Warmun art holds a very special significance in the world of modern art, as well as in the more specialized fields of Indigenous or Australian Art.

There are only a few such places and peoples whose artistic expression occupies a place of similar significance.

In Australia we speak of the “Heidelberg school of art” and we think of the major Australian artists: Streeton, Phillips-Fox, Tom Roberts, Charles Condor, Withers and Buvelot. Their work still resonates across the Australian community.

I have not yet heard people speak about the “Warmun school of art” but I predict that it will not be long before this community, these artists, and their art work – which is so recognizable and distinctive – will soon be awarded that generic collective name of the “Warmun school of art”.

In speaking about “then” – as we are invited to by the title of this exhibition – and juxtapose it with “now” – we can be trapped into thinking just about Turkey Creek of the mid-1970s. It was from this tiny, impoverished roadside community, that a gentle and generous people gave new and contemporary expression to their experience of life and landscape.
This modern art form found its first exponent in the work of Paddy Jaminji as he famously painted on rough boards and on the back of cardboard packaging the story of a dream that had come to one of the Turkey Creek community members following the death in a car accident of one of the local Gidja women; that car accident coincided with Cyclone Tracy of Christmas Day 1974. These painted story boards soon found themselves hoisted onto the shoulders of the Gidja men and were used to accompany the dance and song cycle that retold the story from this dream in a sequence we now know as the Kuril Kuril.

The man whose dream was captured and retold in this way was of course Rover Thomas; Rover – somewhat frustrated by being overly dependent on someone else to paint the stories of his dreams - soon took up painting himself and went on to have an extraordinarily successful career as an artist; the highlights of which included being the recipient of the prestigious invitation to be a Venice Biennale artist in 1990.

Rover Thomas had come up to Warmun from the western desert of the inland Pilbara and had married into the Gidja mob; it was through Rover that Turkey Creek was linked to the peoples who came off the Canning stock route and went north, south, east and west – taking a rich cultural heritage that found divergent artistic expression in the places where they settled: including places
like Wiluna, Jigalong, Hedland, Bidyadanga, Fitzroy Crossing, Balgo and Warmun.

At Rover’s direction, Paddy Jaminji painted away with his brown and white and yellow ochres, in a style that drew at least in part on the artistic style that was back then still in evidence in the remnant form on the caves overlooking the station homesteads that had spread across the Gidja lands. These cave paintings – from back before “then” - were often what is called “contact – art” – they had depictions of station life and people.

The Warmun art story would have been significant if it had just stopped there with Paddy and Rover; but it went on to include a staggering number of early artists – all of great note - from back “then”: including Queenie McKenzie, Hector Chundun, Jack Brittan, Paddy Bedford and so many, many others.

A walk through the Warmun community graveyard, looking at the names on the graves, is somewhat akin to walking around some of the great Abbeys and Cathedrals of England and Europe where the artists are memorialised.

What is so unique about Warmun – both “then” and “now” – is the disproportionate large number of significant artists that emerged from such a small and localized population. Demographers marvel at the global “blue zones” of large numbers of centenarians turn up in one locality – Sardinia and
Okinawa, for instance. But there is something special about Warmun. So many artists, so many great paintings, from such a small population and a tiny community.

I might add that the Gidja people also produced from their ranks a disproportionate number of parliamentarians – both Ernie Bridge and Josie Farrar being proud Gidja people. And, incidentally, the Gidja people also lay claim to at least two non-Aboriginal parliamentarians – in Jack Rhattigan who was the Labor member for Kimberley (until 1969) who was born at Turkey Creek; and Tom Stephens who was the member for Central Kimberley Pilbara who worked at Turkey Creek becoming their first community advisor in 1977.

Contemporary Warmun artists from now have amongst their ranks artists like Lena Nyadbi whose work has been transposed into architectural form and graces the roof top of the world's most prestigious Indigenous Museum, the Musee Du Quai Branly; visitors on the Eiffel tower get to look down on Lena's art work.

Prestige and awards and recognition are many – but we can pick out just one of the contemporary Warmun artists from now and refer to Shirley Purdie whose work – Stations of the Cross – won the Blake Prize in 2007. This painting reminds us
of another recent part of the Warmun art story and that is the fact that the community itself had chosen to securely store significant amounts of the artistic heritage at their art centre and some of this was lost or damaged in the extraordinary Turkey Creek floods of 2011. Shirley’s work was amongst those paintings that was found in the days after the flood hanging from the trees downstream, further down the Turkey Creek.

Today Warmun artists are still producing, still dreaming, still painting; Rusty Peters, Patrick Mung Mung, Mabel Julie, Betty Carrington, and Lorraine Daylight and many many more.

The Warmun art work continues to be recognisable while neither repetitive nor formulaic; it just follows a variety of styles and colours and patterns that help the work jump out at you as you enter galleries around the world – and you know at once: - there is a Warmun painting. There is something about the work that speaks of life, and landscape, with skill and flare and integrity. It is not self-conscious; it is not overstated. It blends in a story of a gentle and generous people, whose special stories and special country they continue to share – gently; generously. Both Then and now!

Today, in this room, we are surrounded by some of our nation’s greatest cultural assets and I thank the artists (Betty, Mabel and Lorraine) not just for their long journey but for their trust in us in
hosting the art and allowing us to understand more fully the stories deep within them.

I am delighted, enthralled and honoured to declare the ‘Warmun, Then and Now’ exhibition, Open.