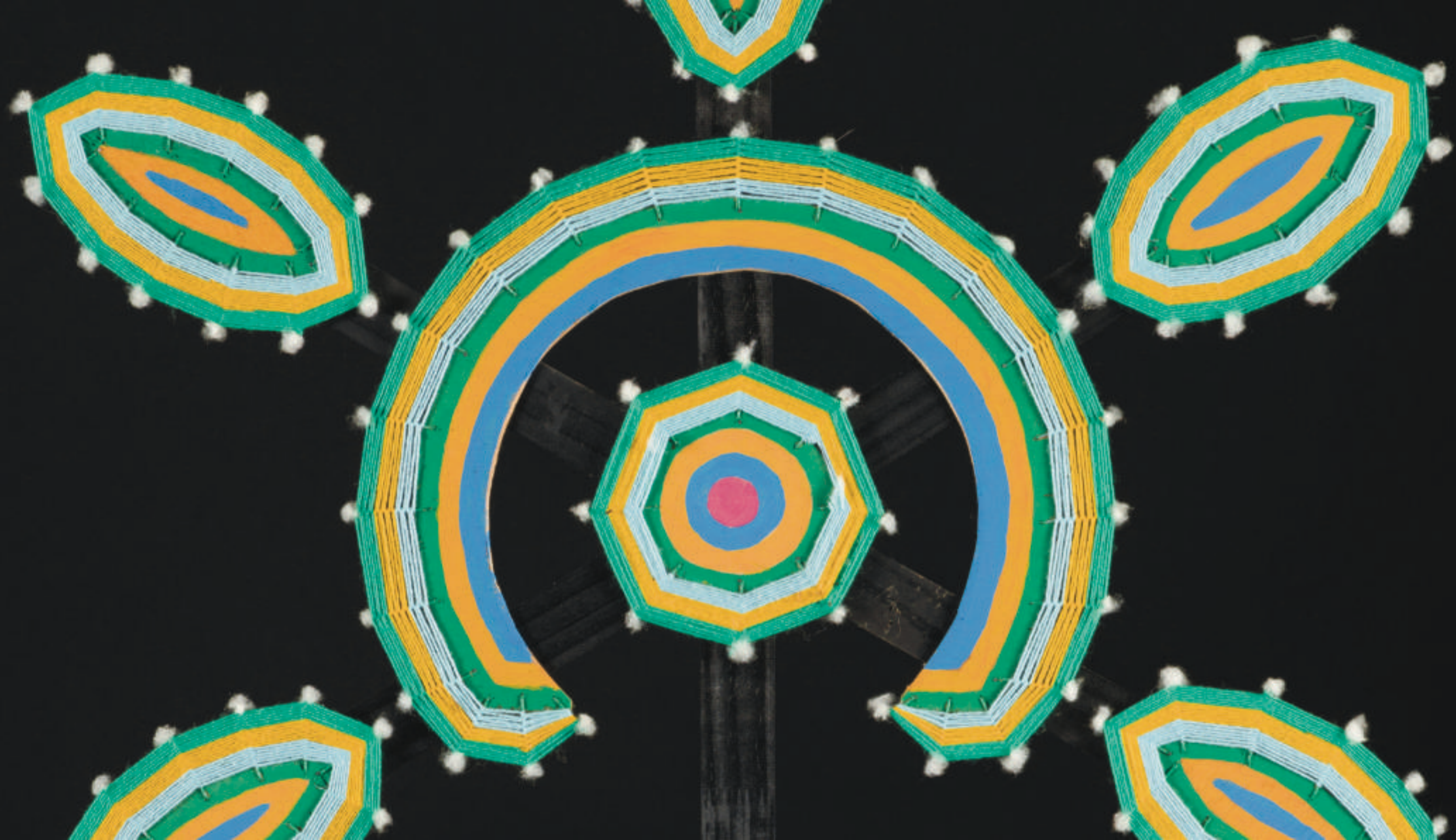
Some ilma such as Swan Point (cat. no. 36) are based on more scientific phenomena. This ilma represents the rain falling at Swan Point. The semi-circle at the top represents the higher lighter cloud. The two shapes coming together are the darker rain clouds merging. The circle is the heavy dark cloud above the waterhole at Swan Point up on the peninsula north of Broome near Sunday Island.

