EXHIBITION

The gentle revolutionary

Gunybi Ganambarr is taking the art world by storm, expressing ancient ideas with a surprisingly modern twist, writes JOHN McDONALD.

When the Aboriginal art movement began to gather worldwide momentum in the 1980s, it was greeted with enthusiasm in some quarters but distrust and bewilderment in others. While many recognised the work as a new and original contribution to the international art scene, there were some sceptics who saw only a glorified folk art, or a marketing phenomenon orchestrated by white entrepreneurs.

It has taken a long time for Aboriginal art to shake off these misapprehensions, which have never been completely eradicated. In Australia, at least, indigenous art is now integrated into many general museum displays of Australian art, including Sydney's newly renovated Museum of Contemporary Art.

Of the many and varied forms of Aboriginal art, bark painting has been possibly the most misunderstood. Some viewers have wanted to see "authentic" or even "ancient" barks, made before European occupation. Others have taken the opposite approach, feeling that work in this medium is too fragile or ephemeral to collect. But until the modern era, bark paintings were never made to last. Produced for ceremonial purposes or for the sheer pleasure of decoration, these small pieces were soon discarded by a nomadic people who did not value material possessions that had outlasted their utility or spiritual significance.

Bark painting today is almost unrecognisable from what it was 30 years ago. The invention of lightweight aluminium supports, the improved methods of fixing ochres to boards, the greater size and stability of the sheets of bark involved – all these factors have transformed the medium into a dynamic form of contemporary art. The distinguishing characteristic that sets this work apart is that it is a present-day activity with roots in cultural traditions that stretch back tens of thousands of years. Oil painting, by comparison, is a mere infant.

The transformation of bark painting in the past 40 years has been driven by a series of innovators. One could reel off a long list, starting with figures such as Yirawala (1897-1976) and including such latter-day masters as John Mawurndjul and his younger contemporary Samuel Namunjdja. Yet there is no doubt that the most radical innovator ever to work in the medium is Gunybi Ganambarr, a 39-year-old Yolngu artist who has taken Australian art by storm.

When one hears about an artist "revolutionising" a medium, it is usually hype and bluster. It was considered revolutionary when Carl Andre stopped stacking pieces of wood vertically, and laid them flat on the floor. It was revolutionary when Andy Warhol exhibited a collection of phoney Brillo boxes. These historical art milestones seem ridiculously trivial

Innovator ... Ganambarr uses materials including PVC piping, metal sheets and rubber slabs. Pictured (from far left) are details from *Two Views* (2011); *Burrut'tji at Baraltja* (2008); and *Milngurr* (2011), made with a combination of crayons and natural earth pigments on bark.

alongside the quantity of new ideas found in Ganambarr's 2009 show at Annandale Galleries.

Never before had an artist incised a design onto a sheet of bark, or shaped the bark itself. Never had an artist used bark shavings to create a paste that was glued onto the sheet to create texture and a shallow relief effect. No previous artist had used the holes and deformations in a pole as part of the design, or carved a shape from the top of a pole rather than trimming it off neatly. Ganambarr's ability to reinvent his chosen medium seemed miraculous. No artist, not even Picasso, had ever managed to come up with so many revolutionary gestures in the course of a single exhibition.

If the 2009 show was mind-boggling, it is astonishing to find that three years later, Ganambarr is back with an even more radical set of new departures. This time he has experimented with a range of unusual materials. His designs are not only to be found on pieces of shaped, incised bark or wooden poles, but on thin sheets of metal, slabs of dense, black, industrial-grade rubber used for conveyor belts in the nearby bauxite mine, and on shiny pieces of ceiling insulation. Some of the poles in this exhibition are not made from tree trunks but from PVC piping, artfully disguised with shaved and powdered wood. He has made lightweight, three-dimensional sculptures from chicken wire, and a large screen featuring two dancing brolgas, fashioned from a galvanised-iron water tank.

Even stylistically, Ganambarr is a risk-taker, combining figurative imagery with traditional patterning on the same piece of bark in *Two Views*. One imagines a story, or stories, in which one part is for everybody and the other for no one but the initiated.

After sampling such a fund of invention, it is almost surprising to realise that Ganambarr's work still conforms to every sacred, traditional stricture. Nothing he has made has caused unease among his peers in the community. He maintains the greatest respect for the law and for the stories passed down from one generation to the next. His eureka moment came when he realised there was no reason why traditional imagery had to be confined to traditional materials. Anybody might have been the first to paint on ceiling insulation, or make a sculpture from a PVC pipe, but it was Ganambarr who had the inspiration and initiative.

If Ganambarr were merely an ideas man, he would cut an impressive figure – but he possesses all the skills and a capacity for hard work that seems almost unbelievable.

There is a remarkable density and power to many of these new works, even those that employ a simple, repetitive symbolic language.

He is one of those rare figures whose work speaks to all times and all places.

One can sense the commitment in these works, the unflinching perfectionism of a master craftsman combined with a deep, spiritual devotion. While some of Ganambarr's works appear to have been made as playful exercises, these large barks have a vortex-like force. They may resemble pieces of op art but they have more in common with the great altarpieces.

When one turns to other barks such as *Mungurru*, the patterns flow and overlap with a natural rhythm, each line bending and gently rippling as it follows the undulations of the surface. This apparent spontaneity is offset by the precise layering and intersection of motifs, testifying to a high level of control and concentration. In the unique work *Tsunami over Yindiwirryun*, the patterning is even more complex and evocative, conjuring visions of surging waves and the tail of a whale as it pushes back under the water.

Although he is first and foremost a Yolngu man, ready to admit his debt to an important older painter such as Djambawa Marawili (born 1953), it would be laughable to classify Ganambarr as simply an Aboriginal artist. He is one of those rare figures whose work speaks to all times and all places. It is hard to think of another artist, of any ethnicity or nationality, who has made so many leaps in such a short space of time. Ganambarr is modest and unassuming in demeanour, but his work invites hyperbole because the magnitude of his achievements is indisputable. He is an artist who plays by the rules of his clan and community but transgresses every stylistic boundary set by habit or convention. Working within an age-old set of beliefs, he has treated the secular elements of his art as a field of unlimited possibility.

This is an edited extract from the catalogue for Gunybi Ganambarr's *From My Mind* exhibition, at Annandale Galleries from Wednesday until June 9.

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See more works from the exhibition.