

DOT, CIRCLE AND FRAME:

**How Kaapa Tjampitjinpa,
Tim Leura, Clifford Possum
and Johnny Warangula
created Papunya Tula art**

VOLUME ONE

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Abstract

Forty years ago, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum and Johnny Warangula were central to the constitution of contemporary desert art at Papunya. Standing out among an exceptional cohort, these four selected artists deployed their inherited iconography while exploring the new poetic possibilities offered by paint on canvas. This thesis addresses the question: how, and to what extent, did the artists' intercultural experience affect their agency and creative processes? The answers to that question will contribute to a deeper understanding of a critical juncture in the nation's art history, when the advent of Papunya Tula art redirected attention from the 'European' artists of the south-eastern seaboard and instead inaugurated a heterogeneous conception of Australia's culture with Indigenous voices at its centre.

This thesis will draw on social history and visual anthropology, as well as formal and technical artwork analysis to identify the diverse influences that contributed to Papunya Tula painting in place, and over time. Rather than commencing analysis in 1971, when Kaapa's revolutionary paintings first came to public attention, the social and ontological context from which Papunya Tula art emerged is foregrounded. Central Australia in the mid-20th Century is examined to reveal how disparate peoples were drawn into a dynamically evolving contact zone. The novel visual forms produced at the Finke River Mission are shown to reflect the ongoing dialogic struggle between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies in Central Australia. Moreover, it is argued that exchange between diverse Aboriginal groups, with markedly different life experiences, was critical to the development of contemporary desert art. The link between the Western Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira and the selected artists is substantiated and his influence evaluated. The importance of Namatjira's 'framing' of Country as a subject for cultural exchange is highlighted.

Papunya is located at the intersection of major cultural and linguist blocs. This thesis reasserts the role played by the selected Central Australian artists in the formation of the painting movement at Papunya. It challenges the conflation of Papunya Tula art with 'Western Desert art', an assumption that was cemented by the title of Geoffrey Bardon's 1979 monograph. Critical pictorial innovations developed by each of the selected artists are identified, and their operation in picture-making is described. Digging deeper, formal qualities of the four selected artists' paintings are examined, to identify evidence of their creative processes and individual sensibilities. In establishing the progression of formal elements within series of paintings, the significance of ongoing creative dialogue between these four artists is verified. The outcomes of their collaborations are presented as a narrative of studio practice in a desert environment.

Declaration

This thesis contains the original work towards a Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy – Arts. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Preface

Dot, Circle and Frame: How Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum and Johnny Warangula created Papunya Tula art is presented in two complementary volumes. *Volume One* includes front matter, chapters, appendices and bibliography. *Volume Two* is comprised of ‘plates’, and includes historic photographs and reproductions of artworks.

This thesis is the most recent and substantial addition to my writing on Papunya Tula art. As a result of my employment by Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd. in the first decade of the artist-owned company’s operation, I have frequently been called upon to write about the artists responsible for the generation of the contemporary desert art movement. Influenced by the growing body of literature on Papunya Tula painting, my approach to the subject has changed significantly during the period. Beginning with memoir, my contributions have recently approached the subject with a more analytic perspective. Indeed, the need for informed analysis has increased in the new millennium, as the importance of Papunya Tula to Australian art history has been more widely acknowledged. Having first-hand experience of the artists and their Country, I felt compelled to share what I know of their individual sensibilities and to identify how their work contributed to the greater desert art movement. I have continued to publish on Papunya Tula painting at a steady rate since commencing my PhD candidature in 2012, and the insights provided by dedicated research have inevitably informed my recent writing. Here follows a list of those of my publications which were significantly influenced by what I learned during my candidature:

- John Kean, ‘Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula, Camp at Walungurru –Dingo Camp at Tinki’, in *Aboriginal Art*, New York: Sotheby’s, 2019, pp. 29-30.
- John Kean, ‘Mural that helped launch a movement’, in *The Australian*, 26 April 2019, p. 15.
- John Kean, ‘Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula: history, landscape and La Niña 1974’, in *Indigenous Archives: the Making and unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, Perth: UWA Publishing, 2017, pp. 113-166.
- John Kean, ‘Framing Papunya painting: form, style and representation, 1971-72’, in Luke Scholes (ed.), *Tjungutja: from having come together*, Darwin: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 2017, pp. 173-194.
- John Kean, ‘How the Men’s Painting Room at Papunya transformed Australian art’, in *The Conversation*, accessed 25 January 2020, <http://theconversation.com/friday-essay-how-the-mens-painting-room-at-papunya-transformed-australian-art-79909>
- John Kean, ‘Albert Namatjira, Quarta-Tooma (Ormiston Gorge) 1939’, in *Deutscher and Hackett, Important Aboriginal Works of Art, Melbourne, 25 May 2016*, Melbourne: Deutscher and Hackett, 2016, p. 24.
- John Kean, ‘Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Budgerigar Dreaming (Version 6), 1972’, in *Deutscher and Hackett, Luczo Family Collection, Melbourne, 19 October, 2016*, Melbourne: Deutscher and Hackett, 2016, pp. 64-65.
- John Kean, ‘Lot 50’ [Dingoes Watch a Corroboree 1973], in *Sotheby’s Australia, Important Australian art, Sydney 13 May 2014*, Melbourne: Second East Auction Holdings, 2014, p. 92.

Prompted by the rediscovery of a perplexing early painting by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri in September 2011, the anthropologist Jason Gibson and I began investigating the extent to which ethnographic photography affected the work of Possum, his brother Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and their cousin Kaapa Tjampitjinpa. Our discussions significantly influenced my thinking on the intercultural origins of the Papunya Tula art movement and helped guide me to ask the question ultimately addressed by this thesis. Research undertaken before the commencement of my doctoral candidature culminated in a co-authored paper, to which Gibson contributed anthropological and historical insight, while I focussed on visual analysis based on my understanding of the artist’s agency. Quotations are acknowledged in the thesis.

- Jason Gibson & John Kean, “‘New Possum Found’! Photographic Influences on Anmatyerr Art’, in *emaj*, Issue 9, May 2016.

Since taking up this candidature, I had a book on natural history illustration published, as well as several essays on Indigenous artists (not associated with Papunya Tula painting). Further, I have written numerous essays on Indigenous art for auction catalogues, but these essays have not been substantially affected by thesis-specific research unless listed above.

The text of my thesis has been copy edited according to university prescription by Dr Sheridan Hart (nee Coleman), Doctor of Philosophy – Art, at Curtin University of Technology. Hart is not a specialist in a subject related to my thesis.

During the period of my candidacy, I have received support from the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) from 2012 to 2018, the Getty Foundation Scholarship in 2016, and the University of Melbourne ‘Grant in Aid’ from 2018 to 2019.

Acknowledgements

My acknowledgements, like my research for this thesis, must reach back in time. The artists of Papunya and its outstations, whom I met as a 23-year-old, influence my thinking into the present. The men, who were then the age of my father, taught me a very different way of being in the world, and how to read its signs. As exceptional painters they also taught me that art does not have to dwell on existential angst to be significant, and that given personal experience and deep-seated authority, painting can be approached straightforwardly: as work. Quite literally, they grounded me in place, and in action.

Prominent among my Papunya mentors are the subjects of this thesis. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa’s ironic playfulness always reminded me of my place, as a whitefella on an Aboriginal Land. I am forever grateful to Kaapa, who sponsored my attendance at *maliyarra* (post-initiatory) ceremonies where links between painting and performance became manifest. Tim Leura introduced me to a confounding metaphysical realm in which the past and present coexist and yet are strangely intangible; I still wrestle with the puzzles that persist in his painting. Clifford Possum, although more reserved than Kaapa and Leura, had the patience to teach me how to handle a four-wheel drive Toyota in a sandy creek-bed. More significantly, Clifford taught me how to construct space/time. The map paintings he created during my residency at Papunya provided the conceptual tools with which I continue to orient myself in Country, and which I have frequently applied as a methodology in my work as an exhibition curator. Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula and his wife Yawintji (Gladys) Napanunka opened their camp to me as they would their own son: their zest for life and good humour remain an inspiration. Warangula’s joy on being in his Country in spring, after good winter rains, was a revelation.

My work at Papunya involved visiting artists at a constellation of outstations dotted around the West MacDonnell Ranges. I invariably travelled with a partner; alternately, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, Nosepeg Tjunkata Tjupurrula, Eddie Etamintja Tjapangati, Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi, Ray Inkamala Tjampitjinpa or Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, all of whom knew every inch of the Land. Told as we travelled, their stories transformed (for me) a backbone of mountains and cryptic dune fields into living ‘Country’ with an absorbing human history. Their accounts underpin the first half of this thesis.

As the subjects of this research, and most of their peers, have passed, I increasingly rely on their sons and daughters for guidance. Warangula’s family still greet me as family, and the anticipation of their welcome results in a rush of excitement as the mass of Warumpi, (the Honey Ant Hill adjacent to Papunya) emerges over the horizon. Narlie Nelson Nakamarra and Candy Nelson Nakamarra

are a fixture at Papunya Tjupi Arts Centre, now my first port of call when arriving at the community. Last year when I visited Papunya, Dennis Nelson Tjakamarra spontaneously took me on an extended tour of Papunya historic sites. After years of wondering, Dennis showed me the location of the original waterhole (now invisible) from which the community got its name. I also acknowledge Warangula and Yawintji's eldest son, Mike Warangula Tjakamarra, who has remained my principal point of contact throughout the course of this thesis. Mike's fascination for his family's history has enriched shared dinner camps among the *mulga* not far from his home at Yamunturrngu (Mount Liebig).

Tim Leura's widow Daisy Leura Nakamarra grew up around Papunya and would most certainly have drunk the water from the local waterhole before a bore was struck at the site in 1954. Her passing, during my candidature, brought great sadness. Since then, Peter Leura Tjungurrayi and Maryanne Leura Nungurrayi have provided their support to my project. Kaapa's eldest son Keith Kaapa Tjangala was an enthusiastic backer of my project until his early death in 2015. Since then, Bob Kaapa Tjangala and Janie Karpa Nangala have been my points of contact. Punata Stockman Nungurrayi (Billy Stockman's daughter), who is about my age, is my confidante at Papunya. My appreciation for her warmth and respect for her wisdom grows with each visit. Like Punata, Charlotte Phillipus Naparrula (Long Jack Phillipus' daughter) remembers the early days of painting at Papunya and has been quietly supportive of my work on the history of movement.

The staff of Papunya Tjupi Arts has always made me welcome. In particular I would like to recognise long-time arts workers Isobel Major Nampitjinpa and Patrick Poulson Tjapangardi. Successive arts centre managers Kasumi Ejiri, Simon Taylor, Helen Puckey, Joanna Byrne and Emma Collard have provided invaluable assistance, while working tirelessly to enhance the standing of Papunya painting. Based at an elegant gallery in Alice Springs, Papunya Tula Artists works with Pintupi artists who have moved back to their ancestral Country to create communities at Walungurru/Kintore and Kiwirrkura, on either side of the Northern Territory/Western Australia border. Director Paul Sweeney and chairmen Matthew Pinta Tjapangati and Bobby West Tjupurrula have provided unwavering support during my candidature. Significantly, Paul made documentation of paintings by the selected artists available for my research. Bobby provided sage advice concerning the interpretation of restricted content of paintings and his enduring friendship is greatly valued. Gallery manager Ben Danks was always happy to be a conduit for communications for the artists' descendants living in or visiting Alice Springs.

Chrishona Schmidt at Ikuntji Arts, and Cecilia Alfonso and Gloria Morales of Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation have also backed my project, providing accommodation for my occasional visits to the Haasts Bluff and Yuendumu communities. I am particularly grateful to Gloria who showed my colleague Vivien Johnson and me through the Yuendumu Men's Museum.

Long-time Yuendumu residents Frank and Wendy Baarda shared their recollections of the early creative enterprise at the community, just 100 kilometres north of Papunya.

Pursuing the connection between Albert Namatjira and the emergence of painting at Papunya has been one of the most exciting aspects of my research. The staff and artists at Iltja Ntjarra/Many Hands, an Alice Springs-based organisation dedicated to maintaining the heritage of Namatjira, have provided invaluable assistance while I was 'joining the dots'. As young men, the watercolour artists Mervyn Rubuntja and Hubert Pareroultja knew the subjects of my thesis and were very happy to share memories of them as stockmen. I was also fortunate to spend time with Lenie Namatjira in the months before her passing, and her recollections of growing up at Raggatt's Well, 50 kilometres east of Papunya, confirmed the extensive network of connections between individuals associated with watercolour landscape and Papunya schools of art. I am also grateful to Iris Bendor, Marisa Maher and Elle Misios who have done their utmost to facilitate my visits to the Iltja Ntjarra Arts Centre.

The staff and board of the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs have always been particularly helpful. Special thanks to Glen Auricht, Graeme Shaughnessy and in particular Shaun Angeles, who works with the extensive multimedia repository. After necessary permissions were attained, Shaun showed me episodes of ceremony that quite literally animated my thesis. Amy O'Donoghue enabled access to resources at the library of the Central Lands Council. Other Northern Territory cultural institutions have willingly opened the storerooms for my research and I would like to thank Stephen Williamson and Tim Chatwin at Araluen Arts Centre, and Luke Scholes, Lisa Nolan and Christine Tarbett-Buckley at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory who enabled access to the rich collections over which they have custodianship. Critically, Stephen and Luke shared their extensive knowledge of early Papunya paintings, greatly enhancing my research.

The significance of Papunya Tula art to national heritage is apparent from the depth of institutional holdings of paintings by the founding artists. I would like to acknowledge the support of the following staff and institutions: Carly Lane, Melissa Harpley and Peter Casserly of the Art Gallery Western Australia; Cara Pinchbeck and Steven Miller of the Art Gallery New South Wales; Francesca Cubillo and Rose Montebello of the National Gallery of Australia; Judith Ryan of the National Gallery of Victoria; Jason Gibson and Philip Batty of Museum Victoria; and Steven Tonkin at Arts Centre Melbourne.

The major cultural Institutions of South Australia maintain strong relationships with the people of Central Australia; the richness of their collections attest to the importance that successive generations of directors and curators have placed

on the region. I recognise in particular Vincent Megaw, who rang me at Papunya Tula Artists in 1979, to arrange the first artists in residence program at Flinders University; Vincent is a true believer. I also thank Fiona Salmon and Nic Brown of the Flinders University Art Museum, who maintain Vincent's initial commitment to contemporary Aboriginal art. The Art Gallery of South Australia was the first of the state collections to purchase major works from Papunya. Curators Nici Cumpston, Elle Freak, Gloria Strzelecki and Assistant Director of Artistic Programs Lisa Slade have engaged in valuable ongoing dialogue with me about works in the Collection, as well as providing ongoing access. The South Australian Museum is custodian to diverse ethnographic, artistic and archival materials from the region of my study. My relationship to the institution goes back to 1986 when Peter Sutton supervised my initial postgraduate thesis. Lea Gardam, Trisha Kidd, Alice Beale, Tara Collier and Kate Rice have facilitated more recent access. A key historian in the region, Philip Jones has willingly engaged in detailed discussions about the Collection. I rang John Carty (in his previous role at the Australian National University), when first considering taking on a PhD on Papunya painting, and his response was instantaneous and totally encouraging. His ongoing support as Head of Anthropology at the Museum has provided additional momentum to my project.

My principal supervisor at the University of Melbourne, Susan Lowish, has offered unfailing support throughout my candidature and I sincerely thank her for her ongoing commitment, seeing me past each and every milestone. Other supervisors at the University of Melbourne have also expanded and deepened my understanding of the discipline: Felicity Harley-McGowan gave me a fine grounding in classical art history and academic writing before her appointment to Yale. Since then, Anthony White has commented critically at key moments along my candidature. His guidance was particularly useful in substantiating my argument in the last three chapters. Alison Inglis has been a mentor throughout and has skilfully chaired each of my assessments and seminars. Andrew May, Ian McLean and Jayne Anderson have shown keen interest my thesis and have encouraged my participation in the broader academic community.

While writing a PhD is a solitary undertaking, numerous people have assisted during the long life of the project. The ongoing contribution of interlocutors deserves special mention. Some have shared my passion for Papunya painting over the decades, and like me, have direct experience working with the artists of Central Australia and the Western Desert. The collegiate friendship and academic contributions of Philip Batty, Wayne Eager, Dick Kimber, Jenny Green, Vivien Johnson, Darren Jorgensen, Fred Myers, Luke Scholes, Marina Strocchi and John Wolseley are especially appreciated in this project, as it has been in others that preceded it. There are many others who have contributed to the development of the thesis, some in the years preceding my official candidature; Kim Ackerman, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Beverley Castleman, Edwina Circuitt, D'lan Davidson, Max Delaney, Martin Edmond, Margaret Friedel, James Goulding,

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Yolande Kerridge, Liz Suda, Jason Gibson and Darren Jorgensen have read various drafts of the thesis; their critique and comments have been critical. Sheridan Hart has copyedited the manuscript. Rebecca McCauley has assisted in numerous ways, always adding polish and panache. She took my rough sketches and turned them into polished diagrams, worked with me to develop maps and laid out the images to best complement the flow of words.

Jason Gibson has contributed at every stage during the growth of this project, as interlocutor and advisor on Anmatyerr terms and history. His acuity as an archivist and oral historian has inspired and informed my work, setting a benchmark to which I can only aspire. I have been very fortunate to have the constant love and support of my partner Jackie Kerin and our daughter Zoe Nanuma Kean. Home has been the garden within which this thesis has taken root and I dedicate this work to Jackie and Zoe.

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Prologue

Notes from Glen Helen Gorge

I am writing from Yapulpa (Glen Helen Gorge) in the Northern Territory, a pivotal site in the history of Aboriginal art. Located at the terminus of a glowing scarp cut by the Finke River, the Gorge is a hub that connects surrounding places where the subjects of this thesis were born, became men, and in early middle age, turned their expertise to imagine new forms of expression. Downstream, the Finke River Mission was founded at Ntaria, a location renamed Hermannsburg by Lutheran evangelists; at Alherramp/Laramba, about 80 kilometres to the north, cattle were run on a station that came to be known as Napperby; at Ikuntji, around 100 kilometres to the north-east, a ration station was named for an adjacent landmark, Haasts Bluff; 30 kilometres to the north of Ikuntji, a government settlement was established at Papunya, a waterhole of major totemic significance. Each of the protagonists of this story knew and enjoyed Glen Helen. The gorge was a highly anticipated destination, from Albert Namatjira's expeditions on camelback in the 1930s; to Tim Leura's visits on horseback as a stockman in the 1950s; until the 1990s, when the painter and arts worker Marina Strocchi remembers meeting Johnny Warangula, by then an old man, wild-haired and unaffected by the esteem in which he was held by the cognoscenti of a distant national art world.¹

Yapulpa (Glen Helen Gorge) also holds personal significance. I have returned to these waters many times over five decades, and on each occasion, I have been overwhelmed by the beauty of the location. I first stopped here briefly in February of 1977 to drop off Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula. They had work, painting murals to adorn the corrugated iron walls of a room intended for Aboriginal drinkers, tacked to the northern wall of the 'whites only' bar of the Glen Helen Chalet.² The artists were to be paid in rations and cartons of beer. I soon learned that the 'Gorge', as it was known, was a magnet for local drinkers and assorted 'grog runners', who purchased crates of beer and flagons of cheap port for consumption in neighbouring 'dry' communities. Numerous men died in rollover accidents on the road to Glen Helen in those years, and local Aboriginal organisations appeared powerless to stop the mayhem arising from the callousness of the outlet's management. Bewildered by an arrangement that appeared to satisfy Stockman and Tolson, I resumed my spot in the back of a canvas-topped Nissan Patrol, bouncing along a dusty track, chasing the setting sun towards Papunya. In the twilight just minutes after arriving, there was a knock at the door. It was Kaapa Tjampitjinpa who introduced himself, making it clear he

1. Strocchi 1991, 28 December.

2. The Chalet is now called the Glen Helen Lodge. The facility has been owned by the Ngurratjuta/Pmarra Ntjarra Aboriginal Corporation since 1992.

was ready to do business with me, an anonymous traveller. Kaapa's forthrightness, I would learn, was critical to the formation of the painting movement at Papunya.³

I had encountered Kaapa's work a year earlier when *Winparrku Serpents* (Plate 35) stood out in *Aboriginal Art from the Western Desert*, a 1976 travelling exhibition shown in a corridor of the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education where I was studying painting and printmaking. I found the exhibition engrossing and confounding in equal measure. I questioned how it was that Aboriginal artists from a remote settlement came to create paintings that so perfectly satisfied the modernist demand for flatness and pictorial autonomy, and yet were informed by a worldview outside my ken. Decades later, this thesis seeks to answer that question.

I was fortunate to get to know Kaapa and his peers following my appointment as art advisor to Papunya Tula Artists (PTA), the company created to support the nascent painting movement.⁴ It was a period of incessant travel, servicing a diverse group of artists while assisting the burgeoning outstation movement, as artists and families sought to return to their ancestral Country.⁵

On my return to Central Australia in the mid-1980s, I came to understand that the episode involving Stockman and Tolson was just one in a sequence of formative artistic interactions that have unfurled at Glen Helen, making it an ideal location to consider the longer trajectory of Aboriginal art in Central Australia. Clifford Possum, for instance, revealed that one of Albert Namatjira's sons gave him a set of watercolour paints at Glen Helen.⁶ The gift raises two key points expanded upon in this thesis: firstly, it provides tangible evidence of the familial and intergenerational links between proponents of landscape painting and Papunya-based artists. Secondly, the episode signifies a point of inflection. Possum's biographer Vivien Johnson has argued that by refusing of "mantle of Namatjira", Possum asserted artistic independence.⁷ She demonstrated that instead of adopting the watercolour landscape tradition practiced by his relatives, Possum chose to make his own way, initially as a carver of realistic polychromatic sculptures, before becoming the first star of the Papunya Tula movement.⁸

3. Where many of his Anmatyerr peers adopted a Westernised first name, Kaapa did not. He is sometimes referred to by a second name, Mbitjana, which is a metonym for his kinship name Tjampitjinpa. See introduction for a longer discussion on naming.
4. I was employed by Papunya Tula Artists (PTA) from August 1977 until December 1979.
5. I have previously written of my perceptions as art advisor. See bibliography: Kean 2000a; Kean 2000b; Kean 2007.
6. Possum 1984, in conversation with the author, Trucking Yards, Alice Springs.
7. Johnson 1994, p. 24.
8. Johnson 1994, pp. 24-26.



Fig. 1. *Yapulpa (Glen Helen Gorge) from the south*, 2019, photograph by John Kean

Sites and Trackways

This afternoon I will retrace the footsteps of Albert Namatjira and his mentor Rex Battarbee from Yapulpa to Kwartinama (Girls-standing), a geological wonder known in the tourist literature as the Organ Pipes. The Finke River has changed course since their famous painting expeditions of the late 1930s. Floodwaters have gouged a deep waterhole below the totemic gorge through which the river runs. Where Namatjira and Battarbee were able to walk through the gap to reach their favoured subject, I will be required to swim a short section, my camera and food in a waterproof bag. Today's excursion is a single episode in a longitudinal project — this thesis — in which I investigate the representation of Country while I am in place, for as the linguist and ethnographer T. G. H. Strehlow observed, Central Australia is a region where "authority... was based upon the soil".⁹ Concomitantly, I emphasise the routes that link these sites, whether they be the songlines of ancestors, the pads followed by cameleers, or the macadamised roads and dusty tracks familiar to more recent travellers who pass with relative ease from one community to the next.¹⁰ Roads followed determine experience; in an arid environment they draw individuals into encounters via paths across desiccated terrain to rare locales where water is available.

9. Strehlow 1965a, p. 142.
10. Information on tracks around Glen Helen is drawn from Bowman 1989.

My research has followed historic tracks and mythic songlines, for it is at the conjunction of these lines, tangible and esoteric, where compelling art is produced. I have visited Country that was known to the most influential artists of the region and through a mercurial process of archival analysis and reconstitution, attempted to conjure the moment when visual and ontological concepts were transferred, artist-to-artist, across cultures. The often-dry course of the Finke River is one such trackway and the waterhole, a few hundred metres from where I write, is irresistible — a point in space where history and culture converge — a deep pool reflecting the geomorphological weight of the land, and the persuasive flow of the *longue durée*.

Introduction

“We started it, like a bushfire this painting business and it went every way, north, east, south, west. Papunya in the middle”¹

Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, 2010

“I never dreamt that Papunya Tula could be convincingly claimed as Australia’s greatest contemporary art movement, of comparable importance to any in the world. It seemed ludicrous to compare paintings made only since 1971 by a small group of men (and later a few women) in one of the poorest and most remote settlements in Australia with European Cubism or American abstract expressionism. This exhibition and book [*Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, 2000] convinced me that such comparisons are completely justified, indeed unavoidable”.²

Joan Kerr, 2001

The consequence of Papunya Tula art, a movement that emerged at a government settlement 250 kilometres west of Alice Springs in the early 1970s, has astounded those who have studied its steady advance from unexpected ignition to globally recognised phenomenon. A founding artist, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, exercised the analogy of a bushfire, sweeping from one desert community to the next. Art historian Joan Kerr evoked the high points of modernism, Cubism and abstract expressionism in her search for an adequate parallel. Both statements expressed satisfaction at the scale of the achievement. The theorist Ian McLean concludes his 2011 anthology *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art* with the claim that Papunya Tula painters “were amongst the first to show an artworld, raised on ‘ethnographic’ and historicist blinkers of European modernism, what contemporary art after modernism felt like. In doing so they played a decisive role in the artworld’s globalisation”.³ When viewed from the local, or the global perspective, the enduring effect of Papunya Tula art demands attention. This thesis interrogates the development of Papunya Tula art *in situ*, at the local level.

While the reach and significance of Papunya Tula art has well been documented, there has not, to this point, been a thorough examination of its formal constitution: how was this new artform (issuing from local iconography expressed with exotic materials) constructed?⁴ Commencing with Papunya Tula: *Genesis and Genius*, an exhibition curated in 2000 by Hetti Perkins for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, there has been a string of major surveys that asserted the ground-breaking

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1. Phillipus cited in Scholes 2011, p. 92.
 2. Kerr 2001, pp. 31-33.
 3. McLean 2011c, p. 340.
 4. Farrago 2013; Myers 2002b, pp. 230-276; Myers 2013b.

significance of early Papunya Tula art. Each project has included a weighty multi-authored catalogue.⁵ Essayists have reviewed the sequence of events at Papunya from 1971, profiling founding artists and describing the artists' relationships to their ancestral Country.⁶ Other writers discuss the movement's correlation to broader issues of ethnography, connoisseurship and problems arising from the revelation of restricted sacred content in a painted form.⁷ For the most part, the emergence of Papunya Tula art has been treated as a single, cohesive project to which at least 20 artists contributed.⁸ This thesis challenges that monolithic model and furthers the recognition of a subset of artists who realised particular pictorial innovations.⁹ Other authors have proposed that the movement arose in defiance of the oppressive environment at the government-run settlement.¹⁰ Moreover, it has been assumed that Papunya Tula was an autochthonous development calling on traditional precepts.¹¹ I contest the latter assumption, arguing that the selected artists established a distinctly dialogic model in which exotic assets, drawn from the contested intercultural context in which they lived, substantially influenced the emergent form of Papunya Tula painting.¹²

The advent of Papunya Tula art is widely regarded as a major turning point in Australian art history. Initial recognition came when expansive canvases by Papunya-based artists were displayed in the same space as similarly scaled paintings by non-Indigenous artists at major exhibitions in the 1980s.¹³ The scope and commanding presence of paintings by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Uta Uta Tjangala and Charlie Tjapangati challenged the dominance of artists from Australia's major capital cities working in the Western tradition. Suddenly, the centre-periphery model of Australian art orbiting around the artistic centres of Europe or America would no longer hold; for it did not account for the appearance of "indigenous Australians without formal artistic training in any conventional sense ... [being] inserted into the cannon of High Modernism".¹⁴ Despite initial resistance, Papunya Tula art was shown prominently at prestigious venues; with five works included in *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art, 1788-1988* (1988), an exhibition that travelled to each of the state galleries in Australia, and as a substantial component of *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (1988)

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5. Perkins & Fink et al. 2000; Benjamin et al. 2009; Ryan & Batty et al. 2011; Johnson et al. 2007a; Scholes et al. 2017a.
 6. Sequence of events: Perkins & Fink 2000, pp. 302-315; Johnson 2000; Benjamin 2009; Ryan 2011a; Scholes 2017. Profiles: Myers 2009; Batty 2007; Johnson 2009. Relationship to Country: Langton 2000b; Kimber 2000a, pp. 268-273.
 7. Ethnography: Batty 2011. Connoisseurship: Benjamin 2009; Ryan 2011a. Revelation of the sacred: Kimber 2009; Myers, 2017.
 8. Exceptions include Benjamin 2009, pp. 28-36; Kean 2017b.
 9. Kean 2011b, pp. 43-57.
 10. Bardon 1989a, pp. 10-16; Ryan 1989, pp. 24-25; Perkins & Fink 2000, pp. 173-174.
 11. Ryan 1989, 24-32; Carter 2000; Johnson 2010, pp. 99; Batty 2011, pp. 60-65.
 12. Although not mapping the links, Papunya Tula is put in a historic perspective by Ryan 2011a, pp. 11-27.
 13. Johnson 2000, pp. 192-193; Mendelssohn et al. 2018, p. 251.
 14. Tillers 1982, p. 160 (anthologised in McLean 2011); Farrago 2013, p. 6.

at the Asia Society, New York.¹⁵ By the start of the new millennium, a more inclusive estimation of Australian art had become irresistible and recent national art histories have emphasised Papunya's importance as the fulcrum on which recent Australian art history pivoted.¹⁶

Where the heterogeneous model best encompassed the diverse scope of contemporary Australian art, it is incorrect to assume Papunya Tula was ever a single entity. Highly regarded for persuasive effect, the technical and intellectual innovations that underpin Papunya Tula's formulation have not been adequately described. The specific contribution of particular artists is seldom recognised, though historian Vivien Johnson's biographical monographs of Clifford Possum and Michael Jagamara Nelson, and more recently, John Carty on Patrick Tjungurrayi and Alec O'Halloran on Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, are notable exceptions.¹⁷

Further, the appearance of art at Papunya tends to be written off as a "Genesis" — "*ex nihilo*" — as if without precedent.¹⁸ The desert art movement is popularly glossed as 'Western Desert art', 'acrylic art' or 'dot painting', and the initial translation of customary iconography onto new media has been regarded as too mysterious, or too self-evident to engage with in detail. Curiously, there has been a greater analysis of the origin, style and semantics of the contemporary art movements at Yuendumu and Balgo settlements (communities with closely related populations) than is the case for Papunya and the findings of these studies are applied where relevant.¹⁹ While some scholars scramble to make room for Papunya Tula within the national and global pantheon, the specific history of art in Central Australia has received scant attention.²⁰ The historian Philip Jones and the theorist Ian McLean have gone some way towards mapping highpoints where individual artists, such as Erlikilyika Jim Kite and Albert Namatjira, sustained careers against the backdrop of colonisation, yet they have not charted the precise connections linking these artists to the founders of the Papunya Tula artists.²¹ I contend that the continuity of artistic achievement in Central Australia has been obscured because its major schools are portrayed in isolation. Moreover, the generation of these schools has been inseparably linked to the intervention of non-Indigenous "catalysts", namely Rex Battarbee, who mentored Albert Namatjira, and Geoffrey Bardon, who promoted painting at Papunya.²² This is especially so as Battarbee and Bardon not only contributed to the generation of the respective movements: they also chronicled the artistic development of those

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15. Thomas 1988; Sutton et al. 1988; Mendelssohn et al. pp. 259-265.
 16. Sayers 2001, pp.201-205; Grishan 2013, pp. 445-450; McLean 2011b; Keneally 2013, pp. 33-35; Caruana & Cubillo 2013, p. 46.
 17. Johnson 1994a; Johnson 1997; Johnson 2003; Carty 2015; O'Halloran 2018.
 18. Carter 2000, pp. 247-248; also, Benjamin 2009, p. 22.
 19. Dussart 1999; Watson 2003; Biddle 2007; Carty 2012.
 20. Carty & French 2011.
 21. Jones 1992 & 2011a; McLean 2016, pp. 75-86 & 120-139.
 22. Smith 2006.

schools with which they are associated.²³ The parameters that Battarbee and Bardon defined in writing, and the images they selected to publish, determined the lens through which the art of their subjects was initially interpreted. I open the aperture to encompass other actors, active over a longer period, setting out a history of art in Central Australia in which Indigenous artists are accorded due agency.²⁴

Central Australia

This thesis focuses on Central Australia, an upland area (generally 500 metres above sea level) bisected by the MacDonnell Ranges and delimited by the Eastern Desert (the Simpson Desert and Lake Eyre Basin) and the Western Desert (a region that encompasses both the Gibson Desert and Great Sandy Deserts). Characterised as ‘the Red Centre’ for its oxidised rock and red earth, Central Australia consists of a mosaic of habitats, including rugged peaks, wide ephemeral rivers cutting through alluvial valleys and adjacent sand plains.²⁵ In a revisionist history of Van Diemen’s Land (colonial Tasmania), the historian James Boyce demonstrated how the environment has a determining effect on culture, and in particular the shape and tenor of colonisation. Boyce established that an understanding of the topographic and vegetative environment is an essential prerequisite to describing the contingencies of regional history.²⁶ Accordingly, this thesis attends to the setting in which art was made, the trails and roads that connected sites of production — artistic practice is set in ‘Country’.²⁷ The geographic reference in the title of Geoffrey Bardon’s first monograph, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* (1979) is significant, as it misleadingly infers that Papunya painting and Western Desert art were synonymous. The title is especially problematic as several of the most influential of the founding artists (including three of the four artists analysed in this thesis) were from Central Australia, not the Western Desert.²⁸ I will demonstrate that the Papunya Tula artists originated from very different environments and historical experiences and that as a consequence, their artistic intentions were as varied and diverse as the paintings they produced. I argue that to understand *how* the individual Papunya artists “invented contemporary Aboriginal art”, it is essential to understand the particular geo-social context in which they operated.²⁹ This thesis demonstrates that the spark which ignited Papunya Tula painting can be traced to artistic precedents in Central Australia; most profoundly, to the pervasive presence of Albert Namatjira and his ground-breaking creations.

23. Battarbee 1948; 1951; 1956; Battarbee & Battarbee 1971; Bardon 1979; 1989a; 1989b; 1991; Bardon & Bardon 2004.

24. Preziosi & Farago 2012, p. 88.

25. Smith, M. 2013, pp. 4-7; the first to use the term ‘The Red Centre’ was Finlayson 1935.

26. Boyce 2008, pp. 251-258.

27. I use the Aboriginal English term ‘Country’ to encompass embedded, cultural, historic and spiritual understanding of land.

28. This assumption is exacerbated by the name of the company Papunya Tula Artists, under which artists from disparate groups convened: Perkins & Fink 2000, pp. 173-185.

29. From the title of McLean 2011c.

Albert Namatjira (1902 to 1959) is widely recognised as a landscape painter who captured the sublime beauty of West MacDonnell Ranges. It is less well known that he was a craftsman who produced ‘curios’ that reflected an ontological battle between Lutheranism and Indigenous religion that framed his early manhood. Namatjira was familiar to the subjects of this thesis, and I will argue that both his products and his identification as an independent artist were critical to the development of contemporary art at Papunya.



Fig. 2. View of Ulunparru from Warumpi, 2013, photograph by Helen Puckey

The Gang of Four

It required remarkable bravado to create a revolutionary Indigenous artform during the application of a policy of cultural assimilation at the government-managed settlement at Papunya. In recognition of the self-assured camaraderie demonstrated by Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum and Johnny Warangula, I have come to think of the subjects of this thesis as the ‘gang of four’. Now acclaimed as leading artists in their own right, these four men were collaborators who sang and painted together. In addition to an undisputed knowledge of their Country and its songlines, the gang of four were men of their time, and like Bob Hawke, then ‘larrikin’ leader of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, they enjoyed a drink.

Kaapa Tjampitjinpa (circa 1926 to 1989) was the “most enterprising and independent artist [painting] in the traditional manner” at Papunya in 1971.³⁰ An impeccable mimic, with a caustic wit, Kaapa was the first artist to be recognised

30. Bardon 1979, p. 14.

for his faultless technique and the clarity of his conception. A ‘trickster’, Kaapa was instrumental in the formation of the new movement at both artistic and strategic levels.

Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri (circa 1930 to 1984) was a go-between who, like his cousin Kaapa, navigated the gap between local artists and the non-Indigenous agents who managed the marketing of Papunya paintings. Of all the artists, Leura had the greatest technical affinity with Namatjira and the watercolour landscape artists who preceded the formulation of Papunya Tula art. Philosophical of disposition, Leura explored the possibilities of introduced materials to evoke the liminal qualities of sacred verse. Although Leura is a singularly expressive artist, his formal innovations have an enduring effect on Central Australian art.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (circa 1934 to 2002) was Leura’s younger brother. He was head stockman at Narwietooma Station during the 1970s and renowned as a craftsman before becoming a painter. Possum set out to define a new relationship between classical iconographic systems and precise representation of environmental phenomena. His mastery of the media made him the first star of Papunya Tula art.

Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula (circa 1922 to 2001) was born at Mintjilpirri in the Western Desert, before becoming a dingo tracker, manual worker and artist. A lyrical artist, Warangula introduced the inflected dot to evoke the aridity that promoted fire, and the violent storms that brought new life. Warangula’s many descendants remember him as a gifted storyteller.³¹

Approaching the Literature

This is a multidisciplinary thesis in which the boundaries between approaches are intentionally blurred. The dialectical tussle between anthropology and art history that characterised the definition of Papunya Tula painting in the 1980s leads to barren ground.³² Accordingly, and in the spirit of Marcia Langton’s assertion that an understanding of “Aboriginal art requires some hard intellectual work based on ethnographic literature”, my approach relies on both art history, with its focus on materiality, style and conceptual concerns, and ethnology/anthropology, that attends to culturally specific discriminations.³³ As this thesis focuses on the relationship of the protagonists to place, not exclusively their ancestral association but also in terms of their lived experience, I therefore draw from practitioners of social history, Marxist economics, phenomenology, linguistics and archaeology. Paintings by the selected artists arise from and communicate environmental relations. They are taxonomically specific, and therefore some

31. Tjupurrula, 1988.

32. Megaw, V. 1982.

33. Langton 2000a, pp. 14–16.

reference to the biological and environmental literature is essential if the artists’ most fundamental intentions are to be recognised. A multi-disciplinary approach best approximates the artists’ integrated experience of the social, spiritual and natural environment. Relevant materials from diverse disciplines are discussed in turn, and in relation to the emphasis of particular chapters.

Literature from a wide range of disciplines will be called on to construct an account of the Central Australian environment, however I will constrain the current discussion to a handful of first-hand observers, who knew the selected artists and who have made a substantial contribution to the literature on Papunya Tula painting. Appropriately, these observers approached the subject from a variety of disciplines: Geoffrey Bardon – artist/teacher; Vivien Johnson – sociologist/historian; Dick Kimber – diarist/historian; Fred Myers – anthropologist. Each has substantially shaped the formulation of this thesis.

The Primary Observers

Employed as a schoolteacher, Geoffrey Bardon spent eighteen months based at Papunya but devoted much of what remained of his life to the documentation of that critical period of artmaking.³⁴ His books (1978, 1991, 2004) essays (1989, 1996, 2000) and films (1971, 1976, 1978) have exerted a profound effect on the public understanding of the emergence of contemporary Aboriginal art. Bardon’s publications provide a highly subjective account of ‘The Origin of the Painting Movement’, documenting key events such as the painting of the *Honey Ant Mural* at the Papunya School, the establishment of the Men’s Painting Room and the sequence in which artists joined the painting group.³⁵ As a key first-hand witness, who actively wrote himself into the narrative of the emergence of painting at Papunya between 1971 and 1972, his works demand particular scrutiny.

Bardon’s major contribution to the theoretical discourse of Desert art arises from his observation that Papunya artists habitually touched their paintings when explaining their meaning. He wrote; “Aboriginal temperament has a predilection to the sensitivity of touch. This is a *haptic sensation, a physical quality and tactile*, different entirely from the visual sensation in eyesight”.³⁶ This observation reflects a prevailing dialectic between the ‘haptic’, or subjective (routinely associated with ‘primitive’ art) as contrasted with the ‘visual’, or objective (more characteristic of the Western tradition).³⁷ Bardon’s recognition of the artists’ haptic propensity informed his repeated attempts to protect the purity he perceived among the artists, as he urged the men to “paint their stories, the proper Aboriginal way,

34. Scholes 2017b.

35. Bardon 1979, pp. 13-16; Bardon 1991, pp. 23-46; Bardon & Bardon 2004 pp. 3-45.

36. Bardon 1979, pp. 22-23.

37. Johnson 2010, pp. 115-118.

nothing white fella”.³⁸ Kaapa, Leura and Possum resisted Bardon’s beseeching’s, adopting European pictorial conventions as required, while creating intellectually rigorous, graphically driven compositions that were clearly intended for the eye and the brain. Accordingly, Bardon described them as “primarily visual painters”.³⁹

Bardon’s final contribution to the subject was co-written with his brother James Bardon and published posthumously.⁴⁰ *Papunya: a place made after the story* (2004) is the weightiest and most extensively illustrated monograph on Papunya Tula art. The coffee table format enables the reproduction of invaluable portraits of artists and images of the community. The volume also includes reproductions and annotated sketches of 450 of the approximately 1,500 works that were produced at Papunya in 1971 and 1972. Although Bardon can be an unreliable narrator, the volume provides the single most substantial source on works from the period.⁴¹

Bardon habitually located himself at the moment of genesis at which, to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist and geographer Marcia Langton, “the main drama is the stance of the Western Observer”.⁴² For instance, he regards his “talkings out” as critical to Warangula’s artistic development. In contradistinction, I argue there is substantial evidence that Warangula’s approach arose from collaborative immersion with other artists in the Men’s Painting Room.⁴³ Writing with an eye to immortality in his final volume, Bardon celebrates his own subjectivity: “Sometimes nothing returns to the dreamer except the dream.”⁴⁴ Wary of that subjectivity, there has been a gradual revision in the understanding of Bardon’s role. The art historian and curator Tim Bonyhady identifies a gradual shift in the emphasis of Bardon’s account of his own role as “art master”, finding it increased incrementally on each telling; the final version including unguarded descriptions of Bardon’s orchestration of the style and content of painting.⁴⁵ Bardon’s memories and conclusions are therefore balanced against alternative versions that rely on contemporary archival sources and the recollections of others involved in the movement’s inception.⁴⁶

Vivien Johnson has a long association with Papunya and has written extensively on the phenomenon from sociological, political and art historical perspectives. While working as an academic for the majority of this period, Johnson was consistently proactive, enabling the early inclusion of Papunya paintings in critical

mainstream events such as the 1981 and 1986 *Australian Perspecta* exhibitions, and advancing the interest of the artists and their descendants in the debate over intellectual property and infringements of copyright.⁴⁷ More recently, Johnson has concentrated her activism at a local level by producing *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists* (2008), a biographical dictionary written with the artists and their families as its targeted audience. *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, with its deliberate nod to the title of Giorgio Vasari’s formative volume on the artists of the Renaissance (1550) is the most comprehensive and reliable document on Papunya art, and the biographical information it contains is adopted in my thesis, unless other sources could be demonstrated to be more accurate.⁴⁸

Johnson’s book *Once Upon a Time in Papunya* (2010) provides an alternative account of the first year of the Papunya Tula movement and its ongoing consequences. Unlike Bardon, who based his interpretation on previous writings, undated notes and recollection, Johnson’s version relies on systematic archival research, a close reading of the literature and first-hand oral testimony. Instrumentally for this thesis, it includes detailed accounts of the agency displayed by Kaapa and Leura.⁴⁹

Johnson’s monographs, *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri* (1994) and *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri* (2003), provide essential biographical and thematic material about the artist. The second volume is somewhat enhanced and enlarged to complement an eponymous travelling exhibition arranged by the Art Gallery of South Australia and includes an entirely new chapter, *My private canvas*, in which Johnson provides insight into Possum’s artistic intentionality, free of the constraints of the ‘company’ (PTA).⁵⁰ Johnson’s account of Possum’s independence, together with her profile of Kaapa’s formative agency and Leura’s advocacy as an Aboriginal Arts Board representative, deliver critical evidence to support my contention that the Anmatyerr artists were key drivers of the early Papunya painting movement.⁵¹

Johnson’s forensic analysis of Possum’s paintings, conducted in association with the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne, was stimulated by the appearance of fraudulent ‘Possums’ in the early 2000s. Johnson’s detailed description of his paintings, as composed of discreet layers of paint, set a new standard for the technical analysis of Papunya art.⁵²

38. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 32.

39. Bardon 1979, p. 23.

40. Geoffrey Bardon’s brother James Bardon is credited as a co-author; however the extent of his contribution is not described: Bardon & Bardon 2004.

41. Scholes 2017b, p. 139.

42. Langton 2000a, p. 11.

43. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p.32.

44. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. xxiii.

45. Bonyhady 2005. See Bardon’s assessment of his influence: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 23-5 & 33.

46. See in particular Kimber 1986; Benjamin 2009; Johnson 2010; Scholes 2017b.

47. Johnson considers it “was much more networking with Bernice Murphy and Nick Waterlow than influential publications” that saw the inclusion the first Papunya paintings into major exhibitions in Sydney during the 1980s. Personal communication, 29 November 2019. See also: Johnson 1990; Johnson 1996.

48. Johnson 2008.

49. Johnson 2010, pp. 11-43 & 96-99.

50. Johnson 2003, pp. 163-191.

51. Johnson 2010, pp. 11-43; Johnson 2007b, pp. 29-30.

52. Johnson 2007c.

Richard (Dick) Kimber is an Alice Springs-based historian with enduring connections to Indigenous men in Central Australia cemented through his role as art advisor for Papunya Tula Artists between 1975 and 1978. Kimber provided a first-hand account of the moment when it was announced that Kaapa “shared the first prize in the Caltex Art Award”, a cathartic event that encouraged other Papunya men to commence painting.⁵³ Kimber recalls his excitement on recognising the power of these “extraordinarily beautiful works”, while at the same time expressing apprehension, when he perceived that they were “potentially dangerous” because of the secret/sacred information they divulged.⁵⁴ This perceived danger continues to confound the display and reproduction of early Papunya paintings. I will demonstrate that these tensions, first documented by Kimber, have much deeper roots, and that the play between revelation and suppression and or concealment of sacred signs has propelled the development of Central Australian art.

Widely acknowledged as Central Australia’s most authoritative resident diarist, Kimber took a particular interest in the areas to the west of Alice Springs.⁵⁵ As someone who travelled with Papunya-based painters more extensively than any other writer, Kimber provides compelling insight into perceptions of place in Central Australia and the Western Desert.⁵⁶ His observations of Country and the development of the painting industry are complemented by precise accounts of the history of the region, from first contact to the end of the 20th century. Read together, Kimber’s historical contributions provide the most relevant survey of major forces that have affected demographic, cultural and environmental change across the study area.⁵⁷

Fred Myers is a New York-based anthropologist who published prolifically on the Papunya Tula movement. Myers’ focus has been the Pintupi, a Western Desert group whose Country is to the west of the area of my study. Myers’ keen eye for emotional nuance, honed in the field, distinguishes his writing from earlier structural anthropology.⁵⁸ His capacity to relate the *oeuvre* of a particular artist to topographical and mythic attributes of their Country, their ritual status and personality, establishes the essential multivalence of Desert art.⁵⁹ Based at Yai Yai (an outstation west of Papunya) from 1973 to 1975, Myers documented hundreds of paintings in preparation for the occasional visit by the art advisor Peter Fannin. His distillation of the composition of these paintings into ‘templates’ allows works that refer to disparate subjects to be compared, providing a diagnostic tool that has influenced my analysis.⁶⁰

53. Kimber 1986, p. 43.

54. Kimber 1986, p. 44.

55. Morton 2017.

56. Kimber 1988, pp. 73-77; Kimber 2000a; several biographical entries in Ryan & Batty 2011.

57. Kimber 1982; Kimber 1988, pp. 40-69; Kimber 1991; 2003; 2006; 2008.

58. Myers 1986.

59. Myers 2002, pp. 30-64; Myers 2009.

60. Myers 2002b, pp. 87-119.

The writings of Bardon, Johnson, Kimber and Myers set out key events and provide extensive analysis; collectively their writings define the field. Subsequent scholarship complements this foundation, addresses gaps, and challenges prevailing interpretations. The curator and ex-PTA field officer Luke Scholes has for instance proposed a radically new account of events at Papunya during 1971 and 1972.⁶¹ Based on a re-examination of primary documents, Scholes demonstrates that, contrary to Bardon’s reports of their wilful intransigence, the non-Indigenous officials at Papunya and Alice Springs materially supported the nascent movement.⁶² It emerged from correspondence examined by Scholes that even the government superintendent backed the flowering of painting at Papunya.⁶³ Further, Scholes tracked the periods that Bardon was absent from Papunya, during which the artists continued to develop new ideas, free of overview.⁶⁴ Scholes’ plotting of Bardon’s absences indicates that there is still much to be done to establish the context in which Papunya painting proliferated during the 1970s. Embracing that challenge, this thesis presents an alternative interpretation of the formation of painting at Papunya, a reading that examines the agency of four artists within the much larger collective.

Geographic and Temporal Scope

In addition to constraining my analysis to the work of four founding Papunya Tula artists, I have limited the geographic parameters for investigation. In contrast to previous studies of the movement however, I have pushed back the period under study by more than a generation.

Many accounts of the development of Papunya Tula painting assume 1971 as ground zero. Concentration on the moment of inauguration does not enable the decisive events of 1971 to be understood in context; especially as such readings inevitably emphasise the arrival of Bardon over the weight of history. The theorist Paul Carter queries the comparison of the emergence of Papunya painting “with the events of Genesis in the Old Testament” where the “exceptional quality [of those works] seemed to embody another dearly held western myth, that of genius”⁶⁵. While the association of the movement with the terms “genesis and genius” helped propel Papunya painting into the limelight, the notion does not account for the contested and, at times, bloody history of the region from which the artform emerged.⁶⁶ Like Kimber and Johnson, I contend that it is essential to look deeper into the historic and social background of the region if a balanced

61. Scholes 2017b.

62. Scholes 2017b, pp. 128-131 & 141-154.

63. Scholes 2017b, p. 142.

64. Scholes 2017b, pp. 128-153.

65. Carter 2000, p. 247. See also: biblical evocations by Bardon in McLean 2011b, pp. 181, 187 & 189.

66. *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* title of the landmark survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Perkins & Fink, 2000.

account of the painting movement is to be achieved.⁶⁷ When a longer view is taken, the uncomfortable reality of Indigenous experience in Central Australia can inform the interpretation of eventualities. Despite the daily struggle, important precursors to the artistic achievements of the 1970s had emerged during the periods of ‘protection’ and ‘assimilation’, voicing Aboriginal perceptions of history, against a backdrop of cultural change and contestation. The significance of these artistic precedents to Papunya painting, and the proximity of the selected artists to the production of works by Albert Namatjira and his followers will be examined in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis. When interviewed in 1984, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa told me of the collaborative beginnings of the painting movement: “We started painting: Tim Leura, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Clifford. Before everybody. This is in Papunya – and outside Papunya. First on art board and on carving”.⁶⁸ Accordingly, this thesis examines how the proponents of an independent artform established their vision and from whence they developed their agency.

This study commences during the late 1920s with an account of events of profound demographic and ontological consequence unleashed across Central Australia. Then, after following a chronological narrative, it concludes in the mid-1970s. By that time, the emergent forms of painting at Papunya had consolidated to become a recognisable new genre, and each of the selected subjects had developed a distinctive artistic voice. In addition to taking a longer historical perspective, this thesis shifts focus from west to east. Because the majority of the founding artists were Pintupi-speaking men from the Western Desert, scholars have frequently focussed on those artists’ experiences.⁶⁹ Western orientation has been amplified since 1982, when most of the Pintupi artists relocated to their homelands, establishing communities at Walungurru (Kintore) and Kiwirrkura. The artists’ company, Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd. (PTA), supported the heroic return of the Pintupi to their Country, and since 1994, has worked solely with artists from the western communities.⁷⁰ By way of contrast, this thesis adopts an easterly orientation, focusing on Central Australia. Central Australia is comprised of a significantly different environmental mosaic to that which characterises the Western Desert.⁷¹ The mountains that dominate much of Central Australia promote higher rainfall than is experienced in the lower, flatter country to the west.⁷² Typically, the soils of Central Australia are richer than those of the Western Desert. This is especially the case across Anmatyerr Country that lies to the north of the MacDonnell Ranges, the great spine of mountains that bisects the region

67. Kimber 1988, pp. 40-72; Johnson 2015, pp. 26-47.

68. Kaapa interviewed by the author in 1984, cited in: Johnson 2010, p. 43. It is notable that Bardon does not encounter Leura or Possum until 1972, suggesting that major developments occurred before his interventions of 1971: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 82 & 88.

69. Myers 1989; 2002b; 2007; 2009; 2013a; Kimber 1990c; Williams & Perkins 2000.

70. Johnson 2015, pp. 150-152; Kean, 1990; 2006.

71. Strehlow 1965a, pp. 122-133.

72. Smith, M 2013, pp. 4-9.

from east to west. The fertility of the soil in Central Australia and its relatively high precipitation, provide the conditions in which the pastoral industry was established, and came to dominate the local economy in the twentieth century.⁷³

More specifically, the thesis encompasses prescient events at Hermannsburg, Haasts Bluff, Papunya and surrounding cattle stations. It was in this region, from Alice Springs to Mount Liebig (which marks the eastern perimeter of the Western Desert), that the selected artists encountered formative influences, mixing with Indigenous evangelists, missionaries, pastoral ‘bosses’, government officials, storekeepers, nurses, teachers and visiting artists. The shift in geographic loci, from west to east, highlights a distinctly different set of experiences to those faced by traditionally-oriented people of the Western Desert during the same period.⁷⁴ Much of the literature on Papunya art has turned on the contact experiences of Pintupi people with non-Indigenous actors in the Western Desert, and the subsequent exodus of Pintupi families to Haasts Bluff and Papunya.⁷⁵ In contrast, Kaapa, Leura and Possum were born into station life, and grew up within sight of the pastoralists’ homestead at Alherramp (Napperby), 100 kilometres north-west of Papunya.⁷⁶ The Anmatyerr artists were therefore never exiled from their Country. Indeed, their work as stockmen afforded them considerable mobility.⁷⁷ Johnny Warangula is alone among the selected artists in being born in the ‘bush’, out west, before making his first contact with non-Indigenous people (and their camels) as a boy. The amended geographic focus of this thesis therefore requires the examination of the artists’ involvement with Lutheranism, fragments of popular culture and the labour market, and after 1962, as citizens in the cash economy of the mid-20th century. This thesis assembles evidence of how these intercultural experiences informed their contribution to the invention of contemporary painting.

Analysing the Material

This thesis proposes an alternative reading of the available material. In addition to the interpretation of archival accounts, I examine the formal qualities of paintings for evidence of the creative processes. By establishing the progression of formal elements within various series, I identify visual evidence of an ongoing creative dialogue between the selected artists. The outcomes of their collaborations are presented as a narrative of studio practice. This approach is markedly different

73. Bowman, B 1984.

74. For analysis of Pintupi lifeways in the desert, see: Myers 1986, pp. 71-101.

75. See biographies of various Pintupi artists in: Johnson 2008; Ryan & Batty 2011; Batty et al. 2006; Carty 2015. pp. 28-46.

76. In 1979, Leura and Possum showed me their old camp at Napperby.

77. Johnson 1994, pp. 11-22.

to that taken by Johnson, for example, who sought to identify significant trends with the presence and departure of non-Indigenous art advisors who managed the production and distribution of Papunya art in the 1970s.⁷⁸

In May 1977, I undertook my first paid work for Papunya Tula Artists (PTA); sketching the design of numerous paintings on certificates of authentication to accompany each work. Driven by an urge to represent their Country, the founders of desert art produced their paintings in advance of market demand, and a forlorn storeroom of homeless paintings was testament to their unquenchable enthusiasm. Sitting at the centre of the small room, I worked my way through several hundred paintings stacked around the perimeter of the windowless space. Using an architect's pen, I outlined a rectangle towards the top of each certificate to mirror the ratio of the painted canvas board, before copying each composition to the best of my ability. I trained my eyes to look through the fields of dots to identify the scaffolding on which additional layers of dots were hung. I learned to assess the discrete elements of each design, and through the process of looking, appreciated the semantics of the painting's construction, while at the same time familiarising myself with the hand of each of the 30 artists who had created the works. On reflection, my particular way of assessing desert art, as exercised in this thesis, commenced in that room: drafting concentric circles under a single light bulb.

Compelled, by the terms of my contract, to empirically analyse, I sought to understand if an artist was striving for symmetry. I squinted to determine how cryptic tracks of animal prints contributed to the composition, and in some cases strained to follow the fuzzy logic of a painting built one roundel to the next. My understanding of the formal dynamics of Papunya painting has built slowly since that introduction, initially via conversation with Kaapa Tjampitjinpa and Tim Leura who were regular visitors to the PTA storeroom in Alice Springs.⁷⁹

It was in August 1977 that the rate of my learning intensified, when as a newly-minted art advisor, I interviewed each artist on completion of every work. Following the precedents set by my predecessors, I attempted to elicit the 'story' envisaged. In most cases, the information disclosed comprised a gloss of the meaning of primary signs and icons, the name of the major site depicted (usually the largest concentric circle) and the principal ancestral heroes represented. Scribbling notes in the presence of the artists, I was aware there was much more behind these bedazzling, enigmatic works than could be captured in the banal translation of their lexical elements into a brief written form for a certificate of authentication.

78. Johnson 2000, pp. 187-197; Johnson 2007a, pp. 51-98.

79. The PTA office and storeroom were located at the back of the Centre for Aboriginal Artists and Craftsmen in Todd Street, in Alice Springs (no longer standing).

I have returned to Central Australia on numerous occasions since the end of my stint as art advisor.⁸⁰ I continue to spend time with artists and their descendants, learning of the particularities of kinship, connection to Country, and the contested history of the region. My interest in the emergent practice of painting persists unabated, and this thesis is an extension of the process instigated so innocently in that storeroom. The principal source for my study remains the paintings themselves; and of course, what I learned of them from the artists. The fine-grained analysis of selected works, in which I attempt to identify the origin of key elements that constitute Papunya painting will, I hope, distinguish this thesis from other studies of the artform.