Roy died on December 3, 2015, the same day and month his father died. Everyone has been so affected by the loss of songs and vast cultural knowledge – he had a huge IP, that left this world when he did. Although recently his daughter Elaine told me of grandchildren, born after the old man died, talk to their parents about seeing and talking to Buggai. The old man is coming to the next generations in order to keep the culture alive and strong. Roy was a force, I have never met anyone like him, he was unique and I for one am not surprised that he will defy death of the physical self to ensure that the culture he loved and lived for, lives on. It certainly is present in each of these ilma.



*Roy Wiggan with Emily Rohr*







1

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 2002  
 painted plywood, nails,  
 thread and cotton  
 186 x 87 cm  
 (height with support 274 cm)



2

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 2002  
 painted plywood, nails,  
 thread and cotton  
 207 x 59 cm  
 (height with support 275 cm)





*"You mark my words, you carry on with your culture and it will carry on and look after you. That is where the payment comes in. Because that culture is not made by you or me. It has always been there and always will be."*

Roy Wiggan (in *Old Country New Country*, Gaia Media 2009)



4

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

190 x 76 cm

(height with support 276 cm)



5

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

172 x 66 cm

(height with support 237 cm)



*"Some ilma are associated with songs passed on to younger generations about the past or as lessons in navigating the sea in treacherous conditions or about seasonal changes in the land, and knowing when things are right to eat. These are taught to children so they can remember their history and place."*

Emily Rohr

6

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

197 x 86 cm

(height with support 260 cm)







7

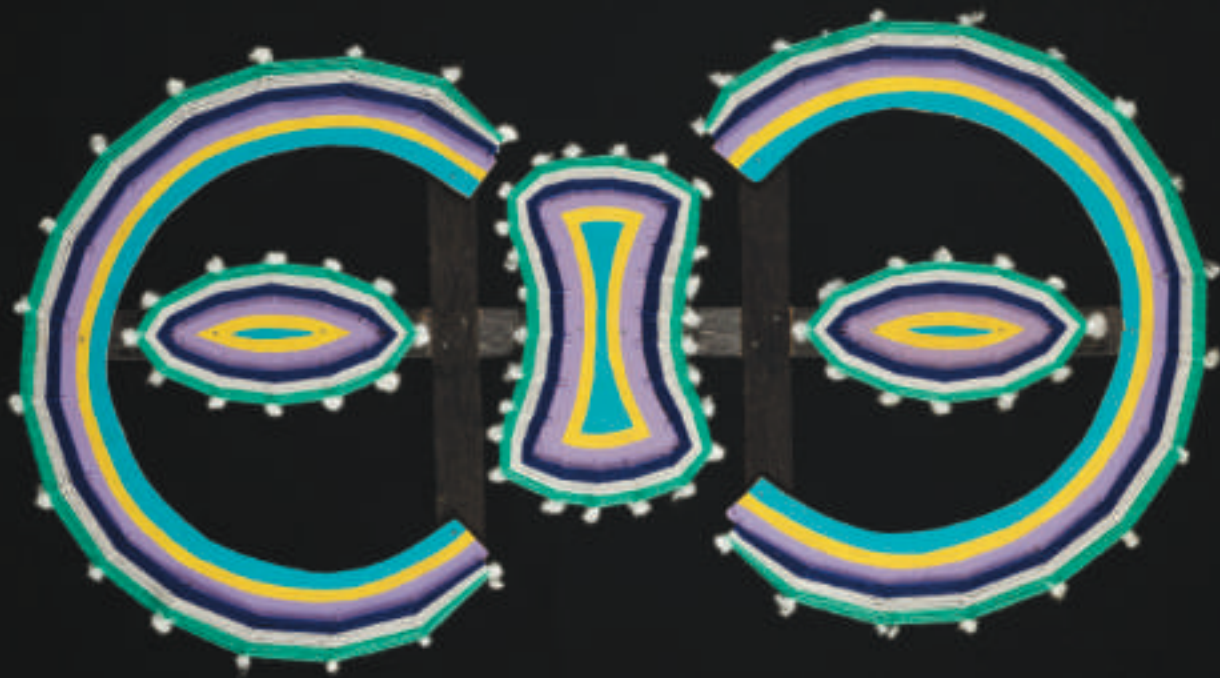
ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1992  
 painted plywood, nails,  
 thread and cotton  
 110 x 47 cm  
 (height with support 141 cm)



