



**SALLY GABORI**  
Story Owen Craven

**A great-grandmother is recording the traditions of the Kaiadilt people in northern Australia in paint**

**An artist, through** their work, tells of their connection to something. It can be a political viewpoint, their reaction to other art forms, an expression of their state of mind, or a response to their environment—natural or otherwise. Through their chosen medium, artists tell a story to their audience, moulding them into a concrete, visual form. History is told and retold. The work of Indigenous artist Sally Gabori contains Australia's pre-colonial history, languages and traditions. More specifically, through her paintings, we gain her insight and wealth of knowledge about the land inhabited by her people before White settlement.

Born around 1924, Sally Gabori, known also by her tribal name Mirdidinggathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori, comes from the Bentinck Island of the South Wellesley Islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Gabori speaks no English, only her native tongue the Kayardilt language, and is now an elder, one of the last surviving keepers of her peoples' language, traditions, stories and culture. She has led a mostly traditional lifestyle, growing up with her Kaiadilt people who, until the late 1940s, had very little contact with or interference by white settlers. This changed in the late 1940s, when many of the communities in the Gulf of Carpentaria were affected by a severe drought. In 1948, a tidal wave struck the Bentinck Island and the missionaries transported the entire population to Mornington Island. Gabori moved there with her husband and family. It was here she bore eleven children and raised them along with several others of her husband's children to other wives, as is Kaiadilt tradition. Gabori is now grandmother and great-grandmother of a large, extended family to whom she represents a living connection to people and places of a time gone by.

While some of the Kaiadilt people began to return to their ancestral land of the Bentinck Island in the 1980s, where they maintain a traditional way of life, Mornington Island is their primary resource centre. Many following Gabori's bloodline have faced the problems all too common to Australia's indigenous communities, and much of the culture and stories are dying out. These days, Gabori is an important repository of tribal lore. And it is now, through the introduction of a new form of artistic expression, Gabori is documenting and communicating the tales and geography of her people.

The rise of Gabori as a prominent figure in the contemporary Aboriginal art scene began only five years ago, in 2005, when she was first introduced to painting materials while at the Mornington Island Arts and Crafts Centre. There was an immediate connection to her materials and Gabori engaged with a huge spectrum of colours. The result of this connection was an outpouring of work stemming from various ideas about her ancestry and its stories as well as her country. What is remarkable is the maturity of her fascination with colour, expressing herself through what would be viewed in Western Art terms as abstraction. On close inspection, one appreciates the intimacy with which the works are produced. The works identify the woman behind their making—who she is and from where she comes.

While the images hold deep significance to Gabori, her peers and family, the broad fascination with her work and artistic development stems, for the wider public, from her unique subject matter. Many of her works, as captured in their titles, are of the country in which she and her family grew up. For instance, in the work *My Father's Country* (2009), she depicts land not visited or even known by many people in this vast country. From the moment she first picked up a paintbrush, Gabori has been recording her Kaiadilt country—her land—and its stories. In *Barramundi Story* (2008) she



02

070



03



04

“There is an immediate connection to her materials and Gabori engages with a huge spectrum of colours”

071



tells a story of her coastal upbringing and life through the bold lines and rich laying of black and white. The importance of her culture and its stories, combined with her love of paint, have enabled Gabori to produce, for the past five years, a distinct, influential and acclaimed body of work.

Gabori's most recent exhibition, at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 'Makarrki—My Big Brother, King Alfred's Country', is the next instalment of her cultural record. The title and subject matter suggests the creation of an enduring body of work to hold her country, its inhabitants and stories in the canon of the Kaiadilt people. Her eighth solo exhibition since her career began, the show will no doubt add to Gabori's reputation as a skillful colourist and storyteller about her connection with her country. Not only does the work speak to her family and community but is now held in important public collections here and overseas, including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. For generations, her country and people have been a muted voice in Australian indigenous history and culture. Through the boldness of her paintings, this woman, her family, traditions and stories are silent no longer. ■

For more information, refer to Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.  
[www.alcastongallery.com.au](http://www.alcastongallery.com.au)

072

073



- 01 **Dibirdibi Country**, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 151cm
- 02 **Barramundi Story**, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 153 x 181cm
- 03 **My Father's Country**, 2009, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 151 x 101cm
- 04 **My Father's Country**, 2009, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 101cm
- 05 **My Dibirdibi Country**, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 197 x 303cm
- 06 Sally Gabori

Images courtesy of the Artist, Mornington Island Art, Queensland and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

06