Terms, Definitions and Disclaimers

Period, School and Style

The terms used to define the periods and schools of art in Central Australia covered in this thesis require definition. I use the term 'classical' to refer to artefacts and designs that were produced before, or coincident, with their maker's contact with non-Indigenous people. I take this convention from linguist and anthropologist Peter Sutton, who demands that we recognise "the difference between recent, sometimes rather abrupt, cultural transformations and the great continuities that preceded them".⁸¹ The term is not applied to suggest that classical Indigenous cultures were ossified; rather that variation in subject and form occurred intermittently over a long and relatively stable period.

The first Central Australian artists to produce portable paintings for a transcultural market emerged from the Finke River Mission and are referred to as the 'Hermannsburg School', after the name of the mission station with which they were associated. In 1948, the founder of the movement, Albert Namatjira, tried to acquire a pastoral lease. Government and mission authorities actively impeded his wish.⁸² Angered, Namatjira took control of his career, spending much of his time in Haasts Bluff and Alice Springs, where he inspired a new generation of artists, not all of whom were from the mission. Although they share technical and pictorial qualities with the Hermannsburg School, I regard paintings produced independently of the mission, as belonging to a broader 'watercolour landscape tradition'.⁸³

The development of diverse artforms at Papunya in the 1970s also requires definition. Indeed, inadequacies stemming from the treatment of this dynamic sequence as a homogenous movement motivate my research. Vivien Johnson was the first to attempt periodisation and I retain some but not all of her

80. I left Papunya at the end of December 1979.

81. Sutton 1989a, p. 354.

82. Edmond 2014, pp. 225-228.

83. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 91-94.

labels.⁸⁴ Critically, Johnson coined the descriptor, ‘the school of Kaapa’ to isolate a relatively small group of early paintings that employ realistically-painted ceremonial figures in three-dimensional space.⁸⁵ My research affirms Johnson’s proposition that this series was produced by a handful of artists working under Kaapa’s leadership. These distinctive works had previously been subsumed into an ill-defined class of ‘Papunya boards’, the majority of which relied on autochthonous imagery and were created in a period that overlapped with the School of Kaapa.⁸⁶ I refer to this larger body of work, created before August 1972 as ‘early Papunya paintings’. Somewhat confusingly, the same artists who gathered under Kaapa’s influence also produced works included in the broader category. Using a limited colour palette of synthetic polymer paints on hardboard, many (but not all) of the early Papunya paintings were created by artists working in association with Geoffrey Bardon.⁸⁷ The next surge of work is perhaps the most difficult to define and least understood; they were created in a brief period after Bardon left Papunya in August and before another teacher, Peter Fannin, was employed to work with the artists in December 1972.⁸⁸ Johnson refers to the period as “the interregnum”, a term that speaks to a period but not the distinctive visual qualities of the works as the artists embarked on a program of radical stylistic experimentation.⁸⁹ The final period, which I refer to as ‘Papunya Tula painting’ encompasses works produced after December 1972 when Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd. was incorporated, up until 1988.⁹⁰ In chronological summary, the schools and periods of Central Australian art to which I refer are: ‘Hermannsburg School’, 1936 to 1948; ‘watercolour landscape tradition’, 1950 to present, ‘School of Kaapa’, 1971 to early 1972; ‘early Papunya paintings’, mid-1971 to mid-1972; ‘the interregnum’ from August to December 1972; and ‘Papunya Tula painting’, December 1972 to 1988.

Sign, Figure and Icon

Looking deeper into individual works, I refer to the graphic elements of classical Indigenous art and more recent Papunya paintings as ‘sign’, ‘figure’ and ‘icon’ according to their semantic complexity and religious signification. My understanding of the semantic conventions of desert art is informed by the work

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84. I do not use terms associated with the presence of specific art advisors (e.g. “Peter Fannin Time”), for they cover a period that I regard as stylistically stable. See: Johnson 2007a, pp. 49. For periodisation, see: Johnson 2008, pp. vi-vii.
85. Johnson 2010, pp. 11-43.
86. The imprecise term ‘Papunya boards’ is routinely used in the secondary market to describe works produced on hardwood board at Papunya circa 1971-72.
87. For a list of founding artists, see: Johnson 2008, pp. vi & 2.
88. Scholes 2017b, pp. 155-159.
89. Johnson 2008, p. 73.
90. I recommend this date, as it marks the moment when the market directly influenced the form and modality of painting, especially via feedback from the Melbourne gallerist Gabrielle Pizzi, who mounted a series of solo exhibitions, commencing with Joseph Jurra Tjapaltjarri (30 August 1988) Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri (22 November 1988).

of the American anthropologist Nancy Munn. Based at Yuendumu, a government settlement 100 kilometres north of Papunya, in the late 1950s, Munn undertook close analysis of the narrative and ritual visual systems among Warlpiri speakers. Munn described a variety of contexts in which women and men formed “discrete, irreducible elements such as a circle, line, or arc” which she regards as “ultimate constituents” that were in turn “combined into standardized arrangements of varying complexity”.⁹¹ I refer to Munn’s ultimate constituents as ‘signs’ and retain her use of the term ‘figures’ for more complex arrangements. For example, kangaroo pawprints are a ‘sign’, which when repeated at regular intervals and combined with an appropriately located circle, create a ‘figure’ showing the animal hopping towards its destination, a waterhole.⁹² Critically, Munn regards Warlpiri graphic art (and by extension the graphic art of adjacent desert groups who share these conventions) as “representational”, for it comprises “a system of denotative signs characterized by some iconic semanticity”.⁹³ Putting it slightly differently, Munn notes that “selected qualities of the phenomenal world”, such as a Brush Tail Possum’s dragging tail are “transposed into the simple linear forms”, in this case a sinuous line, that “are of primary significance to the dynamics of design formulation”.⁹⁴ Munn’s fieldwork was conducted with traditionally-oriented Warlpiri people before portable art on hardboard and canvas, using the same signs and figures, emerged at Papunya. Munn’s findings therefore provide a benchmark against which later paintings can be assessed and compared with classical precedents. It is appropriate at this point to emphasise that many common signs and figures in desert art are derived from the tracks and traces left by human and animal activities. These negative ‘prints’ made by feet, paws, claws or snakebellies require ‘reading’ by the viewer, unlike the visible qualities of the material world that are privileged in Western ‘realism’ (see Plate 6).

Peter Sutton builds on Munn’s analysis, recognising that signs are also combined to create a significant subset of figures that he calls “icons”.⁹⁵ According to Sutton, icons are used in the regulated realm of ritual. Although constituent signs may refer to an identifiable characteristic of the subject, Sutton argues that icons are “typically conventional religious images that emphasise pattern rather than figurative faithfulness to the thing represented”.⁹⁶ For instance, the characteristic ‘moustache’ of a *mala* (Rufous Hare-wallaby) is used to signify the marsupial when it appears in a secular story drawn in the sand; when the sign is attached to a roundel in a ritual context, the *mala* becomes an icon that signifies a particular totemic ancestor. Going further, Sutton regards icons as “typically obscure, [and] often quite unintelligible, to some of its ‘consumers’ (ceremonial novices

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91. Munn 1973a, p. 59.
92. Munn 1973a, p. 59.
93. Munn 1973a, p. 4.
94. Munn 1973a, p. 178.
95. For the former, see: Munn 1973a, pp. 58-88. For comparative examples from Balgo, see: Watson 2003, pp. 336-351.
96. Sutton 1989a, p. 362.

for example), and ‘readable’ by its more senior observers only because they have already been taught its conventions and referents”.⁹⁷ The tension between Munn’s “representational” system of signs and figures and Sutton’s “unintelligible” icons is intentionally highlighted, for the *frisson* between revelation, ambiguity and concealment is intrinsic to the performance of desert art, and was especially so in early Papunya paintings which refer directly to men’s ritual.⁹⁸

Cultural and Linguistic Boundaries

Central Australian artists are typically linked to the language with which they identify most strongly — Arrernte, Luritja or Anmatyerr, for instance — and these identifiers require both clarification and contextualisation. Mid-20th century anthropologists, such as Norman B. Tindale, demarcate precise boundaries of specific linguistic/tribal identities.⁹⁹ Their findings can, however, be misleading. Myers argues that the reality of personal and clan identification is far more nuanced, and rather than speaking of Country in perimetric terms, individuals focus on their *affinity* to or with specific places.¹⁰⁰ Most people use several languages and dialects, modulated according to whom they are talking and to the location they are speaking from. Moreover, exogamous marriage is widespread in Central Australia, a practice that over time ensures most residents maintain active links to distant people and Country. The male protagonists of this thesis, for instance, married women from different language groups than those into which they were born. At a more banal level, nomenclatural complexity has been compounded when the names used to identify various groups have changed. The local Kukatja families around Papunya and Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) now identify as Luritja, whilst Ngaliya families, with origins to the north-west of Papunya, identify as Warlpiri, or in some instances, Ngaliya/Warlpiri.¹⁰¹ In these shifting circumstances, it is difficult to avoid ambiguity and I will refer to these groups according to their identification at the time when events being described occurred.

Language and Orthography

There is inherent complexity when writing of an environment in which several languages are spoken. Moreover, the orthographies used to document Central Australian languages are many and various. In this instance, complexity results from the vicissitudes of history, especially during the 20th century, when non-Aboriginal people of varying skill employed idiosyncratic orthographies to record the spoken languages of this portion of Aboriginal Australia. Where possible, I have

97. Sutton 1989a, p. 363.
98. Myers 2002b, pp. 118-119; Myers 2016.
99. Tindale 1974.
100. Myers 2002b.
101. Particularly those who lived at Nyirripi, according to Sarita Quinlivan: Quinlivan 2019, (personal communications).

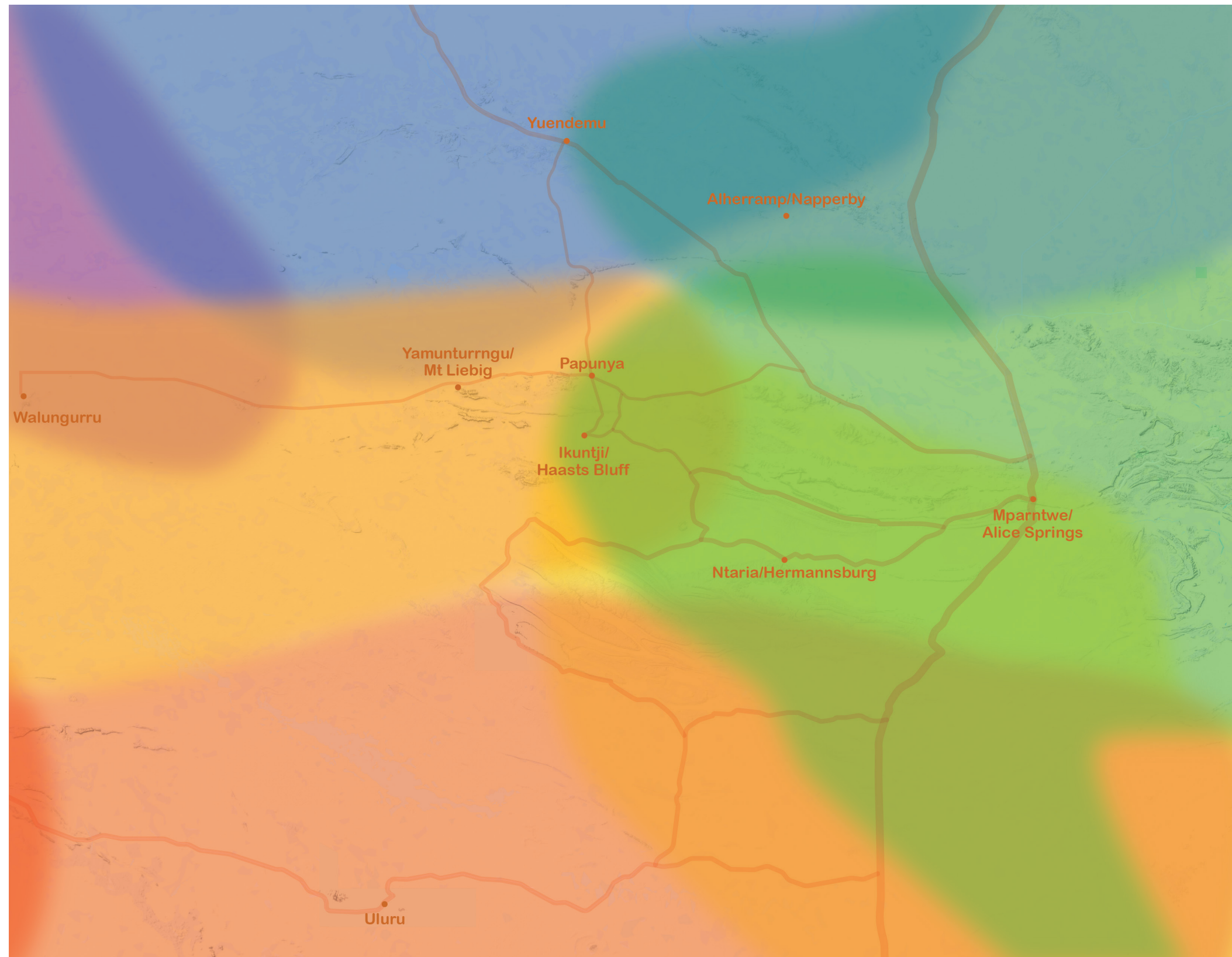
used orthographies recommended by the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD), who over recent decades have produced dictionaries and grammars of many of the languages referred to in this thesis.

The Arandic language group presents a particular challenge, as very different orthographies have drifted in and out of use. The name of this language, for instance, is alternately written as Arunta, Aranda, Arrarnta and Arrernte.¹⁰² A common orthography, developed by the IAD with people across the Arandic-speaking region is used in this thesis.¹⁰³ Despite extensive consultation, some Western Arrernte prefer to use an alternative orthography, spelling their language name Arrarnta.¹⁰⁴ Although the Western Arrernte region is critical to this thesis, I have chosen to use the more widely accepted orthography. Critically, application of the IAD orthography enables comprehensibility with words used in common with Anmatyerr speakers to the immediate north of Arrernte lands. Where Indigenous words are used in quotes, I have retained the original spelling and included contemporary spelling in square brackets, e.g. Illbilla [Ilpili].

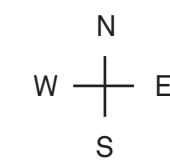
Kinship and Naming Conventions

Kinship defines a person’s roles and responsibilities within society and to Country. Every person is born into one of eight kinship groups and assigned a ‘skin’ name that defines their relationships within family, and beyond, to include those to whom they are not biologically related. A ‘skin’ name is ascribed in addition to a person’s given name or names.¹⁰⁵ For example, Tim Leura is of the ‘Tjapaltjarri’ kinship group; his brother, Clifford Possum is also a ‘Tjapaltjarri’ man; and their cousin Kaapa is a ‘Tjampitjinpa’ man, like his brother Dinny Nolan Tjampitjinpa. In the past, Kaapa has been referred to as Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa, though this is something of a tautology, for ‘Mbitjana’ is a previous spelling of the Anmatyerr kinship term ‘Mpetyan’, and as such is directly equivalent to the Luritja term ‘Tjampitjinpa’. These Anmatyerr men are known by their respective Luritja kinship names in Papunya, where the *lingua franca* is Luritja. At Larumba (Napperby), they are referred to by their Anmatyerr kinship names, where ‘Peltharr’ is equivalent to the Luritja ‘Tjapaltjarri’ for instance. I have chosen to use Luritja kinship terms because this is how these Papunya Tula artists are named in the art sector. I will use an artist’s kinship name on the first occasion; on later mentions I use only personal names. Uniquely for the Anmatyerr artists, Kaapa does not have an anglicised name; I therefore refer to him as ‘Kaapa’.

102. There have been many other variants used in the literature. See Austlang 2019, URL: https://collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/search?search_api_views_fulltext=Arrernte&field_centroid_latlon_op=-&field_centroid_latlon=&field_state_territory=All&field_al_status=All
103. Dobson & Henderson 1994; Green 2010.
104. Roennfeldt et al. 2006.
105. Green 2010, p. 743; Turner et al. 2010; Dobson & Henderson 1994.



Map 1. *Map of region and major language groups*, language distribution based on Hoogenraad and Thornley, 2003



Describing the Intercultural Environment

Central Australia is an intercultural environment in which people from a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures encounter each other in what, the theorist and linguist Mary Louse Pratt has defined as a ‘contact zone’.¹⁰⁶ For 170 years, the history of the region has been shaped by the collisions of individuals and groups holding contrasting ontologies. For non-Indigenous outsiders, a second type of encounter is more difficult to perceive but is also significant. This category encompasses encounters between individuals from distinctly different Indigenous groups. Difference, in this instance, can be measured on two axes: the axis of customary ‘cultural’ difference; and difference born of contrasting lived experience.

First, this study encompasses three major Indigenous cultural blocs (Map 1): the Arandic people who occupy the core of Central Australia, the Western Desert people of the dunefields, saltpans and occasional rocky outcrops to the west, and the Ngarrkic people of the Tanami Desert and its southern fringes. These are discrete groups with distinguishing linguistic, ceremonial and social practices. Each bloc is in turn comprised of speakers of closely related languages and dialects that will be introduced as required in the narrative.

The second axis describes differences in historic experience in terms of the duration and type of contact. The Western Arrernte people (of the Arandic bloc) have, for instance, accommodated European missionaries since 1877. In contrast, the last group of Pintupi (a Western Desert language group) made contact with Western modernity in 1984. The experience of those living on mission stations was fundamentally different to others who exchanged their labour for rations (and later cash cheques) on cattle stations. Despite being governed by contrasting manifestations of the colonial regime, individuals regularly crossed the fenceline separating mission and station. Others, while being counted on occasional censuses conducted at Hermannsburg mission or Haasts Bluff ration station, travelled west to stay in contact with relatives who maintained customary lifeways.

Intercultural/Transcultural

Although nested one within the other, I use the terms ‘intercultural’ and ‘transcultural’ to differentiate imbricated realms of interaction proposed in this thesis. Herein, ‘intercultural’ applies to social and intellectual interactions, occurring *in situ*, across a sweep of Country, from Alice Springs in the east, to Ilpili (Ehrenberg Ranges) to the west. My application of the term draws from the work of the anthropologist Francesca Merlan whose analysis of socio-spatial transformation at the Northern Territory town of Katherine and its outlying areas, shows how the local Jawoyn people navigate the co-presence of diverse groups on

106. Pratt 1992.



Fig. 3. *Between Kaarku and Winitjartu, clockwise from top left, Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula, Jimmy Tjungurrayi, John Kean, Lindsay Tjakamarra, Tjangala, Benny Tjapangati, David Corby Tjapaltjarri, Saybien Tjakamarra, Dick Pantimus Tjupurrula, 1978, photograph by Philip Batty*

shared Country. Merlan’s account is compelling, for she attends to both everyday and political dimensions of life, while giving voice to an elusive esoteric realm (sometimes taking the form of a Rainbow Serpent), which persists and yet is transformed by the actions of non-Indigenous business interests and government officials. Further, Merlan considers the influence of physical landmarks such as sinkholes, streets and fence lines, which define the contemporary environment of Katherine. Her account of the forced accommodation of several different groups, and their conflicting agendas, provides the key analytic framework for Part One of this thesis.¹⁰⁷

I use the term ‘transcultural’ less often and for specific purpose. Ian McLean applies the term to “trace the subtle dialectics between... Indigenous art production and Western artworld discourse”.¹⁰⁸ He examines artistic phenomena at a distance, through the lens of “artworld discourse” as it were, and in relation to comparable phenomena, at different places and times. Rather than digging down into the earth from which the work emerges, McLean identifies examples that are bound into the Australian national narrative, such as Richard Bell’s artwork *Scientia e Metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem)*, 2003 (better known by the text written on the a painting’s surface, “ABORIGINAL ART It’s A White Thing”), or intertwined thematically through the common experience of colonialism, like Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi’s *An Audience with the Queen*.¹⁰⁹ As editor of *Double Desire: transculturation and indigenous contemporary art*, 2014, McLean adopts

107. Merlan 1998.

108. McLean 2004a, p. 5.

109. McLean 2016, pp. 351-254.

a globalised perspective.¹¹⁰ While acknowledging the value of such surveillance, I use the term ‘transcultural’ in a limited sense, to describe the effect of material that is imported into the region (such as artmaking materials, cartoons and biblical posters) or exported from it (artworks, curios and artefacts).

My intention is not to formulate a case study for insertion into a theoretical a meta-narrative, but to discover how certain artists developed their vision at a particular place. I take my lead from Myers, who urges scholars to “show how the paintings were *made* to have meaning, in practice”.¹¹¹ Digging deeper, I seek to identify how meaning was *made* within a specific regional and temporal context.

Structure of this Thesis

This thesis has two parts; Part One consists of three chapters that examine instances of cultural interaction, to establish the colonial context from which Papunya Tula art emerged. Part One traces decisive events in a ‘contact zone’ where the Indigenous owners of Tjoritja (West MacDonnell Ranges) interacted with Lutheran missionaries and their evangelical converts at Hermannsburg. Part One also encompasses the interaction of Indigenous people from different cultural blocs in the vicinity of the Haasts Bluff ration station just 30 kilometres south of Papunya. It is shown that key elements that would ignite Papunya Tula art are emergent in the visual culture produced in the region between 1932 and 1959.

Chapter One examines the collision of contested ontologies at Ntaria (Hermannsburg). Albert Namatjira was both witness to and participant in decisive events at the mission and I argue that the paramount forms of Indigenous Religion and Christianity are reflected in the curios he produced for a nascent tourist industry. Works on paper, attributed to Namatjira, are discussed as potent precedents to the later development of painting at Papunya.

Chapter Two examines notions of emplacement in a contact zone where two Indigenous cultural blocs intersect. Customary encounters around the Belt Range intensified from the 1930s as people from the Western Desert arrived at the Haasts Bluff ration station where they were greeted by Arrernte evangelists. The meeting of the confirmed Christian Albert Namatjira and a young immigrant called Johnny Warangula, provides a lens through which various strands of intercultural interaction, and historic contingency are examined. The chapter also considers the formulation of the ‘Indigenous’ subject and discusses how the emergent category of the ‘artist’ came into focus for prospective Papunya painters.

110. McLean 2014b, pp. 247-259.

111. Myers 2002b, p. 7.

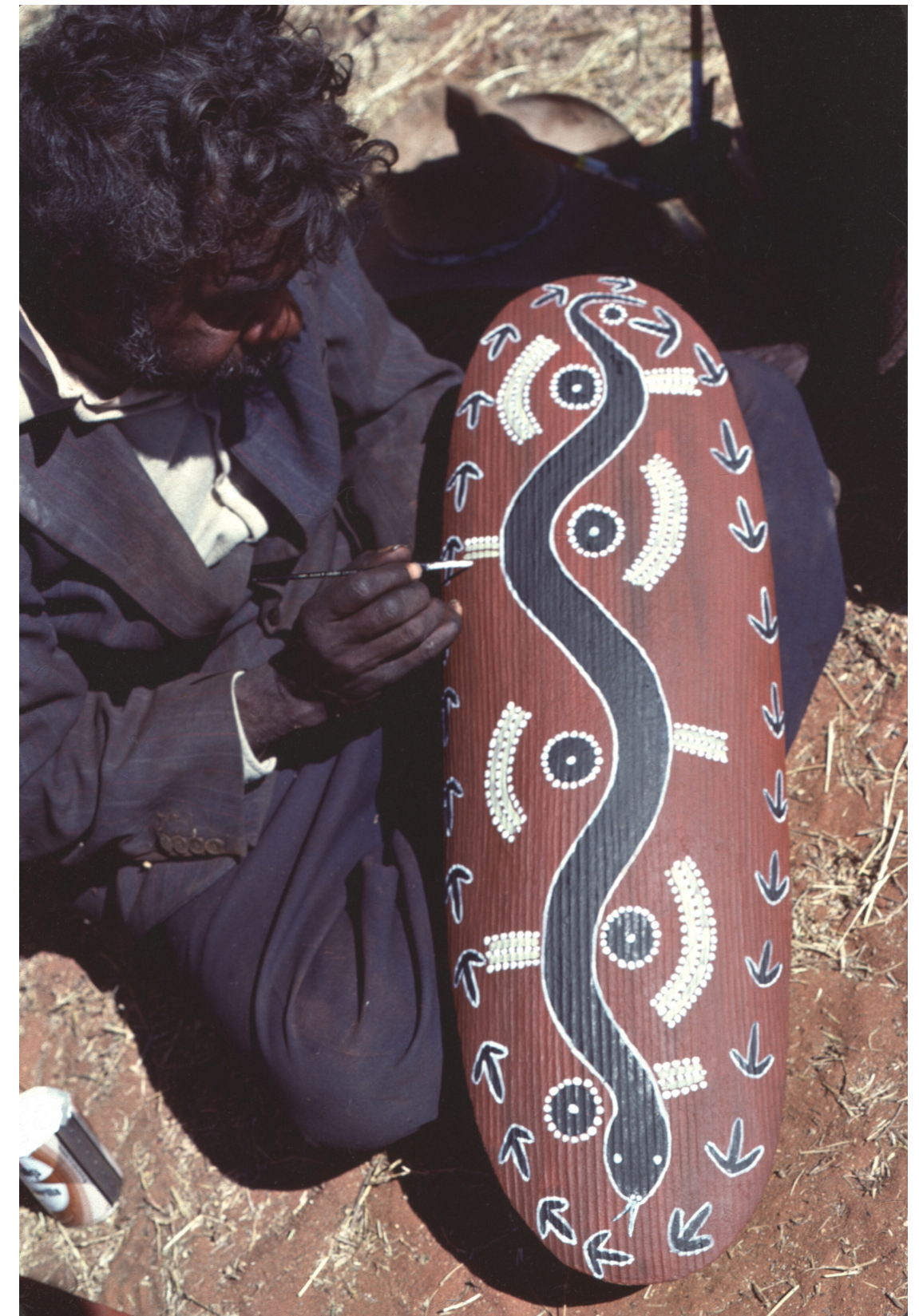


Fig. 4. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa painting a shield, Yarrapirri (*Winparrku Serpent*), circa 1979, photograph by Philip Batty

Set in the ‘picturesque’ Country around Haasts Bluff, Chapter Three identifies the ‘frame’ as the device that Battarbee and Namatjira used to isolate landforms for the purpose of representation. Framed images of a peopled ‘landscape’ are contrasted with Indigenous understandings of an unbounded and interconnected

land. Further, the relationship between images of Country and its enduring sacredness are analysed to elucidate how space and place are conceptualised in the desert. It is argued that ‘autonomous’ images of Indigenous subjects, as developed around Haasts Bluff, set the scene for the conceptualisation of new pictorial schema at Papunya.

Established by the Australian government for the ‘assimilation’ of Indigenous people into ‘Western’ lifeways, from the late 1950s, Papunya became the domicile for diverse clans from three distinct cultural blocs. Part Two of this thesis unfolds at the settlement and is comprised of a set of five roughly chronological chapters. Important pictorial innovations are identified in each chapter and the process by which they were synthesized to constitute Papunya Tula art is proposed. These chapters trace the evolution of painting through a sequence of studios where Kaapa, Leura, Warangula and Possum instigated successive pictorial devices. The entrepreneurial agency and intentionality of key protagonists of the new movement is highlighted. It will be shown how each of the selected artists contributed individually and collaboratively to the early evolution of a new artform.

Chapter Four focuses on the indomitable, entrepreneurial actions of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa. A series of paintings Kaapa produced with salvaged and pilfered materials in the winter of 1971 provide material for analysis in the chapter. The paintings commence with realistic images of sacred ritual. It is argued that these tableaux were stimulated by the artist’s familiarity with Western taste and ethnographic photography. The sequence in which the series was created is proposed according to the shifting spatial perspective adopted in each image. The transition from naïve elevation to plan is identified as a critical innovation that enabled a direct dialogue between classical iconography and two-dimensional pictorial space.

The escalation of cultural expression by a range of artists in the second half of 1971 is used as a bridge into the next key phase in the formal development of style of Papunya painting. It was during this period that 20 men from various clans, spurred on by Kaapa’s commercial success, began to paint together in the Men’s Painting Room, a communal studio.

Chapter Five turns on the hitherto unexamined collaboration between Kaapa and Leura in the first half of 1972. Based on the principles of symmetry and repetition, it is argued that Kaapa and Leura produced closely related experimental series, in which key geometric conventions that would buttress Papunya Tula painting were first realised. The collaboration is examined for its focussed intent. The relationship between the balance achieved in these series, and the occurrence of symmetry in classical precedents, is discussed to identify the extent to which these works reflect the artists’ encounters with non-Indigenous ontology and materials.

As Leura and Kaapa were examining the key compositional principles that underpinned Papunya art, their friend Johnny Warangula expressed his affinity with the Water Dreaming Country of his ancestors. Incrementally, Warangula began to blur any distinction between the structural iconography and ‘surface’ embellishment of his paintings. Based on the analysis of light as an expression of potency, it is shown that Warangula came to ‘invent’ the inflected dot. Warangula’s technique is then discussed in relation to the narrative tradition and Indigenous aesthetics, before turning back to a comparison of Warangula’s works with Namatjira’s light-filled ‘landscapes’.

It is evident from the sequence of paintings produced in the Men’s Painting Room that Warangula’s use of the animated dot had a significant impact among his peers. Chapter Seven will examine paintings by Leura to argue that his previous emphasis on the reproduction of visual resemblances shifted abruptly towards the expression of the phenomenology of light, sound, movement and other forces of ritual performance. A correspondence is made between the preparation of a ceremonial ground mosaic (with crushed feather down), and Leura’s application of skeins of white dots to the surface of his late 1972 paintings. The prevailing scholarly assumption that a ‘veil’ of dots was used to conceal underlying restricted sacred objects is challenged. Instead it is proposed that Leura’s fields of white dots reflect, rather than conceal, the revelatory regime.

Finally, Chapter Eight examines how Leura and Possum took the possibilities presented by ‘a field of dots’ to assemble a new kind of pictorial space in which depth – above; on the surface; below the earth – is layered to provide a multi-dimensional account of space and time. The intensity, sophistication and anonymity of their collaboration is compared with the formulation of Analytic Cubism by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. It is argued that Possum and Leura used possibilities presented by contemporary art materials to bring aspects of the unseen into view. Leura’s interest in the properties of diluted paint is correlated with his capacity to evoke liminal spaces. Where earlier paintings depicted the sacred objects of ceremonial ground, Leura’s poetic evocations of the period refer to subtle environmental aspects of Country.

This account of the composition and treatment of works by Kaapa, Leura, Possum and Warangula, and its correlation to the approach of the preceding watercolour landscape artists, fills out a little understood, but critical passage in the history of Central Australian art. This thesis does not attempt to position Papunya Tula art in a larger history of Indigenous or Australian art, for others have argued the movement’s significance. Rather, by locating the work of four outstanding artists in a specific intercultural and environmental context, this thesis charts the depth and relevance of each artist’s achievement. Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how artistic collaboration was essential to the constitution of Papunya Tula painting.

Introduction to Part One Before Papunya

Part One of this thesis will traverse the socio-historical context that preceded the founding of Papunya. In particular, I will examine the shifting intercultural relations between individuals at dynamically interconnected communities nestled within the rocky MacDonnell Ranges and surrounding plains of Central Australia, the ground on which the instigators of the new painting movement established their agency.

A Contact Zone: 1872 to 1932

The completion of the Overland Telegraph (OT) Line in 1872 instigated the disruption of Indigenous autonomy in Central Australia.¹ Spanning the continent from Adelaide to Darwin, the OT line was managed by small teams of men living at repeater stations built at 250-kilometre intervals along “the thin red line of empire” connecting Australian colonial centres to Singapore, Calcutta and London.² Each of the fortified stations was established adjacent to existing water sources upon which local Aboriginal clans relied. The stations formed a succession of strategic bases from which cattlemen and their herds spread into adjacent lands deemed suitable for grazing.³ After periods of avoidance, and observation, local clans made tentative contact with Europeans at the rudimentary homesteads dotted across Central Australia, after which ongoing relations were established with the invaders.⁴ Tensions over sovereignty erupted into conflict as water-places were despoiled by stock and European men violated Aboriginal women. Traditional owners responded by spearing cattle, or attacking the perpetrators of sexual predation. Hostility escalated as mounted police tracked down the warriors, and cattlemen and miscellaneous vigilantes joined the killing spree.⁵ The intention of the invaders was dispossession, and the locals who survived were compelled to reach an accommodation with the pastoral regime.⁶ Where a small number of Europeans were speared, the blood of Aboriginal men, women and children soaked the land. Justice was denied, as institutional violence cemented asymmetrical cross-cultural relations and provided the social context for the period under study.⁷

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1. Mulvaney et al. 2000; Kimber 2008; Traynor 2016.
 2. The phrase is reported to have been used by the Earl of Kintore, then Governor of South Australia, to describe the OT Line in 1891. Mulvaney et al. 2000, p. 8.
 3. Hartwig 1965; Mulvaney et al. 2000, pp. 3-5.
 4. Mary Louise Pratt, cited in Gibson 2017a, pp. 57-58.
 5. See Walter Smith's account of the killing of between 150 and 170 “nigs” at “Attack Gap, 15 kilometres south-west of Alice Springs around 1885”: Kimber 1991, pp. 14-15.
 6. Nettelbeck & Foster 2007.
 7. It has been estimated that between 500 and 1,000 Aboriginal people were massacred in Central Australia in the period from 1871 to 1894: Kimber 1991, p. 16.

Dispossession and the Pastoral Regime

The relatively rich and well-watered Country of the Anmatyerr to the north of the MacDonnell Ranges (where three of the subjects of this thesis were born) was a magnet for prospective cattlemen. Moreover, the Anmatyerr group faced frontier violence for a longer period than any other in Central Australia.⁸ In 1884, a large group of Anmatyerr and Western Arrernte warriors assembled, setting fire to the homestead at Anna's Reservoir, killing the cook and spearing a stockman as he attempted to escape. Reprisals followed: mounted constables led 'black trackers' and pastoralists on a series of punitive raids.⁹ The loss of life was so extensive that contemporary accounts (incorrectly, as will be shown) suggested the Anmatyerr were "nearly wiped out".¹⁰

Massacres continued unchecked across Central Australia until the most notorious enforcer of Indigenous 'dispersal', the police Trooper William Henry Willshire (1852 to 1925), was apprehended and charged with murder on the instruction of Alice Springs Special Magistrate and Aboriginal Sub-protector Francis James Gillen (1855 to 1912).¹¹ Although acquitted, Willshire was removed from his post and the public opprobrium that surrounded his trial tempered the most egregious of abuses.¹² Meanwhile, further pastoral leases were granted, extending the reach of colonial governance from the pastoral heartland of Central Australia into the fringes of the Western and Tanami deserts.¹³

By the late 1920s, and as a result of the depredations, all Anmatyerr lands had become a patchwork of cattle stations.¹⁴ Having occupied the land, pastoralists recruited local Aboriginal men as stockmen and labourers, while Aboriginal women worked as domestic aides.¹⁵ Despite the uncomfortable accommodation, camps were established around homesteads and other sites where work was available. Tensions persisted.

Violence erupted on Anmatyerr Country at Coniston Station in 1928. The spark was ignited when a Warlpiri man named Kamalyarrpa Japanangka killed Frederick Brooks, a European dingo 'scalper', who he suspected was having sex with his wife.¹⁶ Instead of pursuing the perpetrator, Mounted Constable William Murray led vigilantes on a series of indiscriminate reprisals in which more than 100

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8. The first massacres commenced following the Siege of the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station in 1874, and continued intermittently until the Coniston Massacre(s) of 1928. Gibson 2017a, pp. 61-65.
 9. Gibson 2017a, p. 62; Kimber 1991, p. 15.
 10. Kimber 1991, pp. 10-15.
 11. Gibson 2017a, pp. 61-62.
 12. Nettelbeck & Foster 2007.
 13. Bowman 1984; Mulvaney et al. 2000, pp. 26-36; Young 1987, pp. 160-62.
 14. Young 1987, p. 160.
 15. Chisholm 1999; McGrath 1987; Gibson 2017a, pp. 66-69.
 16. Kimber 2003 <http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/1032.html> (part 1), PAW Media <http://coniston.pawmedia.com.au/background>

Warlpiri and Anmatyerr people were slaughtered.¹⁷ Traditional owners across a vast swathe of Country feared for their lives, many moving to the protection of the mission at Ntaria or to more marginal lands on the other side of the frontier.¹⁸ News of the massacre spread as far as Ilpili, where Warangula's family had yet to contact non-Aboriginal people.¹⁹ The "killing times", as they are known locally, constituted the direct and traumatic context into which Kaapa, Leura and Possum were raised.²⁰

The Finke River Mission

An alternative model of colonial occupation was provided by Lutheran missionaries who settled at Ntaria on the Finke River in 1877 just five years after the first transmission along the OT line.²¹ The founding story of the OT line suggests the rapid advance of communications technology linking Australia to the world, yet the narratives of missionary incursions across arid Australia are epics of another order, as missionaries and their flocks made their way across a hostile desert to establish a community based on the humble virtues of agrarian northern Europe.²²

Hermannsburg was named after the German seminary where Lutheran missionaries were trained for a global evangelical campaign.²³ Although initially tentative, the local Western Arrernte people were incrementally drawn into an ongoing relationship with the Lutherans. In the process, Aboriginal converts emerged as an evangelical force across the western portion of Central Australia, the area of study for this thesis.²⁴ Gradually, as word of the advantages of protection and availability of rations spread, the mission attracted more distant groups who sought refuge during a period of violent lawlessness and environmental degradation by cattle.²⁵ There was, however, a cost to be paid for protection.²⁶ Where the pastoralists were unconcerned with the spiritual beliefs of the local Aboriginal people, the missionaries openly opposed traditional religious practices, repressing the performance of traditional ceremonies.²⁷

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17. Bowman 1984, pp. 88-93; Kimber 10, no. 32, 2003 to 11, no. 3, 2004; Central Lands Council 2003; Wilson & O'Brien 2003.
 18. Cribbin 1984; Albrecht 1977, pp. 48-49.
 19. Mike Warangula Tjakamarra 2019, personal communication with the author.
 20. The Coniston Massacres featured heavily in oral histories recorded with Papunya Tula artists, particularly in the accounts of Bill Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Paddy Carroll Tjungurrayi who, as infants, were orphaned during these attacks. Tjapaltjarri 1984; Tjungurrayi 1984; Kean 1984; SAM archives.
 21. Lohe 1977, p. 13; Traynor 2016, pp. 49-50.
 22. Lohe 1977; Strehlow, T. G. H. 2016 (1969).
 23. Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 27-29; Lohe 1977, pp. 7- 14.
 24. Albrecht 1977; Latz 2014.
 25. Kimber 1988, pp. 56-63; O'Halloran 2018, pp. 38-43; Smith, M. 2005.
 26. Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 7-9.
 27. Jones 2007, pp. 331-35.

The German-speaking Lutheran missionaries worked in consort with local evangelists, including Moses Tjalkabota and Titus Renkaraka, to establish spiritual hegemony over the Arrernte people.²⁸ The anthropologist Diane Austin-Broos describes the “ontological shift” that occurred as aspects of Arrernte practice were overlaid, interwoven and morphed with Lutheran precepts.²⁹ The unstable intercultural environment at the Finke River Mission is of particular relevance to this thesis, for, as I argue, the contested conditions proved a fertile ground for the emergence of new forms of visual expression.

28. Latz 2014; Veit 2004.
 29. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 5

Chapter One

The Cross and the Oval: Hermannsburg (1928 to 1948)

“Plastic art affirms that equilibrium can only be established through the balance of unequal but equivalent oppositions. The clarification of equilibrium through plastic art is of great importance for humanity. It reveals that although human life in time is doomed to disequilibrium, notwithstanding this, it is based on equilibrium...If we cannot free ourselves, we can free our vision”¹

Clement Greenberg, 1944

“Significance is not an independent property of the sign, but it is continually made and remade by its beholders and users...The consequence is that there is no stable set of meanings lying behind a visual image, awaiting discovery and decipherment. Every artefact can be placed in its historical context (the task of the art historian) and an attempt can be made to elucidate its meanings for its current receivers (the crucial role of the art critic). But this will not be the end to the work of interpretation”.²

Marina Warner, 2018

Introduction

In religious and aesthetic terms, the collision of cultures at Ntaria (Hermannsburg) can be distilled to reveal a contest between the authority of the Indigenous *Tywerrenge* (oval-shaped sacred objects) and the European Cross (or crucifix). This chapter will tread the fault line between long-standing Indigenous belief and Lutheran intervention, to reveal how the paramount symbols of conflicting ontologies were used to generate novel forms of expression. In particular, I will discuss instances in which the Hermannsburg-based artist Albert Namatjira overlaid the Cross and the Oval to generate discursive images that speak to the spirit (and spirituality) of his times. Reverberations from Namatjira’s images will be traced in the emergent art of Central Australia across the entirety of this thesis.

Namatjira’s role is critical to the development of the transcultural art of Central Australia. Before adopting the watercolour technique for which he is most acclaimed, Namatjira emblazoned a range of religious images on locally-sourced timber with a red-hot wire. Despite their modest scale, these oval-shaped plaques encapsulated the tension between competing religious imperatives. Living under ‘two laws’ — the Lutheran law of the Cross and the customary law of the *Tywerrenge* — Namatjira interwove and overlaid potent elements from both cultures to create transgressive objects, which masqueraded as tourist curios.³ Namatjira’s small

1. Greenberg 1944, reprinted 1986, pp. 187-189.
 2. Warner 2018, pp. 13-14.
 3. See: Burn & Stephen 1992, pp. 250-255.

plaques embody a monumental battle for the meaning of images (see Plate 7). Despite attempts at the obliteration of Indigenous objects by missionaries at Hermannsburg, it is shown that icons of ‘the old religion’ were revived and reconfigured in relationship to Christian geometries. Namatjira’s plaques, decorated boomerangs and later works on paper provide material evidence of an “iconoclasm”, as conceptualized by the theorist and curator Bruno Latour.⁴ Wishing to plumb the depths of the cultural collision at Hermannsburg, I discuss how the formal qualities of the Oval, and its sibling, the circle, pervade Indigenous culture in Central Australia. In contradistinction, I note how the Cross, and its siblings the rectangle, the cube and the grid, epitomise the exotic material culture entrenched in Central Australia by the authority of the mission. It is essential to establish the dynamic relationship between paramount forms of Indigenous and European cultures at the commencement of this thesis, because their manipulation in pictorial space was critical to the process by which Indigenous icons were reconfigured within the governing rectangle (or frame) of Western art, to constitute contemporary Aboriginal art at Papunya in the 1970s.

The competition between cultures at Ntaria (Hermannsburg) was not limited to aesthetic realms. This chapter commences at the height of a crippling drought, with the arrival of a new missionary, Pastor F. W. Albrecht, in 1926. It pivots on cathartic events at Manangananga, a religious site where *Tywerrenge* (sacred objects) of great significance were stored, and continues into a more optimistic period when the mission was revived with ‘living water’ piped from the sacred spring at Kaporilya to the community.⁵ Albert Namatjira was both witness and participant to each of these critical phases. Produced after his emergence as a craftsman in 1932, his works will be interrogated to reveal the existential tension that shaped this turbulent period of Arrernte history.

Poker-worked Plaques

The efflorescence of watercolour landscape painting by Western Arrernte artists from Hermannsburg has been extensively documented from the mid-1940s to the present.⁶ Conversely, an earlier phase of transcultural production, when Namatjira made artefacts from locally sourced materials for the tourist market, has received scant attention. The publication of a multi-authored collection of essays, *The Heritage of Namatjira* (1992), comprised a revisionist assessment of the artist’s stature and ongoing influence.⁷ Where previously Namatjira had been depicted as a talented client of the civilizing project, he emerges from several of the essays in this volume as a canny protagonist, who employed his intercultural

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4. Latour & Weibel 2002.
 5. Henson et al. 1994, pp. 20-96.
 6. Amadio 1986; Battarbee, R. 1951; Battarbee, R. & B. 1971, Croft 2002; French 2002; Jones 2007, pp. 305-335. Hardy, Megaw & Megaw 1992; Mountford 1949; Rey 2016a; McLean 2018.
 7. Hardy et al. 1992.

skills to imagine a future for those who followed in his footsteps. When recalling a childhood encounter with Namatjira and his curios at Hermannsburg in 1938, the curator and art historian Daniel Thomas wrote; “art museums have become more like anthropology museums and [at the time of writing in 1992] will look at low-art categories, in a greedy search for neglected aesthetic excellence in uncharted territories”.⁸ It is to these neglected categories of Namatjira’s oeuvre that I turn my attention in this chapter, for not only do they have merit in their own right but they also contain the germ of subjects that would later unfurl in ‘high art’ paintings by Central Australian artists.

The museum-based historian Philip Jones has documented how the sale of artefacts contributed to the Finke River Mission’s meagre income, simultaneously sustaining the church and rewarding Namatjira’s burgeoning entrepreneurship.⁹ Moreover, Jones cites the trade in oval-shaped objects to tourists as evidence of the intentional rupture of traditional Indigenous cosmology by the evangelists. Rather than propagating the idea of Namatjira as a gifted but tragic artist, caught in an ontological cleft, Jones portrays Namatjira as a decisive agent, whose manufacture of wooden curios intentionally traversed the gap between “two worlds”, opening a dialectical space between competing regimes.¹⁰ Jones’ analysis is complemented by the work of Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, who deconstruct the semiotic “ambivalence” of Namatjira’s decorated artefacts.¹¹ Burn and Stephen maintain that the contradictions of traditional form and Westernised ornamentation on a *woomera* (spear-thrower) produced by Namatjira reveal a “doubling” of meanings.¹² Attenuating their argument, Burn and Stephen suggest that such ambiguity is commandeered from customary Indigenous modes, to assert agency in the asymmetrical intercultural environment of mid-century Australia.¹³ Namatjira’s ambivalent artefacts will be shown to incite debate between contested regimes.

The Mission Recorded

Taken as a whole, the published literature generated from and about Hermannsburg and its Western Arrernte residents is vast. The numerous publications that chronicle the community at Hermannsburg outweigh a comparative paucity of published information documenting life on adjacent pastoral stations.¹⁴ Accordingly, Hermannsburg has played a disproportionate role in scholarly understanding of intercultural relations in Central Australia. Nonetheless, the mission deserves sustained scrutiny for its own sake: religious

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8. Thomas 1992, p. 211.
 9. Jones 1992, p. 120; Jones 2007, p. 333.
 10. Jones 2007, pp. 317-323.
 11. Burn & Stephen 1992, pp. 278-279.
 12. Myers 2016.
 13. Burn & Stephen 1992, pp. 250-255.
 14. For an account of Napperby Station see Chisholm 1999.

contestation at Hermannsburg has scorched an indelible impression on Australia's cultural history. From its establishment in the late 19th century, the mission has produced writers of note, including the founding missionaries A. H. Kempe and Carl Strehlow, who documented the language and culture of the Western Arrernte people.¹⁵ Carl Strehlow's son, T. G. H. (Ted) Strehlow was born at Ntaria in 1908 and was educated in the classics and English literature in Adelaide before returning to Central Australia in 1931 to become the most significant literary progeny of the mission.¹⁶ Far from being a dispassionate observer of Arandic culture, Ted Strehlow controversially presented himself as a rightful custodian of sacred knowledge.¹⁷ Like Namatjira, Strehlow stepped across cultural boundaries. Born at Hermannsburg in the first decade of the 20th century, both men are remembered for their bi-cultural mastery: Namatjira as landscape painter in the European idiom and Strehlow as inspired translator of Indigenous verse.¹⁸

The residents of Ntaria and adjacent lands have been a magnet for anthropological enquiry, with Géza Róhiem, John Morton and more latterly Dianne Austin-Broos each having made significant contributions that both complement and problematise the work of the Strehlow dynasty. As a result, the Western Arrernte are among the most scrutinised groups in Aboriginal Australia.¹⁹ Other scholars (some of whom have intimate familial ties to Hermannsburg) have authored biographies of influential residents, providing longitudinal insight into the social context from which exportable arts and craft came to be produced at the community. Of particular note are the biographies of Pastor F. W. Albrecht by Barbara Henson and of the evangelist Moses Tjalkabotta by Peter Latz. Both volumes have yielded fine-grained observations that inform this chapter.²⁰

Ntaria (Hermannsburg)

The Finke River Mission, most often referred to as Hermannsburg, was established near Ntaria, a waterhole associated with the songline of the Arathepe, a pair of ancestral twins. The people of Ntaria are descended from The Twins and it is understood that their ancestors were integral to the creation of that Land. T. G. H. Strehlow writes of the filial intimacy with which Arrernte people understand themselves in relation to Country:

Mountains and creeks and springs and waterholes are... the handiwork of ancestors from whom [an Arrernte person] has descended. He sees recorded in the surrounding landscape the ancient story of the lives and the deeds of the immortal beings whom he reveres; beings, who for a brief space of time take on human shape once more; beings, many of whom he has known in his experience as fathers and grandfathers and brothers, and as his mothers and sisters. The whole countryside is his living, age-old family tree.²¹

Accordingly, Austin-Broos has described the lifeways of the Western Arrernte as "kin-based and emplaced".²² In contrast, Lutheran immigrants raised in northern Europe insisted on the acceptance of monotheism in a land brimming with the presence of totemic ancestors. Austin-Broos contends: "The Arrernte's passage between these forms has not been easy, clean, or complete but rather a gnawing tension over time between two regimes of value and their unequal power".²³ She tells how the mission has been a theatre in which these tensions have been enacted unendingly, since the mission's establishment. Though the humble whitewashed church at Hermannsburg may have suggested continuity, Austin-Broos reveals a process of ongoing rupture.

Following the death of the congregation's long-serving missionary Carl Strehlow in 1922, a prolonged drought enveloped Central Australia, compounding the non-Aboriginal mission community's sense of vulnerable isolation.²⁴ The mission's herds perished and the capacity of residents to forage for bush food was diminished by overgrazing. Dysentery, and epidemics of whooping cough, measles and scurvy ensued. Infant mortality escalated and those who huddled in the dust wondered what had befallen them.²⁵ The plight of the community was accentuated by a rift between Christianity (as advanced by Moses Tjalkabotta and his band of local evangelists) and the rule of customary Indigenous law (as maintained by bearded elders).²⁶

It was at the height of the drought in 1926, when the German-speaking Pole Friedrich Wilhelm Albrecht (1894 to 1984) arrived at Hermannsburg as the new missionary.²⁷ Two years later, Albrecht, Moses, and a handful of fellow evangelists resolved to bring the incipient tension between Christianity and Indigenous

15. Kempe 1891; Strehlow, C. 1996.

16. Hill 2002.

17. See biographies in: Hill 2002; Morton 1998; Angeles 2016.

18. For an account of Strehlow's possessiveness, see: Hill 2002, pp. 601-754; Gibson 2017b, pp. 92-111.

19. Peterson & Kenny 2017; Austin-Broos 2009; Kenny 2014; Strehlow, C. 1907a; Strehlow, C. 1907b; Strehlow, T. G. H. 1968; Strehlow, T. G. H. 1971; Morton 1992; 1996; 1997; 1998; Róheim 1945; 1974.

20. Henson 1994. Moses Tjalkabotta was among the second group of Arrernte to be baptised at Hermannsburg in 1890. He was a bright student who went on to play a vital role in the conversion of his people to Christianity: Latz 2014. Other biographies of key Hermannsburg figures include Strehlow, J. 2011; Hill 2002; and for Namatjira: Batty, J. 1963; Edmond 2014.

21. Strehlow, T. G. H. 1947, p. 30.

22. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 5.

23. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 5.

24. Strehlow, T. G. H. 2016.

25. Radford 1992, p. 87; Henson 1995, pp. 42-46; Bowman 1984, p. 39; Latz 2014, p. 174.

26. Long beards are cultivated by Arandic and Western Desert male elders and are frequently stroked to reinforce their owners' high standing.

27. Albrecht was a born of German-speaking parents in Planawice, in the county of Chelm, Poland. He took up his position at Hermannsburg in 1926, leaving in 1951 when he moved to Alice Springs: Lohe 1977, p. 38. Albrecht was a crucial patriarch, fondly remembered by several founding Papunya Tula artists, including Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula, Charlie Taruru (Wartuma) Tjungurrayi and Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri.

religion to a decisive conclusion.²⁸ They planned to strike at the heart of Arrernte tradition.²⁹ These dramatic events, which unfolded at Manangananga, will be examined later in the chapter, for not only did they have a major impact at Hermannsburg, but the reverberations they caused passed through the membrane that enclosed the mission to other Aboriginal groups who remained on nearby cattle stations.³⁰ Before describing those events, I will examine the nature of the customary sacred objects that catalysed the attack on Indigenous religion by the evangelical *iconoclasts*.

Tywerrenge

The reverence for sacred objects, often incised with totemic designs, is common to ritual life in Central Australia and the Western Desert. The Arandic term for this class of objects has been variously transcribed as *Tjurunga*, *Churinga* and more latterly, *Atywerrenge* or *Tywerrenge*.³¹ These potent objects lay at the heart of religious order. Indeed, their pre-eminence is emphasised by the use of the same term, *Tywerrenge*, to mean ‘secret’ or ‘sacred’, and in particular contexts to mean ‘the Dreaming’ or ‘the Law’.³² The Arrernte also use the same word for verses celebrating the actions of totemic ancestors and the sacred designs applied in ceremony.³³ Unless otherwise noted, I will use the term to describe the oval-shaped sacred objects, such as those stored at Manangananga: a cave just to the north of Ntaria.

Since the 1896 publication of the *Report of the Horn Expedition* by Edward Stirling and Francis Gillen, the significance of these sacred objects has been the subject of intense anthropological scrutiny.³⁴ A few years later, Francis Gillen (Master of the Alice Springs Telegraph Station) and Walter Baldwin Spencer (inaugural Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne) wrote the hugely influential *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) wherein ‘*churinga*’ were classified as “various objects associated with totems, but of these the greater number belong to that class of rounded, ovate or elongate, flattened stones and slabs of wood of various sizes”. Spencer and Gillen cautioned readers thus: “Churinga is the name given by the Arunta [Arrernte] natives to certain sacred objects which, on penalty of death or very severe punishment... are never allowed to be seen by women or uninitiated men”.³⁵ The ominous tone set by Spencer and Gillen still reverberates

through the museum corridors where many such objects are stored.³⁶ Spencer and Gillen were enraptured by the allure of ‘churinga’ and the old men who manipulated them; an attraction that recurred in the pages of a series of anthropological tomes, culminating with *The Arunta* (1927).³⁷ Spencer and Gillen’s fetishistic fascination not only incited academic interest but also stimulated a busy trade in this special class of objects, to satisfy demand by museums, universities and collectors of ethnographic curiosities across the globe.³⁸ The aesthetic, almost “hieroglyphic” quality of the signs incised onto these objects no doubt enhanced the appeal of *Tywerrenge*, especially in the wake of the romance surrounding the translation of the ‘Rosetta Stone’ by Thomas Young and Jean-Francois Champollion in 1882.

Museum curator Philip Batty describes the *Tywerrenge* as “a talisman of all things Aboriginal; as a ‘key’ to the ‘mysteries’ of Aboriginal Culture; an all-encompassing icon of an idealised primitivism”.³⁹ Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the power exercised by traditionally-oriented male elders rested on a belief that they could manage and wield *Tywerrenge*, and thereby regulate “interconnections across a wide spectrum of spiritual beliefs, ritual practices and social structure”.⁴⁰ Knowledge of song, together with possession of *Tywerrenge*, enables an individual, and their associated kin, to speak for Land.⁴¹ Since their ‘discovery’ and collection by anthropologists, *Tywerrenge* have become persuasive transcultural objects. Batty, for instance, demonstrated that *Tywerrenge* maintain their tenacious hold on academic, political and legal jurisdictions across Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, despite profound cultural change since colonisation.⁴² I will not delve deeply into the religious or totemic significance of *Tywerrenge*, nor the ceremonies in which they are used, for the intent of my investigations is art historical rather anthropological. Special attention to this class of objects is required however, as the spectre of the *Tywerrenge* looms over the interpretation of Papunya painting.⁴³ A significant proportion of early works by Kaapa Tjampitjinpa and his peers include explicit representations of *Tywerrenge* (and related ceremonial paraphernalia).⁴⁴ Moreover, the presence of *Tywerrenge* in early Papunya paintings continues to cause concern for Aboriginal Australians in awe of their potency.⁴⁵ Thus issues of sacredness and transgression discussed in this chapter set the scene for the subsequent refinement of the form and content of Papunya Tula painting.

28. Lohe 1977, pp. 36-37.

29. Hardy 1992, p. 143; Jones 1992, p. 126; Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 69-70.

30. Gibson 2017b, pp. 57-84.

31. I have chosen to use ‘*Tywerrenge*’, as it is the preferred spelling of the majority (but not all) of contemporary Anmatyerr and Arrernte speakers. It should be noted that the Western Arrarnta/Arrernte prefer an earlier orthography, and the Anmatyerr drop the final ‘e’.

32. Green 2010, p. 541; Henderson & Dobson 1994, p. 332.

33. Morton 1992, p. 31.

34. Stirling & Gillen 1896. See also: Mulvaney & Callaby 1985, pp. 131-128.

35. Spencer & Gillen 1899, p. 128

36. Spencer & Gillen 1899, p. 128; Anderson 1995; Batty 2014, pp. 58-62.

37. Spencer & Gillen 1899, pp. 128-166; Morphy 1997, pp. 37-50.

38. Mulvaney 2008, pp. 145-147 & 154-155; Jones 1995.

39. Batty 2014, pp. 302.

40. Batty 2014, pp. 302.

41. Batty 2014, pp. 302.

42. Batty 2014. See also: Anderson 1995, ed. Johnson 2010, pp. 100-138.

43. Kimber 1995; Kimber & Myers 2012; Myers 2014, pp. 78-91; Myers 2017.

44. For a comprehensive description of *Tywerrenge* and other objects and patterns used in ceremony see: Strehlow 1964, pp. 44-59.