8

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1992  
 painted plywood, nails,  
 thread and cotton  
 69 x 50 cm  
 (height with support 125 cm)





9

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

110 x 57 cm



10

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

113 x 44 cm

*"He was a man of great power and understanding of his culture and law. He was a stickler for these traditions, and repeatedly insisted on keeping the culture alive whilst living in two worlds. He often burst into song. He had an extraordinary memory"*

Emily Rohr

11

ROY WIGGAN

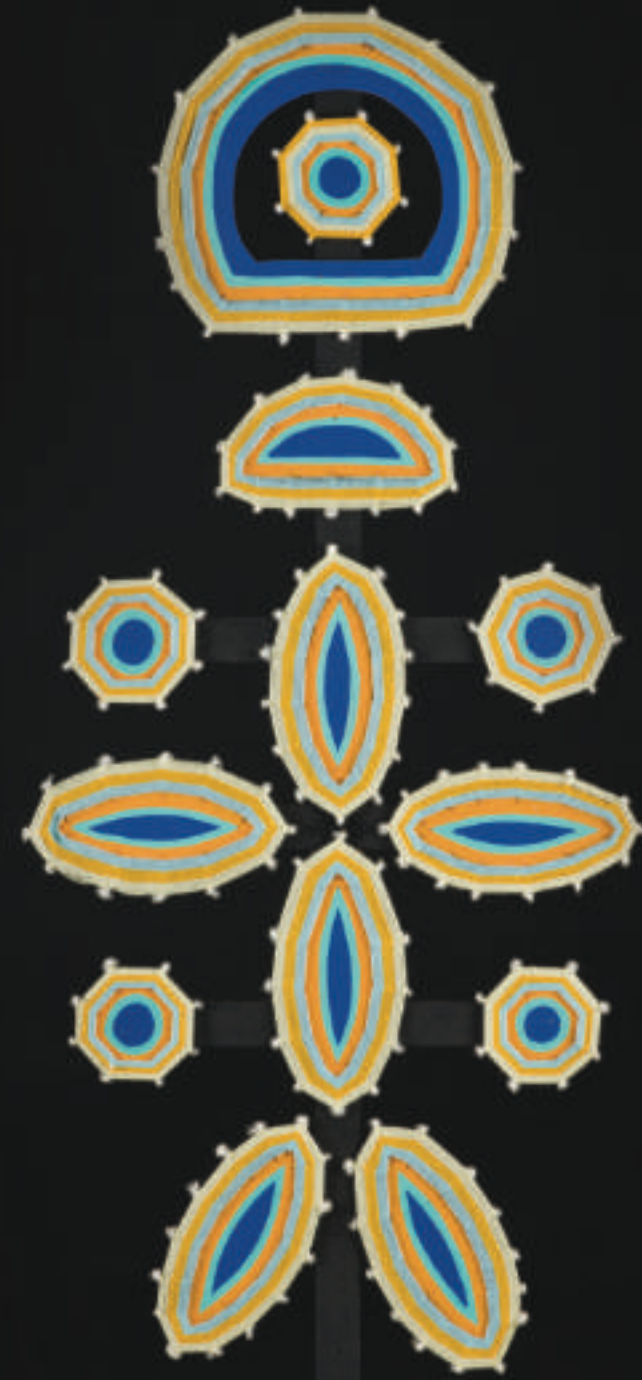
*Ilma*, 1998

painted plywood, nails,

thread and cotton

130 x 60 cm

(height with support 155 cm)





