

## PANEL 1: INTRO

*The outside surface of things hides what is inside. I want to share what is hidden... Inside the larrakitj. Inside our destiny. Inside our hearts.*

— Wukun Wanjambi

*The Inside World* presents ninety-four memorial poles by forty-nine artists from remote Aboriginal communities in the tropical northern region of Australia known as Arnhem Land. In former times, poles similar to the ones included in this exhibition—known as *lorrkkon*, *dupun*, or *larrakitj*—were used to house the bones of the deceased. Traditionally, interment in a memorial pole marked the final point in a long and complex mortuary process designed to guide the spirit of the deceased on its final journey. It signified the moment when spirits were considered to have finally returned to their ancestral homes—when they had left all vestiges of the mundane “outside” world and become one with the “inside” realm of the ancestral world.

Today, these poles are made as works of art, becoming a powerful metaphor for the ability of Aboriginal art to cross cultures, to speak of the secret “inside” world within the mundane outside of the artworld. They are not ritual objects in themselves, but metaphors for the crossing of cultures: spirit vessels designed to hint at the existence of the elusive world of ancestral energy that permeates through all things. The result is not a picture of dying cultures, but a celebration of life. Walking in this forest of bones, we find ourselves reborn. Faced with this joyous elucidation of a culture so distant and different to our own, the world is made more alive.

## SPONSORSHIP

*The Inside World* is drawn from the collections of Miami based collectors and philanthropists Debra and Dennis Scholl. The exhibition is the third touring exhibition of their Aboriginal art collections, following the successful exhibitions *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artist from Aboriginal Australia*, and *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting*, which toured to twelve museums in North America. All three exhibitions are organized by the Nevada Museum of Art.

## PANEL 2: MEMORIAL POLES IN CONTEXT

In former times in northern Australia, Indigenous mortuary rituals were extensive and took place over several months following a person's death. The ceremonies were structured around the journey of the soul from the place of death to the final resting place in traditional clan territory. This journey took place over an extended period of time, and its progression was assisted by the ceremonies that were performed at different stages of the mourning process. First, the body was either buried in the ground or exposed on a wood and bark platform. Months later the bones were removed and placed in a bark or woven container. At the end of the mourning process, these bones were interned in a hollow-log coffin.

By the time that the bones were placed in the hollow-log coffin the soul had already returned to the spiritual domain. The bones were said to have ceased belonging to the dead and were now called "the bones of the clan." The poles would be left standing in the deceased

person's clan country, remaining for many years as a reminder of the person buried within. The memorial pole thus became an embodiment of that loved person, to be hugged and talked to. Finally, as poles weathered in the wind and rain, or burned in bush fires, all physical traces of them would disappear.

Traditional burial poles were made from the trunk of a carefully selected eucalyptus tree that was naturally hollowed out by termites. The most perfectly cylindrical trunk was chosen and its bark stripped so that it could be painted with powerful clan designs to identify and protect the spirit on its journey.

In present times, memorial poles still play an important role in Indigenous mortuary rites and memorial practices in Arnhem Land, but they no longer function as ossuaries, or repositories for remains. In the 1980s, artists began making memorial poles for the art market, departing from the strict conventions of ceremonial design. Artists became less concerned with symmetry and in the 2000s began exploring the surface features of tree trunks, utilizing imperfections as integral parts of their expressive form.