45. Anderson, 2012; Myers 2014a, pp. 80-83; Myers 2017, pp. 199-203.



Fig. 5. Oval objects based on a photograph by Francis Gillen and Baldwin Spencer, *Arrernte family with possessions in front of a bough shelter*, 1896, South Australian Museum

The Oval Template of Central Australia

Although regarded as the supreme object of religion, *Tywerrenge* were not the only oval-shaped forms in the customary life of the Arrernte. Numerous other implements and spaces conformed to the Oval template, which together with the circle, can be regarded as the default forms of desert culture.⁴⁶ Arrernte babies were cradled in shallow, rounded wooden bowls. Women balanced deeper bowls of food and water on their heads as they walked. Men gripped the recessed handles of Oval shields and their multi-functional spear-throwers were concave attenuated Oval objects with a grip at one end and a peg inserted at their tip. This suite of typical carved objects, many of them vessels of various sizes, are almost all Oval in plan, take nesting forms, have sensual surfaces and express reductive aesthetic qualities (Fig. 5). All lack the rectangular corners and perpendicularity typical of the products and utensils of European industry.⁴⁷

The Rectangular Template of 'The West'

In contrast to the Indigenous Oval, the square and its siblings, the rectangle, the Cross and the grid are the default forms of the modern age of the 'West' (for comparison, see Plates 8 and 9).⁴⁸ Objects based on the geometry of the rectangle, the cube and the grid were crucial to the evangelical project. Straight-

46. Strehlow, writing of "The Circle, Line and Square", does not consider the outline of the substrate on which signs and icons are applied, however the illustrations he provides are of oval-shaped objects, *Tywerrenge* and Pintupi spear-throwers: Strehlow 1964, pp. 44-59.

47. See a description of the form and function of various oval-shaped bowls in Proctor ed., 1990.

48. Higgins 2009.

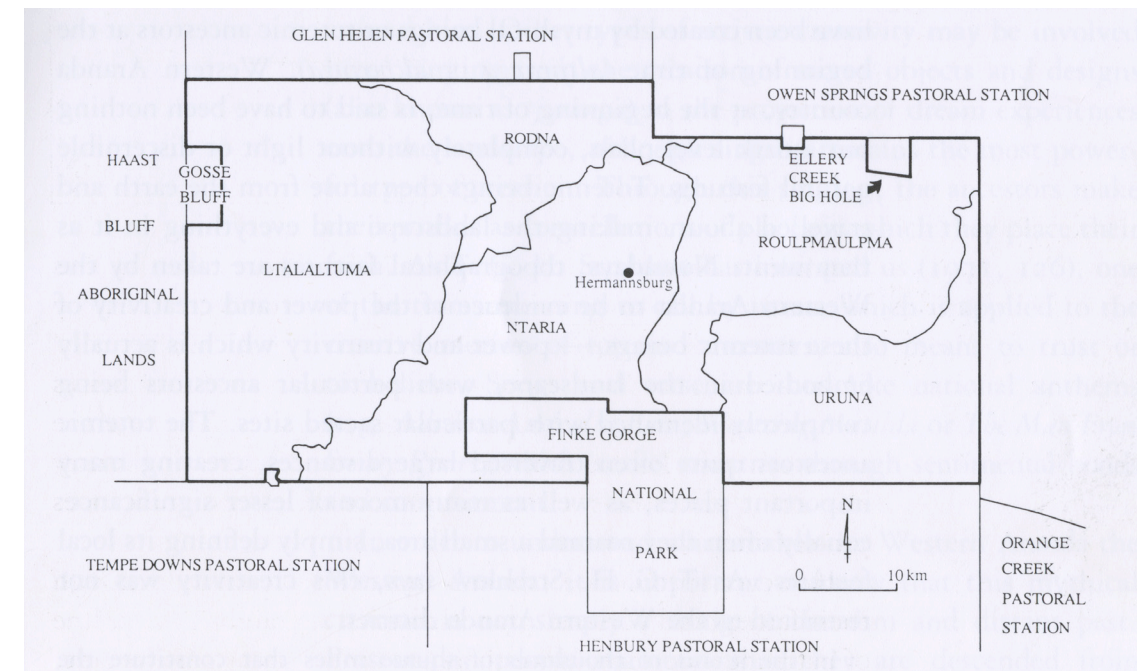


Fig. 6. Jens Smith, *Contemporary boundaries on traditional Western Aranda territory (especially showing areas taken by pastoral stations)*, from Morton 1992, p. 52

lined fences terminating in perpendicular corners defined the space around the mission; the bible, like all the sheets of paper that revealed God's word, was rectangular, and the church in which that word was spoken was a white cube topped with a sharp-edged roof.

Anne Salmond, an anthropologist of the Pacific who examines Maori and Georgian English encounters in the 18th century, described the instruments of measurement and calibration carried by the British to Aotearoa. Salmond concluded that the partition of time and space by the colonists fundamentally influenced the formation of the nation of New Zealand.⁴⁹ Similarly, government officials, pastoralists and missionaries partitioned Central Australia in ways that conformed to the rectilinear precepts of distant Europe, with little or no acknowledgement of the customary spatial regimes of the Indigenous peoples across whose land fences were stretched (Fig. 6).

Spaces of Revelation

In Central Australia, before fences and box-like houses were imposed on the landscape, 'architectural' and ceremonial spaces also took orbicular forms. Domed dwellings created for wet weather were based on a circular floor plan (see Fig. 5). Likewise, ceremonial spaces were cleared of grass and shrubs in an approximately Oval shape.⁵⁰ Fires were lit at dusk, and light caught the leaves of

49. Salmond 2017, pp. 33-36.

50. Based on my observation of the spaces for ritual seen in Strehlow's films, Strehlow Research Centre (SRC).

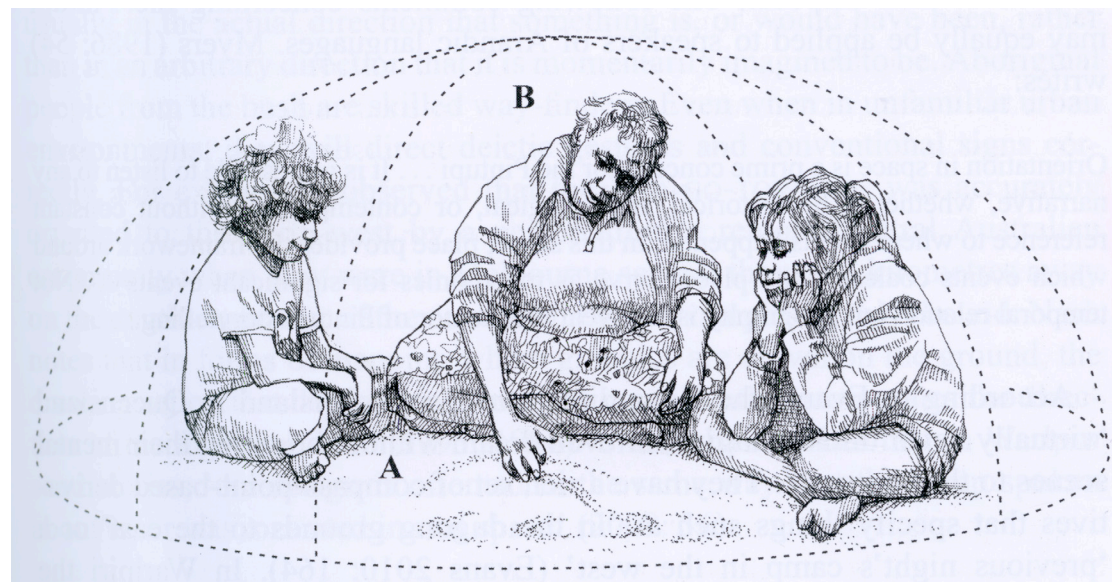


Fig. 7. Jennifer Taylor, *Two interlocking spatial frames used in sand stories*. Interlocutors are shown in varying orientation to the drawing space, from Green 2014, p. 19

adjacent trees to create a flickering, illuminated dome under which the Oval forms were displayed. The Oval and its three-dimensional extension, the dome, were the spaces within which truths were revealed.

The domed space of cultural instruction is not limited to the ritual realm however. Linguist Jennifer Green’s analysis of multimodal storytelling among Arrernte, Anmatyerr and Alyawarr-speaking women and children shows how the narrator of a traditional ‘sand story’ operates dimensionally within a sensory spatial realm:

A sand story performance exists in the framework of several interlocking spatial fields, including the ground space in front of the narrator and the air space around them. In my analyses of sand stories, I describe the use of the two-dimensional drawing space in front of the narrator and the three-dimensional space around their body. At the centre of these spatial frames is the narrator’s body, and in various orientations to these spaces and to each other are the interlocutors.⁵¹

The “interlocking spatial fields” described by Green (Fig. 7) demonstrate how information is transmitted within the intimate domed space of the sand story.⁵² I contend that the theoretical dome around a storyteller can help to explain the dynamics of more expansive spaces in which religious truths are revealed. These are the spaces of cultural performance where, as Fred Myers explains, “a complex set of set of social practices, involving the extension of stories in space, ritual exchange, and intergenerational transmission” unfolded. He continues: “The Dreaming must be considered in all its materiality as what [Marcel] Mauss called a ‘total social fact’”.⁵³ From my observation, Central Australian ceremony is performed in the round, on a cleared patch of earth. Appearing in the guise of totemic ancestors, dancers become the focal point of the interlocking spatial

51. Green 2014, p. 19.

52. Green 2014, p. 19.

53. Myers 2002b, p. 33.



Fig. 8. The church at Ntaria (Hermannsburg), 2016, photograph by Tom Nicholson

frames that constitute ‘multimodal’ ceremony. While dancers are strategically illuminated with fire, a seated chorus and novices witness the scene at a distance in the penumbral light. Critically, the hemispherical dimensions of such ceremonies contrast with the fixed linear perspectives of Western performance, whether from a pew to the preacher at the pulpit, or through a proscenium to actors on the elevated stage of European theatre.

Drawing on Anne Salmond’s observations of Aotearoa (New Zealand), I argue that the regular fence lines and churches of Central Australia have exerted an instrumental effect on the lives and perceptions of Indigenous people, buttressing the authority of the colonisers and pervading the visual imaginations of Indigenous residents. The transition from a world dominated by the Oval form of everyday utensils, and governed by the *Tywerrenge*, to a new regime of straight lines, rectangles and boxes, ruled over by The Cross, was neither seamless nor benign.⁵⁴

Iconoclasm at Manangananga

The power of the *Tywerrenge* was an omnipresent but mainly invisible force at Hermannsburg before Pastor Albrecht’s arrival in 1926. The performance of ceremonies at which *Tywerrenge* were revered had, for the most part, been forbidden at the mission.⁵⁵ Then, two years after his arrival at Hermannsburg, Albrecht was shocked when a man’s “thigh was cut to the bone with a sharp

54. Jones 1992, pp. 122-23; Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 69-70.

55. Henson 1994, p. 13; Jones 2007, p. 326.

butcher’s knife”.⁵⁶ Linking the news of the event to the role of the *Tywerrenge*, the pastor and a handful of local evangelists used this violent but culturally-sanctioned stabbing as the pretext for a cathartic ultimatum: Albrecht insisted that he would not perform another communion unless the Aboriginal members of the congregation at Hermannsburg put “God’s Word” before tribal law, dedicating their allegiance to either the *Tywerrenge* or the Cross.⁵⁷

In 1928, Albrecht and his Arrernte evangelists devised a picnic at nearby Manangananga, where psalms were to be sung and sermons recited. Their choice of location was critical, as Manangananga was an important local repository of *Tywerrenge*, its hoard included sacred boards associated with the *Arathepe* (Twins) Dreaming of Ntaria, objects of governance and authority over the mission site.⁵⁸ Decisively, the site’s senior Arrernte custodian, Titus Rengkareka, was among the evangelists who would use Manangananga as the theatre in which to transgress the taboo associated with the exposure of *Tywerrenge* to the uninitiated.⁵⁹

An anxious congregation made their way to Manangananga on Pentecost Sunday (see Plate 10). A fire was set and water drawn from a sacred waterhole to be boiled in a large copper. Tea was brewed and bread and meat were eaten. Then the *Tywerrenge* were brought down from the seclusion of a high rocky crevice and placed in front of the worshippers. The unveiling of these proscribed objects to the uninitiated was intended to establish the superiority of Christian belief via an act of unambiguous iconoclasm. Much later, two witnesses to the spectacle, Edwin Pareroultja and Pastor Traugott Malbunka, recalled the event with undiminished awe:

Everybody was watching, man and woman and young girls and young boys. We was children, everybody watching for the cave, little bit frightened. Before service, took stones [*Tywerrenge*] out and put them on the ground. Everybody sat in a big circle, and stones were put in the middle. Kids were scared! First time we bin see that stone. Old man [Albrecht] start those opening words, In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, then everybody relax we start to sing a hymn. Then he preach, and about Moses and Aaron and the golden calf. Tjurungas [*Tywerrenge*] are like the golden calf. Old man preach and everybody look up, yes that’s really true.⁶⁰

Local evangelist Moses added his weight with an ardent sermon, entitled *Churinga or Christ*, during which he implored his countrymen to abandon their sacred objects.⁶¹ It seemed to those present that the spell of the *Tywerrenge* was broken and the people of Hermannsburg were free to follow Christ with impunity. Yet, as Austin-Broos argues, the presence of *Tywerrenge* would not be so simply dispelled

56. Henson, 1994, p. 53.
57. Henson 1994, pp. 53-54; Jones 1992, pp. 122-123; Jones 2007, pp. 331-333.
58. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 69.
59. Jones 2007, pp. 331–332. Titus Rengkareka is Albert Namatjira’s uncle.
60. Edwin Pareroultja and Pastor Traugott Malbunka, in Henson 1994, p. 54.
61. Jones 2007, p. 332.

and the objects and the belief systems they encoded continued to pervade the cultures of Hermannsburg and elsewhere across Central Australia.⁶²

Although his thoughts are not recorded, Albert Namatjira has been identified as the young man “sitting hatless on the far left” of a photograph taken by the lay preacher Ernst Kramer to commemorate the victory of the Cross of Christ over the *Tywerrenge* of the old religion at Manangananga (Plate 10).⁶³ ‘Albert’, as he was then known, was a confirmed Christian who had grown up under the mantle of the Lutheran church.⁶⁴ His life, and the images that he produced following the events at Manangananga, provide a lens through which the history, economy and belief of the intercultural community of Hermannsburg can be interpreted.

Mercantile Evangelism

Central Australia remained in the grip of crippling drought as the iconoclastic events at Manangananga unfolded. Albrecht worked fervently to lead ‘his people’ through this time of privation and illness. Ever practical, the pastor determined that for the mission to survive, he must develop new industries based on local resources and Indigenous labour. To maximise the benefit from the cattle, goats and a small flock of sheep that had survived the drought, a tannery was established. Boys were taught to make whips, belts and hobbles and women sewed rugs from tanned kangaroo hides.⁶⁵ Girls knitted socks with wool shorn from mission sheep, to sell at church functions in South Australia.⁶⁶ Albrecht observed the artistic flair shown by women and children at the mission; their needlework comprised another *tranche* of his cottage industry.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, local men were contracted to neighbouring cattle stations as stockmen and as labourers on fencing gangs.⁶⁸ The historian Tim Rowse describes Albrecht’s economic model as an example of “mercantile evangelism”, a system by which missionaries became merchants, paying for the products of Indigenous labour with rations or cash, and trading them for a profit in the wider Australian economy.⁶⁹

From 1929, when the railway line reached Alice Springs from the southern cities, the rate of change at Hermannsburg quickened. Heavy rain fell in January 1930, breaking nearly a decade of drought.⁷⁰ In the same year, Pioneer Coaches established a tourist bus route to Hermannsburg, taking in the idyllic scenes at

62. Manangananga was re-sacralised by 1955 and today remains a restricted area. Austin-Broos 2009, p.70.
63. Edmond 2014, p. 105.
64. Batty, J. 1963, pp. 21-23.
65. Bowman 1984, p. 43.
66. Radford 1992, pp. 88-89.
67. Hardy 1992, pp. 82-92; Jones 1992, p. 104.
68. Radford 1992, p. 88; Henson 1995, p. 74.
69. Rowse 1998, p. 89.
70. Radford 1992, p. 87.

Palm Valley and the spectacular gorges of West MacDonnell Ranges.⁷¹ Namatjira – who had demonstrated his reliability when employed by Ali Mohamed, a cameleer transporting goods from the Oodnadatta Railhead to Alice Springs and Hermannsburg – was an obvious choice as tour guide.⁷²

Further inspiration for mercantile activity came when Albrecht recalled plaques “cut from a birch tree on which a Scripture text had been etched with poker-work” displayed in “practically every Christian bookshop” in Northern Europe.⁷³ Albrecht charged his congregation to “give it a try”, later musing that the commitment of the single man who persevered came as a result of his “consecrated mind”.⁷⁴ This “promising young Christian” was Albert (Namatjira). These seemingly-innocuous *mulga* (*Acacia aneura* wood) plaques were not simply tourist mementos, however: sawn obliquely across the grain, the panels mimicked the classical Oval form of *Tywerrenge*. This resemblance was amplified by the concentricity of the growth rings, echoing the roundels of customary iconography.⁷⁵ The *mulga* wood from which the plaques were crafted was also used to make *Tywerrenge*, further linking two apparently discrete classes of objects.⁷⁶

Although he did not acknowledge the fact, Albrecht would have been acutely aware of this association: Hermannsburg was the clearinghouse for a world-wide *Tywerrenge* trade. Following a precedent established by Reverend Carl Strehlow, Albrecht and his assistant, Pastor Hermann Heinrich, purchased *Tywerrenge* directly from their owners, or from those who looted sacred objects from remote storehouses across the region.⁷⁷ Albrecht was therefore intimately acquainted with the objects, having added value to numerous museum-grade *Tywerrenge* with documentation detailing the particular totemic associations of each object.⁷⁸ Sold at a 50 per cent mark-up, the trade delivered a windfall profit to the mission. In at least one instance, funds derived from the sale of *Tywerrenge* were used “in a symmetrical substitution to purchase altar cloths and vestments for the Mission church”.⁷⁹ I contend that Albrecht’s choice of oval-shaped plaques was not only intended to encourage industry but also contrived to open a fissure in Indigenous social order.

71. Hardy 1992, pp. 137-175.

72. Kenny 2009, p. 438. Namatjira gained permission for his role as guide through Indigenous Law, as Palm Valley was within his mother’s Country.

73. Albrecht in Jones 2007, p. 310.

74. Albrecht in Jones 2007, p. 310-311.

75. Jones 2007, pp. 314-315.

76. *Mulga* (*Acacia aneura*) is a durable hardwood abundant across much of arid Australia. Kean 1991, pp. 113-124.

77. Since the early 20th century, Carl Strehlow had confiscated the objects in order to sell them to German museums. Jones 1992, p. 120; Jones 2007, pp. 334-335; Batty, P. 2014, p. 305.

78. Henson 1995, p. 51; Jones 1992, p. 120; Jones 2007, p. 333.

79. Jones 2007, p. 316.



Fig. 9. Schematic diagram of Albert Namatjira, *Other Refuge have I none*, circa 1932, 21 x 5 x 2 cm, Flinders University Art Museum

Testing the Market

Namatjira proved a resourceful and market-savvy craftsman. Working in consort with Albrecht, he trialled three distinctly different approaches to the decoration: Indigenous icons, Christian quotations and representational images.⁸⁰ Exploiting the resemblance between the oval-shaped plaques and *Tywerrenge*, Namatjira emblazoned icons derived from his own totemic associations (including the “Sacred Honeybee”).⁸¹ Then, as if setting up a dialogue between divergent ontological regimes, he inscribed Christian quotations, such as *Other Refuge have I none* (Fig. 9)(Plate 11), *Sweeten the cup of life whenever you can* and *Jesus*, as simple expressions of devotion. While these proved more popular than the “Aboriginal designs”, Albrecht was downbeat, conceding that the Christian plaques were a dependable standby for “Lutheran Visitors”.⁸²

The most popular of the three styles consisted of what Albrecht described as “free-hand drawings of local animals, palms etc.” that according to Albrecht “sold well” in comparison to the religious series.⁸³ Philip Jones considers that Namatjira’s figurative style emerged from the “undocumented tutoring or artistic influence by Europeans, particularly through the Hermannsburg schoolroom after 1910”, a period coinciding with his school attendance as a young boy.⁸⁴ It was Namatjira’s “free-hand drawings” that stimulated his first major commission when, in 1932, the Alice Springs-based police constable William McKinnon ordered a series of thirteen plaques to commemorate his patrol over remote sandhill Country to Lake Amadeus.⁸⁵ Namatjira would have been able visualise McKinnon’s camel train with precision, having spent much of the previous decade

80. French 2002, pp. 1-35.

81. Jones 2007, p. 315. It is most likely that the ‘Honeybee’ is a small, non-stinging native species.

82. Jones 2007, p. 317.

83. Albrecht in Jones 2007, pp. 316-317.

84. Jones 1992, p. 104.

85. Jones 2007, p. 317. Presumably McKinnon was sent to track and capture Indigenous cattle killers who had retreated into the desert.

on the ‘camel pad’ from Hermannsburg to Oodnadatta Railhead.⁸⁶ The commission may have had additional significance, for as I have argued elsewhere, Namatjira is likely to have been inspired to become an artist while watching Erlikilyika Jim Kite, a Lower Arrernte man who made a range of items tailored to the taste of travellers passing through his home at Charlotte Waters.⁸⁷ Namatjira received “a handsome 5/- each for the plaques”, confirming that drawing camels was more lucrative than actually working with the animals.⁸⁸

“Other Refuge have I none”

As both a consecrated Christian and initiated Aboriginal man, Namatjira straddled the rift between beliefs that tore at the community of Ntaria (Hermannsburg).⁸⁹ Of the 50 or so plaques he emblazoned, *Other Refuge have I none* (Fig. 9) most explicitly reveals the contest between competing ontologies, for it superimposes the Christian Cross directly on top of the Oval form of Arrernte religion.⁹⁰ Although the plaque cannot be counted among Namatjira’s greatest artistic achievements, this apparently humble object draws into service the paramount symbols of both of the regimes vying for supremacy at the mission. Showing the Christian Cross eclipsing the Indigenous Oval, *Other Refuge have I none* is the embodiment of Latour’s “iconoclasm”.⁹¹ Produced in the aftermath of the act of iconoclasm at Manangananga, Namatjira investigates the possibility of the destruction of Indigenous belief by Christianity, while offering a spark of hope for the coexistence of two laws, or at least the persistence of the old law under the shadow of the new. Of one thing we can be certain: Namatjira’s transgressive superimposition of Christian Cross on the *Tywerenge*-like Oval demonstrates his responsiveness to the ontological transformation unfolding at Hermannsburg. The plaque provides early evidence of Burn and Stephen’s assertion that Namatjira’s “achievement lay in appropriating a space of cultural practice for himself — and for subsequent Aboriginal artists — which allowed transgressions of cultural, racial and historical boundaries”.⁹² When read more intimately however, *Other Refuge have I none* can also be interpreted as an existential plea, created after the death of his daughter, as Namatjira struggled to support a growing family amid the clash of dissonant worldviews.⁹³

86. Batty, J. 1963, pp. 22-23.

87. Namatjira passed through Charlotte Waters regularly while working as a ‘camel boy’ with Ali Mohamed during the early 1920s: Batty 1963, pp. 22-23.

88. Batty, J. 1963, p. 26.

89. Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 41-49.

90. Jones 2007, p. 310.

91. Latour & Weibel 2002.

92. Burn & Stephen 1992, p. 278.

93. Namatjira had six children with his wife Alkalita/Rubina by 1932. A seventh child, Nelda, died in infancy in 1929: Megaw, R. 1992, pp. XVI-XVII.

Namatjira’s plaque provides proof of Austin-Broos’ assertion that “Christianity had become part of the Western Arrernte vernacular”.⁹⁴ Thus the juxtaposition of “God’s law with Arrernte law — two laws for different types of emplaced being” as it appears on Namatjira’s Christian curios, can be understood as the manifestation of an emergent intercultural imaginary.⁹⁵

Kaporilya Pipeline

Namatjira’s urge for graphic clarity appears to have been constrained by the crude pyrographic technique encouraged by Albrecht.⁹⁶ The red-hot poker was an inflexible and imprecise tool, even in Namatjira’s skilled hand: furthermore, the intelligibility of Namatjira’s “free-hand drawings of local animals, palms” was compromised by the abrupt concentric contrast between dark red heartwood and lighter yellow sapwood in the plaque cross-section. Accordingly, by 1934, Namatjira had put aside the production of oval-shaped plaques.⁹⁷ Instead he adopted a less contentious, yet resonant form — the boomerang — as the ground on which to incise a new range of representational imagery.⁹⁸

Namatjira’s shift from Oval plaques to boomerangs coincides with the construction of a pipeline linking Hermannsburg to a spring at Kaporilya, eight kilometres to the west of the community. Once completed, the pipeline delivered potable water to a village beset by the vagaries of rainfall and the harrowing memory of disease and hunger visited by the prolonged drought of the 1920s.⁹⁹ The completion of the pipeline was regarded as the crowning achievement of the era, its deliverance celebrated annually into the present.¹⁰⁰

Impetus for the commencement of the pipeline was bolstered by the intervention of sisters Una and Violet Teague, who were among a cohort of southerners who visited Hermannsburg following the advent of the Pioneer Coaches service.¹⁰¹ After returning from the Centre, the Teague sisters initiated an appeal via Melbourne’s *Argus* newspaper and elicited artists to donate works for a fundraising exhibition.

94. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 76.

95. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 101.

96. Jones 2007, p. 317.

97. E. J. Horwood records receiving “mulga slabs” poker-worked by “Albert” in September 1934: Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 70-71. During the same year, Namatjira produced a sketchbook of pencil and ink-wash sketches for the Tasmanian ceramicist Violet Mace, in which his figures appeared much more animated than had been possible to illustrate using a hot poker. I contend that the artist was rehearsing animated figures that would appear on later artifacts and early paintings.

98. Classical Arrernte boomerangs were asymmetrical, non-returning ‘throwing sticks’, whereas Namatjira chose to decorate boomerangs that were symmetrical about their long axis, presumably judging them more suitable as curios that could be propped in a cabinet or hung as a wall piece.

99. Hardy 1992, p. 151.

100. Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 55-56.

101. Hardy 1992, p. 138.

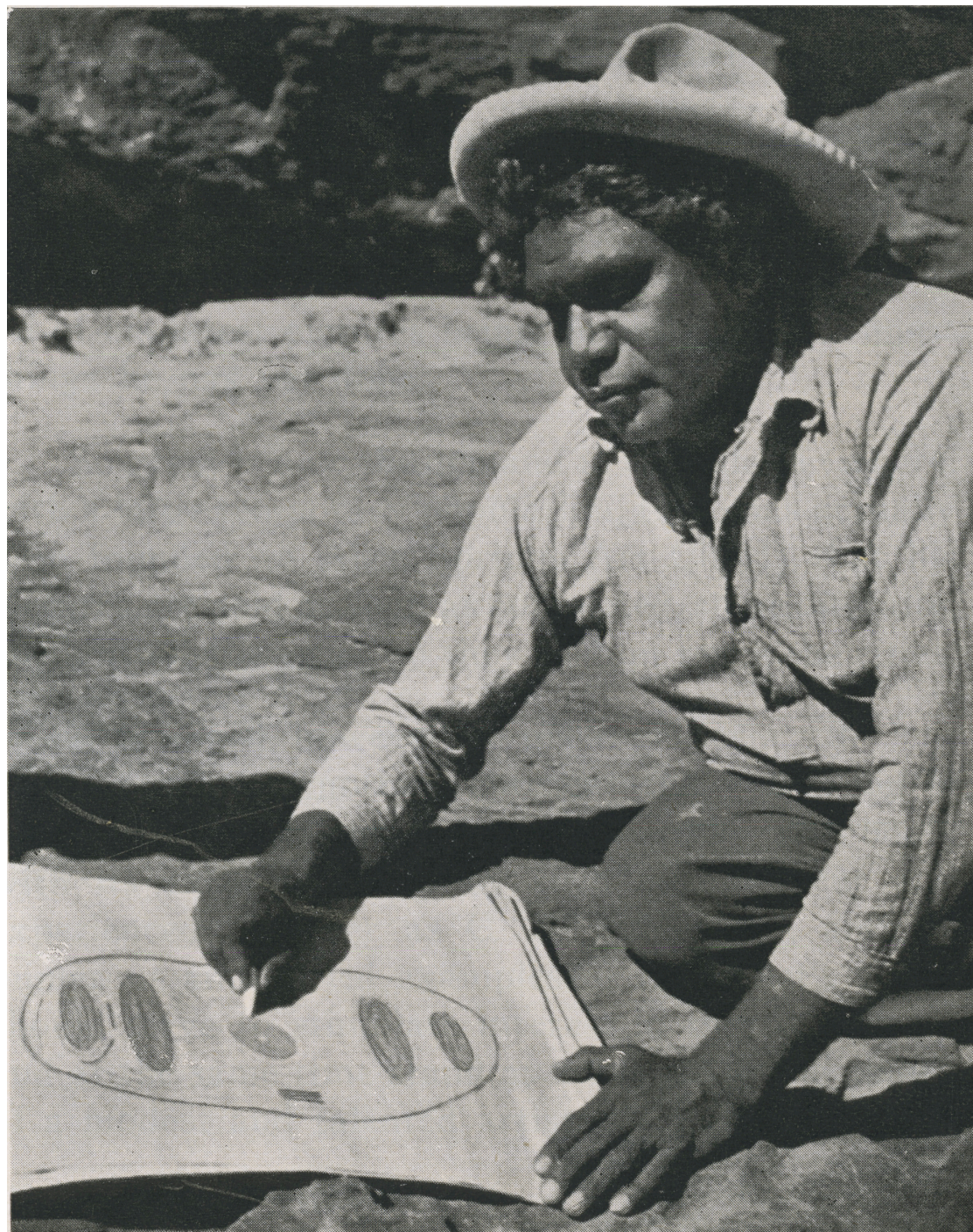


Fig. 10. Albert Namatjira drawing the totemic design of his family group, photograph by C. P. Mountford, circa 1940, from Mountford 1949, p. XXII

Senior figures including Arthur Streeton, Hans Heysen and a young Arthur Boyd were among a host of artists who contributed to the show. Monies raised went towards the purchase of the 25,900 feet of piping required to span the distance from Kaporilya to Hermannsburg.¹⁰²

102. Henson 1994, p. 71.

It was at against this backdrop that Namatjira created a series of commemorative boomerangs (Plate 12).¹⁰³ The upper, burnished surface of each of the *Kaporilya Boomerangs* is adorned with realistic, labouring workers; be-hatted and incised with compelling clarity. Rather than persisting with poker-work, Namatjira adopted a more precise, 'reductive' technique, by which figures are outlined with the sharpened point of a penknife before negative space is removed to give emphasis to smooth black workers who stand out from a lighter, abraded ground. I contend that Namatjira adapted the technique from Jim Kite, the master craftsman of Charlotte Waters, yet the ingeniously resolved compositions of the *Kaporilya Boomerangs* announced the emergence of Namatjira as an artist of outstanding individual talent.¹⁰⁴

While Namatjira's compositions celebrated the success of Western technology and adopted aspects of Western representational realism, they also echoed Arrernte motifs. Daniel Thomas compared the general form of each of the hunched labourers with the conventional 'U' shapes used to signify human figures on traditional objects.¹⁰⁵ Recognising the iconographic confluence, the anthropologist Jason Gibson saw the posture of men, bent to the task of laying the pipeline, as rhyming with figures arrayed at either side of long ritual poles (Plate 12). In that context, the configuration could represent men carrying a ceremonial pole before its erection at the epicentre of the ceremonial ground.¹⁰⁶ Just as the concentric grain of the sawn *mulga* plaques suggests a customary sign for a place/campsite, so the configuration of labourers on the *Kaporilya Boomerangs* resonate with references to Indigenous practice.¹⁰⁷

Namatjira's Compositions with Oval Objects

Although counted among the converted, there is considerable evidence that Namatjira remained attentive to Aboriginal Law. His status and experience as *artwe* (an initiated Aboriginal man) profoundly affected his vision and personhood.¹⁰⁸ It was during the 1930s, and through his work as a guide taking tourists by camel to Palm Valley, that Namatjira became familiar with the watercolour technique for which he would become famous.¹⁰⁹

103. *Kaporilya Boomerangs* dated between 1935 and 1936 have been identified in the collections of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the South Australian Museum, the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Museum of Australia. It is therefore likely that further examples of the series are yet to be identified.

104. Kean 2016.

105. Thomas 1992, p. 212.

106. Gibson 2013, personal communications with the author.

107. Munn 1973a, p. 151.

108. Namatjira's first biographer Joyce Batty covers the first three decades of Namatjira's life in just five pages, relegating his Indigenous education to one line; "When he was thirteen Albert disappeared and was not seen again for six months... taken by the old men of the Aranda tribe to distant ceremonial grounds for initiation into manhood": Batty 1963, p. 21. For transcriptions of Namatjira's telling of creation stories, see: Battarbee diary entries for 21.08. and 15.09.

109. Hardy, 1992, pp. 151-152.

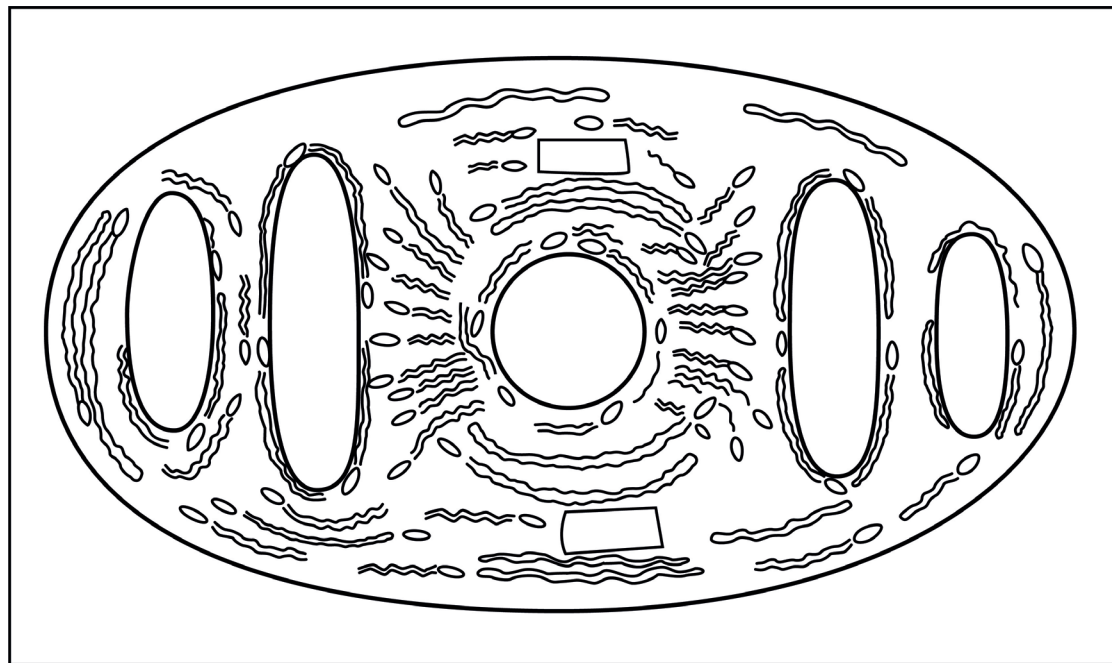


Fig. 11. Schematic drawing of Albert Namatjira, *Crayon drawing of Nuamana, Palm Valley*, from Mountford 1949, p. 74

The amateur anthropologist and photographer Charles Percy Mountford was pleased to be greeted as a “fellow artist” when he engaged Namatjira to take him to the scenic site in 1940.¹¹⁰ Mountford had incorrectly assumed that Namatjira’s mission upbringing had denied him access to the esoteric intelligence of his people, so was staggered when Namatjira demonstrated that he had “retained an intimate knowledge of his native art” (Fig. 10).¹¹¹ Recalling the moment, Mountford wrote:

Then happened something which I never expected to see, even in my most fantastic visions. It was surely an experience without parallel to watch a man depicting, in the most primitive of all arts, beliefs that stretched back to the dawn of his creation, while lying beside him, the product of the same hand, were beautiful water-colours in the art of to-day. It scarcely seemed possible that any man could have bridged that immense gap in artistic expression.¹¹²

Mountford’s comments expose the chasm that was perceived to lie between iron-clad categories of the “civilised” and the “primitive”, a dichotomy that, although ignored by the artist, obscured a nuanced appreciation of his intent until the re-evaluation of his status commenced in the 1980s.¹¹³

Namatjira’s *Totem Place at Nuamana*, 1949, is a pioneering example of the transfer of designs of three-dimensional *Tywerrenge* to a two-dimensional format. Unlike earlier ‘Aboriginal designs’ seared into *mulga* plaques, *Totem Place at Nuamana* was drawn on Country at Nuamana, to educate an interested scholar. The sketch provides a foretaste of the iconography of the Dreaming that would from 1971 become the subject of contemporary desert art.

110. The meeting occurred around 1940. Jones 2007, pp. 317-318; Mountford 1949, pp. 67-79.

111. Mountford 1949, pp. 73-74.

112. Mountford 1949, pp. 74 & 79.

113. Burn & Stephen 1992, pp. 258-264; Mendelssohn 2014, pp. 55-63.

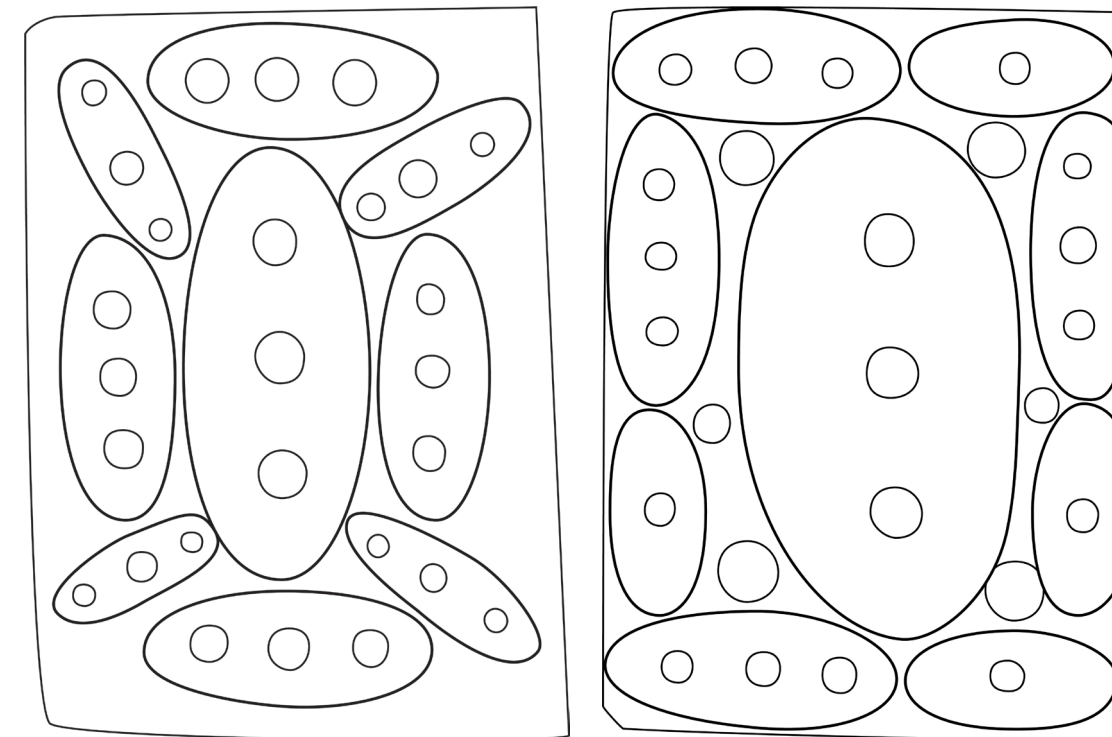


Fig. 12. Schematic diagram of Albert Namatjira, *Untitled (Yalka Dreaming 1)*, 1948, Art Gallery of South Australia

Fig. 13. Schematic diagram Albert Namatjira, *Untitled (Yalka Dreaming 2)*, 1948, Art Gallery of South Australia

Intriguingly, the iconography of Namatjira’s sketch *Totem Place at Nuamana* closely resembles that of a pair of watercolour paintings by an unknown artist, formerly in the collection of T. G. H. Strehlow (Plates 13 and 14).¹¹⁴ I attribute these works to Albert Namatjira on several criteria. Firstly, the iconographic correspondence with *Totem Place at Nuamana* is compelling, and suggests that the artist was an individual with intimate ancestral connection to that site and/or Dreaming.¹¹⁵ Secondly, the compositions were sketched lightly with pencil, before a high-key watercolour was applied; Namatjira used this approach when setting out his watercolour landscapes. Finally, the relatively early date of production (1948) narrows the field of artists with access to the materials and the proficiency to produce such an accomplished work. At that time, Albert was mentor to a cohort of relatives, including three sons (Enos, Ewald and Oscar) and nephews (the Pareroutja brothers Edwin, Rueben and Otto). As the elder artist he is the most likely to have ventured into the potentially dangerous representation of customary icons. I contend therefore that Namatjira’s authority as senior artist, his ancestral connection to the Yalka Dreaming, in combination with the deftness of application

114. It is curious that the normally-punctilious Strehlow did not record the name of the painter or the site depicted. Strehlow was a jealous character whose possessiveness extended to Arrernte men of his generation, whom he perceived as less knowledgeable and committed to customary law than he. Strehlow may have suppressed the artist’s identity purposefully, to preserve the unilateral authority of his account of ‘Aranda Traditions’. See (for example) Strehlow’s relationship to his ‘totemic twin’ and childhood friend Gustav Malbunka in Hill 2002 pp. 728-730.

115. The association was further confirmed by Hubert Pareroutja who identified the icon as “Palm Valley [Albert Namatjira’s] mother’s Country” in conversation with the author, 2019.

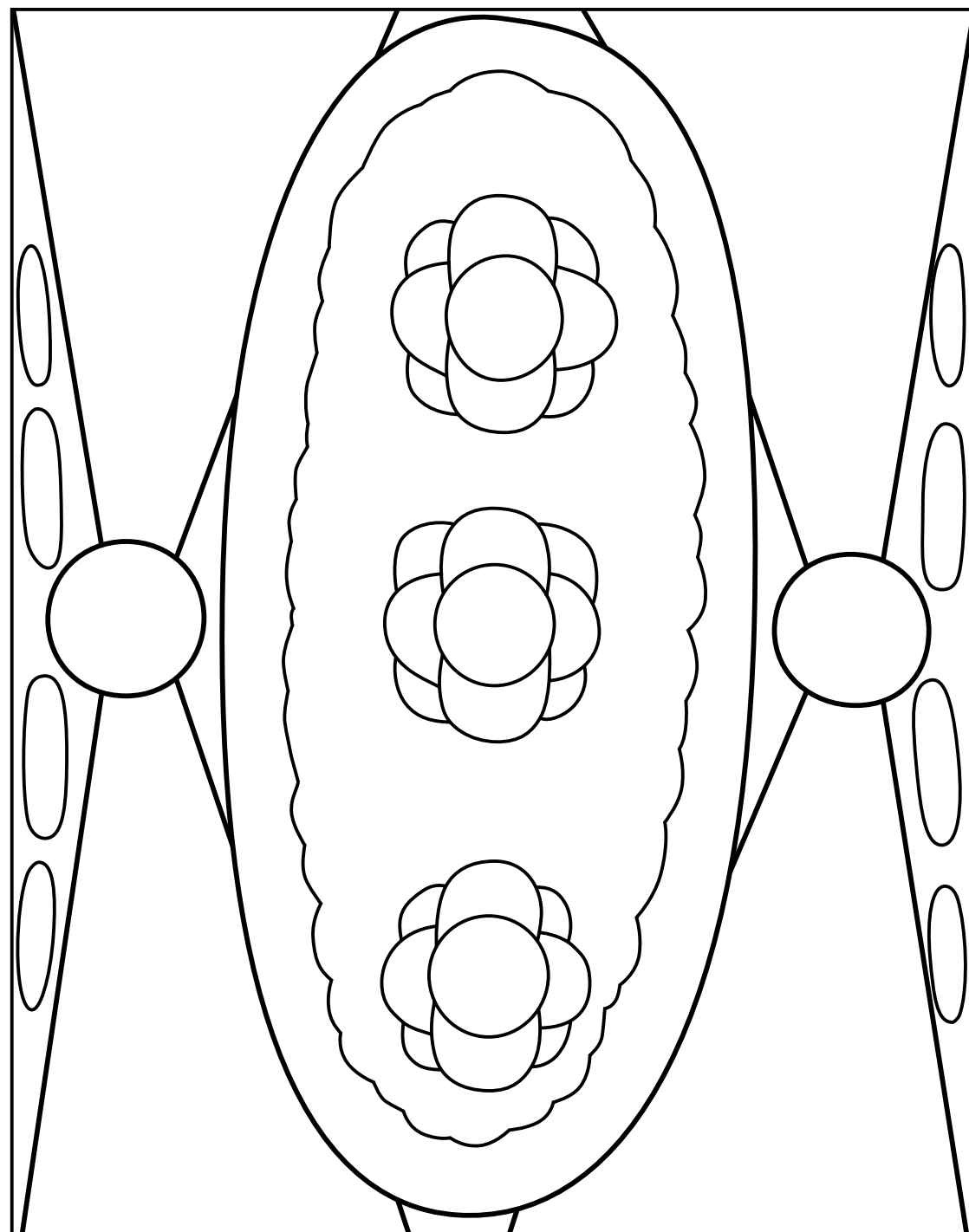


Fig. 14. Schematic diagram of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Honey Ant Dreaming*, 1972, Art Gallery of South Australia

of the watercolour confirms he is the creator of the ‘Strehlow watercolours’. Accepting my attribution, the paintings were acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2016, and have subsequently been exhibited under Namatjira’s name adjacent to early works by Papunya artists.¹¹⁶

116. Sotheby’s 2016, pp. 100-103. My attribution was further confirmed on inspecting both works in the prints and drawings store at the Art Gallery of South Australia. The larger of the works bore faint traces of erased pencil marks from an earlier concept, where the artist had located three roundels along an imagined centre line. This, together with the presence of sets of bars, resembled later compositions by Kaapa, reinforcing the sense that both artists perceived comparable artistic challenges as they attempted to reconcile Oval shapes on a rectangular image field.

It is notable that Namatjira chose to locate these *Yalka Tywerrenge* subjects symmetrically on a cruciform axis and in relation to the perimeter of the rectangular paper on which they are painted. As a fledgling craftsman, Namatjira placed a Cross in the middle of the Oval plaque. A decade after his recognition as an artist, he reversed the relationship, presenting the Oval *Tywerrenge* as occupying the rectangular window of Western Art.¹¹⁷ I place particular emphasis on *Untitled (Yalka Dreaming 1 & 2)* as they share underlying compositional attributes with later works by the Papunya-based artists (Fig. 14). I regard this pair of paintings as the most significant precedents to Papunya Tula painting, for not only do they call upon customary visual language, but Namatjira applied himself to the same formal compositional challenges that intrigued the Anmatyerr artists.

A quarter of a century after Namatjira painted the *Yalka Dreaming* watercolours, and without having seen these pioneering works, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum arrived at a nearly-identical composition of Oval objects within a rectangular perimeter. The confluence of these four innovative artists applying the same compositional solution to a high-order aesthetic problem is recognised here for the first time, and the significance of this fundamental correspondence cannot be ignored. These little-known works by Namatjira are an articulate reflection of cultural clash, through a pictorial negotiation between the Indigenous Oval (*Tywerrenge*) and the European Cross (crucifix).

Conclusion

Reflecting on Ntaria (Hermannsburg) during the interwar period, Chapter One has focused on the intersection of the paramount forms of Indigenous and Lutheran religion. Not only do the *Tywerrenge* Oval and the Christian Cross represent competing religions, their shapes permeate the vernacular and built culture of their respective societies. Implements, such as shields, *coolamons* and *woomera* conformed to an Oval template, which together with the circle, comprised the default forms of desert culture. In contrast, the Cross, and by extension the square, rectangle and grid, permeated the shape of items of material culture introduced by the colonisers. These essential forms were reflected in architectural and social spaces as well as hand-held objects. The comparison was made between the domelike space of Indigenous performance and the cubic church at Hermannsburg with its rows of parallel pews illustrated how contrasting geometries affected cultural reproduction.

Rather than being discrete symbols used in religious seclusion or private worship, the competition between *Tywerrenge* and the Christian Cross was incited at public events at potent sites across the landscape. In 1928, Pastor Albrecht and a group

117. Namatjira’s first solo exhibition was held in August 1948 in the Lower Town Hall, Melbourne.

of Arrernte evangelists challenged the power of Aboriginal Law embodied in the *Tywerrenge* stored at Manangananga. Critically, Namatjira commenced working as a craftsman at Hermannsburg in the aftermath the iconoclasm at Manangananga, when under Albrecht's instruction, he emblazoned Oval plaques with Christian homilies, Indigenous icons and secular figurative narratives. For Lutheran visitors, the plaques may have recalled the warmth of a northern European hearth, but for the Arrernte, the same objects recalled *Tywerrenge*, capriciously powerful objects at the core of men's ritual practice.¹¹⁸ Far from being benign curios, Namatjira's Oval panels transgressed the ontological zone between the unending regime of the *Tywerrenge* and the Cross of an imagined Christian future.¹¹⁹

By 1935, Namatjira had turned his attention to the production of less contentious but semantically ambiguous boomerangs, which celebrated the installation of the Kaporilya-to-Hermannsburg pipeline. The layered meanings encoded in Namatjira's *Kaporilya Boomerangs* are considered to be representative of the ambiguity and doubling intrinsic to the visual expression of desert cultures.¹²⁰ The meaning of signs in Central Australian art is neither singular nor stable, but context-dependent.

Chapter One concluded with a discussion of three lesser-known works on paper by Namatjira. The poised composition of the *Yalka Dreaming* watercolours suggests that Namatjira was engaged with the same conceptual puzzle that would later intrigue founding Papunya Tula artists. Namatjira's marshalling of Oval objects within the rectangular frame of Western art presaged the formation of contemporary art at Papunya. My identification of Namatjira as the author of the *Yalka Dreaming* watercolours establishes a vantage point from which we can look back to the traditional forms of the *Tywerrenge* while anticipating the appearance of a novel form of religious painting at Papunya.

Chapter One described how new forms of expression emerged from the intersection of European and Indigenous ontologies at Hermannsburg. Chapter Two will trace the spread of missionary endeavour to Haasts Bluff, an intercultural territory where Arrernte and Western Desert cultures touched. It was at this remote outpost that the individuals who would go on to found the Papunya Tula movement assembled, while the rate of modernisation in Central Australia accelerated.

118. Jones 2007, p. 313.

119. Jones 2007, pp. 313-317.

120. As Art Advisor to Papunya Tula Artists, I was informed of numerous instances of doubling, ambiguity and disguise when documenting the works of Anmatyerr, Luritja and Pintupi artists.

Chapter Two

The Crucible: Haasts Bluff (1932 to 1959)

Introduction

The subtle stream of association linking the naturalistic watercolour landscapes of Albert Namatjira to the more esoteric acrylic paintings of the Papunya Tula movement is poorly documented. This chapter will identify and trace those vital connections over time and space. Geographic, cultural and historic lines of transmission will be mapped and key protagonists from Central Australia's two most important art movements tracked. The historian Sylvia Kleinert's claim that "the artists of the Hermannsburg School contributed towards developments at Papunya by acting as role models" will be investigated and evidence of their association assessed.¹

Rather than comparing paintings from the two movements, Chapter Two will survey the contextual terrain upon which contemporary art at Papunya grew. Where Chapter One described encounters between local Western Arrernte and Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg, Chapter Two will examine a distinctly different form of intercultural encounter: that between dissimilar Indigenous groups. Meetings took place at numerous locations to the west of Hermannsburg, but were mostly centred on the ration station known as Haasts Bluff.² Intercultural contact between Arrernte and Western Desert people will be described on two axes: the first being 'cultural difference' and the second 'duration of contact with Western influence'. Chapter One examined the experience of Western Arrernte people, who through a prolonged encounter with Lutheran missionaries adopted a "master homology" in which the "association of God's law with Arrernte law" resulted in a new imaginary.³ In contrast, the people of the Western Desert lived as hunter-gatherers, experiencing little or no contact with non-Aboriginal people. From the 1920s, and driven by the fear of frontier conflict, hunger and curiosity, *Anangu* (Western Desert people) were drawn into the contact zone around the MacDonnell Ranges. Appearing from over the western horizon, small parties of *Anangu* made new lives in the vicinity of the Haasts Bluff ration station. While a constellation of comparable outposts sprang up across Central Australia, this chapter emphasises Haasts Bluff because it was there that individual agency and cultural accommodation combined to prepare the ground for the emergence of a new form of cultural representation: Papunya Tula art.⁴

1. Kleinert 1992, p. 243.

2. The ration station was named after the imposing outcrop Unyali (Haasts Bluff), a sentinel greeting travellers from the east. The station is 17 kilometres to the south-west of the Bluff. To make definitions more challenging, the station is located on the Haasts Bluff Aboriginal Reserve, established in 1941: a vast area extending from the Hermannsburg community to the West Australian border to the west and north, and the South Australian border to the south.

3. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 101.

4. It could be argued that comparable conditions at Nepabunna, Ooldea and Ernabella in South Australia also led to new forms of representation.

The Haasts Bluff ration station was established on a site where cultural and linguistic interactions already thrived. Kukatja Country was a multicultural zone long before the arrival of the Europeans.⁵ Arandic, Western Desert and Ngarrkic peoples traditionally came into contact around this region, to settle disputes, arrange marriages and hold ceremonies in which the verses of shared songlines were sung in the languages of their neighbours.⁶ Following the creation of a ration depot, more disparate groups were attracted into the region. Thus, a process of inter-clan accommodation played out in parallel to the presence of European missionaries, nurses and government overseers.

This chapter establishes how key contributors to the development of Central Australian art met and coexisted at Haasts Bluff. Wide-ranging encounters will be examined through the lens of two well-known artists, Albert Namatjira and Johnny Warangula. Namatjira had previously been associated with Hermannsburg, and Warangula with Papunya, and because of this, the significance of their interaction at Haasts Bluff has been overlooked. Herein, I establish that an artistic frontier, such as existed at Haasts Bluff, can only be understood when the experience and motivations of its Indigenous actors are constituted *alongside* the observations of European witnesses. Identifying the scarce and disparate evidence documenting interactions between Aboriginal people at Haasts Bluff, I establish that Warangula knew Namatjira before the latter, older man started painting. I argue (albeit through circumstantial evidence) that their relationship was sustained through regular contact until Namatjira's death in 1959.

The archival record privileges European commentary over the 'invisible' interactions between Indigenous agents, and my reading of encounters at Haasts Bluff therefore relies on informed speculation. Aware of the dangers of authorial overreach, the chapter is anchored by a range of historic, anthropological and geographic evidence. Importantly, it is supported by the oral accounts of residents, and my own familiarity with the Country, having travelled the roads that I write of, with *Anangu* who grew up around Haasts Bluff.

The Literature

In comparison to the extensive written accounts of Hermannsburg, the community at Haasts Bluff has received scant attention.⁷ Marjorie Gartrell's *Dear Primitive; A Nurse Among the Aborigines*, 1957, is a rare exception, yet this anecdotal account

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5. Those Western Desert language groups using the term *kuka* (meat) are referred to by neighbouring groups as Kukatja.
 6. Strehlow 1971, pp. 199-200; Strehlow, 1997.
 7. The importance of Haasts Bluff featured in biographic accounts I recorded with artists including Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi, and Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri between 1984 and 1989, now stored in the South Australian Museum Archives. Numerous Papunya Tula artists were recorded as having lived in Haasts Bluff: Johnson 2008.

of life at the remote outpost reveals more about the chauvinism of mid-century Australia than it does of the lives of her subjects, the residents of Haasts Bluff. Importantly, Gartrell's observation "We often saw native artists, particularly the Namatjiras, either around the camps or in the settlement" reinforces a central contention of this chapter: that Albert Namatjira's ongoing presence in the region had far-reaching effects on the trajectory of Indigenous art.⁸

As it emerges from the archive, Haasts Bluff was a regular destination for Lutheran missionaries and their associates who, unsurprisingly, emphasised the agency of Arrernte evangelists carrying the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ' to the immigrants from the desert.⁹ In contrast, the artist Marina Strocchi and ex-Patrol Officer Jeremy Long sketched aspects of the history of the community, giving weight to the social consequences of shifting government policy.¹⁰ Strocchi and Long's writings are telling; for they are based on enduring personal relationships, and are particularly attentive to the experience of those who were attracted to the station from the Western Desert. Read together, their accounts describe how successive families were drawn to settle in Haasts Bluff from the 1930s to the late 1950s.

The observations of the Hermannsburg-born linguist and classicist T. G. H. Strehlow, who returned to Central Australia in 1931, were informed by a uniquely detailed understanding of the familial and linguistic affiliations of both Arrernte- and Western Desert language-speaking people at Haasts Bluff. Employed as a government patrol officer, Strehlow established relationships with individuals such as Bert 'Parta' Nananana Tjakamarra, who as the senior *kutungula* (guardian/policeman) of the Honey Ant songline was critical in authorising the establishment of a community painting practice at Papunya in 1971.¹¹ I have relied on Strehlow's genealogies, census reports and diary entries, in addition to his numerous published accounts of events from 1956 to 2016, to complement my understanding of the customary cultures of the people who lived across the West MacDonnell Ranges before the advent of Papunya Tula art. Strehlow's archive is located in the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC) in Alice Springs, where it comprises the single most comprehensive repository of materials on the cultures of the Indigenous peoples of Central Australia. One particularly poignant photographic series from the archive, taken by lay preacher Sam Gross, reveals that the Haasts Bluff community could be divided according to their familiarity with, and adherence to the edicts of the Lutheran Church. In one picture, Arrernte evangelists and their kin wear starched white shirts, trousers and coats. Albert Namatjira can be identified at the rear of the congregation gathered outside the newly-consecrated church in 1941. Other images show non-Lutheran exiles from the Western Desert, dressed in rags stained with earth. The contrast between the

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8. Referring to Albert and his sons Oscar, Enos and Ewald: Gartrell 1957, pp. 102-103.
 9. Albrecht 1977, pp. 48-59.
 10. Long 1989; Strocchi 1995.
 11. Nananana performed episodes of the Honey Ant songline for Strehlow's camera at Wolatjatara in 1955: Johnson 2010, pp. 60-61.