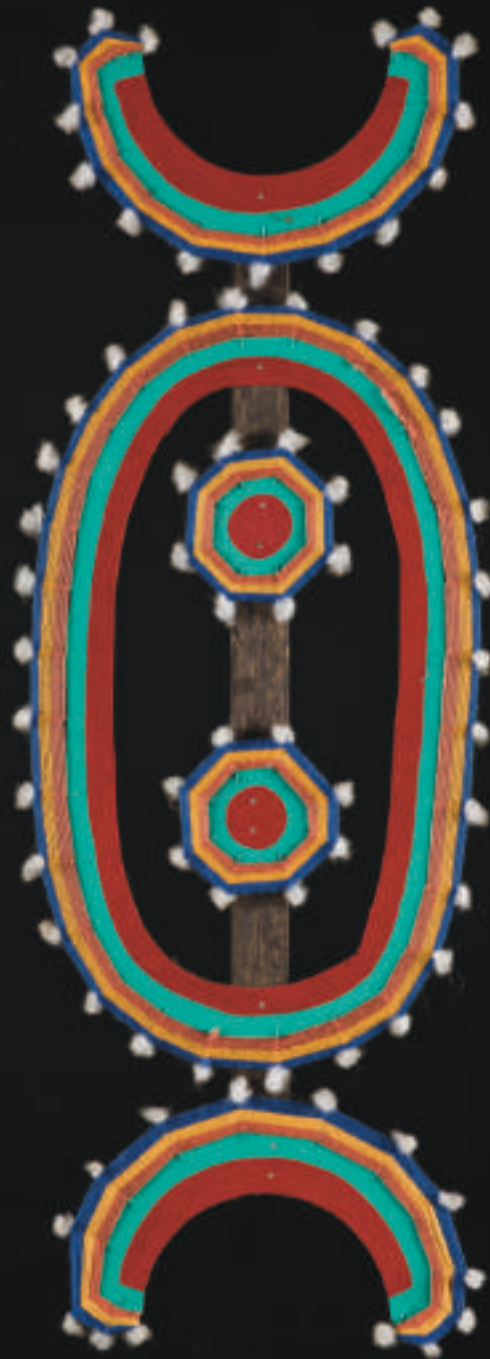
12

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1992

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

100 x 36 cm



13

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1992

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

73 x 78 cm

(height with support 148 cm)

