

"Wilkinkarra" byMitjili Napanangka Gibson. Courtesy image. New exhibits are opening in droves, from King Tut over at Pacific Science Center to the Chihuly Garden and Glass at the Seattle Center.

And now a major Australian Aboriginal art exhibition has come to town. "Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan & Levi Collection," organized by Seattle Art Museum, features more than 120 works of indigenous art created from 1970 to 2009.

Included are paintings on canvas, ochres on bark and sculptures in wood, fiber and bronze, which demonstrate an artistic renaissance of the world's oldest living culture.

The exhibition takes visitors on a magical journey across the Australian continent with paintings that often look deceptively similar to abstract expressionist or minimalist art, but actually depict dreams and stories of the land and its ancestors, who continue to be a powerful presence among the living.

Aboriginal artists use a variety of techniques and styles to transport viewers to this new, yet age-old landscape.

Symbols figure predominantly in much of the work and can denote a wide range of objects, sites, animals, travel patterns, weather and more. Many of the paintings are like maps that not only indicate geographical landmarks, but also identify how the land was formed and the way in which the individual is connected to the land.

Written by Deborah Stone

They also give precedence to the ancestors who are responsible for the all-important sources of survival in the culture, as well as for its direction. Stories abound with themes that focus on common human dilemmas such as greed, desire and punishment for wrongdoing. Tommy Mitchell's "Walu," for example tells the tale of a naughty boy, who stole food from the Owl people and then denied it. Eventually, he is turned into the wind as a consequence for his actions, which the artist signifies via a visual tornado of color that assaults the canvas. Paintings vibrate and shimmer with color, line and bold swirls, emanating forces that captivate and mesmerize viewers.

They lead us into vast deserts, to the edge of salt lakes, underground and into the night skies. In one gallery, a family of innovative women painters pays tribute to a landscape they view as a place of abundance and plenty, but to outsiders is often described as parched and desolate.

In Emily Kam Kngwarray's "Wild Yam Dreaming," luscious pink and red tubes fill the canvas as a maze of overlapping vines, while in Gloria Tamerr Petyarr's "Leaves," a mass of black and white leaves swirl through the air. Each is individuated and no one leaf touches the other. They form waves that threaten to engulf you, giving an odd and unsettling illusion of depth.

Another gallery explores the concept of portraits, which in Aboriginal Australia don't follow the convention of depicting a face or even a physical likeness. Instead, the person's identity is revealed in relation to others, to the land and to the ancestors.

Artist Jarinyanu David Downs, for example, depicts himself as Kurtal, the Rain Ancestor who carries the clouds in an oversized, decorative headdress. And Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's self-portrait is a vision of his ally, the Sea Eagle.

Water takes on significance with a gallery devoted solely to this lifeforce. In the desert, survival depends on knowing the location of fresh water sources, which can be found at rockholes. These are sacred sites, which the people watch over and protect. "Marrapinti Rockhole" by Doreen Reid Nakamarra, portrays a rockhole with lines conveying the flow of water in a creek that leads to a deep pool amid sandhills.

Another gallery highlights drawings in natural ochre on rock and bark from eucalyptus trees. Images depicted derive from observations of food and spirits found within the wetlands of

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tropical north Australia.

In "Yirritja Honeycomb," by Jimmy Wululu, honeycomb is displayed in various stages of development. Pointillism-style dots represent wild bees, which is a metaphor for the spiritual powers of ancestors.

John Mawurndjul gets a gallery to himself and is the only artist in the collection distinguished in this manner.

According to Australian curator Wally Caruana, Mawurndjul is one of the most successful artists in the country. He is also a ceremonial leader, who paints the sacred markings on the bodies of young men participating in the rites. The surfaces of his barks pulsate, exuding an almost spiritual force, representing the powers of the ancestors in the ground.

A number of sculptures are also on display; some made of native spiny sedge grass like Yvonne Koolmatrie's "Pondi," To the Aborigines, Pondi is a mega cod with supernatural strength that can create rivers with his strong movements. All of the pieces in this exhibit will eventually be part of SAM's permanent collection, as they are promised gifts to the museum by Bob Kaplan and Margaret Levi, a Seattle-based couple, who has spent the past 20 years developing the collection.

"Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan & Levi Collection" runs through Sept. 2nd at Seattle Art Museum. For more information: www.seattleartmuseum.org.