Fig. 15. *Monument to founding Arrernte evangelists, on approach to Haasts Bluff, 2016*, photograph by John Kean

brilliantined locks of the Lutherans and the uncombed hair of the desert children signify the ‘difference’ between Indigenous groups drawn into contact at the ration station. Despite this gulf, unseen links between these groups persisted and will be explored through the precise lens of Strehlow’s ethnographic observations and supplementary accounts by European travellers, including Rex Battarbee, Namatjira’s artistic mentor.

Haasts Bluff: “a big place”¹²

Geographically, Haasts Bluff (or the Ikuntji Community as it is now known) lies between Hermannsburg and Papunya. The community’s heyday occurred between the 1935 construction of the Kaporilya pipeline and the official opening of the government settlement at Papunya in 1959. This section examines the notion of ‘place’ to establish how Arrernte people from the West MacDonnell Ranges and *Anangu* from the dune fields of the Western Desert came to reside and interact at Haasts Bluff.

The phenomenologist-philosopher Edward S. Casey could be speaking of Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) when he wrote; “places gather things in their midst—where “things” connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories and thoughts”¹³ Long-time Ikuntji resident Narputta Nangala echoed this notion, in remarking that, “It is true, Arrernte, Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi people lived at Haasts Bluff. This used to be a big place for Aboriginal people”¹⁴ While the population of Haasts Bluff has decreased markedly since the 1950s, reverberations of its complex history are still evident. Nestled on the plain between the peak of Ulunparru and the Mereenie Escarpment, the community is dwarfed by the scale of the surrounding topography. On the approach from the east, white crosses make a stark memorial to early Arrernte evangelists.¹⁵ Nearby, stockyards are silhouetted against the long southern horizon, a clue to Haasts Bluff’s cattle station history. Closer to contemporary houses, the school and arts centre, collapsed flour drums and discarded tobacco tins mark the shifting outlines of early camps. Older residents point to soakage sites in the creek bed that sated Pintupi migrants from the 1930s.

My reading of these material fragments is informed by stories told by Charley Tarawa (Wartuma) Tjugurrayi, Eddie Edimintja Tjapangati and Nosepeg Tjupurrula, who lived at Haasts Bluff and regularly accompanied me on the ‘outstation run’

12. Narputta Nangala in Strocchi 1995, p. 21.

13. Casey 1996, p. 24.

14. Narputta Nangala recalls life at Haasts Bluff during the community’s heyday when her husband Timmy Tjugadai Tjugurrayi was head stockman: Strocchi 1995, p. 21.

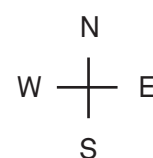
15. Locally, the site is referred to as ‘Memory’.



Map 2. Sites in Kukatja Country painted by Albert Namatjira, 1936-1959

Key

• DIRECTION OF VIEW



while I was working for Papunya Tula Artists (PTA) in the 1970s.¹⁶ At a more theoretical level, I have been influenced by the approach of Ingereth McFarlane, who combined archaeology, geography and archival research to peel back layers of occupation at Charlotte Waters, a long-abandoned relay station on the Overground Telegraph (OT) Line.¹⁷ McFarlane made extensive use of museum collections to retrace Erlikilyika Jim Kite's movements through his Country. Likewise, I compiled an archive of images to determine exactly where Namatjira sat, and what he painted.¹⁸ The array of works Namatjira produced at a constellation of sites around Haasts Bluff testifies to his enduring affinity with Kukatja country (Map 2) (Appendix 2), an association confirmed by the artist's granddaughter Lenie Namatjira, just before her death in 2017.¹⁹ Moreover, the profusion of his paintings depicting the region supports my conclusion that curious young Pintupi men (such as Johnny Warangula) must have observed the artist at work at some of these locations.

The archive assembled for this study confirms that Namatjira made numerous expeditions to Haasts Bluff and the adjacent Belt Range, beginning with an evangelical mission in 1932, and then more famously as a guide for his artist mentor Rex Battarbee in 1936 and 1938.²⁰ Initial expeditions were made with camels (see Plate 15), then following Namatjira's commercial success, in a series of American pick-up trucks.²¹ During the 1950s (while battling for independence from mission authorities wishing to profit from his success), Namatjira set up a caravan on the side of the creek near Haasts Bluff, splitting his time between this bush refuge and the pressured life of a famous artist in Alice Springs.²² The depth of Namatjira's association with Ikuntji is exemplified by the text on the door of one of his American pick-ups, whose now-rusted and bullet-riddled surface reads "ALBERT NAMATJIRA – ARTIST – HAASTS BLUFF". This object, given his eventual hostility to the mission authorities, is paradoxically preserved in the collection of the Hermannsburg Heritage Precinct.²³

Although Namatjira's presence at Haasts Bluff has been confirmed, the effect he had on the imaginations of prospective Papunya Tula painters who also lived in the area during the 1940s and 1950s can only be speculated. The task of attributing influence is especially problematic as landscape painting is an essentially representational form, painted in transparent washes, whereas Papunya Tula

16. The outstation run circumnavigated the Belt Range and Mount Liebig, returning via Kungkayunti to Haasts Bluff and Papunya: Kean 2000a, pp. 218-223.
17. McFarlane 2010.
18. I have undertaken several research trips to the area. One particular trip was undertaken with the artist Tom Nicolson in 2016, during which we identified a number of Namatjira's painting sites in the vicinity of Haasts Bluff: Nicolson 2018.
19. Namatjira, L. 2017, in conversation with the author.
20. Kramer 1932, PRG – 1322 Series 1-11 Kramer Family. Adelaide: Mortlock Library; Gartrell 1957. Numerous references in: Edmond 2014, pp. 107-272.
21. Edmond 2014, p. 276.
22. Gartrell 1957, pp. 100-105; Edmond 2014, p. 255.
23. Edmond 2014, pp. 240-245.



Fig. 16. Albert Namatjira's car door, signwriting reads ALBERT NAMATJIRA - ARTIST - HAASTS BLUFF, circa 1950, Hermannsburg Historic Precinct

paintings employed abstract signs applied with opaque paint. At a surface level, the difference between the Hermannsburg and Papunya schools is so marked that any subtle concurrence of intent is masked by stylistic divergence.²⁴ This account of Haasts Bluff as a site of intercultural encounter in the mid-20th century is intended set the scene for Chapter Three, in which landscape and Papunya painting will be compared at formal and thematic levels to determine the extent of correspondence between these apparently different idioms.

24. Leura is a notable exception, for he often painted transparent washes soaked into un-primed canvas in a manner that resembled aspects of Namatjira's approach.

Haasts Bluff: An Intercultural Site

The area around Haasts Bluff is an intercultural zone where people of Arandic culture rubbed up against the distinctly different cultures of the Western Desert.²⁵ Visits from Ngaliya and Warlpiri speakers (of the Ngarrkic language group) to the north added to existing cultural complexity.²⁶ From the early decades of the 20th century, this mosaic of Indigenous cultures was further complicated by the intrusions of European pastoralists, prospectors, dingo scalpers and evangelists.²⁷

Used as a government-supplied ration station from the mid-1930s, Haasts Bluff was officially instated as an evangelical outstation west of Hermannsburg in 1941. The site quickly became a novel community in which people from several language groups mixed with Western Arrernte evangelists, Lutheran missionaries, nurses and cattle station managers.²⁸ Ballet dancer, writer and member of the Jindyworobak literary movement, Roland Robinson was just one of a procession of artists who visited Haasts Bluff, curious to meet Aboriginal people living semi-traditional lives outside the constraints of modernity. Robinson recounts the spatial dynamics of the way people camped around the rudimentary ration station, according to the direction in which their Country was located:

The settlement of Haasts Bluff was situated near the huge, uprearing tor, or bluff, from which it derives its name. The settlement consisted of the Pastor's cottage, some outbuildings mainly devoted to repair shops for the trucks and other mechanisms of the settlement, and the building of the Lutheran Church. Slightly to the west, the Pintupi tribe lived in its native domed shelters covered with spinifex. To the east, away in the sparse scrub, and near the dry, sandy river bed, a portion of the Aranda [Arrernte] tribe was camped.²⁹

The Pintupi made shelters at soakage sites dug in creek beds (alternately Alyalpi and Ngankiritja) from which they ventured forth to forage bush foods and hunt small game. They supplemented with their diet with tea, flour and sugar from the ration station. Arrernte man Theodore Abbott was a long-term storekeeper who held "cash to pay men for dingo scalps, kangaroo skins and curios as well as rations for the women and children and aged and infirm".³⁰ 'Dogging' (hunting dingoes for the bounty on their "scalps") became a profitable pretext for men and small family groups to cross back over the invisible frontier from station to bush, where they could enjoy indigenous lifeways away from the gaze of evangelists and

25. Strehlow 1965a. In particular, see: Map p. 123.
 26. Songlines, including Yarrapiri (Desert Taipan), *Mala* (Rufous Hare-wallaby) and Kanparraka (Centipede) cross from Ngaliya to Kukatja Country around Haasts Bluff, resulting in ceremonial exchange between groups.
 27. Kimber 1988, pp. 56-67; Smith 2005.
 28. For general descriptions of Haasts Bluff, see: Albrecht 1977, pp. 54-59; Bowman & Central Land Council 2015, pp. 108-110; Henson 1994, pp. 131-174; Kimber 1995, pp. 1-3; Rowse 2002, pp. 96-99; Narputta Nangala, Daisey Napaltjarri Jugadai, Eunice Napanunka, Gideon Tjupurrula Jack and Long Tom Tjapanunka in Strocchi, ed. 1995, pp. 19-36.
 29. Robinson 1976, p. 127.
 30. Long 1989, p. 22.



Map 3. Western McDonnell Ranges showing major roads, communities and sites mentioned in the text

Key

- STUART HIGHWAY
- MAJOR ROAD
- MINOR ROAD
- TRACK
- CAMEL PAD TO OODNADATTA



government officials.³¹ The extent of dogging expeditions depended on seasonal conditions. Regular October excursions ranged toward western Water Places, such as Muruntji, Putarti and Yamunturrngu (Mount Liebig). Longer journeys to desert homelands including Walangurru, Ilpili and Kalipinynga were made in more favourable seasons.³² Young Pintupi men were also employed on road gangs, fencing projects and as stockmen at Haasts Bluff and neighbouring stations, where they formed relationships with European supervisors and men from distant clans.³³

Rerouting Art History

While the network of roads west of Alice Springs may seem peripheral to the history of art in the region, these arteries are worth considering as the routes that connected artists' communities and facilitated encounters between key artistic players.³⁴ The history of Papunya Tula painting has for the most part been written by art advisors and scholars travelling the 'highway' west, through Papunya to Walangurru (Kintore), through to the Canning Stock Route.³⁵ With the exception of Strocchi and Kimber, none of these authors have spent extended periods in Haasts Bluff, nor have they written of the regions to the south or east of Papunya. As a consequence, the significance of Haasts Bluff and Hermannsburg to the development of Papunya Tula art has been, quite literally, bypassed.

As the crow flies, Haasts Bluff is about 100 kilometres north-west of Hermannsburg, but considerably further by road. A circuitous route threads along the dunes on either side of the Missionary Plain and past Gosses Bluff, north towards the Belt Range. A rockier road crosses the Finke River at Glen Helen Gorge, offering a more direct route from Alice Springs (via Namatjira Drive) to Haasts Bluff. The pastoralist, cattle station manager, dingo scalp trader and raconteur Bryan Bowman, described a network of stock roads and bush tracks connecting cattle stations and key watering places throughout the region.³⁶ Lesser roads linking windmills and homesteads were travelled by stockmen, including Tim Leura and Clifford Possum, who worked at Glen Helen and Narwietooma, cattle stations that abutted the Country that was proclaimed

31. Rowse 2002, pp. 89-90. For an account of dogging in the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara land this period, see: Young 2010.

32. Based on personal accounts travelling the area with 'doggers', including Ray Inkamala, Charlie Tarawa and Warangula. See also: Crocker 1987, pp. 15-16; Kean 2017b, pp. 131-134; Tindale 1956a, p. 10.

33. Kean 2017b, p. 131; Long 1989, p. 23; O'Halloran 2018, pp. 48-62.

34. For instance, the passage of a group of ancestral Emu from Ngaatinkititja (to the south of Kintore) to Kurrkalnga (Memory Hill) just east of Haasts Bluff provided both travelling routes and agency for many Pintupi, including Charlie Tarawa, to come and go from their adopted community.

35. The 'highway' is also referred to as the Gary Junction Road. The Pintupi restabilised communities at Walangurru (Kintore) and Kiwirrkura in the early 1980s. I refer to authors such as Bardon & Bardon 2004; Benjamin et al. 2009; Johnson 2007b; 2010; 2016; Myers 2002b; Perkins & Fink 2000.

36. Bowman, B. 1984; 1989.



Fig. 17. *Unyali (Haasts Bluff) from the southeast*, 2016, photograph by Tom Nicholson

as the Haasts Bluff Aboriginal Reserve in 1941.³⁷ While these tracks remain unknown to casual visitors, they are critical to the encounters between artists, for instance the meeting which occurred between Possum and Namatjira at Glen Helen Gorge in the 1950s.³⁸

Robinson noted that the settlement of Haasts Bluff is so-called for its proximity to Unyali (Haasts Bluff), the "uprearing tor" that forms the easternmost point of the Belt Range, the massive, desiccated backbone dominating the skyline at Ikuntji and Papunya.³⁹ A wide gap in the range enables direct contact between Ikuntji and Papunya: a journey of 20 kilometres that residents made on foot, with donkeys or on horseback during the mid-20th century, and later in high-wheelbase vehicles that could tackle the rough, rock-strewn track.⁴⁰ An alternative, graded road issuing from Ikuntji runs east of Unyali before intersecting with the highway from Alice Springs to Papunya and thence to Walungurru (Kintore) and Kiwirrkura (these far western communities were established when the Pintupi returned to their Country in the early 1980s).

37. Albrecht 1977, p. 54.

38. Johnson 2003, p. 42.

39. Robinson 1976, p. 127.

40. Long suggests that the track was rarely used by European staff who did not want to risk their vehicles, but Indigenous people such as Namatjira were more likely to use the route. Long 2015, personal communications with the author.

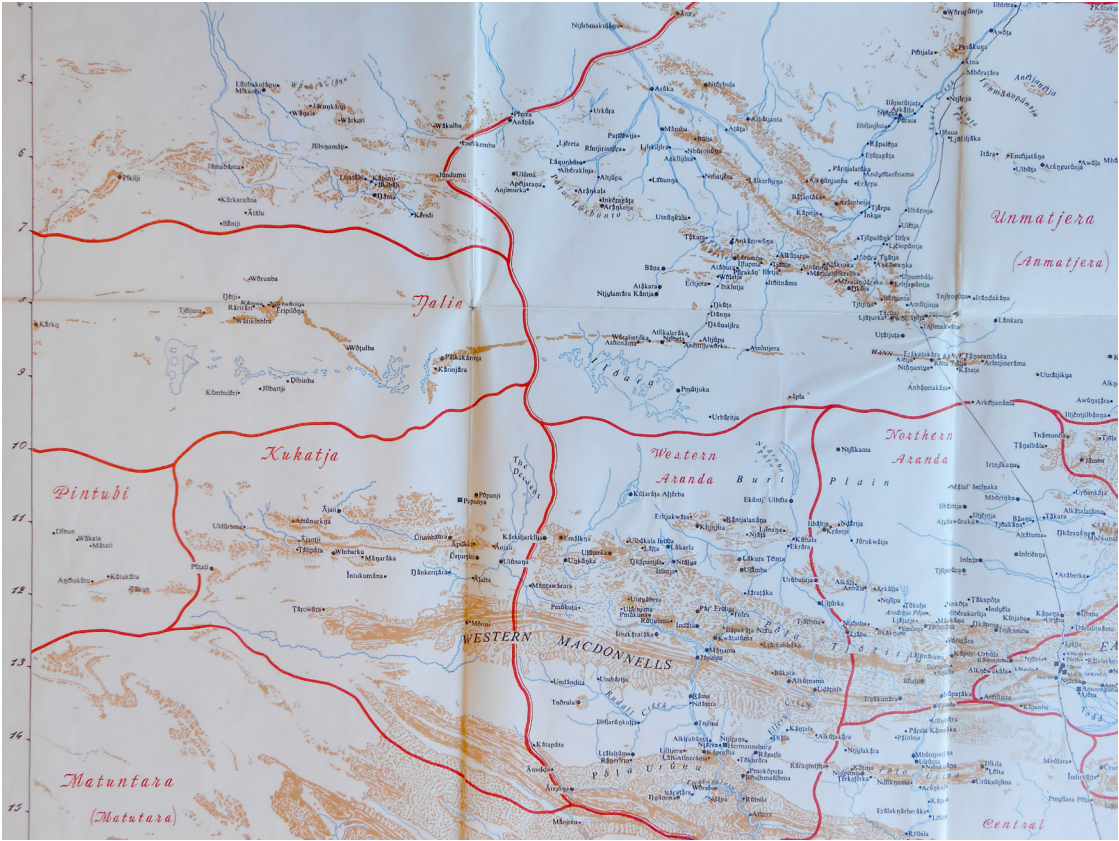
Place, Space and Life’s Contingencies

I have given particular emphasis to the roads that bisect Kukatja Country because experience is described in spatial terms in desert narrative. All momentous events of community and individual life – like conception, the passing of relatives, initiation, marriage and ritual ascension – are ‘emplaced’ in memory and dialogue. An individual’s story is typically recounted episodically, with periods of residence interspersed with travel to the next camp, and so on, through time, as the protagonist advances through youth, initiation, work, parenthood: life’s rhythms intoned with the stop-start modality of a songline. The name of the location where events occurred is invariably recalled.⁴¹ Fred Myers has observed that places “gather” meaning “through human action” and “lived experiences”⁴². Myers had previously written:

Orientation in space is a prime concern for the Pintupi. Even their dreams are cast in a framework of spatial coordinates. It is impossible to listen to any narrative, whether it be historical, mythological, or contemporary without constant reference to where events happened. In this sense, place provides the framework around which events coalesce, and places serve as mnemonics for significant events... Upon close examination, it is activity that creates places, giving significance to impervious matter.⁴³

Although Myers writes of the Pintupi, the importance placed on place and space is shared across Central Australian cultures, where experience in place buttresses an individual’s authority to speak for a particular site. Strehlow, for instance, stresses that “authority” in Arrernte culture is “based upon the soil”.⁴⁴ Myers argues more subtly that to grasp the particularities of Indigenous relationships to land and ancestral presence we must look beyond “more spectacular ritual objectifications”, arguing rather that affinity to country arises from “everyday practices of living, residing, dying on the land that might be called ‘dwelling’ as activities through which place becomes a significant bearer of social identity”.⁴⁵ In particular, Myers notes polysemy in the Western Desert term *ngurra*, translating it variously to ‘camp’, ‘Country’ and ‘place’, while emphasising the range and depth of human associations that link people with the land.⁴⁶ He stresses that the “stories, songs, designs and the like provide the components of the “inner representation” of the country, instructing learners what to find”.⁴⁷

41. A common feature of biographical interviews conducted by the author with Papunya Tula artists in 1980s.
42. Myers 2002a, p. 107.
43. Myers 1986, p. 54.
44. Strehlow 1965a, p. 12.
45. Myers 2002a, p. 105.
46. Myers 1986, pp. 48, 68 & 91-92.
47. Myers 2002a, p. 104.



Map 4. Aboriginal Central Australia (detail from a large format fold-out map), T. G. H. Strehlow, 1971

Struck by the difference in the lifeways and beliefs he encountered, Strehlow claimed that “no stronger contrast can be imagined between two sets of Aboriginal cultural institutions than those of the Western Desert folk and their eastern neighbours the Aranda [Arrernte]”.⁴⁸ Strehlow believed the “Aranda” exercised more structured forms of land-based ritual than he observed among the pragmatic Western Desert groups. He supported his contention by emphasising how the boundaries of *njinangja* (*anyenhenge*) clan estates were “demarcated by episodes in sacred myths, *and were therefore not subject to revision* [author’s emphasis]”.⁴⁹ Typically for an anthropologist of his generation, Strehlow highlighted the geographic borders between linguistic groups.⁵⁰ Strehlow’s 1947 map, *Sub-groups of Aranda Tribe*, proposed a hard line separating “Western Aranda” and the “Kukatja”, bisecting the region to the immediate east of Alyali (Haasts Bluff).⁵¹ Contemporary linguists and anthropologists allow for more overlap between groups and tend to place less consequence on boundaries. Robert Hoogenraad and Brenda Thornley prefer Venn diagrams that overlap at Haasts Bluff to demonstrate the influence of both Western Arrernte and Pintupi

48. Strehlow 1965a, p. 132.
49. Strehlow 1965a, p. 138.
50. Norman Tindale (for instance) based his now-iconic *Map Showing the Distribution of the Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, 1940, on interviews with numerous informants, incrementally refining his interpretation of the borders between ‘tribal’ groups. Founding Papunya artists including Warangula drew maps of their Country, upon which Tindale inscribed the names of adjacent ‘tribes’. See: Tindale 1957.
51. Strehlow 1965a, p. 137.

Luritja-speaking people in the area.⁵² A 2015 map published by the Central Lands Council eschews boundaries entirely, simply placing the name of the language group over the heartland of the area in which it is spoken.⁵³ Despite their anachronism, Strehlow’s mid-20th century maps are of relevance to this study, for they draw attention to the area around Haasts Bluff as the meeting point of three distinctively different linguistic blocs: Arandic from the east, Western Desert from the west and Ngarrkic (Ngaliya, now Warlpiri) to the north (Map 4).⁵⁴ Even within the linguistically-diverse Australian Desert, the region around Haasts Bluff was a zone of exceptional cultural crossover.⁵⁵

Despite having produced maps that suggested certainty and permanence, Strehlow was well aware of the complexities that frustrated those who would like to define Indigenous Australians by one-dimensional ‘tribal’ identifiers. He argued that there was no such unit as an “Aranda Tribe”. Rather, men related as father-and-son and belonging to a particular *anyenhenge* (clan estate), identified most strongly with their particular *apmere kwetethe* (*pmara kutata*): literally ‘eternal place’ or ‘home’.⁵⁶ Moreover, those groups favoured exogamous marriage. Strehlow observed for instance, that the men of a particular Western Arrernte *anyenhenge* tended to marry Kukatja women, while the men of a different *anyenhenge* married Northern Arrernte or Anmatyerr women.⁵⁷ Namatjira for example, married Alkalita (Rubina), the daughter of Wapiti, a Kukatja leader from the Mereenie region to the immediate south of Haasts Bluff.⁵⁸

Strehlow stressed that relationships between speakers of distinctly different languages (such as Western Arrernte and Kukatja), whose ‘eternal homes’ were linked by shared songlines, could be stronger than those of adjacent estates who spoke the same language but who traced their origin to different totemic ancestors.⁵⁹ Such relationships were cemented in ceremonial settings, where Emu, Honey Ant or Water men provided added force and amplitude to ceremonies

that celebrated the songlines of shared totemic ancestors.⁶⁰ Strehlow therefore provided a useful model with which to understand the friendship and creative collaboration between Warangula, who is often regarded as a Pintupi speaker, and Kaapa, whose first language was Anmatyerr. The men shared ritual associations through important songlines, most notably the Water and Emu Dreamings.⁶¹ To further entangle matters, Warangula and Kaapa often communicated in Warlpiri, a language they also shared.⁶²

Crossings

Founding Papunya artists including Johnny Warangula, Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, and Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi experienced boundary crossing as boys.⁶³ Born in the desert, they travelled through Kukatja to arrive in Arrernte Country, where people spoke a very different language. Settling for a time at Hermannsburg, they were initiated, to become men. For Namarari, Warangula and Tarawa, ‘contact’ occurred where and when the pattern of travel between seasonal water sources ended; from that moment life was organised around rations, labour and sociality.⁶⁴ When I met the artists in the 1970s, their contact experiences were told in the form of well-rehearsed ‘coming of age’ tales that signified the teller’s melancholy exodus from Country. The stories were typically accompanied by anecdotes that emphasised their naïve disbelief at each revelation of modernity.⁶⁵ Contact stories were told with a mix of self-deprecation and tragic good humour.⁶⁶

It was later, as initiated men, that Namarari, Warangula and Tarawa returned, along well-trodden routes, to their ancestral Country.⁶⁷ Often using camels as pack animals, small parties of Pintupi people carried food, clothes and revelatory stories of station life to relatives who remained on Country. After many weeks outside the contact zone, the men returned to their families in Haasts Bluff with dingo ‘scalps’ to redeem for cash bounty.⁶⁸ It was on these journeys that the prospective Papunya painters were inducted into the metaphysical significance of their Country; these were periods of immersion in the totemic landscape that

52. Hoogenraad & Thornley 2003, pp. 6-7.

53. Map 8. *Languages of Central Australia*, in Bowman et al. 2015, p. XX.

54. Strehlow published several maps of Central Australia, culminating in *Aboriginal Central Australia*, a large format foldout map in his opus: Strehlow 1971.

55. Located 30 kilometres to the north, Papunya is within the same zone of cultural adjacency/overlap.

56. Strehlow 1965a, pp. 134-142.

57. Strehlow 1965a, p. 138. It is instructive to see how the exogamous pattern of marriage has played out over time. Vivien Johnson recently mapped the genealogies of the families of founding Papunya artists. Many go back to relationships formed at Haasts Bluff: Johnson 2015, pp. 224-227. All five artists of this study (including Namatjira) married women from a language group other than their own primary affiliation.

58. Morton 1992, p. 39.

59. Strehlow 1965b, p. 141. The songline of the Honey Ant Ancestors (stretching from Tatata (near Ilpili), on the eastern perimeter of Pintupi land to Papunya and beyond through Anmatyerr east to Alyawarr Country), afforded agency to Warangula and his relatives when they shifted to Papunya in the late 1950s. Instrumentally, it was the Honey Ant songline that enabled artists from each of these areas to connect over shared projects, such as the *Honey Ant Mural* at the Papunya School. See: Strehlow, T. G. H. 1965a, p. 129; Kimber 1988, pp. 67 & 73-77.

60. Strehlow 1965a, pp. 141.

61. Both Warangula and Kaapa made frequent mention of Water and Emu Ancestors ‘going to’ and ‘coming from’ the other man’s Country when discussing paintings with the author during the late 1970s.

62. Kean 1977-1980, personal observation. Johnson correctly claims that Warangula was Pintupi with Ngaliya (Warlpiri) associations, while Kaapa was Anmatyerr/Warlpiri/Arrernte: Johnson 2008, pp. 17 & 64.

63. All three individuals were present at Mount Liebig in 1932 when the University of Adelaide Anthropological Expedition camped there to examine the Pintupi and Ngaliya people who Ernst Kramer had assembled for the purpose. Batty 2006a, pp. 41-42; Batty 2013a.

64. Batty 2006a, pp. 41-42; Johnson 2009, p. 66.

65. Tjupurrula 1998, p. 16

66. See for example Namarari’s story of burning his first pay cheque: Batty 2007, p. 23.

67. Namarari drew the route to his Country from Haasts Bluff, for Norman Tindale in 1957: Tindale 1957.

68. Tindale 1956a, p. 10.

would later inform their careers as artists.⁶⁹ Without such treks, the trajectory of desert art would have been very different, for the first-hand experience of particular ancestral sites was the wellspring from which artistic creativity emerged. I will now focus on Warangula's experience, while acknowledging that he shared much of it with his Pintupi peers.⁷⁰

Johnny Warangula: A Life's Journey

Warangula was born at Mitjilpirri, north-east of the Ehrenberg Ranges (350 kilometres west of Alice Springs), and spent his early childhood in the bush, without experiencing contact.⁷¹ Warangula's family relied on a handful of permanent waterholes dotted over a vast land, and none were more vital than Kalipinpa, a 'native well' in Sandhill Country towards the Northern Territory/Western Australian border, and Ilpili, a bountiful spring in the Ehrenberg Ranges.⁷²

The cultural and geographic isolation of the families at Ilpili was breached on the day that a caravan of huge, unfamiliar beasts lumbered across the plain from the east. Led by the bushman Bob Buck, the party included 'Afghan' cameleers Mohamet Bux and Ali Mohamed with their string of heavily-laden camels.⁷³ The year was 1930 (Plate 16).⁷⁴

After making camp and establishing contact with the resident Pintupi families, Bob Buck's party set about clearing a landing strip to be used by the aerial reconnaissance pilots of the Mackay Expedition, into 'uncharted country' to the north and west.⁷⁵ Later that year, a team from Hermannsburg, including Pastor F. W. Albrecht and evangelists Martin and Heseziel also reached Ilpili, to be followed in quick succession by the aerial contingent of the ill-fated Lasseter Expedition.⁷⁶ Persuaded by the lure of 'sweet food', Warangula and his family left their desert home and travelled east to Hermannsburg.⁷⁷ By the winter of 1935, the Ilpili clan had regrouped at Alyalpi, a soakage in a creek bed near the nascent Haasts Bluff ration station.⁷⁸

69. For an outline of typical Pintupi patterns of affinity with land, see: Myers 2002b.

70. O'Halloran 2018, pp. 31-65.

71. Mitjilpirri is a Kangaroo and Euro Dreaming site near Ilpili (Ehrenberg Ranges) on the south-eastern perimeter of the Land for which Warangula had responsibility.

72. Strehlow, T. G. H. 1965a, pp. 122-124; Kimber, R. 1988, pp. 61-62.

73. Jelinek, *Robert Henry (Bob) Buck (1881-1960)* in Australian Dictionary of Biography, URL: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/buck-robert-henry-bob-1621/accessed> 30 July 2015.

74. Kimber 1982, p. 50. Coincidentally, Ali Mohamed was the 'Afghan' cameleer who engaged Albert Namatjira as his assistant in the 1920s: Kenny 2009, p. 438.

75. Kimber 1982, pp. 49-53; Corke 2012.

76. Kimber 1982, pp. 54-57.

77. Henson 1994, p. 90.

78. Pastor Albrecht visited the 'new camp' at Alyalpi in July 1935, where Ngarpilala and the Ilipli people had settled: Albrecht 1977, pp. 52-53; Henson 1995, p. 91. In 1941, T. G. H. Strehlow made a census of people living at nearby Ngankaritara. Once again Ngarpilala was present. A twelve-year-old boy called Warangula is listed, but this is unlikely to have been our subject, for in 1941 he was a young man of about 20 years of age: Strehlow, T. G. H. 1941, p. 6.

According to Myers, the challenge for contemporary anthropology is to counter "the focus on an imagined uniform "tradition": he warns of "the failure to conceptualize the potentially conflicting and disaggregated practices through which socially recognized identities with place and places themselves are produced".⁷⁹ Myers recommended a process of "construction, not as a projection of pre-existing cultural templates onto a *tabula rasa*, but a dialectical engagement of socially and historically-constituted schemas of practical activity with worldly circumstance".⁸⁰ He adds, "In this way, and perhaps only in this way, are we able to avoid removing Aboriginal people and their practices of everyday life from history — to see them as only now entering into the world of contesting discourse and contradictory valuation".⁸¹ It is at this fine-grained level, where social agency and contingency intersect with tradition, that the events that led to the formation of contemporary Aboriginal art must be divined.

In an account of contemporary painting by exiles from the Gibson and Sandy Deserts, the art historian Darren Jorgensen challenged the popular assumptions of continuity and residence that had framed the popular reception of 'Western Desert art'. Jorgensen provocatively pronounced: "groundlessness, rather than ground, as the subject of diasporic painting".⁸² While I do not accept Jorgensen's argument (for he totalises the diverse experiences of many artists into a single category), I acknowledge the value of his demand that we embrace the unromantic reality of many artists' experiences, especially those who lived on Country in their youth, before moving to missions or government-run settlements on the edge of the desert, where after decades of dislocation and poverty, they became artists. Significantly, Jorgensen argues that the diasporic experience of the people of the Western Desert is "embodied in the global experience of the Twentieth Century".⁸³ It is in these terms, of individual experience tempered by shared humanity, that I understand Warangula's life journey as an immigrant to Kukatja Country. Rather than anticipating how his paintings might have been derived from 'authentic' traditions existing outside time, I argue that Warangula's practice derived from an intersubjective worldview developed in exile by a skilled bushman who, when opportunity and seasons conspired, returned to his ancestral lands. Further, we should understand that Warangula returned to Country as a 'dogger' and was compelled to learn the metaphysical mysteries of his ancestral land *after* his experience of frontier modernity at Haasts Bluff.

Warangula's geographic and ontological crossings were interspersed between recorded events such as his first marriage, to Narawarintjina Napanangka, circa 1930 to 1958, and the birth of his first child, Narlie Nakamarra, in 1948. The journeys were also made in response to external circumstance, including the fear

79. Myers 2002a, p. 118.

80. Myers 2002a, pp. 116.

81. Myers 2002a, pp. 116-117.

82. Jorgensen 2018, p. 61.

83. Jorgensen 2018, p. 48.

of Japanese invasion during the Second World War, when Warangula gathered camels and (together with his mother, father and uncles) fled west to re-establish a semi-permanent camp at Ilpili, where they intended to see out the war.⁸⁴ I contend that it is essential to consider Warangula's experience in his ancestral Country during this historic period, if the fuller significance of his oeuvre is to be embraced.⁸⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, Warangula created a series of six *Dingo Dreaming* paintings in the dingo pupping season of 1973. The works show the artist's perception of sites outside his ancestral Country and provide insight into another otherwise invisible part of Warangula's experience. The paintings are based on the artist's memory of travels to distant rocky outcrops where dingoes made their dens.⁸⁶ When understood as biographical statements, Warangula's *Dingo Dreaming* series quite literally puts us in the footsteps of the artist as he tracks dingoes across the totemic landscape.⁸⁷

Albert Namatjira at Haasts Bluff

Central Australia's most famous individual, Albert Namatjira, was a regular visitor to and occasional resident of Haasts Bluff. Although 'Albert' had grown up with the church at Hermannsburg, he maintained powerful ancestral associations with the regions to the west of the mission.⁸⁸ Namatjira's familial, mythological and historical connections to Kukatja Country entitled him to use Haasts Bluff as a base for painting expeditions. Namatjira would travel the short distance to the north of the community to sit on a rise from which he could paint Ulunparru (Mount Edward), the mountain that lies between the ration station and Papunya. It is unsurprising, given the drama of this view, that it was the first of his paintings to be acquired by a state institution: *Illum-baura, Central Australia*, 1939, (Plate 17).⁸⁹ Namatjira continued to paint Ulunparru from the same small rise throughout his career.⁹⁰ It should also be noted that Namatjira painted Unyali (Haasts Bluff), the prominent landmark at the eastern terminus of Mount William.

The image on the dust jacket of C. P. Mountford's 1944 volume *The Art of Albert Namatjira* confirms Namatjira's familiarity with Haasts Bluff and refers directly

84. Tjakamarra (Mike Warangula) 2014, in conversation with the author.

85. The author's understanding of Warangula's life 'out bush' is based on conversations with the author while camping with him and his family at Ilpili between 1978 and 1979, and while travelling into the artist's Country of Tjikarri in 1978. I later visited Kalipinya in 1989 with Tarawa, who spoke of Warangula's use of the site as a base.

86. For longer discussion of Warangula's experience as a 'dogger', see: Kean 2017a, pp. 131-134.

87. Kean 2014; 2019b, p. 30.

88. Morton 1992, p. 39; According to Walter Tjampitjinpa, a founding Papunya artist, Albert's father Jonathan Namatjira was born at Blackwater, now an outstation on the northern slope of Ulunparru in the Belt Range between Papunya and the Haasts Bluff community: Kimber 2015, interview with the author.

89. 'Illum-baura' actually refers to [Ulunparru](#) (Mt Edward) in the Belt Range. Illum-baura was painted, in the morning light, from a raised knoll not far from the south of the community of Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff).

90. For example: Albert Namatjira, *Haasts Bluff*, c1956, National Gallery of Australia.

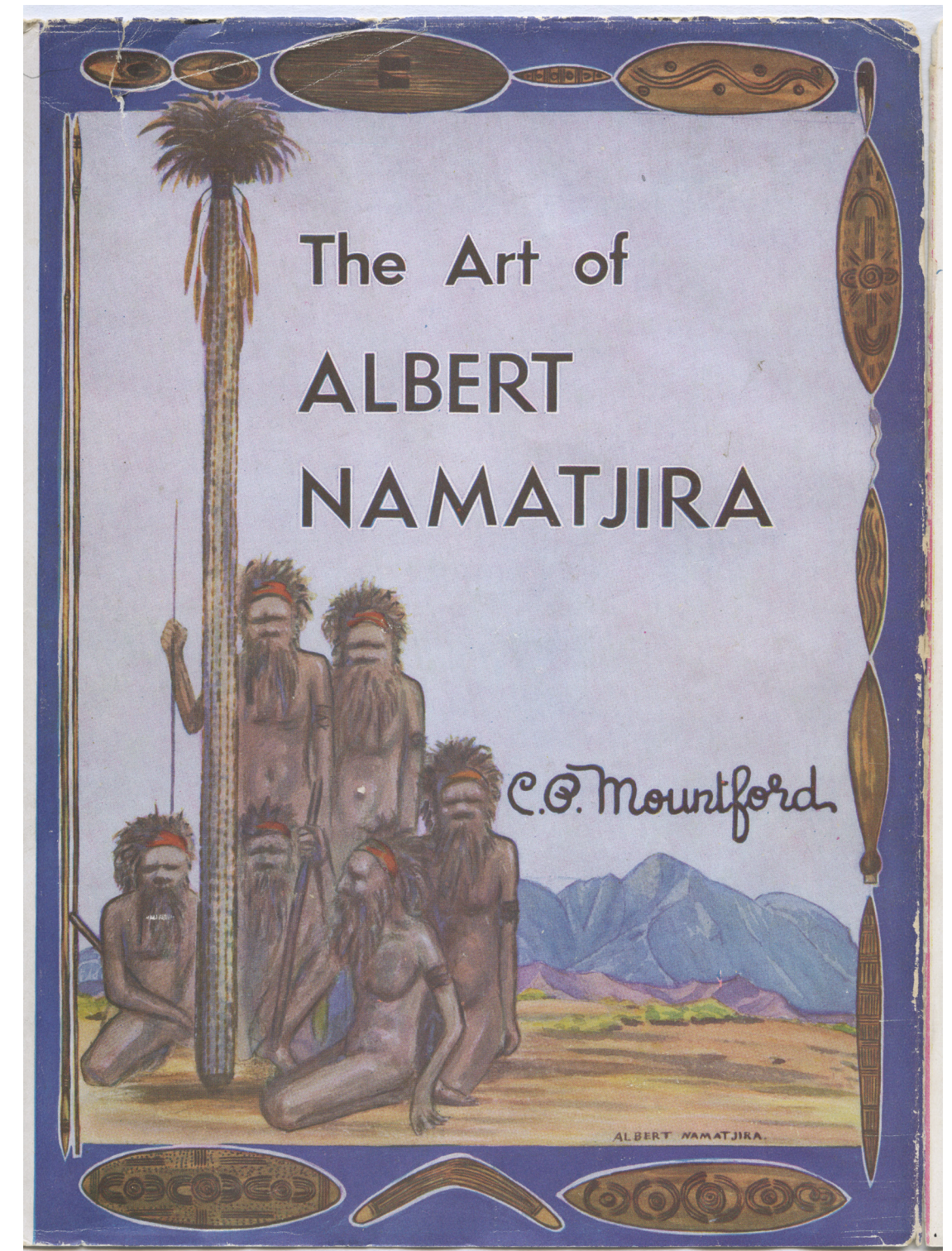


Fig. 18. Charles Mountford, *The Art of Albert Namatjira*, fifth edition, Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1949 (first published in 1944)

to the ritual lives of the Western Desert people who resided there in the mid-20th century. The publication was reissued in many editions (between 1944 to 1958) and as a consequence this is one of the artist's best-known images, though its function as 'cover art' belies the depth of information it encodes.⁹¹ Designed specifically for mainstream publication, Namatjira depicted six *tjilpi*

91. The volume is said to have sold 20,000 copies: Kleinert 1992, p. 239.

(Western Desert elders) gathered around an impressive ceremonial pole, on a cleared ceremonial ground. The distinctive profile of Ulunparru looms blue on the horizon. Rather than adopting his typical, slightly elevated perspective, Namatjira positioned himself at *tjilpi*-level, on the earth of the ceremonial ground.⁹² While the image appears more contrived than revelatory, its well-informed intimacy demands that we consider the possibility that Namatjira participated in Kukatja/Pintupi ceremonies at Haasts Bluff.⁹³ If that were the case, the *tjilpi tjuta* (group of old men) envisaged are likely to have been inspired by Pintupi men such as Ngarpilala Purukulu (Warangula's father) and Kamutu Tjungurrayi (Mick Namarari's foster father), both revered as ceremonial leaders who lived at Haasts Bluff during the period.⁹⁴ Moreover, if these assumptions are correct, Namatjira may have shared the ceremonial ground with some of the younger Pintupi men, such as Warangula, who would go on to found Papunya Tula painting. Evidence unearthed in the course of this research indicates that Namatjira was already familiar with Warangula well before he came to illustrate the cover for his first monograph.

Footprints: Namatjira Encounters Warangula

Namatjira was an accomplished bushman before he took up the brush. Skills learned as a child around Hermannsburg were enhanced while working as a 'camel boy' with Ali Mohamed and further polished while working as a stockman, before he returned to Hermannsburg to commence work as a craftsman.⁹⁵ We can therefore assume Namatjira possessed considerable acuity as a tracker: an astonishing skill to behold, for those not raised within a culture in which the faint traces on the ground are immediately understood as evidence.

Warangula was among a large group of 'new people' who walked into Hermannsburg in 1931. The arrival of the Ilpili clan would have caused consternation in the community, who were recovering from a prolonged drought, and the catharsis of Manangananga. For the Christian converts, themselves separated by a single generation from traditional lifeways, the unencumbered nakedness of the Pintupi arrivals must have aroused both pity and fear. Their apprehension would be amplified by the presence of eight ritually mature men: an

92. It is likely that the scene is drawn from a restricted men's area north-east of the community. A note at the bottom of the table of contents incorrectly states that the mountain is Haasts Bluff. Rather, the mountain is Ulunparru, immediately north of the settlement: Mountford 1949, p. IX.

93. My reading of the cover art was confirmed by Hubert Pareroultja, in discussion with the author, 2019. Other works, such as Albert Namatjira's *Mula (scrub-wallaby)* [sic], circa 1939, South Australian Museum, 41748, show the penultimate moments of elaborate rituals, and confirm that Namatjira possessed a privileged, insider view of Western Desert ritual. Rex Battarbee records, "Albert painted a good picture of *Achilpa* (wild cat) *corroboree*. There is no doubt he can do them. He got an old man to give him a few points on the colours": Battarbee 1939, diary, 26 August.

94. See descriptions of Ngarpilala and Kamutu in: Albrecht 1977, pp. 52-53; Strehlow 1970, p. 108; Gartrell, 1957, pp. 31-32.

95. Batty 1963, pp. 22-27.

ominous reminder of the persistent power of the 'old' religion of the *Tywerrenge*.⁹⁶ Accordingly, the footprints of each of the strangers would be memorised, and added to a collective mental inventory of known individuals at Hermannsburg.⁹⁷ Footprints are diagnostic: most desert people are able to interpret the identity of even faint human traces with astonishing insight. Tracking is therefore not limited to hunting, but extends to the scrutiny of everyday impressions that reveal who is present, and what they have done.⁹⁸

As a young man, Namatjira aspired to bring the gospel to 'bush people' who lived beyond the contact frontier. When the opportunity arose in 1932, Albert and his uncle Titus Renkeraka joined the lay preacher Ernst Kramer on an evangelical expedition into Kukatja Country to the west of Hermannsburg.⁹⁹ Travelling from Winparrku (Blanche Tower) towards Yamunturrngu (Mount Liebig), the party became aware of the passage of a group of women and children (Plate 18). Fortunately, Kramer recorded the sequence of events that brought two prospective artists together under a starry canopy, an encounter that would have remained uncelebrated without the preacher's diligence.

On 29th May 1932 Kramer wrote: "we eventually pull up in Wotutitara Creek. Albert sees more tracks of natives – this evening we have a Musical Concert after Reading 14 John..." The following morning Kramer directed Albert and Titus (Renkaraka) to make contact with the nearby party:¹⁰⁰

I send two Boys down to the Creek to follow up the Native Tracks – they came back in 1 hour's time & had seen 4 women and 7 children of Ilbilla [Ilpili] Mob...Hearing this we decided to Visit these natives for the evening & we arrived at the Camping Ground about 5. One track the Boys deducted as that of a Boy Called Yaragulla [Warangula] who had been to the Mission, they positively knew it by his peculiar shaped feet.¹⁰¹

I contend that the evening Namatjira and Warangula spent in each other's company at Wotutitara would provide the basis for later recognition, in various locales, as their roles changed through time.¹⁰²

96. Images of the immigrants from Ilpili are reproduced in: Albrecht 1977, p. 50. Yawintji Napanunka, Warangula's second wife, showed me these images in Papunya in 1978.

97. From my experience interacting with Central Australian people, individuals are readily recognised by subtle differences in footprints. For example, people will pull over to where another car has been parked to confirm who had just travelled in and embarked from it.

98. Strehlow 1951, p. 3.

99. Henson 1994, pp. 68-69. The party travelled through the region that Namatjira would later immortalise with watercolour. Intriguingly, Kramer's report is interspersed with strongly-drawn elevations of the adjacent landforms, sketches that would have fascinated Namatjira. The question emerges: did Kramer's elevations exercise a significant influence on the young Namatjira at this phase of his life, as he was searching for a deeper purpose?

100. Kramer 1932, p. 12; Tindale estimated that Warangula was ten years of age at the time of the encounter: Batty, ed. 2006a, p. 42.

101. Kramer 1932, pp. 12-13.

102. For more on the context of this journey, see: Henson 1994, pp. 68-69. For an analysis of Kramer's missionary endeavour, see: Jones 2007, pp. 311-313.

Namatjira would have been reminded of Warangula and his family in 1935, when Titus, who had been in charge of rations at Alyalpi, was prevented from leaving the area by Ngalpilala, who had expressed his determination, threatening the evangelist with his spear. As a result of Ngalpilala's insistence that the source of rations not be removed, Titus remained among those he wished to covert, where he was critical to the establishment of the Lutheran outpost at Haasts Bluff.¹⁰³

As a young man, Warangula laboured making the roads from Hermannsburg to Haasts Bluff and Areyonga.¹⁰⁴ Pick in hand, Warangula would have witnessed Namatjira's truck driving past in a cloud of dust and aspired to comparable mobility, made possible through the profession of 'ARTIST', written with emphasis on the driver's door.¹⁰⁵ Word of the money Namatjira was receiving on the sale of his paintings would have swirled in the air, like the dust left in the wake of his truck.¹⁰⁶

The men's destinies converged again in 1954, when both Namatjira and Warangula were called on to be present for the Queensland visit of the recently-crowned Queen Elizabeth II. As Australia's most prominent Aboriginal man, Namatjira was an obvious choice for the assignment, with one observer commenting: "Among the many distinguished Australians presented to the Royal Visitors, the tall, handsome, dark Aboriginal artist was without doubt the most outstanding personality".¹⁰⁷ Warangula and his classificatory brother Nosepeg Tjunkata travelled to Toowoomba. While it is not known if Warangula met Namatjira in Queensland, it is certain that their shared experience would have formed the basis for recognition, communication and mutual respect.¹⁰⁸

The paths taken by Namatjira and Warangula would inevitably have intersected on numerous occasions over three decades, both in the vicinity of Haasts Bluff and finally at Papunya. Narlie Nelson Nakamarra remembers her father Warangula scolding overenthusiastic children for getting too close to Namatjira as he sat painting in the months before his death.¹⁰⁹

Throughout these encounters, Namatjira would have expressed an ongoing bond with Warangula through kinship which, among desert people, is not confined to those with whom one shares direct biological relationships.¹¹⁰ Categories of

103. Albrecht 1977, p. 53.

104. Warangula c1979, personal communications with the author.

105. Namatjira was one of just two Aboriginal men in the region in the early 1950s who owned their own vehicles.

106. For discussion of Namatjira's earnings, see: Edmond 2014, pp. 218-219.

107. Unnamed 'observer' cited in: Edmond 2014, p. 266; Johnson 2008, p. 64.

108. Norman Tindale interviewed Warangula at Haasts Bluff in 1956, noting his impression of the Brisbane suburbs. Tindale 1956a, pp. 15-16, Journal AA 338/4/34, SAM Archives. Gartrell writes that Warangula and Tjonkata (Nosepeg Tjunkata) were "very restless" on returning and that they wanted "white man" possessions: Gartrell 1957, p. 101.

109. Nelson 2017, in conversation with the author.

110. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 18-19.

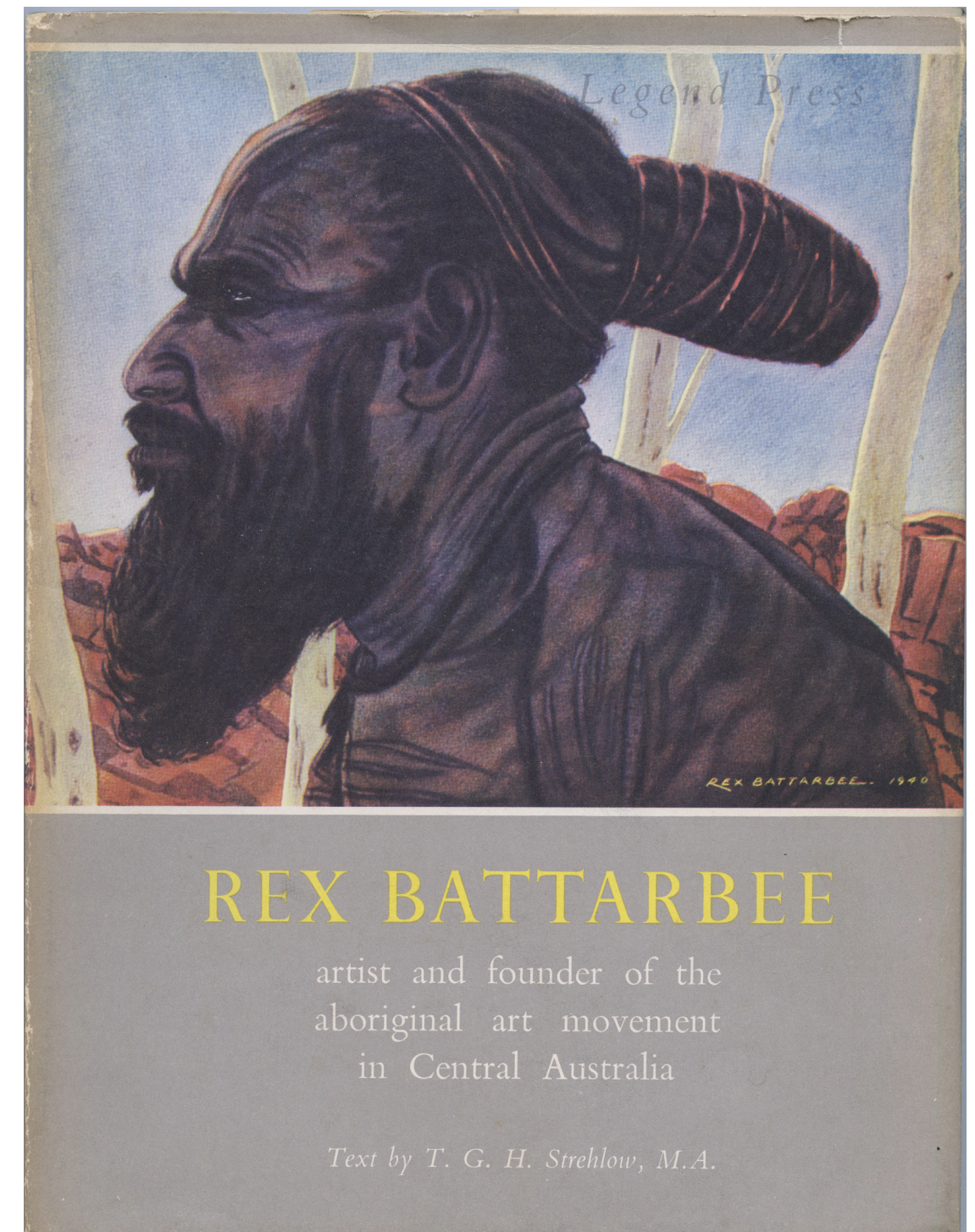


Fig. 19. Rex Battarbee, *Rex Battarbee artist and founder of the aboriginal art movement in Central Australia* (Napi Tjapaltjarri is depicted), Legend Press, 1956

kinship are equivalent across cultural groups in Central Australia and are enacted with individuals from distant clans. Every Aboriginal person has a 'skin name' (section or subsection) that will determine their relationship to other individuals. While these names are pronounced (and spelt) differently in various languages, they are mutually intelligible.¹¹¹ Namatjira was *Kngwarraye* (Arrernte); he was

111. Bowman, ed. 2015, p. XV.

therefore *atyemey*, (mother’s father) to Warangula, who was *Tjupurrula* (Pintupi). The relationship of *atyemey* (grandfather), while not biological, is significant and would have shaped beneficent interactions between the men.¹¹²

Pictures of Strangers

Namatjira, who in the language of his times, had been ‘civilised’ via the patronage of the Lutheran Mission, was a keen observer of the ‘wild’ Western Desert people who came to inhabit the liminal zone between tradition and mission. When distilled into the language of contemporary academic discourse, the naked Pintupi people were seen as the ‘other’ by the consecrated congregation of Hermannsburg. That term is especially apt as its metonym, ‘stranger’, translates to the Arrernte *ulerenye*, the name used to describe the unknown immigrants from the west.¹¹³ An examination of Namatjira’s early works, from 1934 to 1939, reveals that the artist made numerous images of the *ulerenye* who approached his Country. It is likely, for instance, that the sketches Namatjira produced for the Tasmanian ceramicist Violet Mace in 1934 depicted *ulerenye* who camped at the western periphery of Hermannsburg, where they hunted for game and collected grass to make their shelters (see Plate 19).

Namatjira’s fascination with *ulerenye* also finds form in portraits of Pintupi Lawmen, the most striking example of which is *Kamutu near Organ Pipes, Glen Helen* (Plate 20). The work is composed of two distinct elements: Kamutu, the much-feared sorcerer and Ilpili clan leader is shown in profile at the right of the image, his matted hair pulled back with an ochred headband. Kamutu is paired with an equally detailed depiction of the totemic site of Kwariitnama (literally, ‘Girls standing’) a dramatic landmark to the south of Glen Helen Gorge, associated with Women’s Dreaming.¹¹⁴ Namatjira equates Kamutu’s gravitas (a man who Pastor Albrecht describes as “physically... one of the finest Aboriginals I had ever met”) with the remarkable physiography of Kwariitnama.¹¹⁵ Interpreted within the Western conventions of the period, Namatjira had painted a ‘noble savage’, whose profile was comingled with the strange beauty of the ‘natural’ landscape — man and land — Kamutu and Kwariitnama — shown to heraldic affect. The artist’s intent however, may have been more nuanced than that understood when the painting was first exhibited.¹¹⁶ Contemporaneous Indigenous viewers, who

knew the site and the reputation of the man, would, I suggest, have perceived the juxtaposition very differently. They may well have been shocked to see a much-feared sorcerer from Ilpili in such close proximity to a major totemic site in the heart of Western Arrernte Country.¹¹⁷ Namatjira omitted the traditional owners of Kwariitnama from the image and, in their place, substituted a stranger from the west. Understood in this light, *Kamutu near Organ Pipes* is an uncompromising statement of unconventional emplacement, that of the *ulerenye* in Arrernte land. I argue that Namatjira’s portrait documented the dynamic transformation that unfolded as a result of sustained immigration of *ulerenye* from the west. Namatjira evoked the dangerous tension between tradition and the mission inside the contact zone.

Namatjira’s portraits of Pintupi men are not the only example of his contemporary place making. The exquisitely observed *Mangeraka and hunter*, 1939, (Plate 21) shows the pale morning light on the eastern side of an escarpment near Haasts Bluff, where Pintupi migrants hunted and collected bush foods. Silently, a hunter stalks a kangaroo; ears pricked but looking downwind, the animal is unable to locate the threat; in a moment the hunter will launch his spear. Although he captures the moment with precision, I contend that the depicted moment of the hunt is the culmination of a more complex narrative implied by this work. The hunter is naked and sports a traditional chignon; he displays none of the trappings of modernity present at contemporaneous campsites (see for example the artist’s *Landscape with figures*, circa 1938–39). The hunter is *ulerenye*, a stranger from the Western Desert, and Namatjira would have been aware that his right to hunt would have been granted following negotiations with the local Kukatja custodians.¹¹⁸ While Namatjira may appear to have been painting a romantic scene from the traditional past, I argue that he is documenting actions arising from the intercultural accommodation of various resident groups at Haasts Bluff in the late 1930s. Rex Battarbee’s account of an expedition guided by Namatjira in 1938 supports my contention: writing in his journal, the artist made frequent mention of camping with large groups of Pintupi and Ngaliya people who he described as “the most natural lot I have seen and most of them are without cloths and the children which are very numerous, look very well”.¹¹⁹ Rather than being painted at isolated artist’s camps, Battarbee’s accounts reveal that he and Namatjira often camped in a populated Land full of children’s cries, where *ulerenye* maintained largely traditional lifeways, supplemented with rations purchased with the bounty from dingo scalps. I reason that it is likely that Warangula (and other founding Papunya artists) were present at one or more of these shared camps, where they took the opportunity to see two artists, Battarbee and Namatjira, working side by side.

112. The kinship between Namatjira and Warangula would have been readily recognised as his people “had a land-based class-system and a totemic clan organization virtually identical to that of the Aranda”: Strehlow 1965, p. 143; Jason Gibson 2018, email correspondence.
113. When transposed into Western Desert orthography, the term *Ulerenye* is written *Luritja*. Its dictionary definition is “a dialect name; given to the people who now live on Arrernte land; Papunya Luritja is the eastern Pintupi dialect” and describes the evolution of the term and its current meaning. See: Hansen & Hansen 1992, p. 50.
114. Alternative spellings for the site include Kwaratnama, Kwarretname and Kwaarra Itnaama: Gibson 2019, email correspondence with the author.
115. Albrecht 1977, p. 49.
116. For accounts of the shifting interpretation of Namatjira’s intent, see: Burn & Stephen 1992; Mendelssohn 2014; Yunupingu 1989, p. 14.