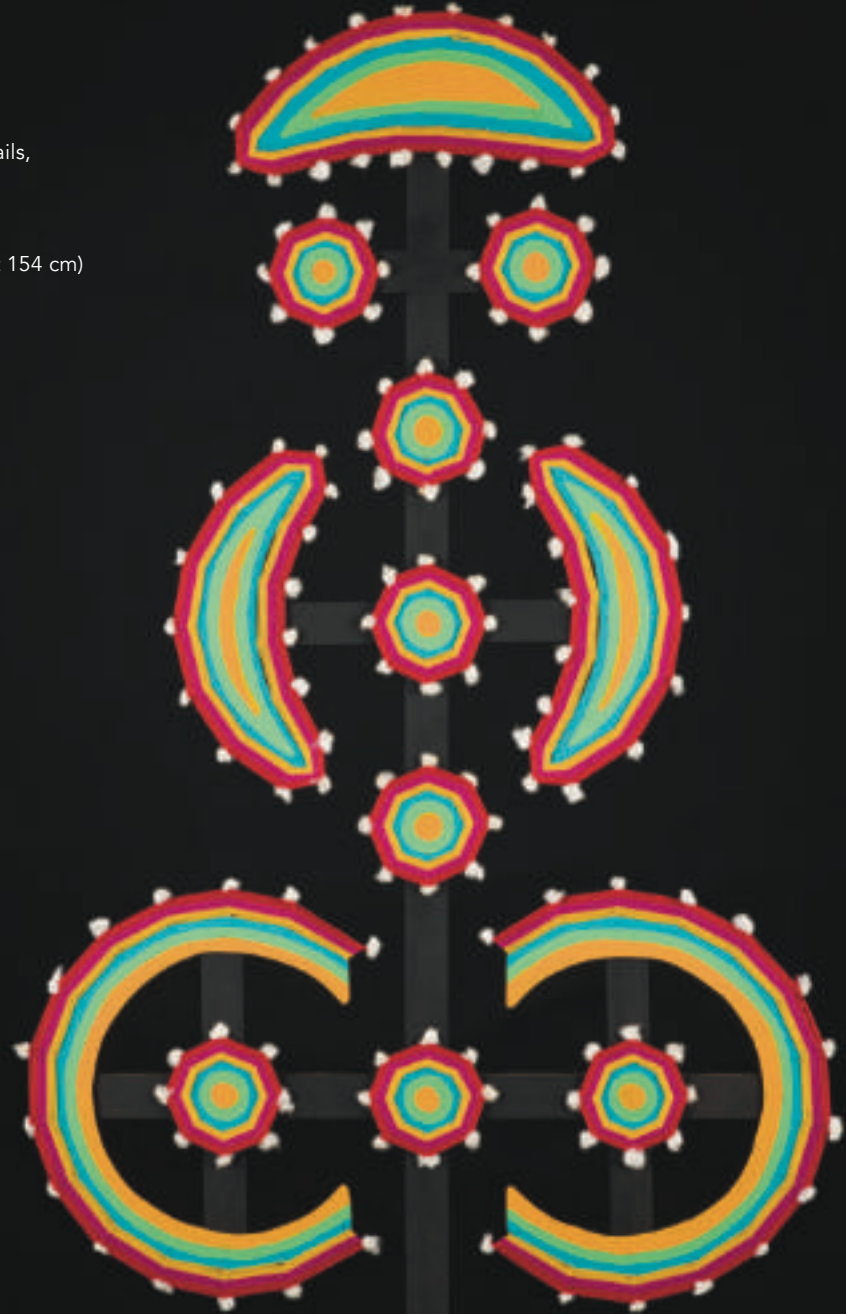


ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

134 x 82 cm

(height with support 154 cm)



ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

115 x 60 cm

(height with support 115 cm)



ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

134 x 82 cm

(height with support 154 cm)







17

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
113 x 26 cm

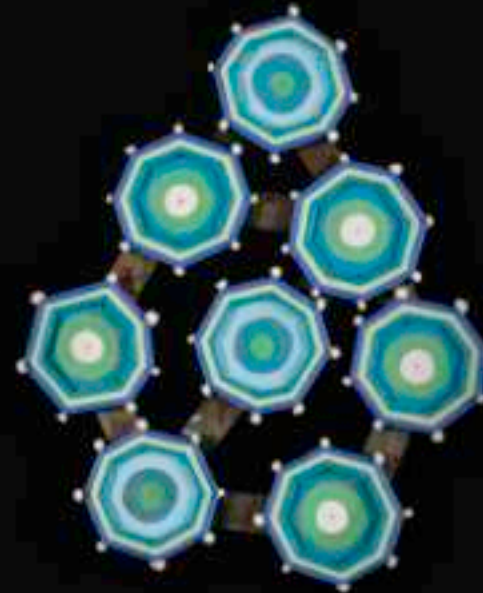
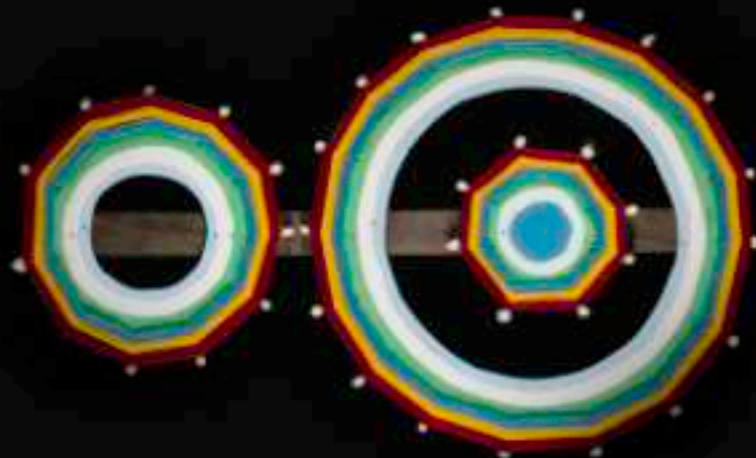


18

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
48 x 36 cm

19

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 2002  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
69 x 47 cm



20

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 2002  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
67 x 54 cm

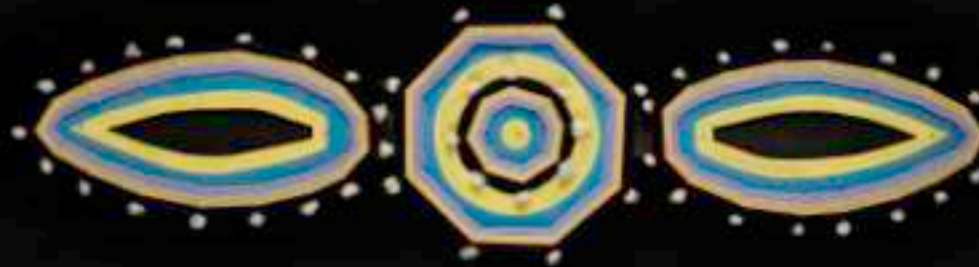
21

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
65 x 37 cm



22

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
97 x 26 cm



23

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

110 x 52 cm

(height with support 110 cm)



24

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

143 x 52 cm

(height with support 143 cm)

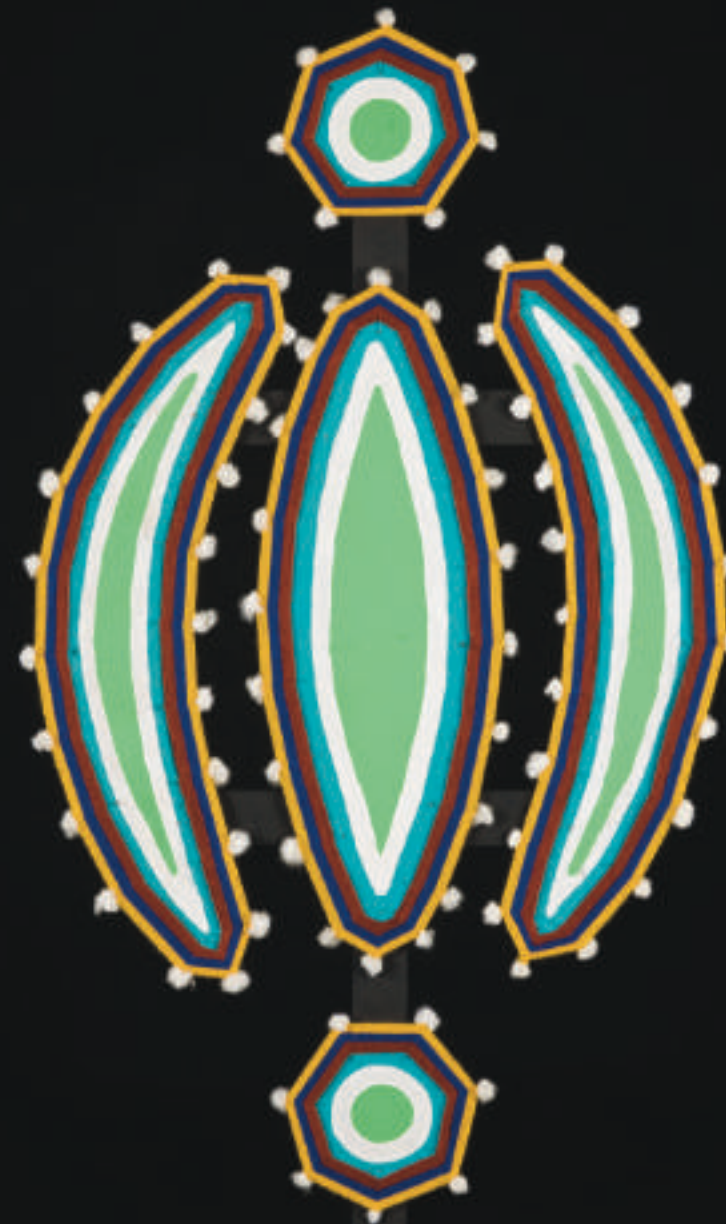






25

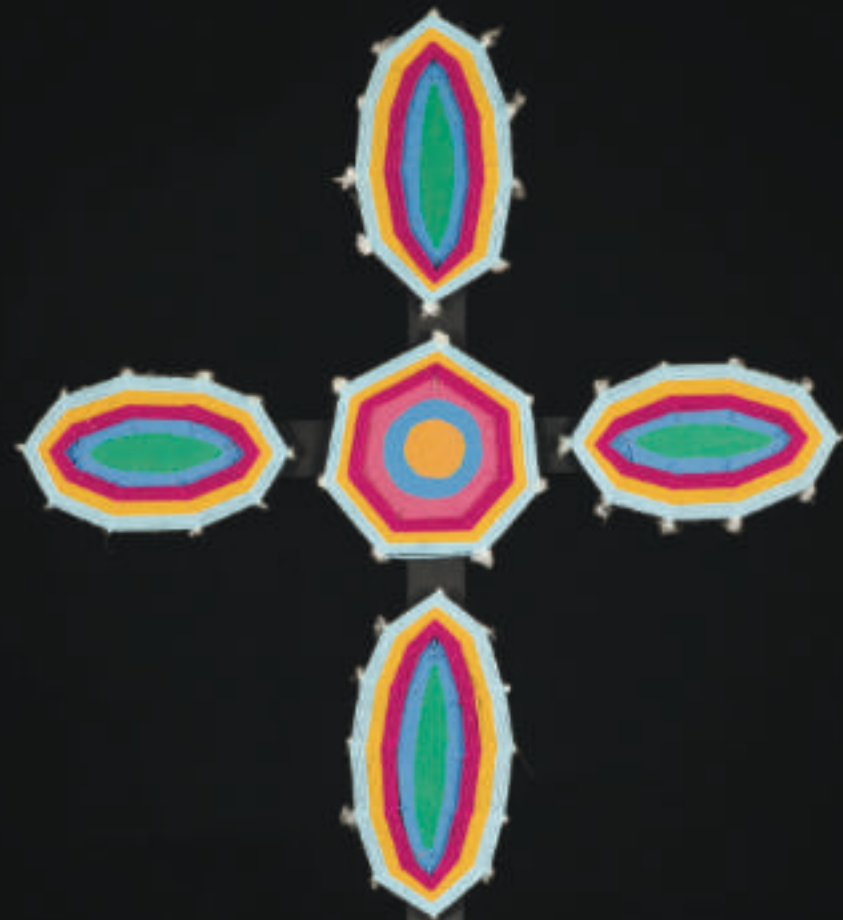
ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 2000  
 painted plywood, nails,  
 thread and cotton  
 102 x 80 cm  
 (height with support 237 cm)



26

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
 painted plywood, nails,  
 thread and cotton  
 93 x 55 cm  