117. Hubert Pareroutja, when shown a reproduction of the image, remarked; “It’s a bit strange, [that it is] not his Country”; Alice Springs 2019.
118. Strehlow records Pintupi and Ngaliya migrants “gorging themselves” on the abundance of game in the area in 1934, and being reckless in their use of fire for hunting: Strehlow 1991, p. 4.
119. Battarbee 1938, journal, 12 - 18 August.

Conclusion

The region around Haasts Bluff ration station was an intercultural location where the idea of becoming an artist was transmitted, through Namatjira, to curious young immigrants from the Western Desert who (as will be shown in Part Two), founded their own school of painting at Papunya. This chapter characterises Haasts Bluff as a crucible in which the elements that would later constitute Papunya Tula painting came together and were incrementally mixed. I addressed a gap in the literature, where the significance of Haasts Bluff in the history of Central Australian art has been bypassed, and argued that the remote station is the principal nexus between the Hermannsburg landscape school and Papunya Tula art.

Chapter Two established the region surrounding Haasts Bluff as the loci for continuous intercultural interaction before non-Indigenous prospectors and missionaries passed through the Country in the early 20th century. I tracked the intensification of interaction during the first half of the 20th century as Aboriginal people from distant Country were drawn into contact around the nascent ration station. While Anmatyerr, Ngaliya, various Western Desert groups and non-Aboriginal people all lived at the community, I focused on the interaction between the Arrernte and Pintupi people present at the Haasts Bluff, to demonstrate that their interactions occurred on two distinct planes. First, calling on Strehlow's contemporaneous anthropological observations, I examined differences in the approach to land ownership of the Arrernte and *Anangu*, who spoke distinctly different languages. Despite the contrast between cultures, common kinship systems, shared songlines and mutual curiosity ensured meaningful interaction. On the second plane of interaction, those who had experienced greater exposure to the European colonisers (and Lutheranism in particular) held advantage. Arrernte people such as Namatjira had been raised at Hermannsburg, were literate and had access to power and resources through relationships with the colonisers. The Pintupi had no such agency and earned their place in the new society solely by trading dingo scalps or labouring with pick and shovel. Despite the difference between their lived experiences, a new space opened in which individuals such as Namatjira and the Warangula could interact.

The stories of Namatjira and Warangula provided a prism through which broader histories have been anticipated. As a young man, Warangula used Haasts Bluff as a base from which to re-establish his connection with Country, learning its mysteries, and laying down the experiential base upon which his later artistic career was established. While associated with the church, Namatjira remained conversant with his traditions, travelling freely through Kukatja Country, painting sites of ancestral association and observing the *ulerenye*, who maintained a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the hinterland. I have shown that paintings by both individuals can be interpreted as richly textured documents, that bring otherwise invisible histories into focus.

Difference at Haasts Bluff was demarcated by dissimilar language, religion and apparel, yet Namatjira crossed geographic and cultural boundaries independently in his own vehicle, exuding enhanced mobility and a new identity (that of 'Artist') to those he encountered beyond the membrane separating modernity and tradition. Namatjira painted *ulerenye*, the strangers he met, and whose charismatic presence suggests a transformative regime of emplacement in the intercultural environment at Haasts Bluff.

Chapter Three will examine Namatjira's framing of visual elements within the boundless landscape around Haasts Bluff. I will argue that beneath the surface of his representational realism (learned from mentor Rex Battarbee) there lay aesthetic interests, religious belief and narrative intent, all of which linked Namatjira's work to that of the younger men who would follow in his footsteps.

Chapter Three
The Frame, Seeing and Being Seen

“The frame belongs then to the space of the observer rather than of the illusory, three-dimensional world disclosed within and behind. It is a finding and focusing device placed between the observer and the image”.¹

Meyer Schapiro, 1972

“Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from the strata of memory as from the layers of rock”.²

Simon Schama, 2004

Introduction

Years after taking up the brush, and when faced with some of his earliest watercolour landscapes, Albert Namatjira reflected on the effect that painting had on his perception. He is recorded as stating, “I painted as a new man, like a blindman, no idea, new man couldn’t see”.³ The artist appears to imply that on learning to paint, a veil was lifted from his eyes, enabling the Land to come into focus. Yet, evidence suggests that Namatjira was already an astute observer of ethnographic incident, and an accomplished tracker who could ‘read’ Country with assurance. It is likely therefore that his eyesight was perfect, and accordingly, Namatjira’s metaphoric transformation from “blind man” to “new man” demands interrogation⁴. Exactly what aspect of vision was he referring to? His statement raises questions regarding the heuristic nature of vision in Central Australia. If the best-known practitioner of representational realism can describe himself as having been ‘like a blind man’, how did his epiphany effect the work of those who followed in his footsteps? This chapter investigates the nature of intercultural revelation, and describes how Namatjira’s new way of seeing swayed the development of Central Australian art.

Namatjira’s transformation occurred after being engaged as a ‘camel boy’ by the travelling artist Rex Battarbee, to lead a painting expedition on camelback through the West MacDonnell Ranges in the winter of 1936.⁵ The tuition that Namatjira received from Battarbee will be discussed and particular attention given to the role that photography played in Namatjira’s evolving practice. While Namatjira and Battarbee are best known as landscape painters, they also painted portraits of Western Desert ‘tribesmen’ on successive expeditions to the Haasts

1. Schapiro 1972, p. 11.
2. Schama 2004 (1995), pp. 6-7.
3. Namatjira 1951, in Edmond 2014, p. 151.
4. Edmond 2014, p. 151.
5. Edmond 2014, pp. 138-150.

Bluff region. I argue that these stark portraits, in combination with the circulation of ethnographic photographs and comics, contributed to the identification of Indigenous culture as a subject for transcultural art by Central Australian artists of the second half of the 20th century.

Thereafter, I argue that the framing technique taught to Namatjira by Battarbee, resonated with the square of the Cross and served to define the boundaries of a hitherto boundless land. Battarbee’s instruction on cropping, either through a viewfinder of a camera, or a peephole held to the eye, became the way in which a scene could be excised from the ‘totemic landscape’ for the purpose of artistic representation.⁶ The notion of a ‘boundless land’ in arid Australia will be discussed, and the conceptual geometry underpinning the Indigenous understanding of connectedness across Country will be described. Despite Namatjira’s landscapes having been produced under the mantle of ‘assimilation’, and while they conform to Western pictorial conventions, I contend that they also encode aspects of Indigenous ontology. To borrow a phrase from natural history, Namatjira ‘acclimatised’ the frame, adapting the device in the service of existing social and cultural understandings of Country. Further, I argue that Namatjira’s apparently photographic representation of the landscape was rejected by a second generation of watercolour landscape artists, who placed more emphasis on culturally-inscribed evocations of ‘the sacred’, than on the ‘photographic’ representation of the site envisaged.⁷ Through an examination of representation of one site, Winparrku, by a variety of artists over time, I interrogate the possibility of ontological equivalence between watercolour landscape painting and Papunya Tula art.

Chapter Three will conclude with a discussion of how the representation of the sacredness of particular sites resulted in the production of autonomous paintings, operating within the constraints of a rectangular frame.⁸ I argue that the resolution of pictorial space perfected by Namatjira via ‘cropping’ a scene from the broader landscape, was akin to the approach later taken by Papunya artists who assembled signs into a single ‘image field’ to represent a specific locale.⁹

6. Edmond 2014, p. 152.
7. Battarbee 1951, p. 19.
8. I use the term ‘autonomous’ as in “A project for wholeness”: Palermo 2011.
9. I use the phrase “image field” with reference the discussion in: Schapiro 1972, p. 9.

Literature

Namatjira was the first Central Australian artist to achieve national recognition. He became a popular figure whose vision of Country pervaded suburban living rooms via high-quality reproductions produced by Legend Press, even as his paintings were shunned by most state Institutions.¹⁰ Namatjira's achievements, and the circumstances leading to his death are central to the story of 20th-century Australia, as chronicled in music, film and a play celebrating his life.¹¹ Namatjira has a special standing for Indigenous artists who have followed his path. The Gurindji/Malngin/Mudburra curator, writer and artist Brenda Croft insists "For Indigenous artists today, [Namatjira's legacy] is present in the long shadow of his spirit, cast over their shared history".¹² Non-Indigenous academic and curator Una Rey asserts that his artistic prominence extends beyond Indigenous culture, declaring him as "the foundational figurehead for postcolonial cross-cultural identities in Australia".¹³ My experience (having worked in the cultural sector for several decades) supports both Croft and Rey's assertions, however the arguments of Chapter Three are confined to Namatjira's influence on prospective artists to the west of Alice Springs.¹⁴

From the 1990s, authors have flagged the nexus between the Hermannsburg and Papunya schools of painting.¹⁵ Indeed, the need to revivify the watercolour landscape was felt during this period as the popularity of the 'acrylic' art movement swelled, threatening to engulf watercolour landscape painting.¹⁶ Calling on her experience as a linguist and arts-worker, seeking to bolster the heritage of Namatjira, Jenny Green examined the contemporary context in which both styles coexisted and flowed into each other at artistic and social levels. Green concluded that despite its local cultural value, the landscape style was under threat from the "the hegemony of the dot", a genre that had come to signify authenticity in an increasingly crowded Indigenous art market.¹⁷ Several years later, Green co-authored a biography with the North Arrernte lands rights activist and artist Wenten Rubuntja, who explained how he could operate as an artist seamlessly, and without contradiction, across both genres. Rubuntja's well-articulated position provides the background for my contention that the presence

10. Kleinert 1992, pp. 234-241.

11. For example: Slim Dusty, *Namatjira*, 1960; Archie Roach, *Native Born*, 1990; Lee Robinson, *Namatjira the Painter*, Australian National Film Board, 1947; John Tristram, *First Citizen*, Juniper Films, 1989; Big hART, *Namatjira Project*, 2009.

12. Croft 2002, p. 145.

13. Rey 2016a, p. 14.

14. Organisations including Iltja Ntjarra/Many Hands Art Centre (Alice Springs) and Hermannsburg Potters (Ntaria) have been established to foster Namatjira's legacy. Long Tom Tjapanangka, in Strocchi 1995, p. 31; French 2008, pp. I-II.

15. See Kleinert 1992, p. 243; Morton 1992, p. 39; Megaw 1992, pp. XI & 14-16.

16. Landmark events of the era included the Papunya Tula Artists pavilion at the World Expo in Brisbane in 1988, while acrylic canvases comprised the largest component of the landmark exhibition, *Dreamings the Art of Aboriginal Australia* at the Asia Society in New York in the same year.

17. Green 1992, pp. 307-310.

of Namatjira at Haasts Bluff was critical to the subsequent formation of Papunya Tula art. Moreover, Rubuntja recommends that we look beneath the watercolour washes of landscape painting to identify more substantive links between the two movements, a position that will be appraised in this chapter.¹⁸

While the influence Namatjira had on the founders of the Papunya movement has been generalised as "inspirational", this chapter will gather substantive evidence of direct association.¹⁹ To date, Vivien Johnson has written the most complete account of the effect Namatjira exerted on the presumptive Papunya Tula painters.²⁰ Johnson however picks up the story from 1958, when Namatjira was convicted for the supply of liquor to his cousin, Henech Raberaba and when, following an appeal, he was sentenced to three months "open detention" at Papunya, then a newly-established government settlement 30 kilometres north of Haasts Bluff.²¹ Adding to Johnson's evidence, I contend that Namatjira had already influenced young Pintupi and Anmatyerr artists, before the settlement was established at Papunya.

Tuition and Reciprocity: Battarbee and Namatjira

The collaboration between Battarbee and Namatjira continues to be the subject of debate, decades after their first expedition in 1936.²² I will not substantially further that discussion, but rather draw attention to those aspects of their relationship that shaped the development of Namatjira's vision. Notwithstanding, it is impossible to approach any facet of their association without addressing a persistent myth that obscures a balanced understanding of their collaboration. The mythmaking started early and was well established by 1944 when C. P. Mountford published *The Art of Albert Namatjira*, just six years after the artist's first solo exhibition.²³ Mountford's breathless account of Namatjira's inexplicably swift mastery of the watercolour technique comprises the volume's dramatic centrepiece:

Almost at once the native artist absorbed the rules of perspective, composition, and the way of seeing colour and setting it down on paper. As the tutor watched the extraordinary progress of his pupil he was filled with astonishment that such a man, not one generation removed from his stone-age culture, could in a matter of months, understand and utilise the fundamentals of art that had taken white men years to learn.²⁴

18. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 159-162.

19. Perkins 2010, p. 183; Rey 2016a, p. 16.

20. Johnson 2015, pp. 26-50.

21. Johnson 2015, pp. 28 & 32-35.

22. Edmond 2014; Rey 2016a; Nicholson 2017; McLean 2018.

23. Mountford 1944; Megaw, R. 1992, pp. XVII-XVIII.

24. Mountford 1949, p. 55.

Namatjira's execution of 'the fundamentals' was by all accounts remarkable; however, Mountford's story was repeated so uncritically that it assumed miraculous proportions. Cemented in an era of cultural assimilation, the transformation of Namatjira's 'native' skill into successful mimesis reflects prevailing hierarchical notions of the superiority of Western art and culture - his artistic intentions were seemingly irrelevant to his ascent. The statement that Namatjira "painted like a new man" was too easily interpreted to mean that he painted like a white man.²⁵ Despite academic reassessment, the notion of the immaculate conception of Namatjira's artistic gift was so thoroughly absorbed into the Australian imaginary that it persists in myth into the present.²⁶

To achieve a more considered appreciation of Namatjira's artistic trajectory, it is vital to recognise that the 1936 expedition with Battarbee was not Namatjira's first opportunity to observe European artists painting *en plein air* in Central Australia. Employed as a 'camel boy' and tour guide from 1932, Namatjira had already watched artists Jessie Traill and Una Teague painting at Palm Valley, ten kilometres from Hermannsburg.²⁷ Namatjira also observed Ernst Kramer, with whom he travelled as an evangelist, sketching elevations of prominent landmarks in Kukatja country (Plate 18).²⁸ I therefore conclude that Namatjira had already begun to interpret the Land in picturesque terms before his first expedition with Battarbee, and that his transformation from 'blind man' may have been more gradual than his account, in Aboriginal English, might suggest.²⁹ Despite the significance of these precedents there can be no doubt that Battarbee's instruction fuelled Namatjira's technical advance. A comparison of works from the start of the partnership in 1936, with those completed on the last expedition in 1939 highlights the pace and extent of Namatjira's progression. Painted just nine days into their first expedition, *Amphitheatre, Palm Valley* is a somewhat awkward representation of a site that was very familiar to the artist - violet shadows contradict and flatten the dramatic rock formations they seek to define. Contrast that clumsiness with the sublime accomplishment of *Flowering Shrubs*, (Plate 78) painted three years later. Set at the terminus of Ormiston Gorge, the viewer's eye is led through a mosaic of plants across a raised plateau to rest in the deeply folded mountain that defines the edge of a vast pound. The artist's newfound grasp of the media is evident in his balancing of restraint and exposition; the filamentous stamens of Melaleuca shrubs shine with the brilliance of untouched watercolour paper, while the deeply eroded topography of the pound is defined economically with a soft pink and two contrasting blues.

25. Namatjira 1951, in Edmond 2014, p. 151.

26. Based on anecdotal conversations, including those heard in the Albert Namatjira Gallery at Araluen Arts Centre in 2017 and the National Gallery of Australia in 2018.

27. Hardy 1992, p. 152; Edmond 2014, p. 118.

28. Kramer produced a series of watercolour elevations of notable landmarks *en route*: Kramer 1932.

29. Namatjira's comment was made in English, his third language, of which he was an imperfect speaker.

The comparison suggests that Battarbee's tuition enhanced Namatjira's capacity to register specific hues in nature and to identify the exact pigment(s) with which to replicate his perception.³⁰

Uncritical accounts of the miraculous effect of Battarbee's tuition on Namatjira also fail to acknowledge the reciprocity at the heart of their relationship. Battarbee's diaries are replete with 'stories' of the totemic origins of particular sites, accounts that reveal how Namatjira was consciously teaching Battarbee how to see a Country animated though Indigenous belief.³¹ Just as Namatjira learned the Western conventions of perspective and palette, Battarbee was taught reverence for totemic ancestry embodied in the Land. Battarbee's diary entries also confirm that not only did Namatjira acquire technical skills swiftly; he was alert to the unseen religious associations of the Country he represented.³²

Photography: "a part of the painting kit"

In the recent double biography *Battarbee and Namatjira*, Martin Edmond emphasises the hitherto neglected role of photography in the evolution of Namatjira's practice. Significantly, Edmond identifies Namatjira's eagerness to learn the basics of photography, writing: "Over this period [the 1938 expedition], at Albert's request, Rex also taught him how to take and develop photographs". Adding, "At some point [Battarbee] gave Namatjira a camera and taught him how to use it; as a part of the painting kit".³³ Namatjira's close-cropped compositions of the period reflect Battarbee's idea that the camera was integral to modern landscape painting. Namatjira continued taking photographs and on his return to Central Australia in the winter of 1939, Battarbee noted: "Albert showed me some of his photos he took on his western trip", confirming: "There are some good snaps".

The destiny of Namatjira's "snaps" remains a mystery but it is most likely the negatives were absorbed into Battarbee's archive.³⁴ Motivated by the prospect of discovering some of Namatjira's unknown exposures, the artist Tom Nicholson and I have trawled through Battarbee's archive, speculating about Namatjira's particular interests and straining to identify any tell-tale shadows cast before the lens of the camera.³⁵ Although we were not able to definitively attribute Namatjira's authorship to particular images, there are several enticing possibilities that invite more detailed scrutiny (for a comparison photographs that

30. Edmond 2014, p. 153.

31. Namatjira's narration of Country commenced on the second day of the first expedition in 1936 and records how his instruction continued intermittently throughout shared expeditions: Battarbee 1936, 8 July, Battarbee diary, Flinders University Art Museum.

32. See for instance, Battarbee 1939, 20 August – 5 September, Battarbee diary, Flinders University Art Museum.

33. "Battarbee had a travelling dark room, and while on the road, developed his own photographs in creek beds on moonless nights": Edmond 2014, p. 157.

34. Edmond 2014, p. 157. For an account of Battarbee's photographic practice see Jones, 2011b.

35. Battarbee, archive.

may have been taken by Namatjira and his framing of trees in paint, see Plates 22 and 23).³⁶

Namatjira's instrumental use of the viewfinder is evident in his subsequent portraits of trees, which appear to have been composed while the artist balanced among the scree of rugged rockfalls. Namatjira's experiments in photographic framing coincided with the period in which he mastered the subtleties of the watercolour palette; the excitement of these simultaneous discoveries is evident in *Quarta-tooma (Ormiston Gorge)*, 1939 (see Plate 24). Painted while seated on a boulder at the base of a towering gorge, the artist was enfolded in the refracted red light of its polished walls – precipitous vermillion cliffs intersecting to suggest the course of an ephemeral creek, as seen through the viewfinder.³⁷

To anyone raised amidst ubiquitous photographic reproductions, representational realism seems natural and inevitable. Yet, single-point perspective, fashioned through a camera's viewfinder, or by holding squared-off index fingers before the eye was a revolutionary innovation for Namatjira and his immediate followers.³⁸ Desert visuality was dynamically attuned to constant spatial adjustment and the interpretation of subtle tracks and traces, rather than being contrived from a fixed viewpoint characteristic of photography or *en plein air* landscape painting. The fixed-point perspective, taught to Namatjira by Battarbee, introduced the people of the Haasts Bluff region to the constitution of a subject in Western vision.

Recognising 'The Native Subject'

Haasts Bluff became an intercultural theatre in which new ways of seeing, and being seen, were experienced (Plate 25). Battarbee's photograph of an impromptu exhibition of his paintings, taken in the early 1940s, stands for numerous undocumented events where the sharing of images provided a common ground for individuals of incommensurate experience (see Plate 26). The photograph shows seated Pintupi men gazing at paintings propped behind a low windbreak. The exhibition includes three landscapes and two portraits. Warangula would have been in his early twenties, approximately the age of the younger man featured in one of the portraits, and given his outgoing personality; it is possible that Warangula posed for Battarbee.³⁹ The making of detailed portraits was a novelty, and we can be assured, on the basis of Battarbee's earlier experience at

36. Nicholson's research has led to two distinct projects; the first with the descendants imagining the photographic collaboration between Namatjira and Battarbee (Art Gallery of South Australia, 2017) and an artist book and series of charcoal drawings: Nicholson 2018.

37. The author identified the location, in differing light conditions, in 2015 and 2016. The first of these trips was undertaken as a tutor while travelling with Susan Lowish and Melbourne University students in the Aboriginal Art Centres of the Northern Territory course.

38. Edmond 2014, p. 152.

39. The identity of many of Battarbee's sitters remains unknown. For an account of Warangula's activities during the mid-20th century, see: Kean 2017a, pp. 131-134.

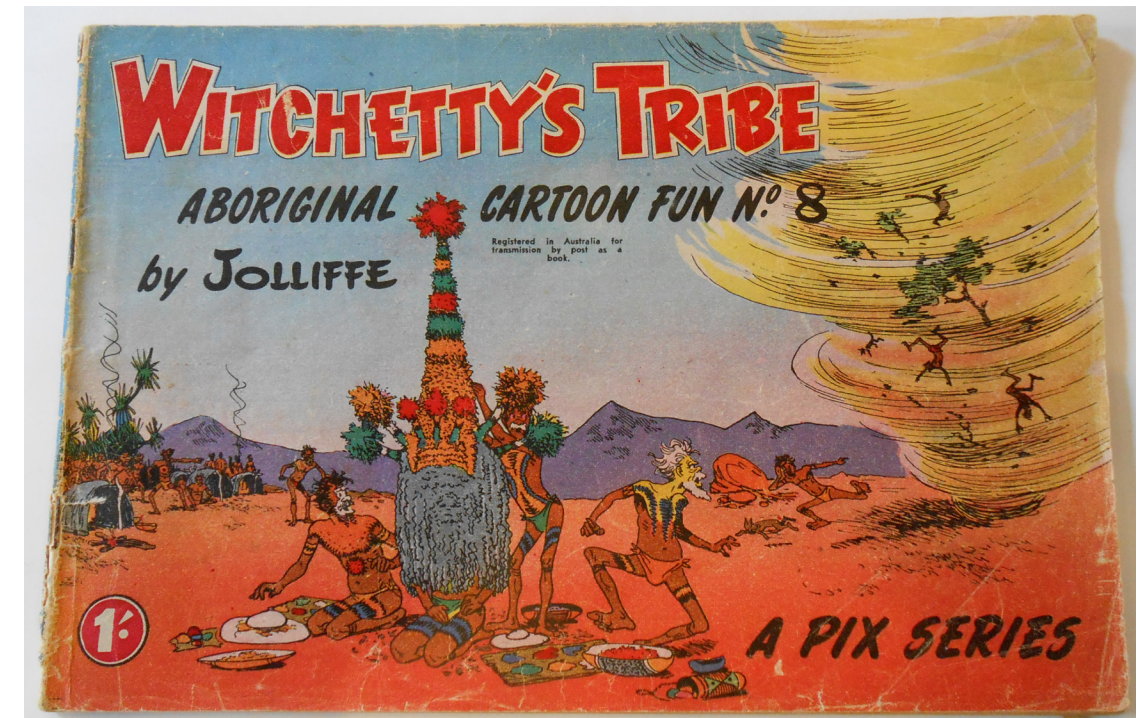


Fig. 20. Eric Jolliffe, *Witchetty's Tribe Cartoon Fun No. 8 by Jolliffe, A Pix Series*, circa 1960, cartoon, State Library of Victoria

Hermannsburg, that onlookers crowded over the artist's shoulder as the faces of their relatives materialised from a rectangular sheet of paper.⁴⁰

The art historian Meyer Schapiro points to the singularity of the “defined smooth surface” of a picture plane, arguing “such a field corresponds with nothing in nature or mental imagery where the phantoms of visual memory come up in a vague unbounded void”.⁴¹ The uncanny verisimilitude of sitter and image no doubt aroused a growing intersubjectivity among observers, whereby images produced by outsiders came to stand for and reinforce self-knowledge.⁴² Witnessing these portraits, whether propped against the windbreak, or in the process of creation, must have also prompted an awareness of the Indigenous subject as a commodity among the curious young men of Haasts Bluff. This awareness would become critical at Papunya, where Indigenous subjects were the focus of the new art form.

The representation of the Indigenous subject was not limited to the high art category. Marjorie Gartrell, a nurse, worked at Haasts Bluff in the mid-1950s and remembered contributing to the circulation of another class of images:

Whenever a Jolliffe cartoon of “Witchetty's Tribe” came to hand, it always went to the window [of the clinic]. These were hardly educational, but drew natives from everywhere. They studied them for ten minutes at a time, but saw nothing funny in them. These of all our pictures were something that they could identify themselves with.⁴³

40. Hardy 1992, p. 148. Battarbee, Arthur Murch and Eric Jolliffe are known to have visited Haasts Bluff.

41. Schapiro 1972, p. 9.

42. Jackson 1998, pp. 6-8.

43. Gartrell 1957, p. 44

The cartoon series *Witchetty's Tribe* contained a range of imagery derived from Eric Jolliffe's direct observation of Aboriginal people. One volume includes a portrait of a young boy at Haasts Bluff signalling that the artist visited the community on at least one occasion. Fascinated by outback life, Jolliffe alternately presented Aboriginal people as free souls, unfettered by the constraints of city life, or as violent wife-beating 'natives'.⁴⁴ Despite the disdain with which Jolliffe's cartoons are sometimes held, the art historian Joan Kerr insists that his "sympathies were always on the other side of the frontier".⁴⁵ On occasion, Jolliffe reserved the full-colour cover of his cartoons for elaborate depictions of ceremonial scenes derived from classic ethnographic treatises. One of his covers is based on the photograph *Frog Totem at Imanda*, copied from *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, 1899, by Spencer and Gillen (Fig. 20). The image would have been greeted with a mix of fascination and concern if pasted on the window of the Haasts Bluff Clinic, for it revealed aspects of secret men's ceremony in considerable detail. Despite low levels of literacy, images of Aboriginal ritual returned to Central Australia in a variety of guises, where pastors, schoolteachers, artists, and anthropologists shared them before Indigenous sensitivity about 'restricted' imagery was considered relevant.⁴⁶ The European fascination with images of 'native' ritual complemented an existing market for *Tywerrenge*, thus reinforcing the awareness among Aboriginal men that there was a strong European market for images and objects of customary culture.⁴⁷ Artists such as Battarbee, Mountford, Jolliffe and Arthur Murch, all of whom visited Haasts Bluff in the mid-20th century, exemplified that fascination and fostered the market for exotic imagery.

Like many visitors, Battarbee sought out Kamutu Tjungurrayi, who he regarded as "a real blackfellow in his native state".⁴⁸ A powerfully-built man of late middle-age, Kamutu was a renowned 'sorcerer' who possessed unquestioned authority in both ritual and secular spheres.⁴⁹ Conveying his impressive physical carriage, Battarbee's photograph shows Kamutu in body paint, with thick ochre bands applied over his shoulder and onto his chest (Plate 25). Far from being accidental, the adornment recurs in other images of Kamutu, suggesting he consciously displayed signs of his ritual achievement to impress Europeans, not merely as residual evidence of ceremonial participation.⁵⁰

44. Joan Kerr, Eric Ernest Jolliffe, <https://www.daa.org.au/bio/eric-ernest-jolliffe/biography/> accessed 05.07.2019.

45. Kerr 1999, pp. 68-69.

46. Robinson 1976, p. 130; Gibson & Kean 2016.

47. Gibson 2018, p. 10 (unpublished manuscript). For instance, Nosepeg Tjupurrula (a Haasts Bluff resident) featured as a 'tracker' and the like in several films: Stoneking 1987.

48. Battarbee cited in Hardy 1992, p. 150.

49. Strehlow 1970, p. 108.

50. See for example, *A group of Aboriginal leaders, Kamutu second from left*, a photograph in which he is the only 'leader' to wear body paint: Albrecht 1977, p. 53. It is usual that ceremonial body paint is at least partially rubbed off at the culmination of ceremony and although its traces remain evident, the detail is obscured. Kamutu's adornment appears fresh in each instance.

Battarbee's intriguing photographic portrait deserves more prolonged attention. Kamutu's obvious, participation as its subject confounds a simple reading of the image. The Pintupi sorcerer is neither passive nor unaware. Kamutu is shown examining one of Battarbee's watercolour landscapes, raised to the burning light of the sun. When considered through a post-colonial lens, Kamutu's agency becomes critical. Was he an innocent subject caught in the act of looking at a picture? Or was he complicit in the creation of the image, complicit in a recursive double take on the art of picture making? The photography historian Jane Lydon observed that late 19th-century photographs taken at Coranderrk Mission near Melbourne, were in fact co-productions in which successive photographers were co-opted to capture scenes that were strategically staged by the local Wurundjeri to achieve their own political ends.⁵¹ Adopting Lydon's analysis, I propose that Battarbee and Kamutu should be attributed as co-creators of the portrait. Indeed, the picture epitomises the archaeologist Mike Smith's conclusion that desert ethnography is driven by a "profound intellectual exchange between elite members of two very different societies".⁵² Significantly, this photograph also forecasts the exercise of cultural authority that would later be vital to the success of Papunya Tula painting. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, like Kamutu before him, was not humbled by European power, but used images to become a broker of cultural exchange.⁵³

Framing an Unbounded Land

Just as portraiture was an unfamiliar genre, with no direct equivalent in Aboriginal visual culture, there are few precedents for the Western 'landscape' genre.⁵⁴ Immigrants from the west who witnessed the lanky *whitefella* and the stout *blackfella* seated together, each conjuring a ghostly image of the land in front of them, must have been perplexed as to the purpose of this strange activity. The pictorial isolation of specific geographic locations from a continuous physical world disrupted the customary Indigenous sense of Country. This section will examine how framing of particular landforms jibed with customary understandings of unbounded Land.

Strehlow coined the phrase "totemic landscape" to describe a cultural environment in which landforms were understood to have been created by the actions of travelling ancestors.⁵⁵ The paths of these ancestral heroes criss-crossed the country, linking geographically distant locales in multiple directions.⁵⁶

51. Lydon 2005, pp. 60-64.

52. Smith 2013, p. 341.

53. For an appreciation of this aspect of Kaapa's personality, see: Kean 2011a, pp. 104-106.

54. As one of the principle subjects of Western Art, 'landscape' has accrued multi-layered significance: Schama 2004, pp. 6-7.

55. From the title of the essay: Strehlow 1970; Munn 1970, p. 142.

56. Lewis 1976, pp. 265-271; Johnson 2003, pp. 86-115.

Typically, the paths of ancestral heroes, such as *Mala* (Rufous Hare-wallaby), entered the known realm from the land of distant neighbours.⁵⁷ Other entities arose from Pintupi Country: Winpa the Lightning Ancestor stood up at Kalipinyapa, where he conjured Clouds, Rain, Hail and Running Water before, as a party, all these elements rumbled east, beyond the ken of the Pintupi custodians to distant Country, to collide with comparable storms, originating from Arrernte, Anmatyerr and Warlpiri Country. The totemic landscape is therefore continuous: not delimited by the horizon, custodianship, occupation or personal knowledge of far-off Country. A local ‘here’ and a distant, unknown ‘there’ can be connected by the trails of ancestral heroes.

Sutton described the conceptual realm of Western Desert people as consisting of “a potentially infinite grid of connected places/Dreamings/people”.⁵⁸ This conceptual schema consists of numerous sites bonded by a network of songlines. Navigator David Lewis noted that, while journeying in the early 1970s, Pintupi men called on songlines as a mnemonic instrument for orientation within a potentially cryptic environment.⁵⁹ The practical methods described by Lewis overlay an understanding of the totemic geography that, according to the linguist Luise Hercus, “gives deeper significance to the ordinary geography and makes it more memorable”. Continuing, Hercus describes “Ancestors who fashioned the landscape [and who] followed the same pursuits and went along the same recognised routes as Aborigines in their travels”.⁶⁰ Orientation within the totemic geography is of particular relevance to artistic practice, for as Sutton demonstrates, a mind map, when explicitly described, illustrated or painted, can become a tool for intercultural discourse.⁶¹

Nancy Munn described the core system of Warlpiri wayfinding as a “site-path framework”.⁶² This conceptual device is not culturally specific; the designer Henry Beck employed a comparable site-path framework to create his map of the London Underground, a model replicated for travellers of urban transport networks around the globe. Nevertheless, the framework requires definition, as it is the conceptual scaffolding upon which much desert art is assembled (see Plate 27).

At the most rudimentary level, circles (or concentric circles) represent named sites, whereas lines (whether strait or sinuous) denote travel between those sites. The direction of travel between sites is not expressed, unless the interconnecting lines are replaced with the (directional) tracks of ancestors.⁶³ Essentially, the site-path framework recalls and communicates approximate geographic

57. Peterson et al. 1978; Myers 1986, pp. 59-68.

58. Sutton 1988, p. 84.

59. Lewis 1976, pp. 249–282.

60. Hercus 1971, p. 94.

61. Sutton 1988, pp. 80-88; Sutton 1998a, pp. 363 & 379-383; Kean 2017c, pp. 89-91.

62. Munn 1973a, pp. 128-138.

63. Munn 1973a, pp. 150-181.

relationships in space, and as Sutton has explained, the same essential framework can be expanded infinitely, beyond the known horizon, to encompass sites under the custodianship of distant groups, who are connected by implication through a network of songlines.⁶⁴ Sutton’s insight that the “Right angled corners and straight edges (of a canvas) have suddenly exerted new pressures on ancient design practices”, is critical to the current discussion, in which the viewfinder or frame limits the scope of representation.⁶⁵ By way of contrast, signs drawn in the sand to produce a ‘mud map’ exist in a conceptual space without edges.

The revolutionary impact of Namatjira’s framing practices can be best appreciated by examining works painted at the height of his experimentation with photography. Returning to *Quarta-tooma* (literally, ‘Egg-hit’, Plate 24), the artist used a viewfinder to isolate a single locale from the episodic songline of a travelling Emu Ancestor. While saturated with refracted light, the scene is presented without reference to directional coordinates, or any iconography indicating the Emu, or the breaking of its egg.⁶⁶ Rather than providing a comprehensive context around the Emu’s journey, *Quarta-tooma* is constrained by the rectangular format of the viewfinder. Yet the period when Namatjira painted *Quarta-tooma* coincides with his nightly narration of Dreaming stories to Battarbee. Without question, Namatjira was alive to the totemic origins of the Land through which he and Battarbee travelled, and we can be certain that his mental map of Country was underpinned by customary knowledge. Yet, Namatjira chose to paint ‘views’ that were governed by the constraints of the ‘right angled corners and straight edges’ of sheets of white paper. The representation of familiar sites, presented in elevation as ‘landscapes’ must have exerted a profound impact on the young men of Haasts Bluff. I contend that Namatjira and Battarbee’s landscapes opened a window, through which the Land could be *registered* through the eyes of the ‘new man’, the painter, in addition to being *mapped* in a customary sense, as the manifestation of ancestral action.

Primitivism and “the technology of enchantment”

Mid-20th century admiration of Namatjira pivots on his capacity, as an Aboriginal, to capture the likeness of the West MacDonnell ranges with unrivalled fidelity.⁶⁷ While Namatjira’s capacity to reproduce an accurate likeness of a chosen site has resulted in his paintings being fetishised as objects of wonder, I consider the extent to which his facility masks other intent. Rather than being awed by the limpid realism of Namatjira’s work, an effect described by the anthropologist

64. Sutton 1998a, pp. 381-383.

65. Sutton 1998a, p. 379.

66. The author visited the site in 2015, 2016 and 2019, under different light conditions, to determine the exact viewpoint.

67. Kleinert 1992, pp. 217-244.

Alfred Gell as “the technology of enchantment”, I search for evidence that connects his work to the more schematic paintings of those who followed in his footsteps.⁶⁸

Namatjira’s brother-in-law Rueben Pareroultja and his brothers Edwin and Otto commenced painting watercolour landscapes in 1940. Battarbee regarded their approach more expressive and less *photographic* than that of their mentor, comparing them to the Post-Impressionists: Edwin’s with Paul Gauguin, and Otto’s with Vincent Van Gogh.⁶⁹ In 1951, Battarbee wrote that Otto conveyed “aboriginal qualities in his work by making his shadows like aboriginal rock drawings”. Continuing, he wrote: “I am sure this tendency was purely unconscious, brought about by his dreaming and his unspoilt attitude towards art”.⁷⁰ Making a direct link between Otto’s brushstrokes and customary artistic practice, Battarbee considers his “concentric circles and wavy lines as deriving from the iconography of ‘sacred churingas’ [Tywerrenge]”.⁷¹ By the 1960s, Otto Pareroultja had established a recognisable personal style, inspiring titles such as *Totemic Rhythm*, coined by Battarbee to excite consideration of the artist through the lens of Primitivism (see Plate 28). In contradistinction to the ‘wildness’ conferred by Battarbee’s title, I propose that Pareroultja’s compositions conform to strict protocols, for they consciously lead the viewer along proscribed pathways to significant totemic landmarks. If translated into a traditional site-path framework, the ancient tree in the foreground could be signified by a set of concentric circles, linked by a line leading to the central rocky outcrop, once again signified by concentric circles, and so on along the distinct sets of rocky ranges, to produce a network of related sites.

Wenten Rubuntja learned watercolour painting at Namatjira’s feet, but his connections to the watercolour movement were also deep and multi-stranded.⁷² Wenten’s uncle Eli Rubuntja was a close friend of Edwin Pareroultja, the second star of the Hermannsburg School.⁷³ Indeed, the sinuous line of Wenten Rubuntja’s watercolour landscapes is closer to that of the Pareroultja brothers, than to Namatjira’s ‘photographic’ style. Compare *Urlatherrke – Mt Zeil* (Plate 29) with Otto Pareroultja’s *Totemic Rhythm*: both artists direct focus towards the singular geomorphic configuration, a rocky outcrop located at the centre of the composition.

Taking the Pareroultja brothers and Rubuntja as indicative of a wider trend among the second and third generation of watercolour painters, I conclude that it was not the ‘photographic’ quality of the Namatjira’s work that his followers wished to emulate. Rather, they adopted Namatjira’s approach to the cropping of salient

68. The phrase “technology of enchantment” is derived from the title of the essay that informed my thinking on the relationship between verisimilitude and intent in Namatjira’s landscapes: Gell 1999.
69. Battarbee 1951, pp. 23 & 27.
70. Battarbee 1951, p. 27.
71. Battarbee 1951, p. 27.
72. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 91-93.
73. Battarbee 1951, p. 22.

elements from unbounded Land to create images of place. The framing process gives emphasis to particular trees, pathways, waterholes and topographic features. Significantly, comparable features are encrypted as tracks, signs and icons in Papunya Tula paintings. For example, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s *Man’s love story*, 1978 (Plate 30), describes the totemic landscape at Ngarlu on Mount Allan Station.⁷⁴ Accomplished practitioners in both landscape and Papunya Tula genres extracted maximum expressive potential from their respective media (be it watercolour on paper, or acrylic on canvas) while encoding elements of the totemic landscape with which they had particular affinity.

Rubuntja’s artistic practice is of particular relevance, for his career bridged both the watercolour and the acrylic art movement. From 1976 until his death in 2005, Rubuntja painted both ‘landscape’ and ‘dot’ paintings with originality and flare.⁷⁵ As an Alice Springs resident, Rubuntja observed the rise of the genre he described as ‘dot painting’ as it supplanted his beloved ‘landscape’ style in a burgeoning market for Aboriginal art during the 1980s and 1990s. Significantly, Rubuntja was a contemporary and countryman of Kaapa, Leura and Possum, with whom he had worked as a stockman on various cattle stations.⁷⁶ Wenten’s son, Mervyn Rubuntja, confirmed that his father remained friends with the Anmatyerr artists after their stockman days, and it is probable that his early familiarity with dot painting came from observing them painting small boards, the proceeds from which were used to support them on their frequent visits to Alice Springs.⁷⁷ While Rubuntja’s approach to embellishment was unique, his ‘dot’ paintings employ the planar orientation and classical signs popularised by the Papunya artists. More specifically, they share compositional conventions that (as will be shown in Chapter Five) Kaapa and Leura developed. Rubuntja was in an ideal position to understand the relationships between landscape and acrylic ‘dot paintings’, going beyond surface treatment to argue for more substantial complementarity:

The landscape painting is the country himself, with the Tywerrenge [sacred object, Law] himself. Tywerrenge come out of there. Songs come out of that body [of the Country]. See all this one, this little waterhole — whitefella can take a picture, say it’s good country — but we’ve got the song to sing. They take a good picture like eagle-hawk. They’re doing it for a pretty thing. But we’re not photographers, taking pictures. The country has got sacred sites, that stone, that mountain has got Dreaming and himself is sacred country.⁷⁸

74. For a description of the Dreaming in relation to local topographic features, see: Kearney 1985, pp. 17-18.
75. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 159-170.
76. The Rubuntja clan estate is centred on Rubuntja (Mount Hay), a Fire Dreaming site located immediately to the south of Tywerl/Altijira, the Emu Dreaming estate where Kaapa was conceived: Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 81-84. Mervyn Rubuntja confirmed that his father knew the Papunya artists: Rubuntja, M. 2015, in conversation with the author.
77. Rubuntja’s early ‘dot paintings’ are stylistically distinct, suggesting that while he may have been inspired by encounters with individuals such as Kaapa and Leura, they appear to have been developed in relative isolation. The author supplied small canvas boards to Kaapa and Leura, who were frequent visitors to Alice Springs, between 1977 and 1979.
78. Rubuntja & Green 2002, p. 161.

Rubuntja privileged the essential representation of sacredness over photographic verisimilitude, and it is at this ‘inside’ level of meaning that landscape and dot painting converged.⁷⁹ The indivisible association of a person, through ancestral connection, to a site, guided artists as they painted in both genres. The overt description of a pathway in Rubuntja’s watercolour paintings, for instance, operated at both literal and metaphoric levels. Such pathways were intended to take the educated viewer to the site of ancestral power “where Dreaming ancestors exists today inside the ground covered over by... visible realities” (see the pathway in Plate 29).⁸⁰ The final chapter of this thesis will return to the concept of ‘concavity’ as a means of signifying that which is known, but cannot be seen.

In addition to his artistic achievements, Rubuntja embodied his commitments as long-term chair of the Central Land Council (CLC); he regarded the co-presence of landscape and acrylic paintings as being emblematic of the ‘two Laws’ that operated in Australia (European and Aboriginal).⁸¹ Rubuntja’s ability to paint landscapes as well as dot paintings signified his capacity to operate successfully in a modern, bi-cultural Australia. Rubuntja anticipated that non-Aboriginal Australians would sense the significance (if not the detail) of the Indigenous concepts encoded in both ‘landscape’ and ‘dot’ painting. As a consequence of that recognition, they would show respect for Aboriginal culture.⁸²

Both sides of the story. Well, this got to be both sides of the story, about landscape, and dot painting. They [whitefellas] can’t say right, ‘Landscape got no *Tywerrenge*’.⁸³

The equivalence of the two idioms of Central Australian art is demonstrated with pedagogical intent by *Atnengkerre atherre akwete – Two Laws Together*, 1990, (Plate 31), a poster by the non-Indigenous printmaker and political activist Chips Mackinolty, published by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority. The poster reproduced Rubuntja’s representations of the Caterpillar Dreaming in both landscape and dot genres.⁸⁴ The contrasting styles are unified by having been produced by the same hand and are separated by an emphatic image of the artist clasping a ‘fighting’ boomerang. Created more than half a century after Namatjira grasped watercolour painting “out from the whitefellas hand”, the poster is a persuasive declaration of the Indigenous meaning encrypted in two forms of painting the Land: asserting that both landscape and acrylic painting can encode the strength of Indigenous authority over Land as directed by senior custodians.⁸⁵

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79. The term ‘inside’ is used in Aboriginal English to refer to restricted levels of meaning that are often encoded in painting, and accessible only to those with sufficient ritual knowledge.
 80. Munn 1973b, p. 214.
 81. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 107-128.
 82. My interpretation of Rubuntja’s intent has been influenced by Hinkson 2017, in particular pp. 11-12.
 83. Rubuntja & Green 2002, p. 162.
 84. Rubuntja & Green 2002, p. 160.
 85. Rubuntja & in Green 1992, p. 288.

A New Man: Kaapa Tjampitjinpa

Like his countryman Wenten Rubuntja, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa straddled the watercolour landscape and acrylic dot painting genres. Kaapa was a ‘new man’, who (like Albert Namatjira) was ambitious to make his way in a variety of cosmopolitan settings.⁸⁶ As the founding figure of the first generation of contemporary artists at Papunya, Kaapa merits introduction at this point in the narrative, when the practices of landscape and dot painting intersected.

Kaapa’s father, Long Jack Kwalapa, was from Warlukurlangu (literally ‘Belonging to Fire’), a site on the Western perimeter of Anmatyerr Country. Through that patrimony, Kaapa had affiliations with adjacent Ngaliya/Warlpiri sites such as Mikantji. As a boy, Kaapa was adopted into families from Tywerl, an estate also known as ‘20 Mile’ on the Emu Dreaming songline, immediately north of the Northern Arrernte estate Rubuntja (Mount Hay) from which Wenten and his decedents draw their name.⁸⁷ Kaapa grew up nearby, at Alherramp/Laramba (Napperby) with his cousins and fellow founders of the Papunya painting movement, Bill Stockman, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum. Like his cousins, Kaapa worked as a stockman at stations across Anmatyerr, Ngaliya and Arrernte Country, eventually droving cattle as far as Mount Isa in western Queensland.⁸⁸ Kaapa then relocated to Haasts Bluff, where he once again worked as a stockman, this time with Timmy Tjugadai Tjungurrayi, a Kukatja man from Yarripilangu and Winparrku.⁸⁹ Kaapa’s breadth of totemic and familiar affiliations, in combination with his assertive personality, found expression at Papunya, for that community was a hub though which he could broker influence with Ngaliya and Warlpiri groups to the north, Anmatyerr to the north-east and Arrernte to the south-east. Critically, Kaapa maintained close bonds with Kukatja custodians of the local area, including with his classificatory grandfather, Mick Wallankarri Tjakamarra.⁹⁰

Converging on Winparrku

Kaapa also had strong links with the Namatjira family.⁹¹ Kaapa’s eldest son Keith Kaapa (1959 to 2006) was named after Albert’s second youngest son Keith Namatjira, who lived and painted at Papunya in the 1960s and early 1970s. Kaapa’s daughter, Janie Karpa (born 1963) married Albert’s grandson Kevin Namatjira (1958 to 2018) and both painted in the watercolour landscape genre.

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86. Kean 1990b; 2011, p. 105-106.
 87. Gibson 2015, in discussion with senior Anmatyerr man Huckitta Lynch Penangk, email correspondence.
 88. Kaapa 1984, interview with the author.
 89. Johnson 2008, p. 148.
 90. For estimations of Kaapa’s influence and agency, see: Bardon 2004, pp. 85-86; Johnson 2010, pp. 11-43; Kean 2011a, pp. 104-106; Kean 2017b, pp. 174-180.
 91. Albert’s father Jonathon Namatjira was born at nearby Ulunparru to the east of Winparrku. Kaapa is also associated with the Flying Ant, as was Namatjira: Batty, J. 1963, p. 106.



Fig. 21. *Winparrku from south*, 2016, photograph by Tom Nicholson

The relationships between the Kaapa and Namatjira families can also be traced in Country, especially via the remarkable site Winparrku (Blanche Tower) that dominates the gap between Ulunparru and Yamunturrngu (Mount Liebig). Winparrku is associated with the travels of the serpent Yarrapirri (Inland Taipan), attended by a band of men and smaller venomous snakes, across Sandhill Country north of Yamunturrngu to the rock shelter Ngama near Yuendumu, and thence to undisclosed locations south of Lajamanu. The *Tjartiwarnpa* ceremony celebrates the travels of this strange party, and is performed when diverse groups meet, to reconcile simmering disputes and abate inter-clan tensions.⁹² In 1932, for instance, the *Tjartiwarnpa* ceremony was enacted when 100 Pintupi, Kukatja and Ngaliya people converged at Mount Liebig to meet the University of Adelaide Expedition.⁹³ Among numerous anthropometric measurements taken and experiments conducted on the assembled clans, the anthropologist Norman Tindale asked about 30 of the older men to make drawings with crayon and brown paper. Fatefully, Ngirritjukurrpa (a Ngaliya man of approximately 60 years of age) chose to produce an image of ceremonial body paint associated with Winparrku (Plate 32). Ngirritjukurrpa's icon of reconciliation is among the earliest evidence of the site-path framework, produced for intercultural communication and as such is a fitting precursor to the desert art movement. The *Tjartiwarnpa* ceremony persisted: in the late 1970s, I witnessed Kaapa and his Anmatyerr relatives sitting with Arrernte and Luritja men, singing *Tjartiwarnpa* in the rock garden of the Centre

92. Peterson 1970, pp. 200–202. Bill Stockman and Michael Jagamara Nelson strategically wore body decorations from the ceremony at the Asia Society, New York, in 1988: Myers 2002b, p. 266.
93. Batty 2013b. The author took a selection of Norman Tindale's Mount Liebig audio recordings to Walungurru (Kintore) in 1989, where they were identified *Tjartiwarnpa*: Tindale 1932a, South Australian Museum, Speech and Sound Collection, AA 338/11/4/1–26.

for Aboriginal Artists and Craftsmen in Alice Springs, where artists from Papunya and Hermannsburg would gather to paint and drink.⁹⁴

Even when they are not named in the title of a work, the stone pillars of Winparrku present an unmistakable silhouette. Albert Namatjira painted the site from as early as 1936 (Plate 33), before receiving his initial tuition from Battarbee. A quarter of a century later, Namatjira's son Keith captured the same site on his approach from Haasts Bluff (Plate 34). Keith's work was originally purchased at Napperby Station in Anmatyerr Country, highlighting the mobility of the artists, who must have met numerous times across the region under study, occasionally leaving clues of their encounters in the archive.⁹⁵ The *Tjartiwarnpa* ceremony, encoded in images of Winparrku, is the ground on which relationships were made and ideas shared. This ceremony of reconciliation, which involves participants brandishing flaming poles that shower the ceremonial ground and fellow participants with sparks and burning embers, is an apt metaphor for desert art, for which much was risked as artists strove to bring about a deeper intercultural understanding.⁹⁶

Kaapa also painted Winparrku, his association having come from the proximity of Ngama, a key site on the songline to his father's Country at Warlukurlangu. Kaapa's most ambitious representation of the narrative, *The Winparrku Serpents* (Plate 35), is of particular relevance, for it demonstrates the capacity of desert art to 'see' over the visible horizon. A comparison of Kaapa and Keith Namatjira's versions of the same landscape is telling: Namatjira painted Winparrku from the south-east; his gaze taking in the castle-like form of the landmark cutting pink across the darkened crest of a well-vegetated longitudinal dune, the tall blue mass of Yamunturrngu abating the view to the north. Namatjira's eye-line corresponded with the path taken by the serpent Yarrapiri and his party, yet his use of European perspective obscured any glimpse of what lies beyond the mountain. In contrast, the synoptic schema adopted by Kaapa enables us to read the totemic landscape *past* the visible horizon. Kaapa expressed Yarrapirri's route with the (mirrored) serpent running adjacent to a succession of sites – Winparrku; Waru Wiya; Kulpuluntu; Ngama – each signified by a set of concentric circles.⁹⁷ Broad arcs composed of yellow dots delineate the sand dunes to the north of Yamunturrngu, the concentric circles showing where the party stopped to perform the *Tjartiwarnpa* ceremony.

94. The Papunya Tula Artists office, where I worked while in Alice Springs, was a part of the precinct.

95. Art Gallery of South Australia, <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/collection-publications/collection/works/winparrku-with-mt-liebig-in-distance/30377/>.

96. Curran 2019, pp. 21–23.

97. The author documented the work in detail in 1984 for the Arts Centre Melbourne where a tapestry of painting is on permanent display: Kaapa Tjampitjinpa *The Winparrku Serpents*, URL: <https://collections.artscentremelbourne.com.au/#browse=enarratives.4061/> accessed 23 July 2019,

Intriguingly, Kaapa produced at least one impression of Winparrku in the landscape genre, imagined from a position very similar to that chosen by his friend Keith Namatjira. Instead of watercolour on paper (which was associated with the landscape idiom), Kaapa used acrylic paint on canvas board, presumably materials he had to hand (Plate 36). Canvas boards were first employed at Papunya in 1973, so Kaapa's painting can be dated after that: perhaps in 1974, the same year he produced several versions of the songline, including *The Winparrku Serpents*.

Such representations of Winparrku, painted over four decades by individuals from diverse backgrounds and in different genres, highlight three interrelated phenomena. Firstly, the pre-eminence of key sites like Winparrku within an unbounded cosmological Land. Secondly (as discussed in Chapter Two), individuals whose home territories were distant could share abiding affinities with such sites if connected by songlines that traversed linguistic zones. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, Winparrku (and the related *Tjartiwarnpa* ceremony) is a vehicle of intercultural connection and reconciliation, and as such is emblematic of the larger artistic project in Central Australia, which seeks to assert and communicate individual authority for particular Country while balancing conflicting social, cultural and religious interests. Seen together, the various representations of Winparrku are a compelling example of how significant landforms and associated ritual can be isolated and framed for transcultural transmission.

The Frame, Resolution and the Autonomy of a Painting

"The desire to represent the world as it is leads certain artists to consider a problem: that the world is vital and uncontained, whereas a work of art is fixed and bounded. This more or less obvious dissimilarity is one of the major reasons that autonomy—self-sufficiency, independence from the world—becomes an issue for modernist art".⁹⁸

Charles Palermo, 2011

Thus, the art historian Charles Palermo asserts "autonomy" as an essential principle that drove Picasso and Braque to create Cubism: a revolutionary approach to the representation of an uncontained world.⁹⁹

Meyer Schapiro asserted that the frame is "a finding and focusing device placed between the observer and the image".¹⁰⁰ Namatjira not only learned how to identify specific hues within the landscape; he also grasped how to objectify a scene through the viewfinder, the frame through which Namatjira came to define his subject, thus declaring his modernity.

98. Palermo 2011, p. 15.

99. Palermo 2011, p. 15.

100. Schapiro 1972, p. 11.

When the prominent critic and modernist painter Elywn Lynn launched the survey exhibition *Albert Namatjira* at the newly-opened Araluen Arts Centre in 1984, he questioned a prevailing argument that the "framed-up scene" suppressed the expression of authentic Aboriginal form:

Albert was to see the country afresh through a western medium, but it remained his own, his native land. Some commentators seemed to find something reprehensible in Albert's pursuit of a western approach: the framed-up scene on a rectangular format and a Renaissance perspective in contrast to traditional... painting.¹⁰¹

Lynn alerts us to the risk of conflating Namatjira's subject, "his native land", with his methodology, the "pursuit of a western approach".¹⁰² By separating Namatjira's deeper intention from his technique, Lynn allows Namatjira's paintings to be appreciated without the moral baggage often associated with his ground-breaking life story. Building on Lynn's separation of form and content, I argue that a number of the founding Papunya artists were inspired by Namatjira's capacity to 'frame-up' a potent site, and when the opportunity arose, they drew on their inherited iconography to shape icons of their own Country, on a comparable rectangular format.

I contend therefore that Central Australian artists, working with introduced media at Papunya and later at numerous other communities, faced comparable challenges as they sought to encapsulate and delimit the subjects of their paintings. By isolating particular fragments from an otherwise 'uncontained' totemic landscape, they created autonomous subjects ripe for transcultural transmission. Wenten Rubuntja for instance envisaged a wide swathe of Country, with the largest circles in his monumental canvas *Keeper of the Dreaming*, 1987 (Plate 37), representing a reach of Country from Papunya in the west through Anthwerrke (Emily Gap) to Ltarlpelte (Harts Range) to the east.

The geometric principles of Renaissance perspective are well established in the popular Western imagination. In contrast, the 'planar' orientation of Land that is intrinsic to desert visuality remains poorly understood outside of Central Australia. Desert art is routinely described as being derived from a bird's-eye view, but such simple analogies do not accurately capture how a Papunya Tula painting is composed in practice. Desert paintings are not conceived photographically from a single, aerial viewpoint. Rather, sets of concentric circles are arranged with an understanding of their relative location in space, and tracks are drawn from these sites to establish totemic geography.¹⁰³ While this approach is more akin to classical cartography than single-exposure aerial photography, such paintings are not intended for site location or navigation: traditional owners do not need a

101. Elwyn Lynn 1984, n.p.

102. Elwyn Lynn 1984, n.p.

103. Sutton 1989b, pp. 399-401.

map.¹⁰⁴ Despite the difference between Western maps (which typically have a fixed scale) and Papunya Tula paintings (in which distance between sites is elastic), the area envisaged is typically set within a rectangular space or frame. Expanding and contracting resolution in order to encompass more, or less, of the Land in a planar projection is comparable to pulling focus in a photographic landscape. Just as Namatjira made conscious decisions to crop the form of a mountain range, affording emphasis to its most dramatic, picturesque or mythically significant features, the founding Papunya artists made comparable judgments as to the extent of the totemic landscape they would encompass on a given rectangular substrate.

Thus a process equivalent to ‘framing a scene’ occurred when Papunya painters composed a representation of a tract of land.¹⁰⁵ Possessing a greater familiarity with conventions of paper-based media than their peers, the locality depicted by the Anmatyerr artists appears more consciously determined than is the case with the Western Pintupi, whose earliest paintings appeared to grow organically from their core. Take Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s *Man’s Love Story*, 1978 (Pate 30), in which the artist drew focus on the scene of an illicit sexual encounter taking place within a darkened Oval form at Ngarlu.¹⁰⁶ Possum placed emphasis on the man, and his spindle, spun in conjunction with his incantation of a ‘love song’ (intended as a “telegram”) to draw the woman to him.¹⁰⁷ The lover man’s precisely painted footprints convey the sensual touch of the earth on which he and his ‘wrong way’ love would copulate.¹⁰⁸ Possum, who became the undisputed master of topographic representation, cropped the scene tightly for dramatic effect. It is pertinent however that he also included the tracks of a goanna and a lizard, totemic ancestors who traverse the Country immediately adjacent to Ngarlu.¹⁰⁹ Conscious of his media, Possum soaked the background of the canvas before applying interlocking patches of dots to define an autonomous rectangular surface.

Whether approached systematically, as with *Man’s Love Story*, or more subjectively, the determination to include or omit objects from the aperture of the frame applies equally to realistic landscape painting, as if seen through a viewfinder, as it does to the representation of Country in plan, as is the case with Papunya Tula art. In both cases, landforms are located with reference to their actual relationship in space.¹¹⁰ Just as the parameters of a landscape painting are cropped to include salient geomorphological, botanic and atmospheric

104. For an extended discussion on Aboriginal spatial order, cosmology and maps drawn to communicate across cultures, see: Sutton 1989b, p. 387-416.

105. Not all Papunya paintings represent a site; occasionally the body paint on a single performer is depicted for example.

106. Possum in original documentation of the painting see: Johnson 2003, p. 232.

107. Johnson 2003, p. 232.

108. See also: Possum’s *Love Story*, 1972, National Gallery of Australia, in which the marks left on the ground by the couple are more explicit.

109. Johnson 2003, pp. 79-120.

110. See for instance discussion of the spatialised representation of multiple Dreamings converging at Karrku: Dussart 1999.

features, the signs signifying landforms and related phenomena are assembled within the defined image field of a Papunya painting. Definition of the scope of representation is as critical in plan as it is in elevation.

Determining the topographic scope of a subject to be painted was a complex task, taken up with particular verve by the protagonists of this thesis. The pictorial solutions they invented later became conventions that continue to shape the development of Central Desert painting into the present. The process by which Kaapa, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum resolved the arrangement of signs and icons within the governing rectangular frame of Western art, will be examined in Part Two.

Conclusion

Battarbee and Namatjira provided an encouraging presence in Kukatja Country. Unlike early prospectors who arrived with dynamite and guns, the pair camped at favoured sites where they conjured the likeness of the Land in front of them. Groups of children and young men hovered, to stare at the spectacle of an angular, old white man and a well-fed Arrernte, sitting abreast on an elevated outcrop, working with shared intensity. Using fine brushes touched to small cakes of mysterious origin, they invoked the colours of life on brilliant white sheets. Trees and rocks emerged, and the sky, for which there was no naturally-occurring local pigment, nevertheless shimmered forth as light caught the tooth of handmade paper. Occasionally, old men with matted hair bound in chignons would be called on to freeze in front of one or other of the painters and their likenesses would materialise from the whiteness. I contend that the alchemical act of painting Country and *Anangu* had an instrumental effect on the young men of Haasts Bluff, the outcome of which will be examined in Part Two.

A range of transcultural images complemented the landscapes and portraits painted by Namatjira and Battarbee. Pages of Jolliffe’s *Witchetty’s Tribe* were posted on clinic windows. *Cowboy* and *Phantom* comics were passed hand-to-hand. Illustrated gospels were studied and biblical posters were raised in front of assembled congregations. Curious travellers introduced ethnographic volumes, illustrated with sketches of weapons, sacred objects and ghostly photographs of secret ceremony. The idea of the ‘native subject’ emerged incrementally as *whitefellas* sought ‘a real blackfellow’ to capture on film and paper.

The representational genre, introduced by Battarbee and ‘acclimatized’ by Namatjira, resulted in a radical new way of seeing the totemic landscape. The disjuncture that arose when a narrow gorge, rocky escarpment or glowing sandhill was cropped from a boundless landscape provoked a new way of seeing the Land. While recognising the national significance of Namatjira’s paintings, I further

contend that the local effect of his vision was revolutionary: especially so for those with little previous experience of two-dimensional representational media, who encountered Namatjira painting at Haasts Bluff.

Rather than emulating Namatjira's capacity to produce 'photographic' representations of the of the MacDonnell Ranges, Otto Pareroutja and others who followed in his footsteps used bold patterns and dynamic forms to evoke the sacred nature (*Tywerrenge*) of the mountains, trees and waterholes. Though Rubuntja acknowledged that watercolour painting "came out of the whitefella's hand", Rubuntja's artistic sovereignty was not ceded, for as he proclaimed: "They taught us and now we are continuing to paint our way".¹¹¹ Significantly, Rubuntja argued for an epistemological equivalence between landscape and dot painting. Kaapa also painted in both landscape and dot painting genres and the fluidity with which he and his countryman moved from one idiom to the next reinforces Rubuntja's insistence of congruence and complementarity between two superficially distinct genres of Central Australian art.

Finally, I argue that the process of framing, implicit in Namatjira's perspectival projections, is not exclusive to that genre, as certain Papunya painters, such as Clifford Possum, used a comparable process to define and delimit the scope of their representation. The term 'cropping' can therefore be applied to Papunya Tula painting where a locale or tract of land is excised from unbounded Land. Just as scenes are selected and details edited to compose a landscape painting, salient signs and icons were assembled, with a sense of geographical relationship, on the rectangular image field of a Papunya Tula painting.

Rather than its being a neutral artifact, the 'framed-up scene on a rectangular format' instituted a new way of seeing and understanding the totemic landscape. When combined with an awareness of 'Aboriginal culture' as a commodity for exchange, key elements required for the generation of a new genre, developed from customary visual systems, were set in place. The process by which those elements were combined and resolved to create a revolutionary new pictorial space at Papunya will be the subject of Part Two of this thesis.

111. Rubuntja cited in Green 1992, p. 288.



Fig. 22. *Unyali looking west to Ulunparru*, 2016, photograph by Tom Nicholson

Introduction to Part Two Papunya (1971 to 1974)

“Imagining can re-present the past and link it with the present. It can also produce new models of reality, new social imaginaries”¹

Diane Austin-Broos, 2009

Approaching Papunya Painting

The instigation of new approaches to painting at Papunya in 1971 is regarded as the point of inflection from which a change in the trajectory of Indigenous art in Australia can be traced.² Yet the creative efflorescence at Papunya did not emerge from barren ground. As demonstrated in Part One, the preconditions were set at Finke River Mission, where mercantile evangelism resulted in the production of potent tourist curios and the eventual commercial success of landscape painting. Further, the burgeoning interest in Indigenous culture sparked awareness among prospective artists who sought to participate in the cash-based economy of post-war Central Australia. The creation of a government settlement at Papunya in the late 1950s intensified the rate of change, providing a locus for intercultural contact and cultural expression.

Like its predecessor Haasts Bluff, Papunya is situated on the perimeter of Kukatja Country, abutting Arrernte Country to the east and Anmatyerr Lands to the north-east. Curiously, the Arrernte term *ulerenye* (stranger), when written in the Western Desert orthography as *Luritja*, has been adopted as an overarching identity by people who remain at the community.³ Not limited to social identity, the word *Luritja* is used to describe the *lingua franca* into which local dialects including Kukatja are subsumed.⁴ The term no longer conveys the pejorative association of being ‘a stranger’, which was intended by Arrernte speakers in the early 20th century.⁵ Dig deeper however, and contemporary residents of Papunya will point to their fathers’ and grandfather’s Country at all points of the compass.⁶

1. Austin-Broos 2009, p. 11.
2. Sayers 2001, pp. 201–203; Grishan 2013, pp. 445–450; McLean 2011b; Caruana & Cubillo 2013, p. 46.
3. A similar integrative process has been documented at Balgo: Watson 2003, p. 16.
4. This also applies to the Eastern Pintupi dialect of immigrants to Haasts Bluff. Many of the children and grandchildren of Anmatyerr and Warlpiri people who grew up at Papunya also speak Luritja as their first language.
5. *Luritja* is also referred to as Papunya Luritja or Pintupi/Luritja. Communities including Maryvale and Tjitjikala (Finke) abutting Arrernte Country to the south of Alice Springs also refer to their language as *Luritja*: Hansen & Hansen 1992, pp. V–VI.
6. Papunya residents also speak Arrernte, Anmatyerr and Warlpiri.

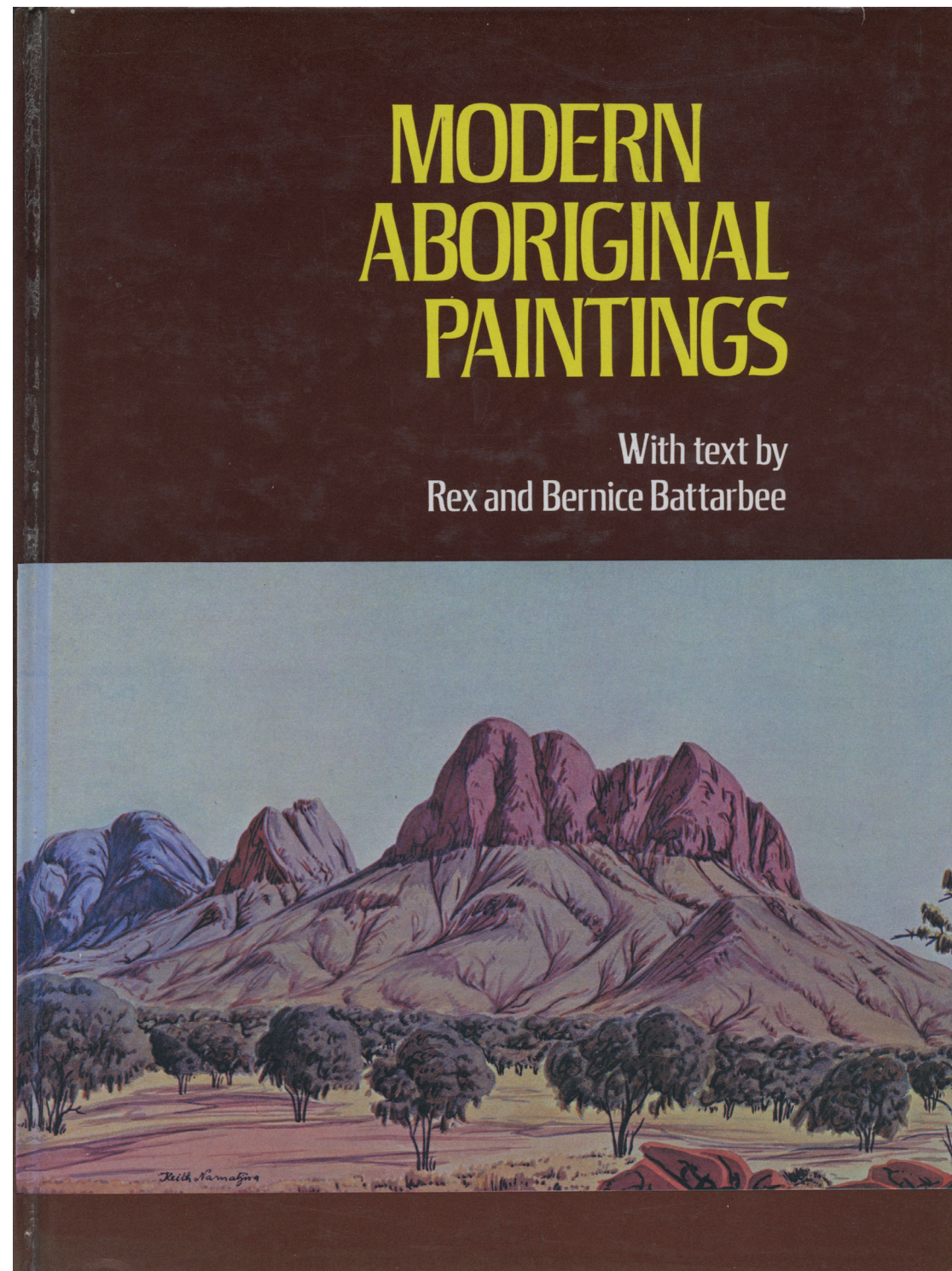


Fig. 23. Rex Battarbee, *Modern Australian Aboriginal Paintings*, Rigby, 1971, image Keith Namatjira, *Haasts Bluff*, 1963

The geographical and temporal nexus between the watercolour landscape tradition and the emergent form of painting at Papunya coincided with the 1971 publication of *Modern Aboriginal Paintings*, a slim coffee-table book celebrating Namatjira and his followers.⁷ Considered in retrospect, the publication marks the transition from ‘modern art’ (associated with the ‘assimilation policy’ of the 1950s

7. Battarbee & Battarbee 1971.

and 1960s) to ‘contemporary art’ (linked to the assertion of Aboriginal Land Rights and the policy ‘self-determination’ between 1972 and 2007).⁸ It is fitting therefore that Keith Namatjira’s 1963 painting *Haasts Bluff* is reproduced on the book’s cover (Fig. 23), for the painting illustrates the prominent landmark on the physical and metaphoric road from Hermannsburg to Papunya.

From 1971, the classical visual language of the desert would be distilled from the restricted realm of men’s ritual, to be used as the defining constituent in new forms of portable art. I contend that the movement is best understood through analysis of the collaborative, intellectual labour required to formulate a new genre. Part Two examines just one strand in the interwoven development of Papunya Tula painting in Central Australia: that of the Anmatyerr painters who worked in consort with their friend Johnny Warangula. The distinctly different paths taken by Western Pintupi artists of the Western Desert will not be discussed in detail.

Before examining the emergence of painting at Papunya, the specific nature of the settlement requires introduction. Ironically, it was from this problematic outback station, created for the purpose of the gradual assimilation of Aboriginal people into ‘white Australia’, that the nation’s most celebrated art movement arose.

Papunya and the Policy of Assimilation

“Papunya was the last of the major government settlements established in the Northern Territory under the policy of assimilation....Circumstances have combined to give the settlement and its inhabitants a reputation for being troublesome. Some factors contributing to this reputation are three “riots” in 1961, 1970 and 1972, and other acts against Europeans, incidents stemming from over-consumption of liquor, juvenile petrol sniffing, decreasing school attendances, all giving Papunya the aspect of a place where neither Aboriginals nor Europeans were happy to live”.⁹

D. H. Penny, 1977

Located 30 kilometres north of the Haasts Bluff station, through a gap in the Belt Range, Papunya is a major site of the Honey Ant Ancestors. In 1954, a bore was struck into the earth at Papunya waterhole.¹⁰ Initially intended to quench cattle on the northern side of the range, instead, when the artesian water at Haasts Bluff was deemed unfit for human consumption, Papunya was selected as the location for the construction of a model settlement.¹¹

8. Battarbee & Battarbee 1971; McLean 2019. Gough Whitlam and the first Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gordon Bryant, initiated the ‘self-determination’ policy, roughly coinciding with the emergence of Papunya painting: Rowse 2005b, pp. 1-24.

9. Penny et al. 1977, executive summary, n. p.

10. Email communications with Jeremy Long, 10 March 2016.

11. Penny et al. 1977, p. 15.

Papunya was notable, not only as the “last of the major government settlements established in the Northern Territory” but also because much of the town’s infrastructure was built by a team including a high proportion of local Indigenous workers.¹² From 1957, the opportunity of employment attracted capable men to the site, several of whom went on to found Papunya painting. Kaapa, Leura and Warangula were among those who established themselves and their families at the worksite.¹³

The cultural composition of the new community resembled that of its predecessor Haasts Bluff, with Western Arrernte, Pintupi, Warlpiri/Ngaliya and the local Kukatja people accounting for the majority of the population. Papunya’s pivotal location also made it an attractive home for the Anmatyerr, particularly families from Mount Allan and Napperby Stations just over the horizon to the north-east. The proximity of their Land and their affiliation with the totemic landscape afforded social and ritual agency to men such as Kaapa and Leura, who camped facing in the direction of their Country, outside the settlement’s growing administrative centre.¹⁴

Kaapa made himself conspicuous from the settlement’s inception (see Plate 38). He was, for example, one of just three Aboriginal men interviewed by the *Federal House of Representatives Select Committee on Voting Rights of Aborigines* on 3 August 1961. While his peers were referred by their European names (Mr. Tommy Doolan and Mr. Johnny Lynch), “Karpa” was referred to by his Indigenous name.¹⁵ Mr. G. F. Holden (Acting Superintendent of Papunya Settlement) and Mr. S. A. Luck (Teacher-in-charge at Papunya School) were also interviewed.¹⁶

The assimilation policy, championed by Minister for the Interior Sir Paul Hasluck, reached its zenith with the creation of Papunya.¹⁷ According to D. H. Penny, who was commissioned to draft a report on what was regarded as a strife-riven community in 1977, the settlement was intended primarily as a training station.¹⁸ Native Affairs Patrol Officer Jeremy Long put it more bluntly, describing Papunya as a location where traditionally-oriented people were expected to “learn to use clothing; to live in houses and adjust to the public health practices of settled community life... and to modify or abandon their traditional systems of retributive

12. Penny et al. 1977, p. 15.

13. Johnson 2008, pp. 19 & 44.

14. Songlines including Honey Ant, Python, Scorpion, Hare Wallaby, Inland Python (Yarrapirri and his party) and Dancing Napaltjarri Women link Western Anmatyerr Country to the lands around Papunya.

15. Lynch was a ‘Honey Ant man’ from Alcoota and Woodgreen Station. He was a close associate of Kaapa’s who perfected the stockman’s laconic body language and affected a cowboy’s drawl: Johnson 2008, p. 120.

16. The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1961, p. 25.

17. Johnson 2010, pp. 122-123.

18. Penny et al. 1977, pp. 8-12.

justice”.¹⁹ Subsequently, Tim Rowse has written that the assimilation policy was created to enact an “unrequitable colonial desire to transform the colonised into what the colonists imagine themselves, at their best”.²⁰

The communal eating facilities were emblematic of policy failure at the community. Designed to bring nutrition and order to the population, the ‘canteen’ caused friction among Papunya’s traditionally-oriented residents. Located in a large corrugated iron Nissen Hut on the northern side of the administrative hub, getting a meal demanded that individuals of varied lived experience shared a single public space. Historic animosities were ignited and strict avoidance relationships between pairs of kin were compromised.²¹ Paradoxically, it was in the northern end of a similarly-scaled Nissen Hut, intended as the Town Hall, where men from diverse Country would later gather to share the excitement of revealing images of their Country in painted form.²² Though the ‘assimilation’ policy was doomed, its unanticipated outcome was the formation of a spectacularly successful artform, budding like exotic fungi from the detritus of failed policy.

Despite its problems, the commitment to “training” by the Welfare Branch of the federal government brought tangible benefits to particular individuals.²³ The educationalist Jack Frawley scrutinised the government archive of this era, and confirmed that subjects including oral English, civics, numeracy, literacy, vehicle driving and maintenance were offered to the adult population of Papunya from 1962. Significantly, Frawley found that, from 1964, art classes designed to cater for “an already-growing interest in art and practical painting” were initiated, via a course that would “try to promote an interest in painting Aboriginal designs”.²⁴ In 1967, the teacher E. Bourke proposed a more precisely targeted course that would “develop existing art skills through the use of European media”.²⁵ Frawley also found that Papunya-based educators were aware of the richness of customary visuality vested in Papunya residents. For example, one teacher, A. P. Barum, asserted twofold aims: firstly “to gather information on Aboriginal art symbols and catalogue them so that Europeans may learn them and be able to understand and preserve original Aboriginal art”, and secondly “to exchange art forms, so that Aboriginals may eventually interpret their stories in a European format”.²⁶ Thus, Frawley provided evidence that during the height of assimilation era,

19. Long, cited in Penny et al. 1977, p. 8.

20. Rowse 2005 p.2.

21. Penny et al. 1977, p. 78.

22. As a gendered (all male) space, avoidance relationships did not compromise contact to the same extent as in the ‘canteen’. The space is alternately referred to as “The Great Painting Room” in: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 27-34.

23. See references to training and education: Penny et al. 1977.

24. Frawley 2003, p. 43.

25. Frawley 2003, p. 44.

26. Frawley 2003, p. 44.

Chapter Four

Figure and Ground

Papunya-based educators presented courses with the intention of transcultural exchange in which the participant’s knowledge of customary design was both recognised and encouraged. Frawley concluded that the aims of the early adult educators came to fruition with the emergence of Papunya Tula art, but that their contribution has been overlooked in favour of the “new truth” of a special teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, as catalyst.²⁷

A single object verifies Kaapa’s participation in those largely-forgotten classes. Sometime in the mid-1960s, Kaapa assembled a sturdy bookshelf that he sold to Jim Gallacher, a Welfare worker who lived at Papunya in the mid-60s (see Plate 39). Intriguingly, Kaapa emblazoned a profile of an Aboriginal man onto one side of the bookshelf. Its contours show an alert individual with a distinctive upturned nose — surely a self-portrait — a prescient likeness of the instigator of contemporary art at Papunya.²⁸

Bardon’s characterisation of the whites at Papunya as “a group of drunken, foul-mouthed and violent men, who I was to learn were the settlement’s administrators” dismisses the contribution of many of the non-Indigenous workers who attempted to balance government policy with the difficulties of life on a remote settlement in the 1960s.²⁹ Bardon’s disdain for his fellow non-Indigenous employees served to reinforce his teleological priority, however if we are to accept Frawley’s findings as indicative of a wider trend, there was a steady stream of imaginative, educated teachers who facilitated reciprocal encounters with the Aboriginal residents of Papunya throughout the early 1960s. Sensing a burgeoning interest in Aboriginal culture among the non-Indigenous employees at Papunya, Kaapa produced imagery targeted towards their curiosity. Rather than reiterate the story of Bardon’s exceptionalism in the face of colonial brutishness, I contend that the development of Papunya painting was one of intelligent exchange across challenging transcultural terrain.

27. Frawley 2003, pp. 44-45.

28. When shown an image of the bookshelf, Mervyn Rubuntja (who knew Kaapa as a young man) commented: “That’s him, see his forehead and nose – similar to him. I know that face”: Rubuntja in conversation with the author, Ittja Ntjarra, Alice Springs, 2019.

29. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 3.

“The conditions for an Aboriginal aesthetic are the conditions for living with the possibility for expansion and transformation, always moving slightly beyond recognition, allowing critics and traders the glimpse of a secret which is both profound and as candidly open as the Country in which we walk”.¹

Stephen Muecke, 1988

“It is even possible that in two or three generations’ time — perhaps sooner — young aboriginal artists may begin to use again the spirals, lines and circles in a new geometrical form of abstract art”.²

T. G. H. Strehlow, 1956

Introduction

The early months of 1971 saw the advent of novel forms of visual expression at Papunya. Over the course of the year, various approaches to painting, instigated by a diverse group of artists, would converge to become Papunya Tula art. Where Papunya Tula art is popularly understood to have originated from the co-operative energy of that group of twenty artists, re-examination of the evidence in this study suggests a subtly different origin.³ Rather than survey the collective creation of the artform, this chapter will focus on the agency of a single individual, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, who I argue is critical to the inception of the larger movement. In addition to asserting Kaapa’s precedence, I demonstrate how he acquired the technical expertise and conceptual capacity to create the first works of a revolutionary new style.

Although instigated by the Australian government for the assimilation of disparate Indigenous clans into mainstream national culture, Papunya was ecclesiastically connected to Hermannsburg and Haasts Bluff. As is the case with those precedents, the Lutheran church was a powerful institutional presence within the community. The balance between religious and state control over the lives of Papunya residents is difficult to determine, however in a 1977 report prepared for the Federal Ministers of Aboriginal Affairs and Education, D. H. Penny concludes: “Aboriginals seem to discern little difference between the various types of settlements, probably as they are run largely by Europeans”.⁴ Penny goes on to note that government settlements and missions were perceived as “a major

1. Stephen Muecke 1988, pp. 57-58.

2. Strehlow 1956, p. 20.

3. 18 artists are profiled in Bardon 1979; 25 men are listed as ‘First Artists’ five of whom seldom or never painted: Johnson 2008, p. VI.

4. Penny et al. 1977, ‘A summary’, n. p.

manifestation of the European policy towards them”.⁵ I suggest that Kaapa would have subscribed to Penny’s assessment and that his early paintings demand the recognition of Indigenous authority.

The situation was decidedly different on nearby cattle stations. Although pastoralists were deferred to as ‘bosses’, it was understood that they depended on Aboriginal labour to manage vast properties.⁶ Kaapa (along with his cousins Tim Leura and Clifford Possum) had worked as a stockman alongside European pastoralists at cattle stations across Central Australia. The men brought a stockman’s swagger and a sense of independence to Papunya, attributes that would be critical to the formation of the new art movement. Kaapa exploited the unstable conditions at Papunya as the scaffolding of the assimilation policy failed, and a new order based on the incoming policy of ‘self-determination’ was implemented.⁷ Described as a “smart cookie” Kaapa applied his intelligence for the benefit himself and his family.⁸

There are several competing accounts of the ‘genesis’ of a new style(s) of painting at Papunya. The exact context in which generative events occurred may never be known as they are most likely to have occurred between small groups of senior men working away from the gaze of European administrators. In the absence of concrete written evidence of the quickening of the artform, the material generated in the first months of production provides the best indication of how events unfolded. While the sequence in which particular works cannot be ascertained (there were no centralised processes for their documentation), it is apparent that the paintings Kaapa produced are distinctive, both in conception and execution, from those produced by other artists during the same period.

I therefore turn to an assessment of the paintings Kaapa produced between April and August of 1971. Fortunately, all seven paintings from Kaapa’s first consignment to leave Papunya were located for this study. The sequence in which these works were painted is proposed herein.

Increasingly, Kaapa has been recognised as the most accomplished early exemplar of Papunya art.⁹ I build on what is known of his role as the provocateur and the magnet around which other artists clustered. Further, I will demonstrate how Kaapa grasped key aspects of Western representation in order to visualise episodes from his own cultural practice, and in doing so, cemented totemic ritual

5. Penny et al. 1977, ‘A summary’, n. p.

6. McGrath 1987; Jorgenson 2017.

7. For a summary of the conditions at Papunya in the 1970s, see: Penny 1977. As the first federal minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gordon Bryant initiated the policy of “self-determination” in 1973: Rowse 2005, p. 19a.

8. Long, cited in Johnson 2010, p. 26.

9. Benjamin 2009, pp. 28-31; Johnson 2010; Kean 2017b, pp. 175-77.



Fig. 24. *The site of the original waterhole at Papunya*, 2019, photograph by John Kean

as the enduring subject for the art form. Finally, I identify certain formal attributes emergent in the series that became critical to the development of Papunya Tula art.

A Place Called Papunya

As established in Chapter Two, *place* is fundamental to society in Central Australia, where authority arises from connection to Country. Papunya’s significance as the major home of Yerrampe (Honey Ant Ancestors), and Kaapa’s relationship to the site, had a determining effect on how the painting movement unfolded. Before embarking on a detailed analysis of Kaapa’s first paintings, it is essential to establish the cultural context of the locale in which they were created and to assert Kaapa’s relationship to the home of the Honey Ant Ancestors.

Papunya’s status as a place of residence and spiritual power predated the construction of the new settlement. The bore of 1954 was struck deep into the earth at Papunya, to draw water from the heart of Yerrampe (Honey Ant Country), a waterhole that had quenched Kukatja, Anmatyerr, Arrernte and Ngaliya people for generations.¹⁰ In contrast to its European status as an ‘isolated outpost’, Papunya was already a familiar domicile and ceremonial centre.

10. Strehlow initially referred to the location as the “Mitala of Popanja” when he first learned of the resident Honey Ant cult from Paddy, Ronald and Moses. Strehlow continued to emphasise the site’s importance throughout his career: Strehlow 1933, p. 26; 1947, pp. 31, 48 & 53; 1971, pp. 199-200.



Fig. 25. *Warumpi approaching from east*, 2013, photograph by Helen Puckey

Historically, custodians of distant Honey Ant Dreaming sites had converged at Papunya to enact the epic song cycle of the Honey Ant Ancestors.¹¹ Performed over successive evenings, the ceremonies concluded with the elaborate ritual re-enactment of the actions of Yerrampe, the Honey Ant Sire at Papunya.¹² The 20th-century construction of a utilitarian settlement, situated on a colonial grid graded across the surface of the land, masked an Indigenous understanding of the place. Unseen but powerful Honey Ant Ancestors are known to reside deep within the red earth at Papunya. A network of preternatural tunnels, the songlines of the ancestral Yerrampe, lead to and from the major underground chamber at Papunya.¹³ The paths of the Honey Ant Ancestors are also manifest above the Land as small rounded hills, across Kukatja, Northern Arrernte and Anmatyerr lands. Warumpi, five kilometres east of Papunya, is one of many such landmarks.¹⁴ Like the spokes of a great wheel, Honey Ant songlines radiate from Papunya, linking the distant Country of the settlement's contemporary residents, north; east; south; west (Fig. 25).¹⁵

11. Strehlow 1947, pp. 31 & 53.

12. The author viewed a film made by T. G. H. Strehlow showing the ritual performed by Parta Nananana Tjakamarra (Johnny Warangula's classificatory father) and Paddy Anatjari Tjapaltjarri, during the "Wolatjatjara Ceremonial Festival". The film documented episodes of the Yerrampe songline, beginning with Tatata and culminating at Papunya: Strehlow 1955.

13. Kean 2019a.

14. The community at Papunya was frequently referred to as Warumpi during the 1970s and 1980s, giving its name to the Warumpi Band, the first rock band to record in an Aboriginal language (Pintupi/Luritja).

15. Strehlow 1947, pp. 31, 48 & 53; Strehlow 1971, pp. 199-200. The trails of the Honey Ant Ancestors travelling to and from Papunya are graphically represented in paintings such as Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri's *Honey Ant Hunt*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 199.5 x 171 cm, National Museum of Australia.

Tom Onion Tjapangati (circa 1890 to 1976) was the senior custodian for the Yerrampe Dreaming at Papunya. Despite being a pensioner, Onion was critical to negotiations that led to the creation of the much-celebrated *Honey Ant Mural* at the Papunya School in late winter of 1971.¹⁶ In accordance with familiar ceremonial protocols, Onion and Mick Wallankarri Tjakamarra (as senior *kutungula/kwertengerl*) delegated the actual painting of the Yerrampe icon to a younger man with appropriate knowledge and experience.¹⁷ Kaapa's selection as the artist and manager of this project was significant. Firstly, it was an acknowledgement of his connection to Papunya.¹⁸ Secondly, his appointment demonstrates that his status as 'artist' predated the mural.¹⁹ Further, it was recognised that Kaapa's facility as a go-between enabled him to represent the interests of senior custodians in negotiations with schools, authorities and other stakeholders.²⁰

Carving: "No, No. I do it my way."²¹

Vivien Johnson has previously argued that carving was integral to the formation of a distinctive style of transcultural art at Papunya.²² Typically fashioned beside the domestic hearth, carved artefacts were usually sold to non-Indigenous workers, who after a stint on the community, dispersed with their mementos to far-flung locations.

Kaapa, Leura and Possum grew up together at Napperby Station, and began making artifacts for sale to private customers before carrying those skills to Papunya.²³ Possum, for instance, refused Namatjira's offer of tuition in the watercolour technique, preferring the independence of carving, with which he could explore space and form without impinging upon the cultural capital of his famous Western Arrernte uncle.²⁴ While their innovative carvings do not attract equivalent attention to more recognised paintings, it is important to appreciate that pre-existing conceptual and manual skills embedded in carving helped to

16. Johnson 2008, p. 50.

17. Johnson 2008, p. 50.

18. Kaapa's Country was north and north-west of Papunya and the artist was *kwertengerl/kutungula* for the Honey Ant songline.

19. The *Honey Ant Mural* is mistakenly cited as the event that stimulated the painting movement in: Bardon 1979, p. 13; 1991, pp. 18-21; Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 12-19; Grishin 2013, p. 445. I insist recognition of Kaapa's existing status as an artist demonstrates that the production of the mural was subsequent to a more extensive movement, already underway by the time that schoolteacher Geoff Bardon was mustering the resources to produce the mural. See also: Bardon 1979, p. 14. The *Honey Ant Mural* was painted in August 1971.

20. Johnson 2010, pp. 105-111; Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 12-19.

21. In conversation with the author: Possum 1984, cited in Johnson 2003, p. 42.

22. Johnson exhibited carvings as a curator: Johnson 2007, pp. 118-133. Johnson also wrote of their significance: Johnson 2010, p. 24.

23. Possum told me his first carving was a stockman's saddle: Possum 1984, conversation with the author, Trucking Yards, Alice Springs. It is reasonable to assume that Kaapa and Leura also perfected carving while working as stockmen in the 1950s.

24. Johnson 2003, pp. 41-42.

facilitate the transition from stockmen/carver to ‘artist’. Despite their relative obscurity, I contend that the highly resolved forms and polychromatic treatment of the carved and painted animals by the Anmatyerr trio hold clues to their emergence as skilled and sophisticated painters.²⁵

The post-war growth of the cash economy encouraged independent carvers (such as Kaapa, Leura and Possum) to sell their wares at outlets such as the Arunta Bookshop and the Mbantua Trade Store in Alice Springs.²⁶ Pastoralists including Edward ‘Eddie’ Connellan (from Narweitooma Station) and D. D. Smith (owner of Mount Allan Station) acted as middlemen, encouraging talented stockmen and the “unemployed” to create artefacts which they bought and later resold.²⁷ Both Possum and Leura worked at Narweitooma and Mount Allan, where according to the historian Dick Kimber, they were responsible for creating “very symmetrical ovate painted wooden plaques, and opposing paired snake and goanna in relief about a central wooden pole which were also much in demand by tourists”.²⁸ Rather than being confined by the template of traditional forms or tourist ornaments, Kaapa, Leura and Possum fashioned innovative polychrome objects with fine brushes and permanent paints. I argue that these ambitious objects, created at scale, are important precursors to the first innovative paintings on board created by the Anmatyerr trio.

When interviewed by the author in 1984, Kaapa recalled carving small lizards before progressing to life-sized representations of *Tywenp* (Perentie), Australia’s largest monitor lizard.²⁹ Kaapa’s Perentie is not as deftly carved as those made by his cousins, but its scale and approach suggests that Kaapa, Leura and Possum’s creative collaboration emerged at shared campfires before their celebrated association as painters in the 1970s.³⁰ Critically, these polychromatic carvings provide evidence that Leura and Possum were able to source paint and watercolour brushes, years before the emergence of the Papunya Tula movement (see Plate 40).³¹

Just as Kaapa tired of the hard life of the stockman, his commitment to carving also waned before that of his Tjapaltjarri cousins. As they perfected their craft, Kaapa was swayed by the lucrative return received by the landscape painters,

25. For an account of Possum’s work as a carver see: Johnson 2003, pp. 41-54.
26. Kaapa (and Leura) were regular visitors to Alice Springs. Bardon’s reliance on Leura as his assistant in 1972 infers pre-existing familiarity with art suppliers: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 37. An exemplary carved Perentie (Lizard) by Leura was displayed at Mbantua Trade Store in the late 1970s but was labelled ‘not for sale’.
27. Both Leura and Possum were stockman at Narweitooma Station in the period when pastoralists based their economy on “rationing using government subsidies” while encouraging residents “to make artefacts which are purchased for resale”: Rowse 1998, p. 136.
28. Kimber 2000a, p. 210.
29. Kaapa & Clifford 1984, interview with the author; Johnson 1994a, p. 25.
30. Johnson 2003, p. 50.
31. Possum 1984, interview with the author, Trucking Yards, Alice Springs.

including Keith Namatjira and Joshua Ebatarintja, with whom he sold his artefacts door to door at Papunya.³² Rather than appropriating the style of his Western Arrernte peers, Kaapa determined to pursue his own ideas.³³

The Old Settlement Office

Kaapa Tjampitjinpa routinely patrolled the dusty roads that defined the administrative hub of Papunya. He observed comings and goings among the matrix of Nissen Huts, bland iron buildings and the comfortable houses of the expatriate workers, many of which were ‘Queenslanders’ elevated on stilts to catch the breeze.³⁴ With a mix of opportunism and authority, Kaapa inspected the earth for footprints and tyre tracks, knocking on the doors of friendly teachers who might buy his wares, or offer him tea and biscuits on their lunch breaks.³⁵ In 1971, as the summer haze cleared and the sun arced lower over the northern horizon, Kaapa landed on an abandoned building that suited his purpose.³⁶ Built as the original administrative headquarters, the “old settlement office” was the site where “the architect of the assimilation policy” Paul Hasluck had declared Papunya open on the 1st of October 1959.³⁷

Making himself comfortable in the sheltered surroundings of the abandoned office, Kaapa gathered what he needed from the detritus of the colonial project and set to work. With salvaged boards, and paint and brushes commandeered from the adjacent school, he poured forth images that had been burned into his consciousness on the ceremonial ground. The paintings Kaapa created in this co-opted *atelier* foreshadowed an era in which Indigenous culture would be celebrated rather than suppressed. Unsurprisingly, Kaapa’s boxy studio jibed with the dramatic ceremonial scenes he painted. The *arleyarr* (post-initiatory ceremonies) he conjured were performed under the vast dome of the sky, outside the perimeter of the settlement, away from the purview of white-socked settlement officials. It was here that ceremonial leaders had “room” to re-enact the creation stories for Country.³⁸ Yet, it was in an incongruous office building that Kaapa seized on a theme that was at once close to his heart, and that was destined to become the object of fetishistic desire among future collectors.³⁹

32. Johnson 2010, p. 29.
33. Johnson 2010, pp. 22-28.
34. For insight into Kaapa’s entrepreneurial ability, see: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 85.
35. From the author’s personal observation, Kaapa spent a lot of time scouting for opportunities in Papunya’s administrative grid. On one occasion, Kaapa tracked me to a teacher’s house in the heat of the day, where I had retreated, exhausted, trying to avoid the artists’ unrelenting, after-hours demands for materials, assistance and cups of tea.
36. While it is not known exactly when Kaapa began using the office, it was most probably in April 1971.
37. Hasluck was then Federal Minister for Territories: Johnson 2010, pp. 28-29.
38. Munn 1996, p. 448.
39. “The fetish for Papunya boards” is explored by Benjamin 2009; Batty 2011, pp. 59-67.

Warangula, Leura, Possum, Kingsley Tjungurrayi and the influential Pintupi powerbroker Nosepeg Tjunkata Tjupurrula, are known to have joined Kaapa at his studio where they made paintings which adapted designs from *kutjitji* (softwood shields) or from the painted backs of performers in ceremony.⁴⁰ Their materials were salvaged panels, floor tiles and a mixture of paints from building sites. These works, together with Kaapa's larger, more ambitious compositions, were the foretaste of a broader movement that would follow.⁴¹

The Instrumental Intervention of District Welfare Officer Jack Cooke

Until scholarly interest in the formation of Papunya art increased in the new millennium, it had been assumed that the schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon was responsible for the export of the first paintings from Papunya.⁴² Subsequent archival research and interviews conducted with living protagonists revealed that a more extensive cast of characters shepherded the emerging artform into the public domain. The notion of unilateral support by Bardon has its origin in his published accounts.⁴³ Bardon was either blind to the significance of others' contributions, or distrustful of their intentions.⁴⁴ Jack Cooke was the most vital of the early protagonists Bardon overlooked.

Fatefully, on one of his regular visits to Papunya as the District Welfare Officer, Cooke encountered a curious painting for sale in the community store. When interviewed by Johnson three decades after the event, Cooke recalled a "lemony yellow" painting that included "a mixture of styles: part Albert Namatjira gum trees, a goanna, and a bit of Aboriginal style dot painting". It was undoubtedly, *Ceremonial scene (Mikantji)*, 1971 (Plate 41), a work that will be discussed in detail in the next section.⁴⁵ Cooke (for whom "Productivity was an almost unhealthy obsession") was compelled to meet the individual who showed such entrepreneurial initiative.⁴⁶ Cooke's hopes for economic improvement through homegrown enterprise were ignited on locating Kaapa at his studio in the Old Settlement Office. Seizing the moment, he urged Kaapa to finish a batch of paintings for dispatch to the Native Welfare Office in Alice Springs.⁴⁷

Intriguingly, Scholes uncovered a telegram in the Northern Territory archives revealing that Nosepeg Tjunkata delivered the first consignment to Jack Cooke

in Alice Springs.⁴⁸ Nosepeg's involvement is not merely an interesting anecdote, but bears heavily on ongoing academic discussions about early Papunya painting. The presence of sacred objects, in combination with the explicit representation of ritual deeds has caused contention over the decades and makes the display of early Papunya paintings controversial into the present.⁴⁹ Kimber described Nosepeg as a Lawman "whose every deed appeared to make him more important in Aboriginal eyes — as well as I think European ones".⁵⁰ Nosepeg's complicity with the transport of Kaapa's first paintings confers his all-important *imprimatur*, for as Kimber observes, Nosepeg was "incredibly important in things to do with sacred objects".⁵¹ Put bluntly, Nosepeg's authority was such that he could have quashed the nascent movement before its emergence. His approval was critical to the survival of Papunya painting, at this moment and throughout the movement's fragile first decade.⁵² Critically, and in a moment of under-recognised foresight, Cooke entered three of Kaapa's paintings into a competitive art award that on previous occasions had been won by local white artists.⁵³

Jack Cooke was in attendance on the 27th of August 1971 at the Alice Springs Golf Club, and remembers a murmur of disquiet pass over the room when judge Jo Caddy proclaimed Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's painting *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, 'Gulgardi'* (hereafter referred to as *Gulgardi*) as joint winner of the Caltex Northern Territory Art Award (see Plate 45).⁵⁴ In spite of the disapprobation of the Alice Springs art community, Caddy pressed on, explaining her judgment:

This old man is a true artist. He took what he found, an old piece of waste lumber he located in a rubbish tip and the dregs of some paint he found lying around the settlement and made art out of it.⁵⁵

Caddy's assessment of the work's merit was accurate, for despite its overtly ethnographic intent, *Gulgardi* is unequivocally 'art'. Painted for a transcultural audience, *Gulgardi* was designed, complete with a painted frame, to be hung inside an architectural setting. The first work in a recognisable 'Papunya' style to be acquired by a public collection, the painting's importance has for the most part, rested on its precedence. Exquisitely conceived and executed, I contend that *Gulgardi* can be counted among the most significant artworks to have been created in Central Australia. Its revolutionary compositional and stylistic components will be discussed later in this chapter.

40. Johnson 2010, p. 30; Mary White cited in Scholes 2017b, p. 134. Scholes suggested these sources of early painting designs, email correspondence with the author, Scholes 2019.

41. Papastergiadis 2012, pp. 147-154; Carter 2000, pp. 248-249.

42. The interest both prompted by, and coincident with, the *Genesis and Genius* exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales. See: Perkins & Fink et al. 2000.

43. See an account of Bardon's role in Bonyhady 2005.

44. By his own admission, Bardon was in a vulnerable emotional state at Papunya: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 37-39; Scholes 2017b.

45. Johnson 2010, pp. 30-31.

46. Gary Stoll cited in Scholes 2017, p. 133.

47. Scholes 2017b, pp. 131-132.

48. Scholes 2017b, pp. 132-133.

49. Johnson 2010, pp. 100-138; Kimber 1995; Myers 2014a, pp. 80-88.

50. Kimber 2011, p. 280.

51. Kimber in Johnson 2008, p. 70.

52. Nosepeg took me under his wing when I started work at Papunya Tula Artists in 1977, conferring on me the kinship classification *Tjakamarra* (son). While Nosepeg rarely painted, he was a gifted diplomat whose presence at key moments ensured that delicate intercultural proceedings could ensue without undue stress.

53. Scholes 2017b, p. 133.

54. Johnson 2010, p. 12.

55. Award Judge Jo Caddy, as recalled by Jack Cooke, cited in Johnson 2010, p. 12.

The Missing Link?

Kaapa's first known painting was created on an irregular piece of salvaged plywood, measuring 45.9 by 85.9 cm. Its edges reveal holes where it had previously been fixed to a settlement structure. A transparent, lemon-yellow wash (perhaps student-grade poster paint) is brushed across the exposed grain of the board in a manner that recalls the application of watercolour for the sky of a typical Central Australian landscape. Yet the direction of the brush does not correspond to any imagined horizon; rather it is applied vigorously to achieve rapid coverage of a thirsty surface.⁵⁶ With under-painting complete, Kaapa appears to have started from the left edge of the board, shaping the drooping foliage of a spindly tree (see Plate 41).⁵⁷ Significantly, this simplified treatment suggests Kaapa was aware of the composition of Namatjira's later 'memory' paintings, in which a tree framed the view beyond, and yet he appears inexperienced in the practical application of picturesque principles.⁵⁸ Immediately to the right of the tree is a monochromatic figure, a chimeric goanna-man; his legs spread in the posture of a human stamping the ground, or a 'racehorse' goanna running upright on its hind legs. In an abrupt shift in style, the remaining three quarters of the board is given over to the punctilious representation of an elaborate ceremony: performers kneel at the edge of a ground painting; black bodies adorned with ochre bands from shoulder to knee, edged with white dots, the pattern continues vertically from their chests high over ceremonial masks tipped with feathers; performers raise their arms, shaking feather sprays grasped in each hand. It is the climactic ceremonial moment, and Kaapa recounts the scene with the authority of an accomplished performer.

At a compositional level, the performers are positioned perpendicularly to each other. Each figure faces the true centre of the Oval ground mosaic, once again negating the possibility of a single horizon.⁵⁹ Kaapa's ceremonial space is rendered malleable, neither totally flat nor oblique in perspective. Events appear to unfold like frames of a cartoon, scenes recalled from shifting points of view and laid across the ground in temporal order, left to right. Ceremonial poles, several ground designs and embellished sacred objects are described from a variety of unrelated perspectives, each element realised with utmost assurance. With *Ceremonial scene (Mikantji)*, 1971, Kaapa's awakening vision can be traced.

Unfortunately for the art history record, Kaapa's first-known painting contains restricted ceremonial detail and cannot therefore be reproduced in full.

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56. Johnson writes of the application of a similar yellow wash as the background of *Corroboree of Waru* by Kaapa: "If this is the work of an experienced watercolour painter, it is very carelessly done": Johnson 2010, p. 32.
57. Kaapa was right-handed.
58. For a discussion of the wider implications of painting from memory, see: Rowse 1992.
59. 'Ground paintings' or 'mosaics' are prepared on hardened earth for animation by ceremonial participants in ritual. They use large-scaled icons constructed with natural materials, including ochres, feather-down, crushed plant material and ritual objects, to make ephemeral three-dimensional 'installations': Munn 1973b, p. 209.

Assessment of its chronology and the sources of its imagery can only be conveyed via analysis of its composition, narrative structure and a description of the objects depicted. The left segment of the work *can* be reproduced, providentially, for it contains evidence on which a key element of my argument rests. *Ceremonial scene* also shares critical spatial elements and materials with *Ceremony at Waru*, an early Painting of Kaapa's that has been cleared for public exhibition (see Plate 42).

It is important to note that *Ceremonial scene* was painted as early as April 1971, well before the commencement of the mural project at Papunya School. Vivien Johnson, who recognised the significance of *Ceremonial scene*, claimed that it is "the missing link" between the Papunya movement and the preceding "Hermannsburg School".⁶⁰ Her assertion does not allow for other influential sources that I argue were critical to the formation of Kaapa's cosmopolitan vision. Notwithstanding, Kaapa's assured approach to figuration insists that he was already a competent draftsman before commencing this ground-breaking work. Yet the rough background and the awkward spindly tree suggest that Kaapa was not yet competent in the watercolour landscape technique.⁶¹ Kaapa painted at least ten watercolour landscapes and although none of these small works are dated, they bear a style of signature that Kaapa used after he painted his first breakthrough works.⁶² If *Ceremonial scene* is not the missing link between his watercolour landscapes, where should we look for its antecedents?

Ethnographic Photography and Popular Culture

Counter to Johnson's 'evolutionary' assumption that Kaapa's image making grew directly from his history as a watercolour painter; I contend that *Ceremonial scene* was generated from Kaapa's familiarity with a diverse range of transcultural media.⁶³ From childhood, Kaapa would have been exposed to devotional material like evangelical posters of Christ and Palestine displayed at sermons delivered at church and under the stars at remote camps. As objects of reverence, these posters are likely to have made an enduring impact on his curious young mind.⁶⁴ Another relatively unexplored vector of transculturation was the adult-education program (previously discussed in the Introduction to Part Two), which delivered tailored courses to all comers. Representation of realistic figures on an illusionistic ground (as in *Ceremonial scene*) corresponds to the outline of a 1964

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60. Johnson 2010, p. 31.
61. *Ceremonial scene*, 1971, is signed "KARPA", in Kaapa's hand, at the bottom right corner (in the manner of the watercolour artists). The signature was made with a marker pen that bears no relationship to the paint used in the work's production. I concur with Johnson's contention that the signature was applied *post facto*: Johnson 2010, p. 34. The presence of the signature on early work does not therefore prove that Kaapa was an experienced landscapist.
62. Eight of Kaapa's watercolour landscapes are recorded: Australian Sales Digest 2019.
63. See also: Roy Monks cited in Johnson 2010, p. 27.
64. Lutheran evangelism encompassed Napperby: Albrecht 1977, pp. 78-79; Jones 2007, pp. 311-313.

course that included “painting a scene, copying a painting from a book, painting human figures and general painting”.⁶⁵ Jack Frawley’s research confirms that students were encouraged to copy images from illustrated publications, and raises the intriguing likelihood that Kaapa’s ground-breaking figurative works may have been occasioned by programs auspiced under the assimilation policy. Even if Kaapa did not enrol in that particular course, he could have gained access to drawing materials and printed collateral as he moved around the school, or befriended teachers in their houses.⁶⁶

Elsewhere, Jason Gibson and I have argued that Clifford Possum’s *Untitled (Kwaty anganenty rntwem — Rain Dreaming Dance)*, 1972, (Plate 43) was based on specific plates from Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen’s 1899 book *Native Tribes of Central Australia*.⁶⁷ Furthermore, we argued that Possum’s knowledge of *Native Tribes* was not exceptional, and that illustrated ethnographic tomes were routinely circulated across cultural boundaries:

Native Tribes remained a standard text for interested newcomers to Central Australia into the 1970s. The men of Papunya would not have to have gone any further than the Papunya Special School to come across a copy of the volume, for according to a former teacher at Papunya in the late 1970s, a 1968 reprint copy of the book was readily available on the library shelves.⁶⁸

Our argument continued: “Kaapa was among several men who were employed as gardeners at the school in the early 1970s, and the book would have been of as much interest to him as the clean-skin teachers who drove the long dusty track from the city to Papunya in late January in preparation for the start of school year”.⁶⁹ That several of the book’s photographs illustrated ceremonies from the Anmatyerr repertoire would have especially fascinated Kaapa.⁷⁰

The photographs comprising the dramatic core of *Native Tribes* were taken near Alice Springs Telegraph Station in summer of 1896 to 1897, when then Station Master Francis Gillen invited Arrernte men from a wide swathe of Country to gather to perform *engwura* (post-initiatory ceremonies). Aware of the spatial dynamics of men’s ceremony, the anthropologists positioned their tripod and equipment under a low bough shelter “with a view across the ceremonial area”.⁷¹ Each day for eight weeks, Spencer and Gillen recorded ceremonies from their

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65. These activities were included in a broader course offered at Papunya in 1964: Frawley 2003, p. 43. Harry Giese (1913 to 2000), then Director of Welfare NT, approved the course. Coincidentally, Giese was Kaapa’s first patron. He purchased seven early boards, including *Ceremonial scene*, on behalf of Native Welfare.
66. For accounts of Kaapa’s cross-cultural assurance, see: Johnson 2010, pp. 20-22; Kean 2011a, pp. 104-106; Thorley & Greenslade 2012 pp. 202-208.
67. Gibson & Kean 2016; Spencer & Gillen 1899.
68. Gibson & Kean 2016, p. 13.
69. Gibson & Kean 2016, p. 13.
70. Including Rain, Emu, ‘Native Cat’ and Plum Dreamings that comprised a significant component of Kaapa’s repertoire.
71. Mulvaney & Calaby 1985, p. 176.

privileged vantage point. *Native Tribes* features over 100 photographs, many taken from this shelter. Their favoured perspective established the benchmark for ethnographic photography in Central Australia and beyond.⁷² I argue that Kaapa assumed a comparable ethnographic perspective when planning his early figurative boards. Kaapa was an astute observer, and mimic, absorbing the principals of ethnographic photography, and turning those techniques inwards to visualise his own ceremonies that, in turn, were crafted for an external market.⁷³

In addition to images from ethnographic tomes, transcultural influences were absorbed directly from the popular culture of the stock camps. Kaapa’s age-mate and countryman Wenten Rubuntja recalls drawing cowboys after seeing “Tex Morton, Pat Jones, Flash Gordon and all them” at the ‘walk-in’ cinema on the banks of the Todd River in Alice Springs⁷⁴. Similarly, cowboy comics fascinated the Kimberley carver Jack Wherra, who carved successive episodes from frontier stories in the round on spherical Boab nuts. Wherra’s ‘frames’ bear a compelling resemblance to the jump-cut narratives and dramatically cropped figures of animated cartoons.⁷⁵ Writing of the art produced by men and women whose formative working experiences were in the pastoral industry, Darren Jorgensen concluded, “The art history of [cattle] Station Time also visualises freedoms achieved through labour, and the complexities of classical modes of life that carried on in spite of the pastoral regime” (see Plate 44).⁷⁶ While Kaapa’s early paintings do not reflect directly on his experience as a stockman, his sensibility is suggestive of the heroic improvisation required of life in the saddle, and his images provide a privileged glimpse into the ‘classical modes of life’ that he and his fellow stockmen were able to pursue on ‘summer holidays’ away from stock work.

Kaapa would have seen cowboy movies on his regular trips to Alice Springs.⁷⁷ Indeed, cowboy movies remained a popular staple among Kaapa’s generation at Papunya where they were shown in constant rotation in the Town Hall.⁷⁸ Images of cowboys, whether drawn from the lived experience of stockmen, inspired by film Westerns or copied from comics, comprised a visual vernacular across Central Australia, where the buck-jumper was a secular icon imposed on any available material by a host of anonymous hands.⁷⁹

Bardon’s belief that Kaapa, Warangula, Leura and Possum were the only Papunya painters who had “ever seen magazines and comics in the western manner” is in my opinion, overstated.⁸⁰ I recall that comics were prevalent in the late 1970s,

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72. Gillen worked alone for weeks before Spencer’s arrival: Jones 2011b, p. 12.
73. As mimic, see: Kean 2007, p. 10.
74. Rubuntja & Green, 2002, p. 51. Also see Kimber 2000c.
75. Email correspondence with the author: Ackerman 2017.
76. Jorgensen 2017, p. 120.
77. Kaapa interviewed by the author, Papunya: Kaapa 1994.
78. Personal observation as a Papunya resident between 1977 and 1979.
79. Kimber 2000c.
80. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 20.

especially so in homes to the north and east of Papunya where the Anmatyerr and Warlpiri camped.⁸¹ Kevin Keefe, who taught at Papunya from the late 1970s, also remembers that “Phantom and Batman were in circulation” especially “from the chalkies [teachers]”.⁸² I argue that comics were consumed more widely than Bardon allows. Albeit, the individuals Bardon nominated as being familiar with cartoons were, tellingly, the four subjects of this thesis, each of whom made extensive use of representational figures across their artistic careers.⁸³ Bardon’s contention that the extent of figuration in the works by Kaapa, Warangula, Leura and Possum bares a direct relationship to their exposure to illustrated media, is persuasive and adds to the weight to my assertion that transcultural media played a significant part in the formation of Kaapa’s vision, and by extension, that of his closest artistic peers.

Sequencing the First Consignment

Having identified several influences that guided Kaapa’s first painting, I now turn to an assessment of the other boards included in the consignment of Kaapa’s works delivered to Alice Springs in August 1971.⁸⁴ Packed in the back of a utility, the consignment contained seven boards of varying sizes.⁸⁵ Fortuitously, all works have survived; six are in Australian institutions and one is held by a prominent private collection in the United States.

None of the works in Kaapa’s first consignment were documented at the time of their production, and the sequence in which they were painted is not recorded. My proposed order of production is based on an assessment of the colour and size of the substrate, in conjunction with the changes in the artist’s treatment of pictorial space (see Appendix 4).

Before embarking on further close analysis of individual works, it is helpful to identify particular characteristics that Kaapa’s boards have in common. From the outset, Kaapa chose to apply a single “ground” colour across the entirety of the board.⁸⁶ This decisive move ensured that his paintings conveyed a dramatically different pictorial space than the atmospheric perspective imparted via a

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81. While it is now difficult to identify exactly which publications were in local circulation, I recollect that cowboy, *Phantom* and *Superman* comics were available in the community store, while most magazines were distributed by expatriate workers, and therefore would have covered a wide gamut, from *Pix-People* to *Walkabout*.
 82. Keefe taught at Papunya from 1979 to 1980: Keefe 2017, Facebook correspondence with the author.
 83. Warangula’s figures were less realistic and more schematic than those of the Anmatyerr artists.
 84. This ‘consignment’ should not be confused with ‘Consignments 1-19’ sent to the Stuart Arts Centre (to be discussed in later chapters).
 85. Scholes 2017b, pp. 133-134.
 86. I am influenced here by the classic study of the visual art of north-east Arnhem Land, in which anthropologist Howard Morphy identified key structural components of Yolngu painting: Morphy 1991, pp. 142-167.

sequence of transparent watercolour washes meeting at a distant horizon, used by his Arrernte peers. The overall yellow wash that Kaapa applied as a ground to *Ceremonial scene (Mikantji)* and *Ceremony at Waru*, appears not to have satisfied the artist, and was not replicated in later works.⁸⁷ While Johnson attributed the change to Kaapa’s pragmatism and a “sheer lack of materials”, I contend that it was intentional, and aesthetically driven.⁸⁸ Kaapa’s choice of opacity, in combination with the roughness of the boards that he selected, imbued his paintings with a palpable sense of materiality which is absent in the translucent watercolours of the Hermannsburg School. Henceforth Kaapa’s paintings could be appreciated as ‘objects’, with a weighty presence, comparable to classical ceremonial shields or painted boomerangs. Moreover, the deliberate avoidance of ‘atmosphere’ infused Kaapa’s paintings with an aura of ‘primitive authenticity’, a quality esteemed by patrons of artists working outside the Western tradition.⁸⁹

Despite eschewing the picturesque, one element of Kaapa’s new work appears to have had its origin in the watercolour tradition. The painted line around the perimeter of the work is a vestigial legacy of the Hermannsburg School. Aware that watercolour paintings were framed before being hung in a domestic setting, experienced landscapists pencilled a discreet framing margin approximately 12mm from the edges, within which they would paint, and which could be measured by a framer when mat cutting. Adapting the convention, Kaapa painted an external border of the same dimension — a frame marked out with a row of dots — strategically appropriating an element of the picturesque into an autonomous form.