 (height with support 204 cm)





27

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

68 x 62 cm

(height with support 215 cm)



28

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

145 x 80 cm

(height with support 216 cm)



29

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
71 x 24 cm



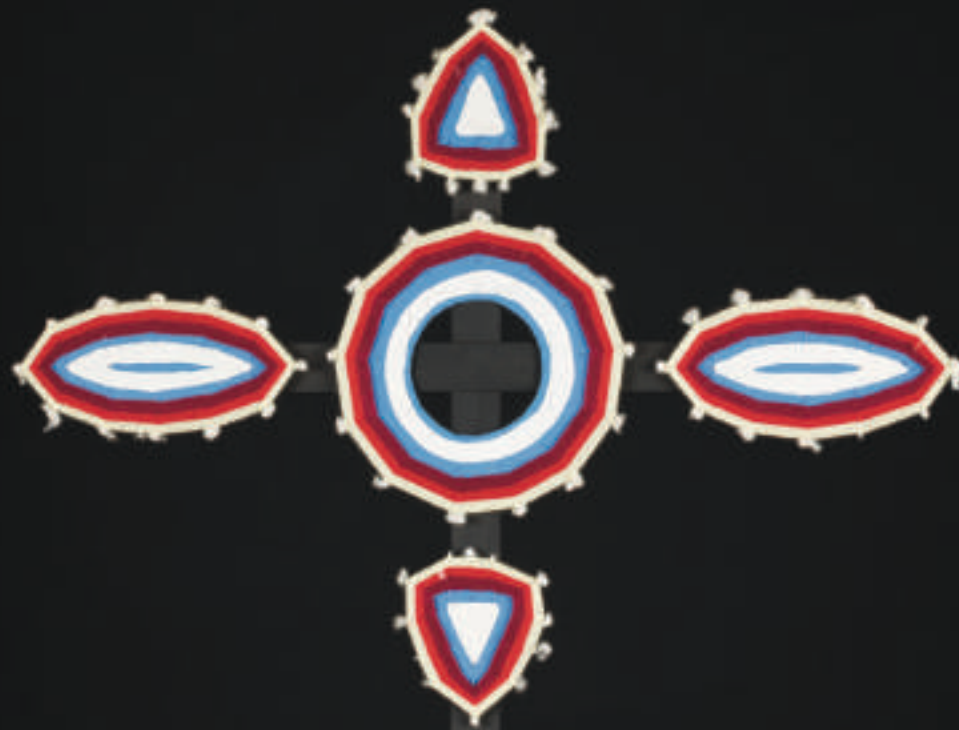
30

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1998  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
106 x 30 cm