Men’s Ceremony for the Kangaroo ‘Gulgardi’

Having abandoned (or exhausted) his supply of yellow ground Kaapa turned to a pot of grey house paint to create an opaque ground on his next two paintings, one of which was the prizewinning *Men’s Ceremony for the Kangaroo ‘Gulgardi’* (Plate 45). Although Vivien Johnson, Roger Benjamin and Judith Ryan write of the painting, its unique and enduring qualities have not yet been conclusively analysed.⁹⁰ Significantly, *Gulgardi* is the first work to be built on a geometric armature that would later inform Papunya painting.⁹¹

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87. For instance: Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Untitled*, 1971, Queensland Art Gallery, was painted with watercolour and poster paint on the unpainted cream surface of fashion board popular with the watercolour landscapists.
 88. Johnson 2010, p. 33.
 89. The critical debate about the status of Papunya painting was initiated by *Western Desert Acrylic Painting – Artefact or Art*, an essay that explored the paradox of tradition and contemporaneity: Megaw, V. 1982. Two years later, William Rubin’s 1984 exhibition *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, elicited protracted global debate over the relationship between modern art and the work of non-western ‘tribal’ artists.
 90. Johnson 2010, pp. 33-34; Benjamin 2009, p. 30; Ryan 2011a, p. 19.
 91. The work also exemplifies properties that make Papunya boards “a distinct aesthetic category”: Benjamin 2009, pp. 24-28.

Gulgardi is painted on a neutral grey background with the signal colours of Aboriginal identity, black, red and yellow.⁹² The viewer's eye is arrested by the gestures of a central, iconic figure: a performer adorned in the guise of a totemic ancestor.⁹³ Thick bands of red paint on the performer's thighs and torso extend to his face, encompassing a horizontal headdress. Represented on his knees adjacent to a ground mosaic, the performer directs the viewer's attention towards one of three ceremonial poles with an outstretched arm. Two of the poles are portrayed vertically, (as viewed from the performer's point of view), while a longer pole is shown horizontally at the bottom of the work. All poles are topped with bunched feathers.

In contrast to Kaapa's previous works, which employed perspectival projection (see plate 42), *Gulgardi* strives for symmetry. As Johnson noted, the performer is situated on the painting's vertical axis.⁹⁴ It is also significant that poles and ground paintings are mirrored on either side of the performer to establish a longer, horizontal axis. The composition is therefore configured around both vertical and horizontal axes, intersecting near the true centre of the board [the central roundel]. By dividing the picture plane into four quadrants, Kaapa has effectively flattened pictorial space; following the creation of *Gulgardi*, this 'planar' perspective (as I will refer to it) was incrementally asserted to become the essential organising principle of Papunya painting.⁹⁵ Chapter Five will demonstrate how Kaapa, in collaboration with his cousin Leura, systematically explored the potential of cross-axes as a compositional template.

Vivien Johnson classifies early paintings (that share figurative attributes with *Gulgardi*) as constituting a discrete movement – the "School of Kaapa". She defines the style as comprised of "miniaturised depictions of ceremonial grounds, objects and performers on plain background", adding that they constituted an "independent practice": distinct from, but sharing some attributes with works facilitated by Bardon.⁹⁶ School of Kaapa paintings are scarce, comprising approximately 50 works produced by a handful of men directly influenced by Kaapa.⁹⁷ The paintings display unmatched detail of ritual paraphernalia, ground designs and body adornment that is derived directly from the artist's knowledge of the esoteric realm of men's ritual.

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92. Some details are painted with fine white dots. It is relevant that Harold Thomas designed the 'Aboriginal Flag' in Adelaide in 1971, the same year that Kaapa painted *Gulgardi*.
 93. Typically, dancers will emerge from windbreaks at the perimeter of the ceremonial ground and make their way across cleared earth towards a ground mosaic, lowering their bodies towards the icon for the final acts of the ritual.
 94. Johnson 2010, p. 33.
 95. The planar perspective is elsewhere misleadingly described as the 'birds-eye' view. However, as will be discussed in Chapter Eight, rather than being a 'view' as understood in the Western tradition, the 'planar' method entails the organisation of spatial relationships on a horizontal surface on the basis of knowledge rather than vision.
 96. Johnson 2010, p. 18.
 97. Artists include: Long Jack Phillipus, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum and Billy Stockman. Other artists, including Warangula, Mick Namarari, Anatjarri Tjakamarra and Charlie Tarawa (Wartuma) painted works that could be included in a slightly broader grouping, as they were also stimulated by Kaapa's approach in the early stages of their artistic development.

While the image of the performer in Kaapa's *Gulgardi* may be distanced from the viewer's viewpoint, he is not objectified; rather, his commanding gesture is instructional, as if to proclaim; "Look! Listen! Learn!" The artist addresses the viewer directly, from his point of view at the heart of the ceremonial ground. Alert to comparable commanding of paintings by Uta Uta Tjangala and Shorty Lungkarta, Fred Myers writes: "The vitality of Pintupi painting seems associated with the rendering of the complex of ritual knowledge and experience onto a two-dimensional plane". He continues: "In the initial periods, for example, one finds the greatest range of paintings, and one finds this range in the work of the men most dedicated to ritual..."⁹⁸ Kaapa was in his mid-40s and at the height of his ceremonial power when he commenced painting. Following Myers' reasoning, the assured presence of the decorated dancer in *Gulgardi* speaks of Kaapa's *experience* as a performer, re-enacting the actions of totemic ancestors.

Dick Kimber recalls witnessing Kaapa performing with his peers at ceremonies at Yuendumu:

During the Yuendumu Sports Week-ends in 1971 and 1972 Kaapa was one of many men who applied their totemic paintings to their bodies in the men's camp prior to performing revolutionary dancing that all men, women and children could witness and enjoy. Older men who could no longer dance as well as in their youth and middle age, played the boomerangs...⁹⁹

Kimber's interpretation of the ceremonies as "revolutionary" is noteworthy, for it conjures the moment when contemporary painting emerged at Papunya, as cultural certainties were actively reconstituted within a changing cultural landscape.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Kimber was observing a process of intergenerational transition, as middle-aged men assumed key ceremonial roles and older men sat back to allow them space. Kaapa's knack was to create the regional style though which the zeitgeist could be expressed.¹⁰¹

Gulgardi invokes 'performance' with a revolutionary *bravura* absent in Namatjira's earlier images of ceremony, free from nostalgia and emotional distancing. The muted, illusionistic representation of figures and ceremonial objects on the dust jacket of *The Art of Albert Namatjira*, 1944, pales in contrast to Kaapa's *Gulgardi*, in which totemic signs are applied with conviction to the performer's body, as they would be in ceremony. The audacity of Kaapa's *Gulgardi* is emblematic of the struggle for land rights and political recognition in the era of self-determination.¹⁰²

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98. Myers 2002b, p. 119.
 99. Dick Kimber 2010, p. 32.
 100. For a description of the reconstitution of cultural strategies at Yuendumu see Hinkson 2017, pp. 137-152.
 101. McLean 2016, pp. 126-133; Preziosi & Farago 2012, pp. 52-70; Smith, T. 2008, pp. 23-40.
 102. Papastergiadis 2012, pp. 147-154; Carter 2000, p. 248.

The curator Judith Ryan regards *Gulgardi* as: “Kaapa’s *tour de force* [for it] renders visible and powerful ... figures participating in ceremony and creates an illusion of the third dimension through the combination of lateral and planar perspectives.”¹⁰³ For instance, the fine tracks of an ancestral kangaroo can be traced, hopping into the space, repeated in each corner of the work. The animal’s rate of movement is then shown to slow on entry into the ceremonial ground (communicated via traces of forepaws and tail contacting the ground). Then, in an abrupt change of mode, the Kangaroo Ancestor is depicted in its iconic form as a large U shape, embellished with dots, and mirrored for emphasis at either side of the composition. Finally, the decorated performer is represented realistically, in elevation, in the guise of the Kangaroo Ancestor. Thus, the mercurial transposition from totemic ancestor to human actor is conveyed in three distinct phases: ‘animal’ tracks which imply movement; a U-shaped icon to represent ancestral power; and finally driven home in the form of a fully-realised ‘human’ performer.¹⁰⁴ Despite being signified with dissimilar lexical idioms, the elements constitute a continuous sequence which conjures the theatre of the ceremonial ground. *Gulgardi* was not only significant as the first Papunya painting to receive public recognition but – in Kaapa’s ingenious integration of “lateral and planar perspectives” – the first to create a compelling whole.

Kaapa’s Return to ‘Flatland’

The planar view of the ceremonial ground trialled in *Gulgardi* provided Kaapa with clarity and purpose. I contend that *Gulgardi*’s flatness was further explored in a subsequent work in the Art Gallery of South Australia collection. *Untitled*, 1971 (plate 46) is significant, for it is the first work in which Kaapa unifies all elements on a single visual plain. Underpainted with matte black, the board is comprised of icons that are applied to the surface of the board with no attempt at perspective, just as they would be to the hardened earth of the ceremonial ground. All indications of Western representation have been abandoned and the icons that persist are distilled from elements of body adornment or derived from ground painting. Critically, icons are expressed laterally on the surface of the board, and pictorial depth has been atomised to produce a rigorously conceptual work, a *métier* that Rudolf Arnheim describes as constituting a “flatland”:

The two-dimensional units of the drawing are equivalents of solids and/or two-dimensional aspects of the outsides of solids depending on what is needed. The relationship between flatness and depth is undifferentiated, so that by purely visual means there is no way of telling whether a circular line stands for a ring, a disc, or a ball.¹⁰⁵

103. Ryan 2011a, p. 19.

104. My understanding of the temporal and spatial aspects of ceremony came when Kaapa invited me attend a sequence of *maliyarra/arleyarr* ceremonies held to the near north of Papunya in 1978.

105. Arnheim 1954, p. 60, cited in Munn 1973b, p. 206.

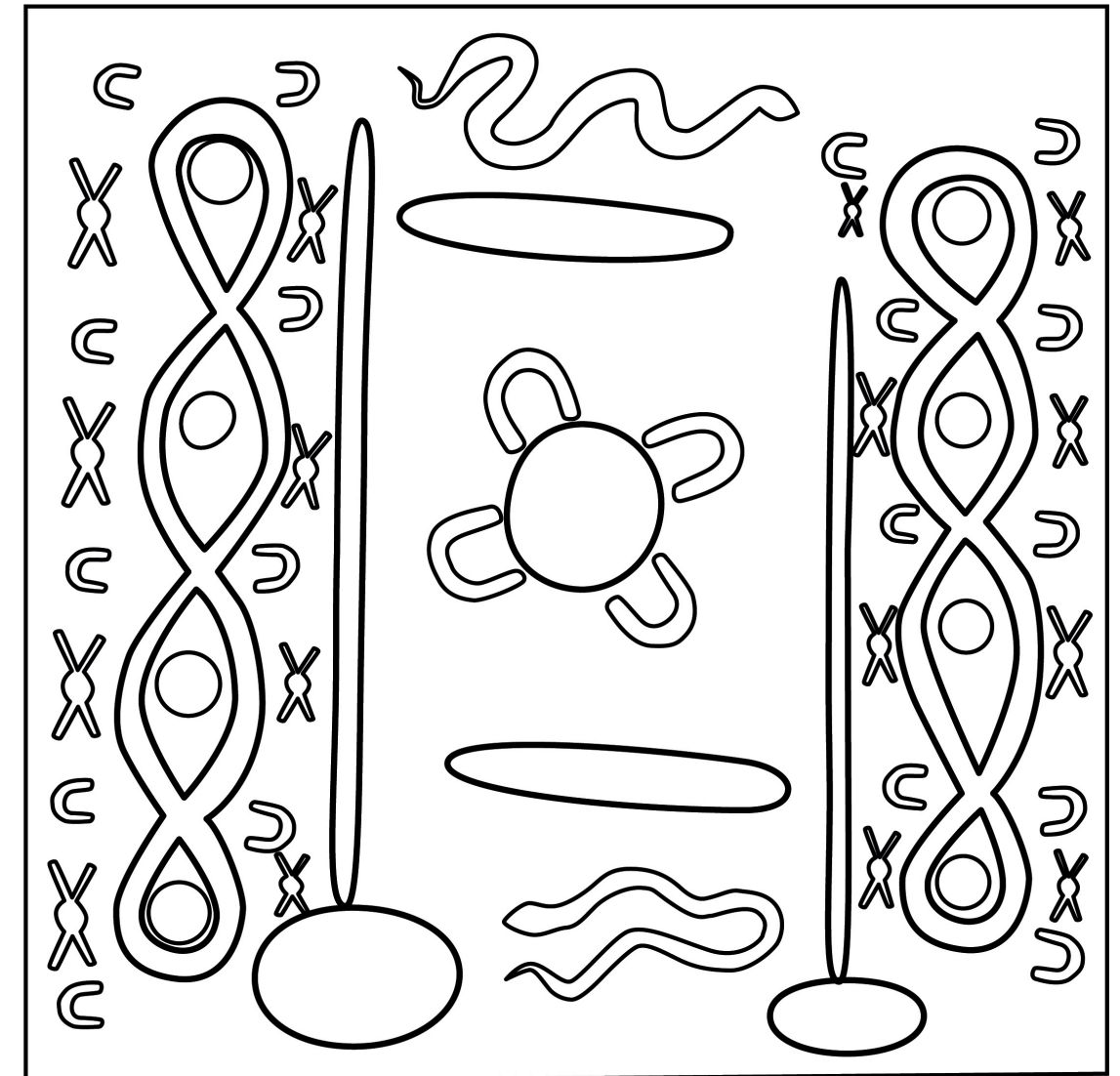


Fig. 26. Schematic diagram of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Mikantji* [formerly *untitled*], 1971

The image that persists after Kaapa’s distillation can be compared to the ground painting created by Yuendumu men for the film *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 (see Plate 47). The similarity is not surprising, for the Yuendumu artists were Kaapa’s countrymen and he would have been familiar with each of the themes disclosed in Paris.¹⁰⁶ There are major differences of scale: Kaapa’s works were created with recycled boards and requisitioned paints, where the Yuendumu men’s ground design was created with natural materials on an expansive area of hardened earth comparable to that prepared by a group of men working at an isolated ceremonial camp.¹⁰⁷ Kaapa’s flatland was achieved through a return to the realm where his esoteric journey had begun – the flat earth of the ceremonial ground – on which icons were laid out with assured lines and embellished with rows of white dots.

106. The images referred to site at the conjunction of Warlpiri and Anmatyerr Country.

107. Spencer & Gillen, 1899; Spencer & Gillen 1904.

Mirroring Mikantji

The final work in the first consignment of Kaapa's paintings, *Mikantji* [formerly *untitled*], 1971 (John and Barbara Wilkerson Collection)(see Fig. 26), combines elements of the planar view of ground paintings evident in *Untitled* 1971 (Art Gallery of South Australia) with the emergent bilateral symmetry of *Gulgardi*.¹⁰⁸ The art historian Roger Benjamin regards *Mikantji* as "a crucial early work" constituting an "aesthetic advance" from *Gulgardi*.¹⁰⁹ Approaching the comparison analytically, Benjamin draws attention to *Mikantji*'s formal qualities, writing:

In *Mikantji* Kaapa provides a symmetrical schematization of the ceremonial scene. "Realistic" figures are replaced by U-signs set around a central sand mosaic partitioned off by large ceremonial objects. Beyond these lie arrays of ground paintings, set out in ampersand-like format. Tjurungas, bullroarers, and ceremonial poles topped with emu feathers are all in evidence—as presumably allowed by the artists' more liberal Anmatyerre view of issues of secrecy.¹¹⁰

Benjamin's critique raises three questions at the heart of this thesis, each of which will be addressed in detail in subsequent chapters. When considered in sum, they demonstrate the revolutionary significance of Kaapa's early works.

Firstly, Benjamin's recognition of *Mikantji* as advancing Kaapa's previous painting assumes artistic intentionality, the pursuit of innovation. This notion is interrogated by the curator Stephen Gilchrist in his use of William Stanner's neologism 'the Everywhen' to capture the elusive elasticity of time in Indigenous belief, suggesting that "Indigenous Art from Australia" populates an "Eternal Present".¹¹¹ Gilchrist emphasises intergenerational continuity, stressing that a circular understanding of Indigenous art should not preclude the recognition of incremental development. The curator Hetti Perkins also argues, from an Indigenous perspective, that tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive in Papunya Tula painting.¹¹² While recognising that his vision is steeped in tradition, I regard originality as the most compelling attribute of Kaapa's artistic project. The sequential development of Kaapa's early works has convinced me that he was eager to solve formal pictorial problems; and his approach can, in this sense, be equated with the restless momentum of the 'modernist project'. That said, Kaapa was an Aboriginal man who reiterated and revitalised his totemic inheritance. Indeed, Kaapa's choice of the ceremonial ground as subject incites *frisson* between contemporaneity and the Eternal Present, a tension that continues to propel desert art.¹¹³

108. The order (and month) that this particular work was painted in is the subject of ongoing debate. See Benjamin 2009, p. 84; Johnson 2010, pp. 15-18.

109. Benjamin et al. 2009, p. 84.

110. Benjamin et al. 2009, p. 84.

111. Gilchrist 2016, p.19.

112. Perkins 2003, pp. 57-68.

113. Johnson 1994a, p. 39; Myers 2002b, pp. 118-119.

Secondly, Benjamin argues that the "symmetrical schematization of the ceremonial scene" evident in *Mikantji* suggests that Kaapa made very deliberate aesthetic judgments in setting out the painting's complex elements.¹¹⁴ Identifying the source of Kaapa's preference for symmetry is a core question addressed in the following chapter, where further evidence of his intentionality is assembled.

Thirdly, Benjamin claims that Kaapa and his Anmatyerr peers were more 'liberal' in their approach to the representation of elements of men's ritual than other Papunya-based artists of the period. I will return to the complex role of secrecy in Anmatyerr art in later chapters. For now, it is important to note that according to historian Dick Kimber (our most informed contemporaneous witness), Kaapa was "absolutely emphatic that this particular painting...could be openly displayed".¹¹⁵ In contrast, the second Papunya art advisor, Peter Fannin, characterised Kaapa as the "most determined apologist for revelation".¹¹⁶ The revelation and suppression of sacred images is central to the development of early Papunya painting. The artist's assertion that his early works were appropriate for open display supports my contention that Kaapa approached the painting project as a man of his time, with deliberate transcultural intent in a period of radical transformation. The fact that a more cautious approach to the representation of sacred images now exists, and that some works that were painted for the transcultural market are now classified as restricted, should not reduce our appreciation of Kaapa's original 'liberal' intentions.¹¹⁷

Intriguingly, *Mikantji* is painted on a blackboard requisitioned from the Papunya School. Given that Kaapa had previously been sacked as a school yardman for stealing paintbrushes, it is possible that he also stole the board.¹¹⁸ Alternatively, it may have been proffered as a gift by the teacher Geoffrey Bardon, who by the winter of 1971, was a regular visitor and occasional customer of the artists who assembled under Kaapa's leadership at the Old Settlement Office.¹¹⁹ On examining *Mikantji* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2011, I noticed a residual mist of chalk smeared across the blackened surface, proving the link to the school, where Kaapa was a crucial go-between in the creation of the much-celebrated *Honey Ant Mural*.¹²⁰ The material qualities of *Mikantji* are significant, for they speak of

114. Myers' argument that symmetry, ceremony and aesthetics are inextricably linked in Pintupi art provides further support of Benjamin's contention: Myers 2002b, p. 105.

115. Kimber cited in Sotheby's 1998, p. 21; Johnson 1994, p. 38.

116. Fannin 1974, p. 4.

117. Johnson 1994, p. 39; Myers 2002b, pp. 118-119.

118. Bardon 1991, p. 108.

119. According to Scholes (personal communications with the author, Darwin: Scholes 2016) paintings included in consignments 1, 2 and 3 (now in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory collection) were originally purchased by Bardon before he commenced commissioning artists, and were included in early consignments as required.

120. *Mikantji* was exhibited at *Tjukurrjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art*, at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2011. For a description of Kaapa's role in the *Honey Ant Mural*, see: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 12-19.

the tension between Kaapa's independent *atelier*, and the invitation to paint under Bardon's purview at the back of the school art-room.¹²¹ The work is therefore a bridge between the independent School of Kaapa and a later, better-known phase, when under Bardon's guidance, diverse group of artists would assemble to share stories of distant Country.

Conclusion

The inception of painting at Papunya has its source in Kaapa's pictorial discoveries, in combination, and in equal measure, with his intercultural advocacy. In an atmosphere of colonial control under the assimilation policy, it took an individual of Kaapa's resolve to negotiate barriers that separated the Indigenous community from an alien administration. Kaapa's assertive intelligence was an essential precursor to the manifestation of his revolutionary new vision. Kaapa's confidence can be traced to his formative years as a stockman, when Aboriginal labour contributed to the success of the pastoral industry. His agency grew as a craftsman, making life-like carvings for the local market at Papunya. Importantly, Kaapa's authority was bolstered through his ancestral connections to the region.

Once ensconced in the Old Settlement Office, and using salvaged materials, Kaapa produced a series of ground-breaking paintings, a selection of which constituted the first consignment to leave Papunya. The examination of Kaapa's evolving practice, through the lens of this initial consignment, substantiates Kaapa's artistic operation, from an independent studio, before Bardon's involvement in the painting enterprise. Drawing on the scholarship of Johnson and Scholes, I have inverted the conventional narrative (which placed Bardon at the centre), to focus on Kaapa's agency and artistic invention. To do otherwise would be to pick up the story after Kaapa inscribed its opening passages. While Bardon did recognise Kaapa as "a most enterprising and independent artist in the traditional manner", he did not acknowledge the scope of his vision, nor did he understand the extent of his influence.¹²² It took Vivien Johnson, writing nearly 40 years after the phenomenon, to recognise the significance of the eponymous 'School of Kaapa'.

In addition to his mastery of classical Anmatyerr iconography, Kaapa created *métier* informed by the global flow of images in the 20th century. Kaapa's compositions were framed for architectural settings outside the ken of many of Papunya's impoverished residents who lived in corrugated iron humpies or in windowless one-room 'Kingstrand' houses.¹²³ His foresight was born of intercultural experience; selling his work door to door to expatriate staff, and

making himself at home in airy houses where framed paintings and photographs were hung and appreciated.¹²⁴

Kaapa's first paintings feature ceremonial scenes, recalled in realistic detail. I argue that the framing of ethnographic photography influenced the forced perspective of *Ceremonial Scene*, *Gulgardi* and *Ceremony at Waru*. Kaapa's overview of the ceremonial ground, as if 'looking in' from the periphery, was a critical step in the formation of contemporary art at Papunya. I also linked Kaapa's fascination with comics to the narrative construction of his earliest ceremonial scenes. Kaapa's paintings announced a new pictorial space in which Indigenous iconography operated in consort with western tropes, to enact the theatre of the ceremony. Crucially, Kaapa established the ceremonial ground as the movement's first and abiding subject.

Appreciated in sequence, the paintings of the first consignment trace the inception and initial trajectory of Kaapa's vision. From the realistic representation of ceremony, the compositions were distilled, and totemic signs were aligned on vertical and horizontal axes to flatten pictorial space. Increasingly, as the series progressed, paint was applied to the board, as it would have been to the hardened earth of the ceremonial ground. By the winter of 1971, Kaapa had attained the overall flatness for which Papunya paintings would become famous.

Mikantji, the final work in the consignment, demonstrated a range of inventions whereby objects and signs were concentrated and mirrored about a perpendicular axis to attain a striking degree of bilateral symmetry. Importantly, Kaapa's radical flattening of pictorial space enabled him to engage more deeply with the formal properties of his visual tradition. The following chapter will follow the refinement of the Kaapa's vision to demonstrate how he reconciled the Oval forms of the desert with the governing rectangle of Western tradition. Rather than working in advance of his peers, as he had done in 1971, the next phase of Kaapa's artistic development proceeded in collaboration with his cousin Tim Leura.

121. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 21.

122. Bardon, 1979, p. 14.

123. The subjects of this thesis dwelt in rows of houses to the north and north-east of Papunya in the 1970s, which were referred to as 'dogboxes'.

124. Thorley & Greenslade 2012, pp. 202-208.

A Narrative Interlude:
The After-effect of Kaapa’s Recognition

The balance of this thesis aims to demonstrate how key stylistic innovations were layered and interwoven to create contemporary desert art. While recognising the influence of the wider collective practice, and the divergent trends established by Pintupi artists, I contend that each of the four selected protagonists of this thesis made a particularly significant contribution to the formal lexicon of what became Papunya Tula art.¹ The following synopsis of key studio-based events is therefore intended to chart the collective terrain in which the chosen artists worked.

August 1971

In 1971, the average income for an Indigenous resident of Papunya was \$5.55 per week.² Unsurprisingly, the \$750 Kaapa earned from the sale of all seven paintings in the first consignment, along with his Award prize money, caused a sensation among the community’s impoverished population.³ Suddenly, Kaapa could afford ample meat to feed his extended family, an endowment observed by fellow residents who struggled to gather enough cash to purchase basics like flour, tea and sugar (see Plate 48).⁴ On sensing the potential for a new industry, government officials were also prompted to act, mobilising material support for the embryonic movement.⁵ Bardon, for instance, redoubled his efforts, reporting: “Following Karpa’s [sic] success really saw me apply concentration towards the art work of the men to raising technical standards, ‘purifying’ the mythology and general encouragement where the men responded willingly.”⁶ Meanwhile, Kaapa (who had previously been regarded as a ‘troublemaker’) enjoyed a moment of positive recognition.⁷

A Significant Meeting and the *Honey Ant Mural*

The trickle of boards produced before Kaapa’s triumph increased to a torrent as aspiring artists grasped the potential for a financial return from their knowledge of Country and ceremony.⁸ Meanwhile, Long Jack Phillipus, Billy Stockman, Johnny Warangula and Nosepeg Tjunkata created a suite of murals, using icons from their

1. See Appendix 3: Papunya Studios 1971 to 1975.
2. Scholes 2017b, p. 134.
3. Johnson, 2010b, pp. 13.
4. Regarded as life’s essentials at Papunya.
5. Scholes 2017, pp. 134-141.
6. Bardon 1972, *Art Report to the Australia Council*, cited in Scholes 2017b, p. 136.
7. Johnson 2010, p. 11; Bardon 1991, pp. 36-39.
8. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 27-40; Johnson 2010, pp. 44-99; Scholes 2017, pp. 136-141.

respective Countries, on external walls of the Papunya School.⁹ Prophetically, it was Keith Namatjira, son of the founder of modern art in Central Australia who rendered and prepped the surface for the most expansive mural.¹⁰ It was at this juncture that Kaapa stepped forward, meeting Bardon for the first time.¹¹

Kaapa and his friend Mick Wallankarri approached Bardon’s flat with intent.¹² They came armed with a design concept, sketched on a small sheet of paper, consisting of a pair of parallel lines dissecting several sets of looping concentric circles.¹³ When enlarged, the icon fitted the proportions of the wall with perfection and Bardon immediately approved the plan. It was only later that he learned the design was a local icon signifying the subterranean realm of the Honey Ant Ancestors upon which the settlement was constructed.¹⁴ The wall’s white surface beckoned and Kaapa had the expertise and connections to assert Indigenous sovereignty at the heart of the settlement’s administrative centre.

Writing years after the event, Bardon pronounced the *Honey Ant Mural* to be “the beginning of the Western Desert Movement”, an assertion relegating Kaapa’s independent practice to secondary status. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the *Honey Ant Mural* was but one of a number of significant artistic events that occurred in the region during 1971.¹⁵ I have argued elsewhere that Bardon’s claim for the mural’s primacy rests on the relentlessness of his public advocacy to a greater extent than the actual impact it had at the local level (which appears more muted than he would have us believe).¹⁶ Approached retrospectively, I contend that the mural’s principal significance lies in the fact that it brought Kaapa and Bardon into constant communication, enabling concurrent streams of creative endeavour to converge and become an irresistible force.¹⁷

9. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 12-19.
10. Fred Friis, cited in Scholes 2017b, p. 131.
11. “A new man became known to me Kaapa Tjampatjimpa [sic]”: Bardon 1979, p. 14.
12. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 14. Wallankarri was the *kutungula*, with custodial authority for the site on which the settlement was established: Johnson 2008, p. 14.
13. The sketch is unusual in a culture where the capacity to reproduce specific designs is implicitly understood, according to a person’s authority for Country; the presentation of a pre-drafted concept demonstrates Kaapa’s familiarity with European process.
14. Bardon 1979, p. 14.
15. A series of murals were created for the Yuendumu Men’s Museum in the same year: Carmichael & Kohen 2013. For alternative interpretations of these events, see: Johnson 2010, pp. 3-78; Kean 2017b; Scholes 2017b; Edmond 2019.
16. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 17; Kean 2019.
17. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 16-17.

Scholes dissects Bardon's account of the unfolding of events of 1971 into 1972, shedding new light on Bardon's conflicted role as both catalyst and chronicler of the emergent phenomena.¹⁸ For the purposes of brevity however, I will not dwell on the consequence of Bardon's artistic interventions, for others have tilled that earth; rather I will concentrate on his contribution as a primary source.¹⁹

The Men's Painting Room

Following the positive reception of the *Honey Ant Mural*, Kaapa abandoned his studio at the Old Settlement Office and returned to the school, where he started painting in a 'back section' of Bardon's art room.²⁰ The move is likely to have been motivated by access to the sable brushes and poster paints that Bardon controlled; media required to achieve the graphic precision Kaapa desired.²¹ Yet, the cramped school-based experiment was short-lived. Contrary to Bardon's recollections, Kaapa and his peers had relocated to the northern end of the Town Hall by October/November 1971, a venue henceforth referred to as the 'Men's Painting Room'.²²

The 'movement' was well underway by the end of the year with more artists joining the group, painting excitedly on small boards. Meanwhile Kaapa executed a sequence of expansive and exquisitely detailed large panels.²³ Alternately undercoated with rich red oxide, orange or matt-black backgrounds, these works showed objects and ancestral tracks in an airy space that conveyed the long horizons and domed sky of Central Australia, yet Kaapa's focus remained squarely on the representation of the ceremonial ground.²⁴ Despite evidence that indicates he had only been painting for a few short months, Kaapa's early paintings exhibit a singularly sophisticated level of planning and execution. I concur with Bardon's summation, that Kaapa was, "the first Master Artist of the Papunya group of painters".²⁵

18. Scholes 2017b.

19. Bardon 1991; Bardon & Bardon 2004; Carter 2000; 2004; McLean 2011b; Smith, B. 2006; Edmond 2019, accessed 14 August 2019, URL: <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/bardon-story-place/?fbclid=IwAR1QsAiJ3lyOWuClSPCi0PKFZ7AEymft8jtuuqIHsaWn64Wsv-8El5XgphM>

20. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 24.

21. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 86.

22. Scholes 2017b, pp. 138-139.

23. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 65; Scholes 2017b, pp. 138-139.

24. Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory holds 14 paintings produced at Papunya in 1971 and 1972 by Kaapa. Of these, *Goanna Dreaming*, 1971, 91.4 x 91.7 cm, WAL-62, and *Untitled (Kangaroo)*, 1971, 91.7 x 91.2 cm, WAL-63, stand out as exceptional, being the largest and most technically accomplished.

25. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 280. Kaapa's pre-eminence among the painters was reflected in the price he could command for his works. An examination of early stock books shows that Kaapa was being paid up to five times (and invariably twice as much) per painting as were his peers: Art Gallery of New South Wales Library Stuart Arts Centre Stock book 1971-1972.

Tim Leura Enters the Building

Tim Leura had been watching from a distance before deciding to enter Bardon's sphere of influence. Eventually Kaapa arranged a meeting, in February of 1972.²⁶ Despite his initial aloofness, Leura quickly became Bardon's key friend and confidante, advising him on cultural matters and assisting in the operations of the budding enterprise. For example, Leura accompanied Bardon to Alice Springs where he was authorised by Bardon to purchase art materials from Iris Harvey's Arunta Bookshop and Alice Springs Timber and Joinery.²⁷ Leura was comfortable operating as an independent artist in Alice Springs, where he had already established a relationship with Pat Hogan, director of Stuart Arts Centre.²⁸ A proficient English speaker and (considered by many) an effective broker, Leura was "chosen by the men in 1972 as their spokesman", wrote Bardon.²⁹

In turn, Leura introduced Bardon to Clifford Possum. Deferring to his brother's formidable skills as a craftsman, Leura professed, "I can't beat him".³⁰ Possum continued to work as head stockman at Narwietooma Station; he therefore could only attend the Men's Painting Room intermittently during his holidays. Despite limited opportunity, Possum demonstrated unrivalled technical virtuosity. Like Kaapa, Possum turned out ambitiously resolved and conceptually sophisticated works while the majority of artists simply made the transition from decorating earth and skin with traditional materials, to painting with brushes onto a two-dimensional substrate.³¹

The formation of Papunya Tula Artists relied on contingencies quite unlike those experienced in the contemporary context, where models of production and distribution are well honed and institutionally supported.³² Given the particularities of Papunya in the early 1970s, this brief account of studio-based proceedings is intended to outline how the movement gained momentum, following Kaapa's recognition as a 'master artist', by which time a collective of men from diverse backgrounds were busy in the Men's Painting Room. Despite the dynamism of the movement during this period of rapid-fire development, Chapter Five will remain focused on the efforts of just two artists, Kaapa and Leura, who worked with particular purpose in that crowded environment.

26. The meeting occurred on Bardon's return from summer school holidays in Sydney: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 88.

27. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 37.

28. Hogan 1986. See annotation for *Wild Peanut Dreaming*, 1971, prepared by Hogan, which reveals that the painting was "Brought to the Gallery by Tim". Also see works attributed to 'Timmy Japaltjarri Madgera' [Anmatyerr] at the Art Gallery of New South Wales Library, Stuart Arts Centre Stock book, 1971-1972.

29. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 37.

30. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 82.

31. Regarding early Pintupi painting, see: Kean 2017b, pp. 181-185.

32. Desert is the peak body for Aboriginal arts and crafts centres, servicing over 40 community-based enterprises in arid Australia.

Chapter Five
The Rectangle

“The grid is an introjection of the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work: it is a mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself. It is a mode of repetition, the content of which is the conventional nature of art itself”¹

Rosalind Krauss, 1979

“Although some designs, such as those once painted on the back, are transposed directly, others have to be adjusted to include all the elements and still fit the space”.²

Fred Myers, 2002

Introduction

Like light filtered through dusty windows, the process by which divergent forms of expression emerged at Papunya in 1972 remains dimly understood.³ This chapter will illuminate the artistic interaction of two protagonists who worked with particular purpose in the darkened space of the Men’s Painting Room. In previous chapters, I identified examples of intercultural exchange and contestation that stimulated new forms of artistic practice in Central Australia. In this chapter, I will take a more empirical approach to discuss serial painting; a study intended to demonstrate how Kaapa and Leura used symmetry to institute a precisely balanced aesthetic.

The collaboration between Kaapa Tjampitjinpa and his cousin Tim Leura is exceptional for its focused intent. Based on principles of symmetry and repetition, their precise, iterative compositions instituted geometric conventions that underpinned the development of desert painting. In what follows I focus on the development of Kaapa’s *Budgerigar* and Leura’s *Honey Ant* series. These two series were created in parallel, as the cousins experimented within a mutually understood set of parameters between April and July 1972 in the Men’s Painting Room.⁴ Where Kaapa’s first consignment of paintings was characterised by a rapid transformation from quasi-perspectival to planar viewpoints, the works produced by Kaapa and Leura in 1972 reveal a more gradual consolidation and innovation. The analysis below identifies Kaapa and Leura’s concern with formal attributes of picture making, even as they celebrated ancestral subjects.

1. Krauss 1979, p. 62.
2. Myers 2002b, p. 61.
3. Descriptions of the social dynamics and artistic consequence in the Men’s Painting Room are found in: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 27-34; Benjamin 2009, pp. 14-40; Kean 2017b, pp. 185-194.
4. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 277-81 & 334-337.

Kaapa’s *Budgerigar* and Leura’s *Honey Ant* series

Most analysis of desert art has taken the ubiquity of the rectangular substrate for granted.⁵ Rather than questioning the basic shape on which paintings were created, scholars have focused on emic characteristics, such as the meaning of symbols, relationship to Country and ceremony, or the development of style.⁶ There have been fleeting exceptions however; anthropologist Peter Sutton determined that “Right angled corners and straight edges ... exerted new pressures on ancient design practices”.⁷ Sutton’s astute observation encapsulates the thrust of investigation of this chapter.

While unremarkable to those habituated to the ubiquity of the grid, the rectangular boards adopted at Papunya shaped the development of contemporary art in Aboriginal Australia.⁸ It is therefore essential to interrogate the effect of the rectangular perimeter on the compositional schema of Papunya artists, for as the curator William Rubin says of Paul Cezanne, “the shape of the support became effectively the first four lines of the composition, and as such, powerful determinants of the work”.⁹ I contend that Kaapa and Leura worked consciously and paid deliberate attention to the constraints and potential of this exotic format. The following analysis demonstrates how they choreographed customary signs to aesthetic effect within the strictures of the rectangle.

In Chapter One, I argued that the rectangle (and Cross) of Lutheran ontology and the Oval (and circle) of Arandic belief were comparable paramount symbols for their respective cultures. Rather than being natural or neutral, the perfect rectangle was an exceptional form in Central Australia.¹⁰ This chapter will demonstrate that Kaapa and Leura addressed the format directly, and in so doing, established a dialogical relationship with colonial governance.

5. Note the absence from seminal texts, including: Myers 2002; Perkins & Fink 2000; Johnson 2010.
6. See for example: Johnson 1993; Kimber 1977; Perkins & Fink 2000; Myers 2002; Ryan 2011.
7. Sutton 1989a, p. 379.
8. Benjamin 2009.
9. Rubin 1989, pp. 26.
10. Rectangular forms occur more consistently in the Western Desert, where they are often associated with sacred objects. Interestingly, T. G. H. Strehlow refers to an object collected from Johnny Warangula’s father Ngalpilala, to illustrate the use of the concentric square in the Western Desert (Fig. 34), a form he regards as being largely absent from Central Australia: Strehlow 1964, pp. 57-59.

Symmetry in Anmatyerr Art?

While researching the landmark 1988 exhibition *Dreamings - the Art of Aboriginal Australia*, anthropologist Peter Sutton founded the analysis of composition in contemporary desert paintings.¹¹ Via an examination of 300 paintings produced at Papunya, Yuendumu and Kintore between 1971 and 1987, Sutton identified key schematic and semantic attributes of the genre. The first of his conclusions is most relevant:

The majority [of paintings] consist basically of symmetrical arrangements. These are the patterns and motifs, which are the elements usually laid down first by the painters before infilling and details are added. Symmetry and the use of geometric forms increases as one moves further south and west into the Pintupi, Luritja, and Pitjantjatjara areas, from the more northern and eastern Warlpiri, Anmatyerre, and Arrernte (Aranda) areas.¹²

Curiously, Sutton’s account of the prevalence of symmetry to the south and west of his study area contradicts the assertions of others who have written of symmetry as a defining quality of Anmatyerr painting. Geoffrey Bardon, for instance, claimed that the Anmatyerr “were the most formal of the tribal groups in their painting representations”, noting that “their work was frequently heraldic and strongly symmetrical”.¹³ The curator Judith Ryan concurs, placing emphasis on the “virtuoso image-making, bilateral symmetry and subsidiary elaboration of Kaapa, Clifford Possum and Tim Leura”.¹⁴ Despite these contradicting opinions, the operation of symmetry in works by the Anmatyerr artists has not been examined in detail. The disparity of opinion on this fundamental compositional attribute invites further investigation.

My investigation will assess the prevalence of symmetry on two axes: the first, geographic (building on Sutton’s supposition), and the second, temporal, to ascertain if the preference for symmetry comes as a consequence of intercultural contact. Bardon, who was aware of Kaapa’s interest in European imagery, wrote of *Budgerigar Dreaming (version 6)*, claiming: “The classic order of the painting is evidence of *advanced design reasoning* [emphasis added]”.¹⁵ Recognising the relationship between style and the availability of introduced materials, Bardon added: “Such visual boldness depends to a certain extent on modern painting methods and the use of brushes and paint, surpassing the severe limitations of the traditional techniques”.¹⁶ Pursuing Bardon’s notion that modern materials fed aesthetic transformation, I argue that the plasticity of the new materials enabled Kaapa and Leura to reconfigure the spatiotemporal dynamics of ritual on a flat

11. Sutton 1988, pp. 80-88.
12. Sutton 1988, pp. 81-82.
13. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 33.
14. Ryan 2011, p 21.
15. Bardon 1991, p. 111.
16. Bardon 1991, p. 111.

rectangular surface. Bardon was the also first to recognise seriality in Kaapa’s *Budgerigar*, and Leura’s *Honey Ant* paintings, and his insight has prompted me to assess how studio practice may have affected aesthetics at Papunya.¹⁷

Symmetry and History

The tension between symmetry and asymmetry has been identified as a “central force” in Indigenous aesthetics.¹⁸ As a youthful denizen of the storerooms at the South Australian Museum, Dick Kimber built an extensive knowledge of customary design. Following his arrival from Adelaide into Central Australia in 1970, Kimber became a participant in ceremony, learning how the still objects he had previously admired on museum shelves were animated in ritual.¹⁹ Kimber was also alert to trends in ‘transitional’ art, displayed at various art and craft outlets in Alice Springs. It is on the basis of appraisal in these varied contexts that Kimber concluded that symmetry evident in paintings by Kaapa, Leura and Possum was “in part... a traditional feature, and in part it had been developed as result of requests for earlier works in wood: [by] the late D. D. Smith, owner of Mount Allan Station, on which all of the men had worked”.²⁰ Intriguingly, Kimber links the production of the Mount Allan curios to historical precedents, claiming: “The origins of these items, in turn, goes back to interests by Hermannsburg missionaries from about the 1920s...”²¹ Here, Kimber is referring to the oval-shaped plaques instituted by Pastor Albrecht and embellished by Albert Namatjira, discussed in Chapter One. By drawing a line through artistic practice, from Hermannsburg via Mount Allan to Papunya, Kimber was among the first to sketch a history of art in Central Australia.

Although the Anmatyerr artists chose ceremony as their principal subject when painting at Papunya, their early paintings reflected aesthetic qualities comparable with the “very symmetrical ovate painted wooden plaques” commissioned by D. D. Smith. The paintings produced by Kaapa and Leura in 1971 and 1972 can therefore be understood to constitute an episode within a discrete lineage of objects intended for a transcultural market, that is distinct from (but intricately related to) the production of customary objects for ceremony. It should not be assumed therefore that symmetry evident in paintings by Kaapa and Leura was an inevitable outcome of an ‘Anmatyerr aesthetic’; rather, it loomed as a considered response tailored to a non-Indigenous market.

17. The works are illustrated together in Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 278-81 & 334-37.
18. Myers 2002b, p. 105.
19. Various personal communications with the author.
20. Kimber 2000a, p. 210.
21. Kimber 2000a, p. 210.

Collaboration

Writers who have worked closely with the artists consistently refer to the collaboration between Kaapa, Leura and Possum.²² Yet the dynamics of their relationships are not yet sufficiently understood, especially following the School of Kaapa period when their influence became increasingly multidirectional.

The unique chemistry that can exist between desert artists such as Kaapa and Leura, is often based on shared formative experiences and complementary responsibilities for Country, connections that may not be evident to outside observers.²³ Bardon wrote that he was “raising technical standards, [and] ‘purifying’ the mythology” expressed in early Papunya painting.²⁴ Putting aside the plainly naïve claim that an outsider could ‘purify’ Indigenous belief, Bardon’s assertions are indicative of a wider assumption; that European ‘art advisors’ have been integral to the constitution of contemporary Aboriginal art. Indeed the ‘collaboration’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agents has been critical to the success of Aboriginal art, and as a consequence has received considerable scholarly attention.²⁵ Seeking to identify other stimulus for co-operation and reciprocity, the anthropologists Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart demonstrated that collaboration, among Warlpiri artists was rooted in heritable ritual responsibility.²⁶ Reinforced by Anderson and Dussart’s conclusions, I regard intra-cultural collaboration as one of the most important and understudied forces behind the initial formation of Papunya painting.

The reciprocal bonds between particular pairs of closely related individuals are fostered in desert culture, especially in relation to Land and ceremony, the realms from which Papunya painting was derived (see Plate 49).²⁷ The following discussion uses terms from the Anmatyerr language but comparable relationships apply across the study area, even when they are defined with different terms. *Merek-artwey* is the name given to the owner/custodian of a site. The representation by *merek-artwey* of the mythic events associated with that place, is enabled by a *kwertengerl*, the manager/policeman who ensures that depiction is correct and fit for purpose.²⁸ Instrumentally, the relationship is reversed on an adjacent estate whereby the *kwertengerl* becomes the *merek-artwey*, and vice versa.²⁹ Kaapa and Leura (as well as his brother Possum) were from opposite moieties and adjoining estates – as *merek-artwey* and *kwertengerl*

they were bound in reciprocity – their cooperation implicit, given the relationship into which they were born.³⁰ The inherited bond they shared was strengthened during a lifetime of common experience of ritual, station work and later as creative partners of the pioneering artistic innovation explored in this chapter.³¹ Their binary relationship was complementary and enabling.³² However, the reciprocal responsibilities that existed between Kaapa and Leura did not, in and of themselves, account for their deliberate exploration of the aesthetic qualities that distinguished the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series.³³ Rather they mapped the ground on which their shared creativity could flourish. I contend that their shared experience of the intercultural environment was concentrated to become a new space for artistic enquiry.

“singular habits”

Up to twenty men gathered as equals to paint their Country in the Men’s Painting Room. Yet Leura and Kaapa adopted distinctive postures that set them apart from the Pintupi men with whom they worked. Bardon writes of “certain singular habits: Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri *sitting on a chair* in the north-east corner or Kaapa Tjampitjinpa in the centre of the room *at his table* [emphasis added]” (see Plate 50).³⁴ In contrast, most men sat cross-legged, boards held in their laps, or rested obliquely on the floor in front of them.³⁵ At a superficial level, Kaapa and Leura’s postures suggest their familiarity with drawing with pencil and paper in structured settings, such as adult education classes.³⁶ Delving deeper, I contend that Leura and Kaapa’s distinct physical relationship to the boards on which they worked signalled their distinctive approach to the endeavour on which they embarked.

The ‘singular habits’ practiced by Kaapa and Leura were not limited to their posture when painting. Amid the hubbub of the Men’s Painting Room, where most artists explored the diversity of inherited songlines and riffed on a variety of painting styles that pulsed through the room, Kaapa and Leura worked with particular rigour and focus.³⁷ Like chemists at a laboratory, they experimented with variant combinations from a list of ingredients that, when judiciously mixed, could spark and fizz: Kaapa and Leura arrived at their ideal schema via focused

22. Kimber 2000a, p. 210; Johnson 2010, pp. 20-28; Kean 2011b, pp. 43-57.

23. The creative collaboration of a large group of complementary patricouples, working together on a large canvas is described as a “meta-ritualistic” phenomenon rather than a creative enterprise: Dussart 1999.

24. Geoffrey Bardon 1972, cited in Scholes 2017b, p. 136.

25. For example: McLean 2014b; Rey 2014; Sprague 2014; 2016; Edmond, 2019.

26. Anderson & Dussart 1988, pp. 93-95.

27. Sutton et al. 1988.

28. The terms *kiita* (owner/custodian) and *kutungula* (manager/policeman) are used in Western Desert culture to describe a similar reciprocal relationship: Dussart 1999.

29. Gibson 2017, p. 255.

30. They were cousins from a mutual grandfather, Long Jack (Kwalapa) Tjangala of Warlukulangu: Johnson 2008, pp. 17, 44 & 33; Johnson 2010, p. 20.

31. For an overview of the artists’ shared background, see: Kean 2011b, pp. 43-57.

32. The enduring partnership of Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula and Mick Namarari provides another example of reciprocal *kiita/kutungula* resulting in significant artistic innovation.

33. Gibson 2017, p. 254.

34. Kaapa’s table was positioned to maximize his visibility and light whereas Leura sat in the north-east, oriented towards his Country: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 24 & 29.

35. See Michael Jensen’s photos in Benjamin et al. 2009, pp. 14-19.

36. Leura’s early paintings occasionally included figures drawn in pencil.

37. Contrary to popular assumption, Bardon was often absent during the period and as a consequence, artists worked independently of his interventions: Scholes 2017b, pp. 143-151.

collaboration in their visual laboratory. The clearest statement of their singular intent can be found in the incremental development of Kaapa's *Budgerigar* and Leura's *Honey Ant* paintings, series that, I contend, were painted concurrently and with the artists in dialogue.

Serial Painting

Kaapa's *Budgerigar* and Leura's *Honey Ant* series built on the achievement of Kaapa's *Mikantji* [formerly *Untitled*], 1971, described in the previous chapter under Benjamin's rubric, "the symmetrical schematisation of the ceremonial scene".³⁸ The source of the iconography in the serial paintings can in turn be traced to ceremonies for Budgerigar and Honey Ant Ancestors as performed to educate *arleyarr* (post-initiate novices). The Budgerigar ceremonies are metaphorically potent in Anmatyerr Country, where vast flocks of budgerigars congregate at waterholes, and are compared with *arleyarr* who gather on the ceremonial ground to learn Budgerigar Law (see Plate 51).³⁹ Similarly, subterranean colonies of ancestral Honey Ants are believed linked by tunnels connecting major ceremonial centres such as Papunya.⁴⁰ The *Tywerrenge* revealed to *arleyarr* in ceremony are the essence of respective ancestors, and their use in painting denotes significance. The ceremonies to which the paintings refer also involve complex multimedia fabrications that bring together 2D design with decorated 3D objects, in 'architectural' space.⁴¹ Comparable fabrications, if presented in a contemporary gallery, would be regarded as installation art, or when animated by dancing bodies, performance art. Significantly, the medium of opaque paint applied with precision by sable-hair brushes on hardboard, enabled Kaapa and Leura to articulate the semantic and material relationships of ceremony with unprecedented ambition.

Both *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series are painted on unadorned backgrounds (dots were not as yet a defining aspect of the new media) and rely on graphic clarity for their visual impact. Significantly, all compositions in these series are symmetrical on both horizontal and vertical axes. Meticulously produced, the series echoed the encrypted exactitude of illuminated Islamic manuscripts or the radial accomplishment of Ernest Haeckel's *Medusa* (see Plate 52). Both *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series mirror the attention to detail required when conducting elaborate ritual: they aim for perfection.⁴²

38. Benjamin 2009 et al., p. 84.

39. Kean 2012b, p. 36.

40. John Kean 2019a. Termites are similarly 'invisible' yet revered: Kimber 1977, p. 6-7.

41. The Honey Ant and Budgerigar ceremonies were performed for T. G. H. Strehlow's camera at Wolatjatara, Strehlow Research Centre: Strehlow 1955.

42. Strehlow 1964, pp. 48-51.

Establishing the sequence in which works were created is an essential precondition upon which 'technical criticism' can proceed.⁴³ Where Bardon's thematic grouping of the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* paintings into series is irrefutable, the sequence he ascribes to individual works appears implausible. Accordingly, I propose a revised sequence of Kaapa's *Budgerigar Dreaming* (versions 1-10) and Leura's *Honey Ant Dreaming* (versions 1-8) (see Appendices 5 & 6) that is based on close analysis of the iconography and composition in the light of available archival data. I retain Bardon's numbering in the body of this text to facilitate cross-referencing but insist that his order of works requires revision. The accompanying schematic diagrams of selected images from both series are presented in the order that I propose they were produced (see Fig. 27 and Fig. 28).

Kaapa Tjampitjinpa - *Budgerigar* Series

The rigorous symmetry of Kaapa's compositions has been remarked on, yet the operation of that defining quality has not been adequately described.⁴⁴ The following account of the *Budgerigar* series is intended to delve deeper into the nature of symmetry by which Kaapa achieves what Bardon calls a "heraldic" effect.⁴⁵

Bardon recorded ten versions of the *Budgerigar Dreaming*, although Kaapa is known to have painted at least three additional works on the same theme in 1972.⁴⁶ The series is defined by shared compositional elements and an eponymous theme.⁴⁷ Ten of the thirteen variations are composed around a central axis, established by dominant ceremonial objects, extending from top to bottom. In each of these compositions, two shorter objects, tipped with feathers, are arranged horizontally to create a double-ended crucifix. The arrangement constitutes the scaffolding around which subsidiary elements are positioned (see Fig. 27). The double crucifix creates six subdivisions, which are treated with greater or lesser degrees of symmetry. All subdivisions at the top and bottom of the compositions are mirror images of each other on horizontal and vertical axis. In versions 3, 4, 8, 2 and 9, the central sections are mirrored on the vertical axis but are slightly asymmetrical on an imagined central, horizontal axis. These (early) versions retain a sense of elevation, wherein the bottom of the string-crosses (and in the case of version 9, a ceremonial pole) are 'secured' in a small circle within the space representing the ceremonial earth. The central sections of later versions (2, 10, 11 and 12) are fully symmetrical, around an imagined horizontal

43. Shapiro et al. 1970.

44. Bardon & Bardon 2004; Kimber 2000a, p. 201; Ryan 2011, p. 21.

45. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 45.

46. Each of the 'versions' is a standalone painting, produced on a variety of different sized panels: Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 278-281. Other works include the painting on the extreme right of Jensen's photograph: Benjamin et al. 2009, p. 15-16. Also: Sotheby's 2012, p. 64; Davidson 2017.

47. The dates are supported by a photograph that shows Kaapa working on version 6 with the already-completed version 7 in the background, taken in the Men's Painting Room by Rosalie Bayetto, who is known to have visited Papunya in May 1972: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 278.

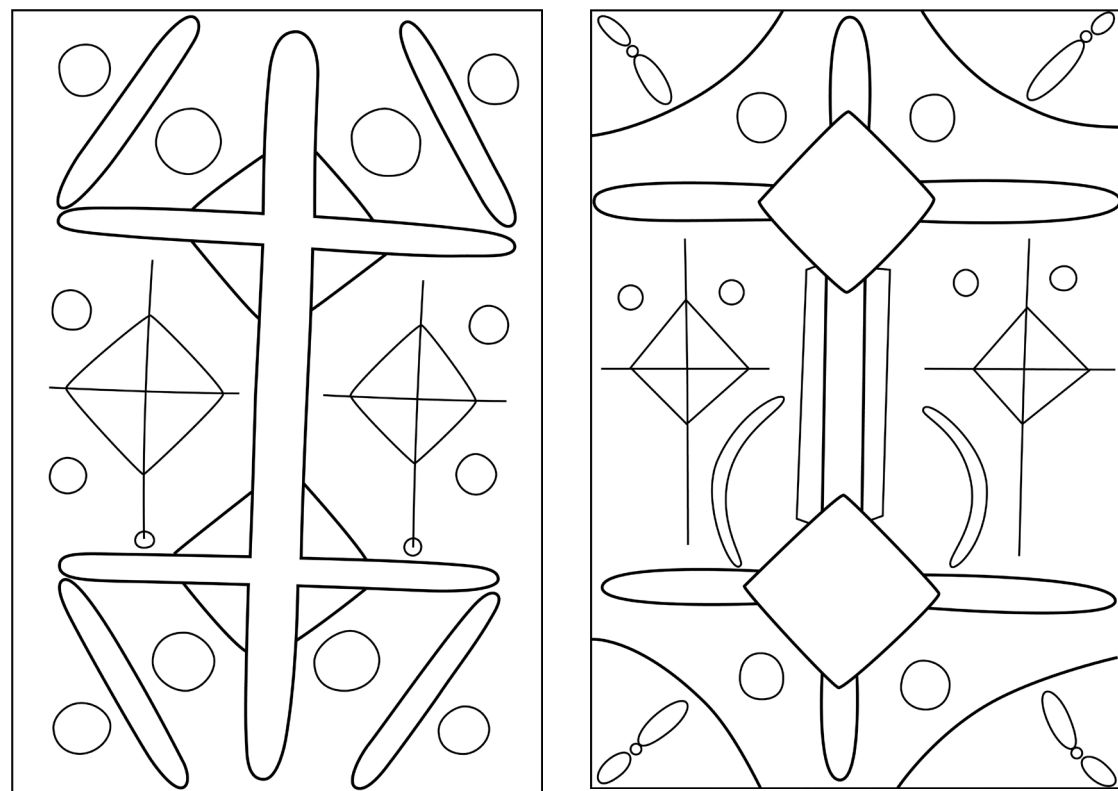
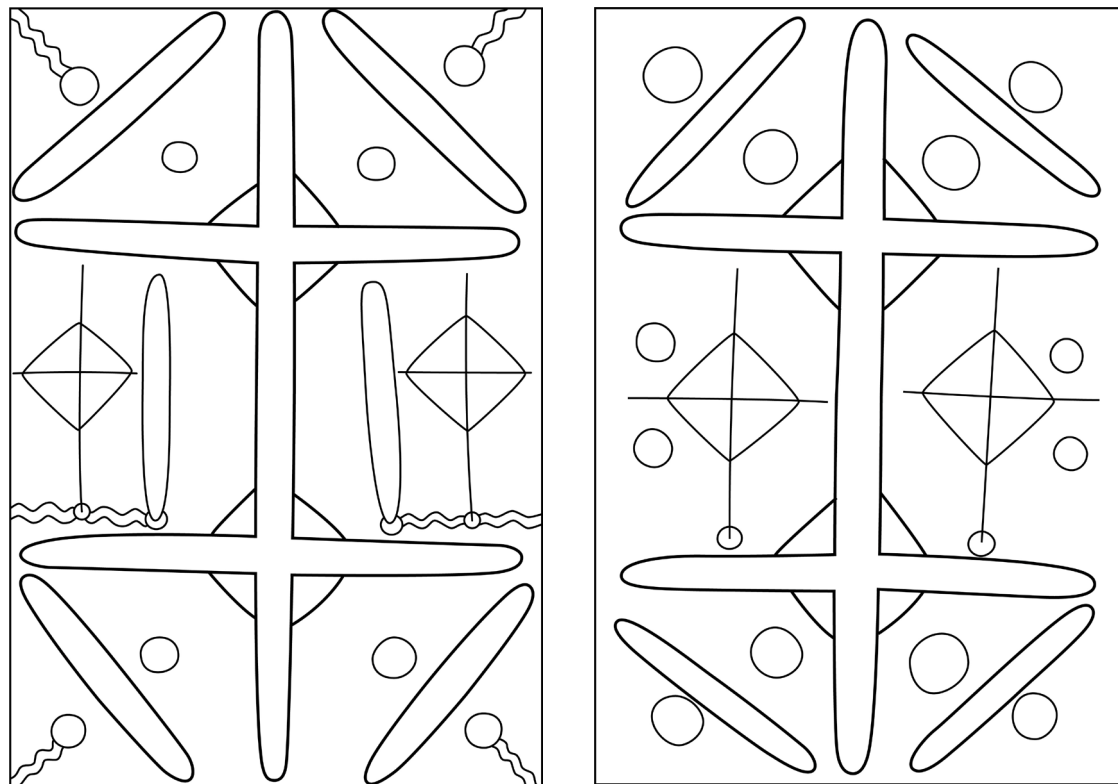


Fig. 27a. Schematic diagrams of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Budgerigar Dreaming* in proposed sequence of production.