31

ROY WIGGAN  
*Ilma*, 1992  
painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton  
61 x 74 cm  
(height with support 61 cm)



32

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

62 x 82 cm

(height with support 216 cm)



33

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

104 x 51 cm

(height with support 213 cm)





34

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

99 x 66 cm

(height with support 154 cm)



35

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 1998

painted plywood, nails,  
thread and cotton

132 x 45 cm

(height with support 153 cm)

*"This ilma represents the rain falling at Swan Point. The semi-circle at the top represents the higher lighter cloud. The two shapes coming together are the darker rain clouds merging. The circle is the heavy dark cloud above the waterhole at Swan Point up on the peninsula north of Broome near Sunday Island."*

Emily Rohr

36

ROY WIGGAN

*Ilma*, 2002

painted plywood, nails,

thread and cotton

131 x 37 cm

(height with support 216 cm)



ROY WIGGAN

Language group: Bardi

Born in 1930, Sunday Island, Western Australia

Died in 2015, Broome, Western Australia

Collections

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

National Maritime Museum, Sydney

National Museum of Australia, Canberra

Nevada Museum of Art, Nevada, US

Hood Museum of Art, Darmouth, US

Holmes a Court Collection, Perth

Stokes Collection, Perth

Dennis Scholl Collection, Miami

Berndt Museum of Anthropology, Crawley

Laverty Collection, Sydney

Monash University Collection, Melbourne

Royal Perth Hospital Art Collection, Perth

UTS ART Gallery Collection, Sydney

Art Bank Collection

Group & Solo Exhibitions

2023     *Black Sky*, Perth Festival Visual Arts and University of Western Australia, Perth, WA

2022     *Making Worlds*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, North Building, Sydney, NSW

2018     *Sydney Biennale*, Sydney, NSW

2016     *Magic Object*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA

2013     *With or Without You*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and University of Western Australia, WA

2012     *Un-acclimatised*, Monash University Museum of Art at Switchback Gallery, Melbourne, VIC

2012     *Fish in Australian Art*, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, NSW

2011     *Pearls, Paint & Ilma*, Aratong Galleries, Australian High Commission, Singapore

2008     *25th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award*, MAGNT, Darwin, NT

2008     *The Ecologies Project*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, VIC

2007     *Spirit Dancing: Ken Thaiday and Roy Wiggan*, University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, QLD

2007     *Aboriginal objects, sculpture and bush toys*, Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay, NSW

2005     *Nararlala - recent works*, Roy Wiggan, Mary's Place, Sydney, NSW

2005     *Recent Works from Roy Wiggan*, William Mora Gallery, Melbourne, VIC

2004     *Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award*, Darwin, NT

2003     *Field*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, QLD

2003     *Roy Wiggan Solo Exhibition*, Art Mob, TAS

2003     *Waterhole*, Raft Gallery @ Grant Pirie Gallery, Sydney, NSW

2002     *Roy Wiggan Solo exhibition*, Short St. Gallery @ William Mora, Melbourne, VIC

1996     *The Eye of the Storm: Eight Indigenous Australian Artists*, National Gallery of

1996     Australia, Canberra and National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India

1996     *13th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders Award*, MAGNT, Darwin, NT

1995     *The Power of the Song - The Sea Journey*, National Maritime Museum, Sydney, NSW

1994     *Roy Wiggan - Tide Rider from the West*, National Maritime Museum, Sydney, NSW

1993     *10th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders Award,,* MAGNT, Darwin, NT

1993     *Images of Power, Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

1991     *Sea People*, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, NSW



Catalogue to accompany the exhibition *Roy Wiggan: Ilma*

Sydney Contemporary

7 - 10 September 2023

A Secondary Eye

29 Merthyr Road

New Farm QLD 4005

[www.asecondaryeye.com](http://www.asecondaryeye.com)

Artwork © Roy Wiggan / the artist's estate

Photography: Joseph Ruckli

Publisher: A Secondary Eye

Essay: Emily Rohr

A SECONDARY EYE