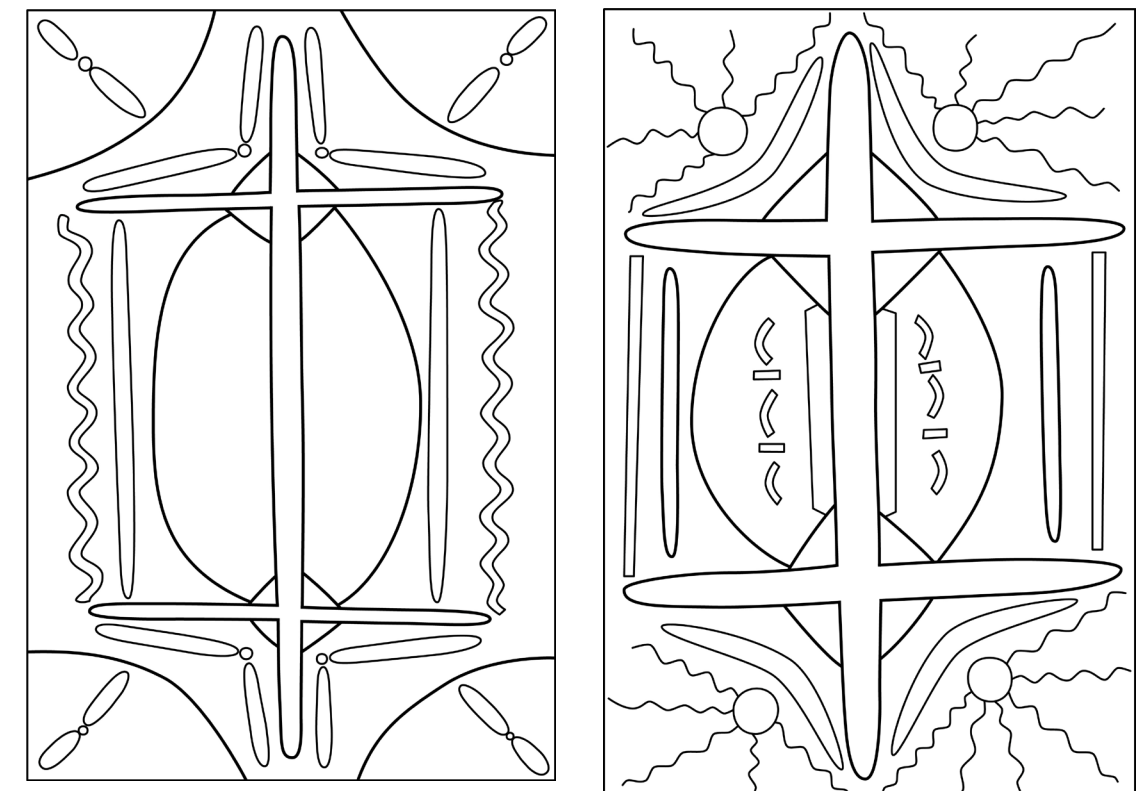
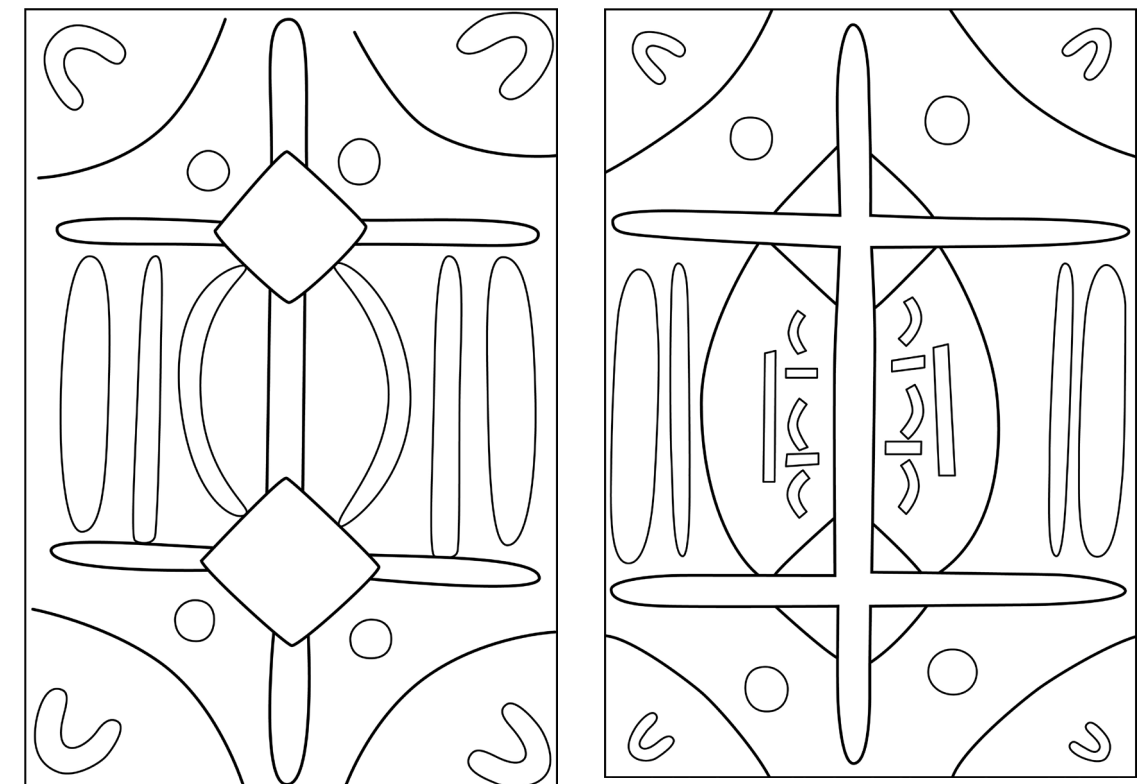


Fig. 27b. Schematic diagrams of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Budgerigar Dreaming* in proposed sequence of production.

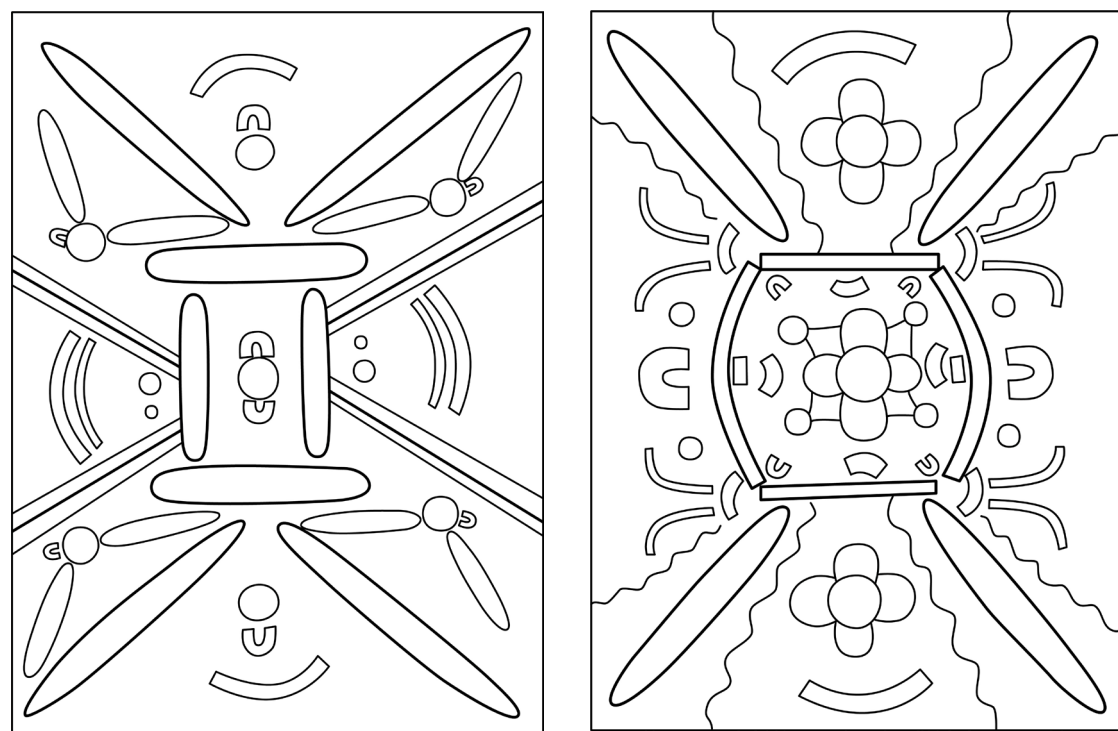
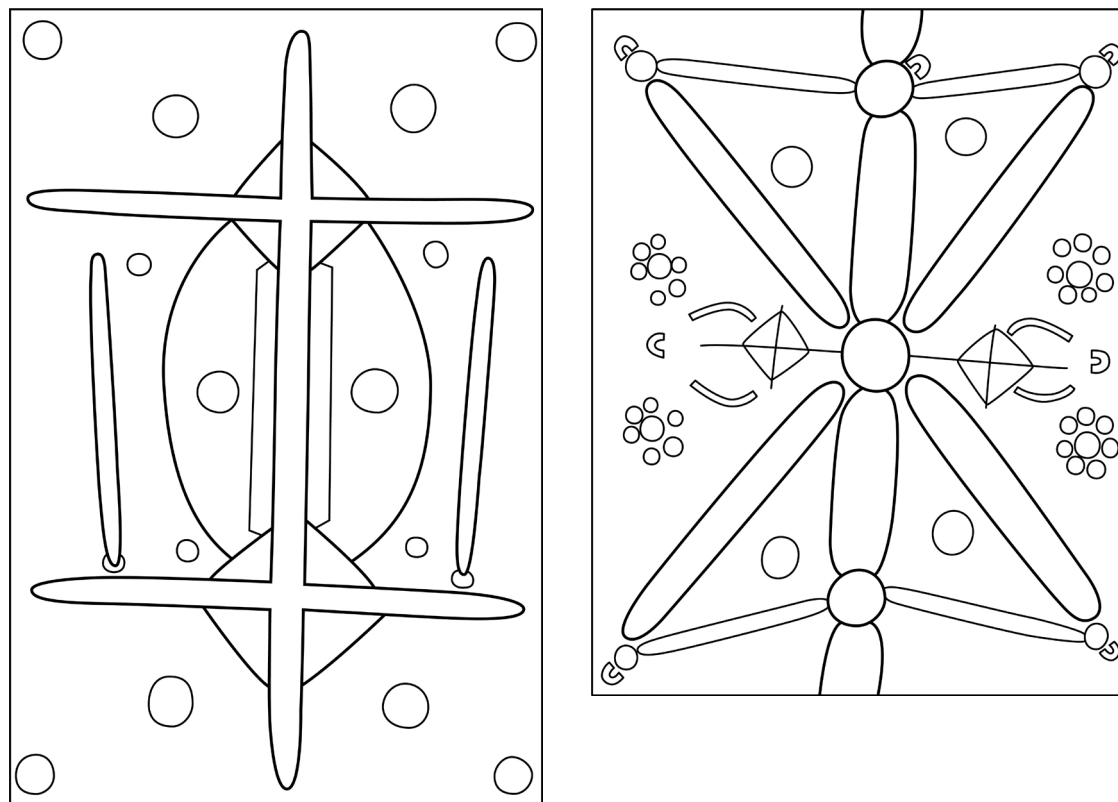


Fig. 27c. Schematic diagrams of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Budgerigar Dreaming* in proposed sequence of production.

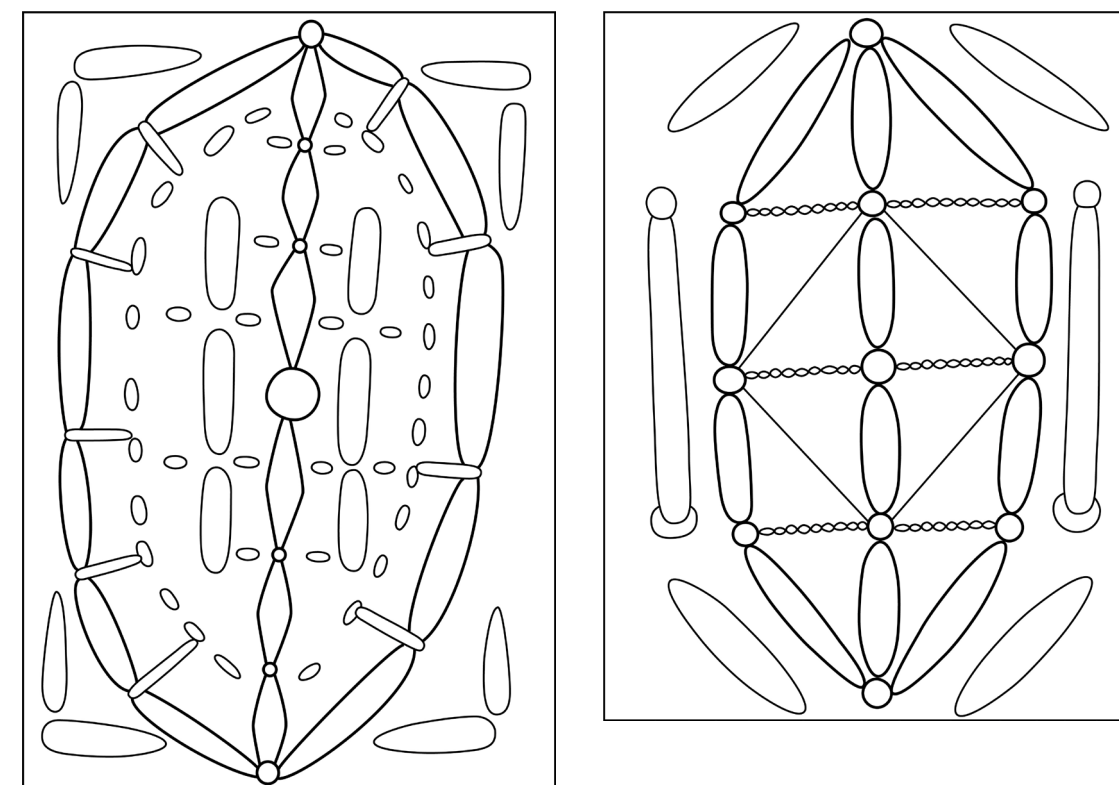
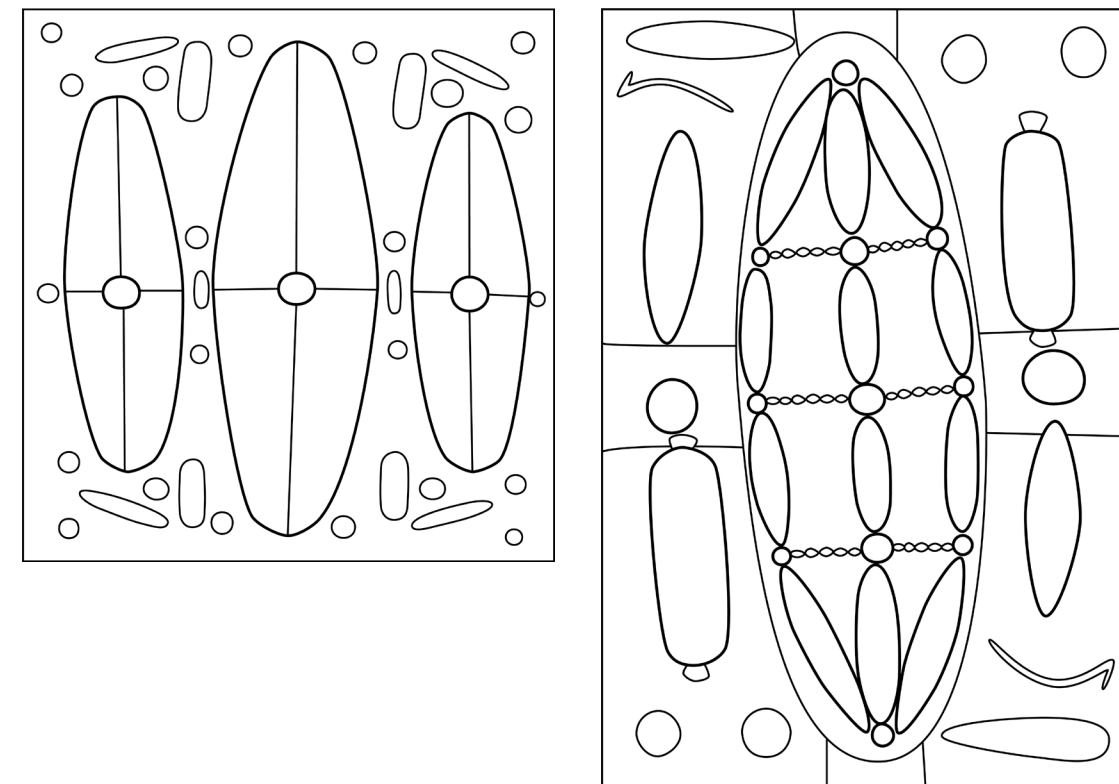


Fig. 28a. Schematic diagrams of Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Honey Ant Dreaming*, in proposed sequence of production.

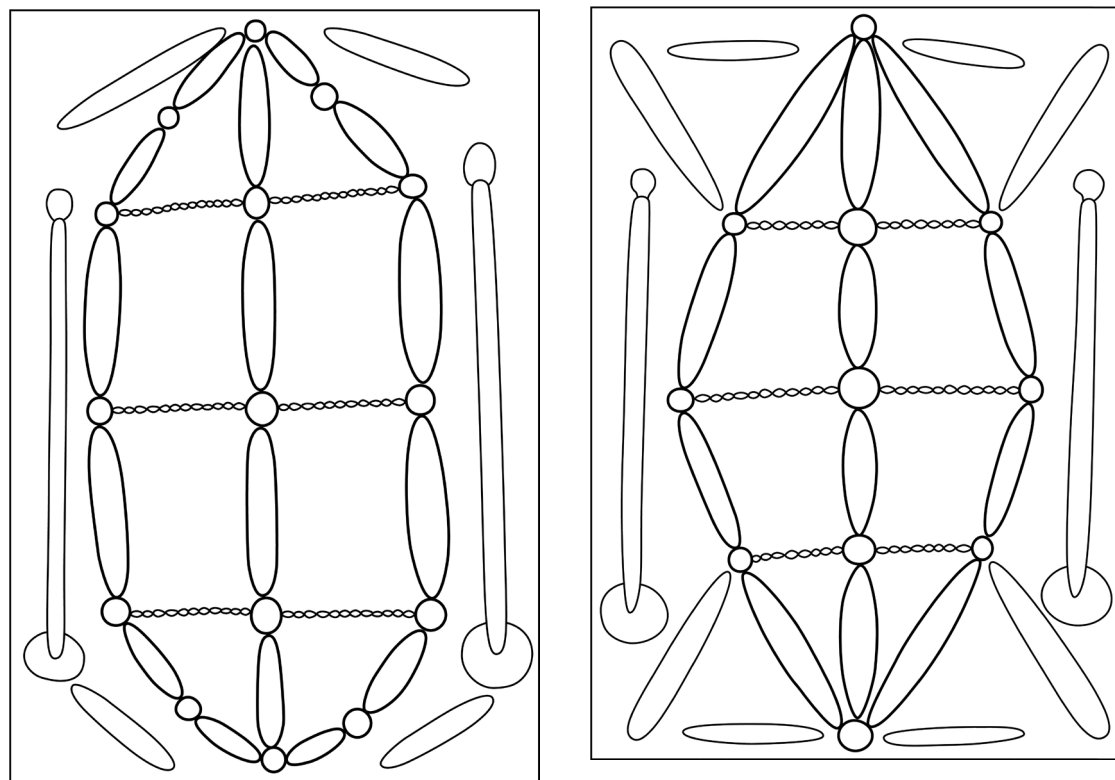


Fig. 28b. Schematic diagrams of Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Honey Ant Dreaming*, in proposed sequence of production.

axis as well as on the visible vertical axis. The move away from implied elevation, which distinguishes otherwise similar variations, is critical, for it freed Kaapa to imagine the dimensionality of ceremony on a radically flattened picture plane. The formalist critic Clement Greenberg famously proclaimed “Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else”.⁴⁸ Similarly, Kaapa’s radical flattening of the picture plane drove the development of further variations that resulted in the inclusion of dynamic diagonal elements, a subset of the *Budgerigar* series that will be discussed later in this section.

All works in the *Budgerigar* series contain representations of similar objects, including *Tywerrenge*, string-crosses and roundels, while some paintings also include ceremonial poles, string lines and signs indicating ceremonial figures, windbreaks, and track ways. The corners of the first seven paintings are partitioned with a *Tywerrenge* (or a comparable visual device), placed diagonally across each corner to create discrete zones outside the principal design. I contend that these elements define the edge of the *apwelhe* (men’s ceremonial area), creating ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spaces (the significance of this demarcation will be discussed later). Dots were used sparingly, if at all; however, there is a trend towards increased elaboration at the conclusion of the series, with the use of small (reversed) arrows indicating budgerigars moving from the perimeter (outside) into the *apwelhe* (inside) to receive instruction. While the severe geometry of the *Budgerigar* paintings does not, in my opinion, make them his most attractive works, the sustained focus that underpins the series demonstrates Kaapa’s determined rigour.

Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri - *Honey Ant Series*

Bardon recorded that Leura produced eight versions of the *Honey Ant Dreaming* between April and July of 1972. The following analysis traces the development of Leura’s series, a path that matches the trajectory taken by Kaapa as described above. Just as Kaapa used ritual objects and signs to evoke action on the ceremonial ground, Leura used *Tywerrenge*, bullroarers and ceremonial poles to evoke the ritual celebration of the Honey Ant. Aware of the artists’ familial affinity, I will work back from the material to argue that they painted together as a shared artistic project.

Leura’s *Honey Ant Dreaming* versions 1 and 3 appear to be preliminary experiments, with the artist yet to find a satisfactory form, though it is worth noting that each of the large Oval forms in version 3 is divided into equal quadrants by a well-defined cross, indicating that Leura may have been monitoring Kaapa’s cruciform *Budgerigar* paintings. Leura’s *Honey Ant* versions 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8 (that I contend followed the first three works), share portrait

48. Greenberg 1986, p. 87.

orientation and key compositional elements (see Plate 53).⁴⁹ Each of these variations is built around four *Tywerrenge* positioned top to bottom through the centre of the board. Similar ‘strings’ of smaller Oval objects are placed end-to-end to form semicircles that touch top and bottom to create a meta-oval. The long axis of the large Oval progressively becomes more aligned to the centre of the board, suggesting that the artist was incrementally perfecting an imagined template. The space *inside* each of the meta-ovals is charged with flecks and dots, to signify its standing as *apwelhe*. In contrast, the space *outside* the meta-oval is unadorned. I contend that the meta-oval represents the edge of a proscribed ceremonial ground.

A grid of nine linked roundels is located to correspond to the widest portion of the meta-oval in Versions 4, 5 and 8. The array of *Tywerrenge* is effectively moored within this subtly marked scaffolding. Later, I argue that this marriage of the grid with the Oval proposes the reconciliation of Western and Indigenous aesthetics on the same plane, a dialectical juxtaposition first encountered in Namatjira’s oval-shaped plaque *Other Refuge have I none*, circa 1932, discussed in Chapter One.

The corners of five of the eight versions of Leura’s *Honey Ant* series are occupied with bullroarers, oval-shaped objects that when spun produce a whirring thrum, a warning to the uninitiated to keep a safe distance from the restricted ceremonial area. For the trained viewer, the presence of the bullroarer conveys the uncanny sound made by the object just as surely as a photograph of the swinging arm of a guitar hero signifies the brutally amplified twang of a Fender Stratocaster to a rock aficionado.⁵⁰ Leura is clearly considering the dynamics of the ritual celebration of the Honey Ant Ancestors, and his arc toward geometric precision throughout this series, conveys the attention to detail required when preparing for ceremony.⁵¹

Interpreting Relationships in Space

Nancy Munn has urged caution over liberal use of the phrase “bird’s-eye view” when interpreting classical desert iconography: a warning that is especially applicable to the current series.⁵² While it may appear that discrete objects are laid out geometrically on the ground, this reading does not reflect their orientation in the actual space of the ceremonial ground. When activated, these objects

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49. Images of the artist holding the boards at Papunya in April 1972 confirm the artist’s preferred orientation: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 334.
50. The use of an image to convey a sound was widespread. For instance, the black oval-shaped disk on the chest of a dancer (in Tim Leura, *Emu Ceremony*, 1972) was said to represent “the distinctive deep grunts and drumming sounds made by emus”, unpublished documentation, Gibson 2019, p. 1.
51. I was struck by the attention to detail evident in the Honey Ant ceremonies filmed by Strehlow at Werlatyatherre/Wolatjatara in 1955 and Akwerrperl/Korbula in 1965, Strehlow Research Centre.
52. See footnote 24: Munn 1973b, p. 219.

occupy distinct planes; ephemeral mosaics for instance are applied directly to prepared earth, ceremonial poles erected vertically, string lines are assembled in three-dimensional space, and bullroarers are spun in centrifugal orbit.

The *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series are conceptual works that operate in the ‘flatland’, which, without additional knowledge “there is no way of telling whether a circular line stands for a ring, a disc, or a ball”.⁵³ Indigenous peers familiar with the function of the objects depicted, interpreted these paintings according to their knowledge of the spatial dynamics of ceremony. My capacity to interpret these works was enhanced on viewing Kukatja and Anmatyerr ceremonies, in particular those Honey Ant ceremonies recorded by T. G. H. Strehlow’s camera at Werlatyatherre/Wolatjara ceremonial camp in 1955.⁵⁴

I contend that the compositions of Kaapa and Leura’s series are heuristic evocations of the concrete and esoteric relationships at play on the ceremony ground. Readers may be familiar with the ‘frozen’ moments of ethnographic photographs, such as those taken of the *Engwura* ceremonies documented by Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen during the summer of 1896 to 1897.⁵⁵ In contrast to the single point perspective of Spencer and Gillen’s glass plate camera, Kaapa and Leura built a novel ‘analytic’ space in which objects were dispersed into idealised relationships. Their compositions described a dynamic space, not one in which the point of view is fixed, as through a camera’s viewfinder. While the earlier versions of both series appear somewhat rigid, the ceremonies to which they refer call on embodied involvement of performers over time.⁵⁶ Kaapa and Leura were ritually mature men, participants in the physical and metaphysical spaces they depicted. Decades after their passings, their countryman Johnny Jack Mpetyan remembered Kaapa and Leura (together with Johnny Warangula) as artists *and* dedicated performers, referring to them as “Painting mob. Painting and sing-em-up!”⁵⁷ As was the case with founding Pintupi artists, we can be confident that Kaapa and Leura’s paintings arose from their participation as performers, and that the diligence evident in the *Honey Ant* and *Budgerigar* series can, in part, be related to their “dedication to ritual”.⁵⁸

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53. Arnheim 1954, p. 60.
54. Werlatyatherre/Wolatjara ceremonial camp in 1955, Strehlow Research Centre.
55. Spencer & Gillen 1899.
56. Based on observation of comparable ceremonies filmed by Strehlow.
57. Johnny Jack Mpetyan in conversation with Jason Gibson, at Alherramp (Napperby) on 17 May: Mpetyan 2016. Unpublished, 2018.
58. Myers 2002b, p. 119.

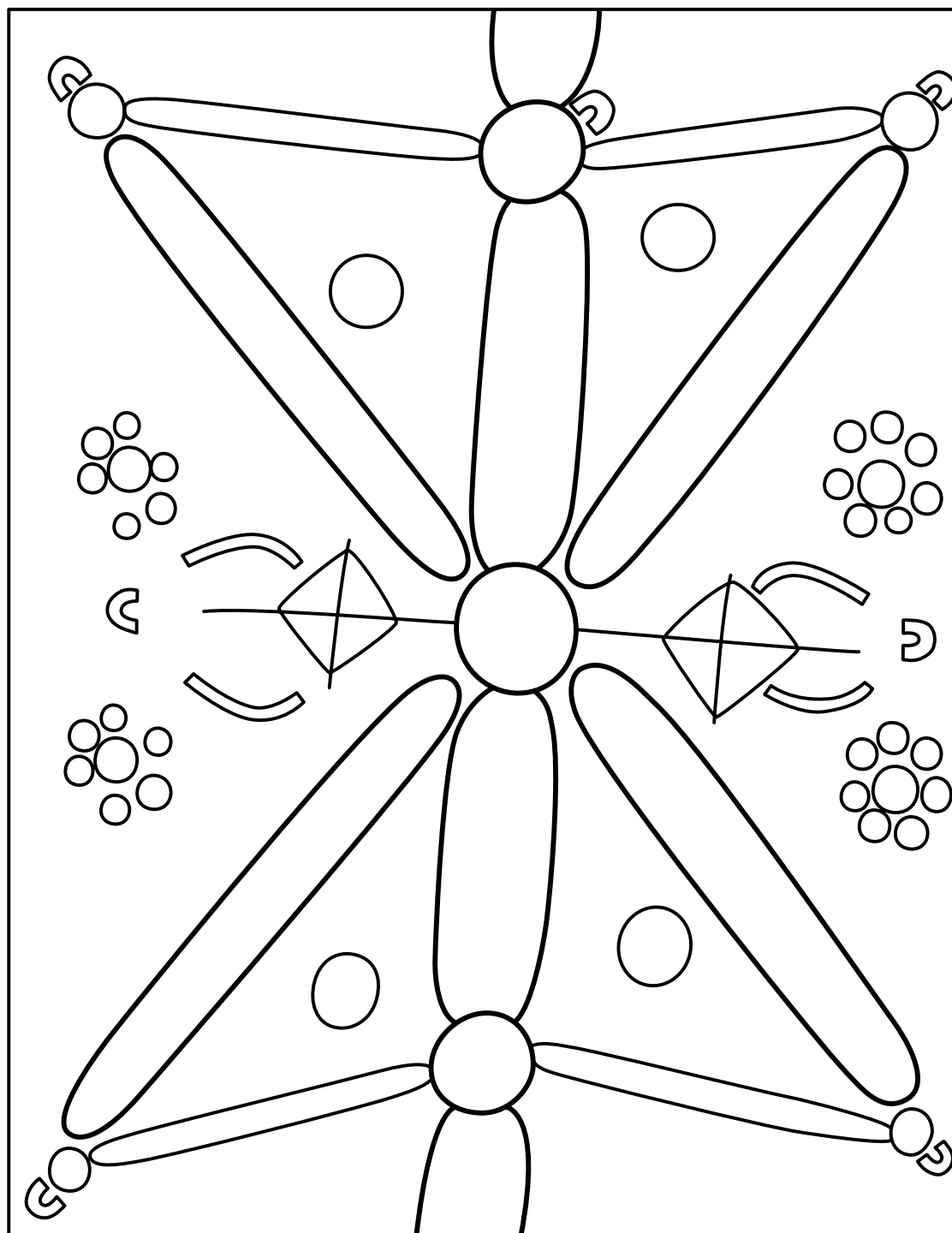


Fig. 29. Schematic diagrams of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Budgerigar Dreaming*, Version 7

Discovering the Diagonal

The next development in the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series referred more directly to the performative verve of ceremony. My reconstruction of the order in which the paintings were created (Appendices 5 and 6) supposes that Kaapa and Leura introduced transverse elements into their compositional vocabulary at the same moment, and that these diagonal shapes instantly injected dynamism into previously static compositions. This quality is most dramatically expressed in Kaapa's *Budgerigar Dreaming*, version 7, where large transverse *Tywerenge* dominate. In previous iterations, Kaapa used minor Oval objects (and lines) to

cut across each corner, resulting in awkward ancillary areas. In version 7, Kaapa inverted these elements. Where minor objects had abated the corners, large *Tywerenge* were inserted and rotated 90 degrees to aim with intent at each apex. The double cruciform scaffolding of early iterations was replaced with objects inducing axial tension. The diagonal axes, formed by the four major *Tywerenge* radiating from the central roundel, towards each corner, also unified the pictorial plane. Although more subtle, Leura's approach in *Honey Ant Dreaming* version 8 is similarly transformative (see Plate 54). Rather than abandoning the meta-oval, refined in an earlier iteration, Leura merely rotated the four major bullroarers, adjacent to the *apwelhe*, to address each apex. By breaking rigid compliance to the vertical and horizontal grid, diagonal elements breathed life into the compositions of both artists.

The diagonal axis created by the *Tywerenge* pushes into space, while also responding to the constraints of the quadrilateral perimeter of the board on which it is painted. The resulting picture plane is drawn taut; more in tune with the aesthetics of modernism. When appreciated as abstract compositions, the expansionary thrust of the Oval *Tywerenge* against the constraining edges of the rectangle engenders a satisfying *frisson*, a quality that was noted and emulated by peers in the Men's painting room. A photograph taken by Michael Jensen in the winter of 1971 shows both Pintupi and Anmatyerr artists painting in the newly-adopted dynamic style. Crucially, Kaapa's *Budgerigar Dreaming* version 7 is displayed in the centre of the room, while the artist mooches in the background, inspecting a small work by Anatjarri Tjakamarra that reflects a compositional structure that Kaapa himself initiated (see Plate 55). Surprisingly, the transverse geometry that entered the compositional lexicon of the Men's Painting Room in the winter of 1972 has only recently been identified as a critical innovation.⁵⁹ Labelled by Myers as "the five-circle-grid" the process by which this influential trope was realised is described here for the first time.⁶⁰ The essential geometry of the five-circle-grid was extended by the Papunya painters to form seven-circle-grids, nine-circle-grids and so on.

Once achieved, the expansive dynamism yielded by transverse compositions could be redeployed to imply connection to related sites across the unbounded landscape outside the frame. Leura (who continued to paint *Honey Ant* sites (see Plate 56), soon settled on a composition of supple lines radiating from central concentric circles into the corners and midpoints of each of the board's four edges. Importantly, the top, bottom and both sides of the board were understood to align to the cardinal directions; north, south, east and west respectively.⁶¹ By implication, the sinuous lines, leading to the corners of the board, refer to associated locations to the north-east, south-east, south-west and north-west of

59. I had previously incorrectly identified the work in the photo as an *Emu Dreaming*: Kean 2017b, pp. 192-193.

60. Myers 2002b, pp. 88-95.

61. See discussion of "absolute frames of reference": Green 2014, pp. 20-22.

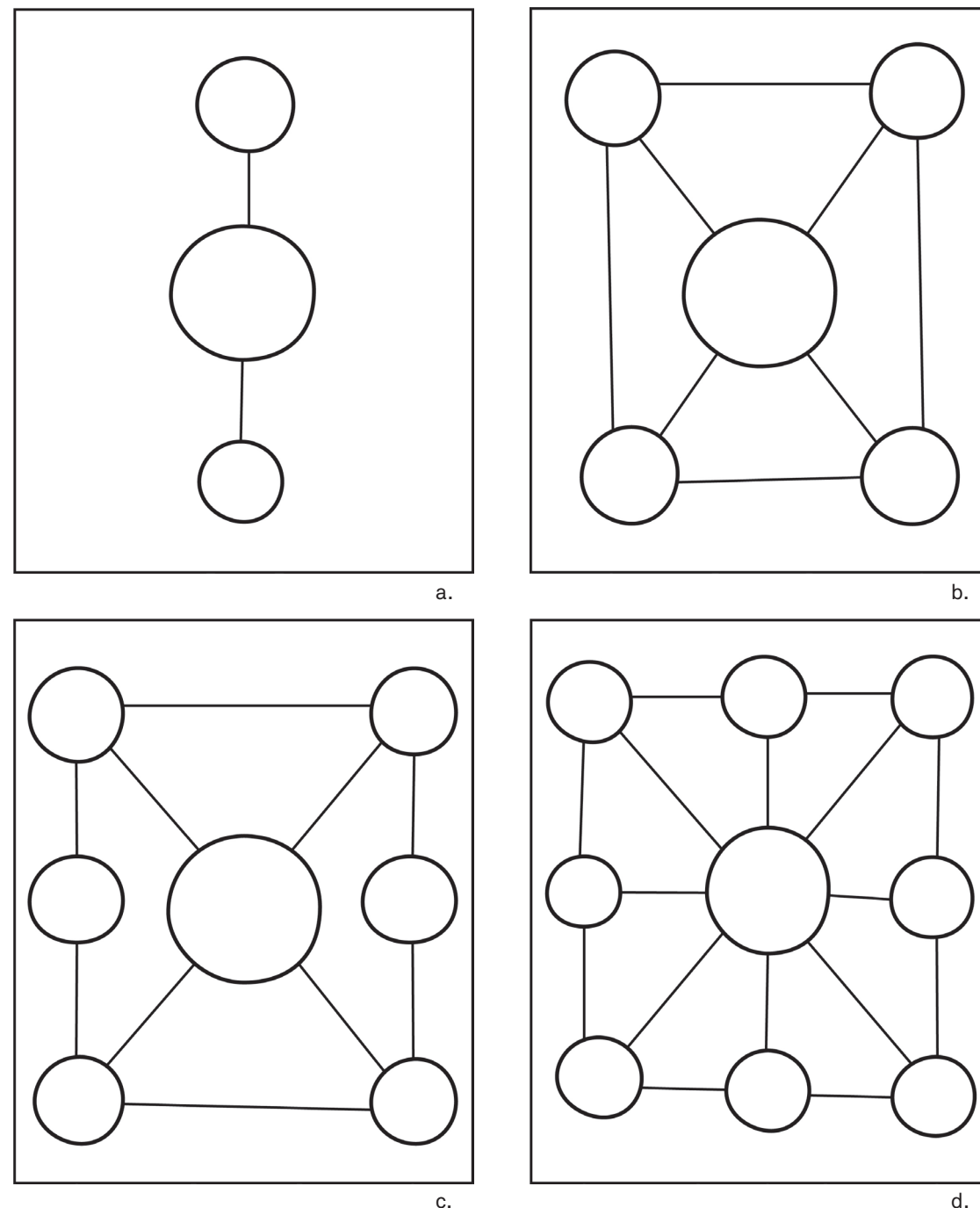


Fig. 30. Schematic diagrams typical painting templates; a. three-circle site-path sequence, b. five-circle-grid, c. seven-circle-grid, d. nine-circle-grid

the central location. While there was no strict numerical relationship to connected sites, the overall expansionary dynamic of the schema was intended to convey the profusion of tunnels emanating from a major Honey Ant centre (such as Papunya) to a network of interconnected sites.⁶² I will return to describe representations of the subterranean realm of the Honey Ant Ancestors in Chapter Eight. For now, it is sufficient to foreshadow the significance of precisely inscribed transverse elements as the Anmatyerr painters expanded their scope of reference from the representation of ritual practice to encompass a more holistic reference to Country.

62. For a more extended discussion of these works see a podcast of the lecture *Digging for Honey Ants*: Kean 2019, URL: <https://acca.melbourne/program/defining-moments-digging-for-honey-ants/>.

Multiplicity and Repetition

It cannot be assumed that there is a one-to-one relationship in desert art between signs and what they signify.⁶³ The anthropologist Fred Myers wrote that “the multiplicity and magnitude of [the Tingarri Men’s] aggregation is conveyed through the large number of small circles arrayed around the central circle”.⁶⁴ He showed how the relative scale and number of signs (denoting landforms, ancestors or objects) indexed degrees of importance. Similarly, Kaapa and Leura used repetition and multiplicity as signifiers of potency. Rather than just extending the composition outwards, via ever more sites and adjoining lines, as do Pintupi artists when painting their Tingarri Ancestors, Kaapa and Leura applied symmetry as the tool to effect repetition, a tendency noted in the work of Indigenous carvers working in the classical tradition.⁶⁵ When arranged radially around a centre point, symmetry generated multiplicity, just like the inclined mirrors of a kaleidoscope.

Close analysis of Kaapa’s *Budgerigar* series reveals that a single object is reflected on one axis (or both axes), to produce two (or four) images of the same object. Images of key ceremonial objects are thereby multiplied to form a more compelling, hypnotic image. Critical information is multiplied geometrically in each half, or quadrant, for emphasis, as well as to achieve balance. Realising the poetic possibilities of the new media, Kaapa and Leura use *reflection*, *repetition* and *multiplicity* to communicate the esoteric power of ceremony.

Degrees of Symmetry

Having established that the manipulation of symmetry was central to Kaapa and Leura’s shared project, it is timely to consider the extent to which their approach to compositional symmetry reflects the intercultural world in which they lived. Or, as others have wondered: did Kaapa and Leura’s adherence to symmetry reflect customary Anmatyerr aesthetics?

Following Sutton’s approach, when analysing the formal qualities of acrylic art, I examined the designs on *Tywerrenge/Tulku* in the Museum Victoria collection.⁶⁶ Although the vast majority of these objects were collected in the ‘contact period’ (from the late 19th to the mid-20th century) and several of the designs appear to have been incised with introduced iron tools, I have (for the purposes of this exercise), assumed that they reflect ‘customary aesthetics’.⁶⁷ Most objects were oval-shaped, though several were particularly slender and possessed pointed ends, and a handful were round rather than ovate. The objects were double-sided

63. Sutton 1989a, pp. 362-365.

64. Myers 2002b, p. 95.

65. Using terms such as “trebled” and “quadrupled”: Strehlow 1971, p. 246.

66. The Museum Victoria provided an extensive collection of relevant sacred objects (accessed via the necessary protocols).

67. Judging from the qualities of the incisions and general wear, the vast majority of these objects were produced before ‘contact’, using stone or bone tools.

and often carried an alternative design on their verso. The designs on both sides were assessed. Note was taken of the expression of symmetry apparent in the engraved, pecked, and painted images on each surface.

I inspected 126 designs in all: 71 were symmetrical, while 46 were assessed as asymmetrical. Of the remaining nine, three exhibited all-over patterning and six were unmarked. Of the 126 objects, 39 were from the Warramungu and Warlpiri groups (of the Ngarrkic language group), 49 from Western Desert groups and 38 were associated with Arandic groups. Unfortunately, only one object could be positively associated with the Anmatyerr region; accordingly, it was assumed that designs across the Arandic regions shared aesthetic values.⁶⁸

While Sutton found the highest incidence of symmetry in paintings by the Pintupi, Luritja and Pitjantjatjara groups of the Western Desert, I determined that symmetry was noticeably less prevalent among sacred objects from the Western Desert. Symmetry was more frequently a characteristic of objects collected from the Warumungu, to the north of the study area, and across the Arandic area of Central Australia.

These blunt generalisations do not however convey the precise qualities of symmetry, either in terms of the precision of manufacture, or the particular geometry for which the craftsman strived. Accordingly, I also noted if the design showed bilateral symmetry along the long axis only or if the design was ‘mirrored’ on both long and short axes. A handful of Arrernte designs were radially symmetrical. In one instance, a sinuous line issued from a single concentric circle to snake at a regular ‘wavelength’ along the centre of a long ovate form. Although not symmetrical according to the strictest Western definitions (for one half of the design is not a mirror image of its other half), for an Indigenous viewer, the design may be perceived as possessing comparable aesthetic balance. Such qualities would certainly have satisfied scholar of antiquity Jay Hambidge, who coined the term ‘dynamic symmetry’ to describe the geometric progression evident in a variety of natural forms, such as a transversely sectioned Chambered Nautilus. Startlingly, Hambidge suggests that ‘dynamic symmetry’ was “entirely unrecognized in modern times.”⁶⁹ While Hambidge’s claim appears somewhat overstated, it stands as a useful reminder that the aesthetic realms of cultures and epochs may not be commensurate.

68. In contrast to the Arrernte, the Anmatyerr were not the focus of sustained anthropological study during the 20th century, when museums actively acquired sacred objects: Gibson 2017b. The major anthropological incursions into Anmatyerr Country were: a South Australian Board of Anthropological Research expedition to Cockatoo Creek in 1931, and various expeditions by T. G. H. Strehlow in 1932, 1958, 1955 and 1968.

69. Hambidge 1926, p. 7.

Symmetry and Modern Materials

Notwithstanding the finesse of their execution, none of the designs on *Tywerrenge* in the Museum Victoria collection were as precisely symmetrical and geometrically perfect as Kaapa’s *Budgerigar Dreaming* series. The precision of Kaapa’s composition may in part be attributed to the plasticity of his chosen media, for it is easier to create clear and consistent lines with poster paint, applied with a sable-hair brush, than to incise comparable lines with simple hand tools on stone, or tight-grained wood. The impact of modern materials is not limited to Indigenous artists of course. The conservators and theorists Jo Crook and Tom Learner demonstrated the effect of novel materials on mid-20th century North American art. They noted for instance, that the viscous qualities of newly-formulated car duco enabled Jackson Pollock to create his legendary ‘drip painting’ technique.⁷⁰ I argue that self-levelling water-based paint, in combination with quality brushes, had a comparable revolutionary impact on the ambition and technical capacity of Kaapa and his Anmatyerr peers.⁷¹

Both Kaapa and Leura exhibited a flair for graphic design, and it was their capacity to conceptualise a completed design, before embarking on a painting, that enabled them to press home a determined experimental program. Furthermore, I contend that the fluency of their line is derived from a sophisticated understanding of viscosity that can be traced to their association with the Hermannsburg landscape artists.⁷² Close examination of the construction of concentric circles in the work of both artists reveals that paint flowed freely from a brush loaded with enough pigment to produce a well-formed line of consistent width. Both conceptual ambition and technical precision were required to achieve the delicately balanced compositions for which they strived. The combination of these qualities distinguishes their work from the more direct attack of the majority of Pintupi artists with whom they worked in the Men’s Painting Room (compare Plate 57 with 58).⁷³

Kaapa in particular was able to achieve a level of near-perfect symmetrical elaboration that would have been unattainable using customary materials in a traditional setting. Conflating virtuosity with ceremonial authority, Bardon described Kaapa’s *Budgerigar* series as “the most accomplished painting record in existence of the perceived sacredness of ceremony itself.”⁷⁴ Expanding on Bardon’s observations, I contend that the plasticity of commercial paint, coupled with the rectilinear rigidity of hardboard, enabled Kaapa to both *imagine* and

70. Crook & Learner 1999, pp. 8-11.

71. Kean 2017b, pp. 184-85.

72. In the first few years of painting at Papunya, Kaapa and Leura frequently used materials (including watercolour paint and fashion board) that are likely to have been obtained from Arrernte watercolour artists.

73. It can be argued that Anatjarri Tjakamarra shares comparable formal qualities with Kaapa; in particular, he is undeniably “virtuosic in his interest in form”: Myers 2002b, p. 106.

74. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 64-65.

realise compositions that were inaccessible to earlier craftsman. Indeed, Kaapa's capacity to imagine novel configurations on transcultural media is a measure of both his intellect and his modernity.

Returning to the visual qualities of sacra in the Museum Victoria collection, my assessment of their imagery suggests that the degree of symmetry expressed varies in accordance with the iconicity of particular totemic ancestors more strongly than it does between the various visual cultures of particular linguistic groups.⁷⁵ For example, snake icons tended to be represented asymmetrically, whether they occurred in Pintupi or Arrernte Country.⁷⁶ In contrast, the Honey Ant icons tended to be more symmetrical, regardless of whether painted with contemporary materials or with ochre in a ritual setting (see Plate 59).⁷⁷ Although my research revealed an appreciably greater occurrence of symmetry among designs associated with the Arandic region than with the Western Desert, symmetry and asymmetry figured in both regions.

Rather than searching for the relative quantum of symmetry in Western Desert art, Myers preferred a more nuanced approach, arguing that the "tension between symmetry and asymmetry is a central force in its aesthetics".⁷⁸ Seen in this light, the stubborn extent of symmetry in the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series is exceptional and can reasonably be linked to the artists' exposure to transcultural media, the availability of new materials and artistic preference. I conclude therefore that symmetry cannot be used as a means of defining or differentiating 'Anmatyerr' art; rather it is an inherent aesthetic trait, amplified and elaborated upon by Kaapa and Leura as individual practitioners working with particular programmatic intent.

Paramount Forms and Religious Discourse

Bardon, recognising Kaapa's skill, wrote: "It was around his classic artistry the painting movement of Papunya in 1971 was built, his ability in achieving visual boldness and a kind of heraldry depending to a large extent on modern painting methods using European brushes and paint."⁷⁹ While acknowledging his gifts, Bardon was unsettled by Kaapa's eagerness to draw from Western forms of representational realism, effectively rejecting his contemporaneity, which

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75. The degree of iconicity in Central Australian art contrasts with the "sociologically motivated" clan designs of the Yolngu of North-east Arnhem Land: Morphy 1991, p. 178.
76. See for instance the highly asymmetrical ground designs, each created in succession over seven days, to represent the progress of Wollunqua, a 'mythic beast', and the Black Snake, at seven sites along a songline in Warumungu Country: Spencer & Gillen 1904, pp. 737-743.
77. Compare images of the *Honey Ant Mural* with the *Honey Ant Totem*: Spencer & Gillen 1899, Fig. 131, p. 631. The Honey Ant site is on Kaytetye Country according to: Gibson 2007, personal communication with the author, December.
78. Myers 2002b, p. 105.
79. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 86.

Bardon interpreted as social commentary:

However, the social tensions within the painting group spilled over ferociously into his work. He was the most vigorously symmetrical of the painters, yet his paintings are a compendium of sacred signs with secular subject matter. Kaapa consistently allowed the secular and sacred to clash in his symbology. His intrusive icons were forever commenting on (and thereby, it seemed to me, questioning) the tribal traditions.⁸⁰

From my understanding, Kaapa's 'symbology' was consistently 'sacred', yet Bardon is right to conclude that his thinking reflected the contemporary world in which his imagination was forged. Bardon however failed to consider that Kaapa could maintain traditional attachment while also being fully aware of the abject social conditions prevailing at Papunya. Disregarding Kaapa's positivistic pragmatism, Bardon assumed that the artist shared his own anxieties. Rather than reflecting his adherence to a static tradition, I consider Kaapa's fascination with strict symmetry to have been borne out his engagement with the contemporary world. Armed with good quality materials and sandwiched between the familiar practice of ceremony and the intercultural environment – with its Christian Crosses and straight fence lines – Kaapa created rigorously conceived images intended for his time.

Schematic diagrams of the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series (see Figs. 27 and 28) demonstrate that Kaapa applied the Cross and Leura the Oval as primary structural elements. Where the early examples of Kaapa's *Budgerigar* series were constructed around a double Cross, formed by the conjunction of three or more *Tywerrenge*, Leura's *Honey Ant* paintings were fashioned by the arrangement of many smaller *Tywerrenge* to form a meta-oval. Despite this dissimilarity, each series shared compositional features, whereby forms were rigorously mirrored on horizontal and vertical axes. In both cases, paramount forms acted as the scaffolding around which pedagogical and poetic allusions were fastened. Building on Munn's observation "that circles [and by extension ovals], crosses... are bound cultural notions about order in the world as a whole", I contend that the Oval and the Cross indexed distinct but not necessarily conflicting allegiances; namely, customary Indigenous religion and Lutheranism.⁸¹ Beyond the overt thematic references to Budgerigar and Honey Ant ceremonies, the semiotic power of the Cross and the Oval reigned; both paramount forms represented ontological regimes entangled in the daily discourse at Papunya.

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80. Bardon 1991, p. 108.
81. Munn 1973b, p. 193



Fig. 31. The Papunya Church, Town Hall and School with Warumpi (the rounded hill) in the background, 2016, photograph by John Kean

Marcia Langton contended that Aboriginal ‘art’ is constructed from the inter-religious matrix of experiences of its makers, writing:

When we look at Aboriginal art and images, often the religiosity of the work is evident as a result of the emblems depicted in the work that we have learned to be religious symbols, and often as a result of symbols of the historical dialogue with Christianity. The engagement between two religious systems on the Australian continent since the eighteenth century, and the conflict and discourse which ensued, is, for ironic reasons, as much a source of what is labelled Aboriginal ‘art’ today as is the millennia-old social engagement of the peoples called ‘Aboriginal’ with this continent.⁸²

While Langton notes that both ‘conflict and discourse’ have stimulated artistic production across the continent, I suggest that art produced in Central Australia before 1980 tended to emphasise discourse over conflict. This emphasis can be traced to the emergence of artistic practices at Hermannsburg, where refuge was afforded against the worst depredations of a ‘secular’ pastoral industry, backed and enforced by a network of mounted police, a process that reached its deadly apogee during the Coniston Massacre(s) to the near north of Papunya.⁸³ Understandably, *conflict* (in the form of cultural repression), and dispossession, has been the context against which Papunya painting has been understood as an emblem of resistance.⁸⁴ While not denying the validity of such readings, I suggest that the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series can be viewed through an alternate lens; as discourse.

82. Langton 2004, p. 22.

83. Lohe 1977, pp. 17-19.

84. Crocker 1981, p. 3; Bardon 1989a, p. 10; Sprague 2014, p. 72.

Religious Syncretism

Although Kaapa and Leura grew into manhood under the influence of the Lutheran Church at Napperby, and later at Papunya, they did not necessarily see Christianity and Indigenous belief as incompatible (see Plate 60). Leura regarded the ontologies as complementary, believing an Indigenous creation proceeded naturally from God’s founding as described in the Book of Genesis.⁸⁵ Kaapa’s status as a practicing Christian is not recorded; however, from my observation, he maintained an opportunistic distance from both the church and state. Whatever the stripe of the institution, he chose independence over unthinking adherence.

Reflecting on the inter-faith complexity of Papunya, Kaapa’s *Budgerigar* series is explicitly driven by a cruciform geometry, with an overlay of attenuated Ovals. In contrast, Leura expressed the grid (that I have previously argued is a geometric extension of the Cross) more subtly, in synchrony within an enveloping Oval form. I argue that the paramount forms in both series arise from each artist’s experience of the overlaying and intertwining of Christian and Indigenous ontologies in Central Australia.⁸⁶ When compared with contemporaneous paintings by Western Pintupi artists who had less experience of Christianity, the compositional rigidity of Kaapa and Leura’s 1972 works are exceptional. While being constructed from the icons of Indigenous belief, they bring to mind the straight-edged artifacts of

European intrusion: the machined forms of steel tools; the partition of Country into quadrilateral pastoral ‘runs’; the guillotined edges of the *pepe* (the Bible: literally, ‘paper’); the uncompromising rectangular outlines of ‘posters of Palestine’ used by evangelists for religious instruction (see Plate 61).⁸⁷

The experimental series produced by Kaapa and Leura satisfy Langton’s identification of ‘art’ as a “discursive location [that] exists between Christian proselytism and Aboriginal religion”.⁸⁸ Rather than anticipating uniformity of engagement across the continent, Langton encourages historically-based analysis of ‘art’ at the local level, writing:

...the invention and construction of Aboriginal ‘art’ and ‘culture’ in modern Australia must, in each geographic region and in each community, reflect on Aboriginal engagement with European religion, as much as with any other aspect of European society.⁸⁹

85. Leura was the most articulate and openly philosophical of the artists and carefully explained his understanding of successive creations to me in the Papunya Tula Artists office in Alice Springs in 1978. See also: Swartz & Dussart 2010, pp. 1-13.

86. See also: Austin-Broos 2009; Jones 2007, p. 312-313; Gibson 2017a, pp. 198-199.

87. For a discussion of the meaning and ‘iconography’ of *pepe*/the Bible at Hermannsburg, see: Austin-Broos 2009, pp. 85-100.

88. Langton 2004, p. 34.

89. Langton 2004, p. 34.

I contend therefore, that Kaapa and Leura's deployment of symmetry was not merely an aesthetic tactic; rather it was a manifestation of a 'radical hope'.⁹⁰ These works were produced during the period when Indigenous Law and lore was actively suppressed, before the election of Gough Whitlam in December 1972 (an event that would transform 'Aboriginal Affairs'). To assume that their reliance on symmetry is a habitual residue of Anmatyerr aesthetics is to deny Kaapa and Leura agency as contemporary artists.

Conclusion

Kaapa's *Budgerigar* and Leura's *Honey Ant* series arose within the emergent practice of the Men's Painting Room at Papunya (see Plate 62). While the significance of this early phase of painting at Papunya has been celebrated in recent exhibitions and their accompanying scholarly publications, the examination of the several strands of painting encompassed within the larger movement is still in its embryonic stages.⁹¹ Bardon recognised that *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* were important series but stopped short of a detailed analysis of their formal development and influence. I have re-examined the construction of both bodies of work and proposed a new sequence of production. Further, I proposed that the series were conducted in parallel through intellectual collaboration based on the artists' reciprocal relationship as *merék-artwey* and *kwertengerl*.

Analysis of the sequential development of the works shows that the deployment of transverse axes, at the conclusion of the series, augmented the integrity of the picture plane (as understood by Greenberg). Further, the directionality of transverse axes inferred connection to related sites beyond the corners of the frame. The laterally-expanded space engendered by diagonal axes opened new possibilities for the representation of an unbounded Land, the space of the infinitely connected songlines discussed in Chapter Three.

Kaapa and Leura's application of symmetry within the governing rectangle of Western art was used as the lens to examine the core question of the thesis: to what extent did the selected artist's intercultural experience affect their creative expression? Accordingly, I compared Kaapa and Leura's paintings with the work of unknown makers of an array of sacred objects in a museum collection. Despite the extensive use of symmetry in the traditional objects, the degree of symmetry evident in the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series is exceptional. Rather than being a predetermined outcome of Anmatyerr aesthetics, as others have postulated, I argue that the application of near-absolute symmetry in the latter works reflects the artists' personal preferences, expressed through their mastery of novel materials.

90. This term is derived from philosopher Jonathon Lear, in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of Cultural Devastation*: Lear 2006. The concept is discussed in the local context by Hinkson 2017.

91. Ryan, Batty et al. 2011; Benjamin et al. 2000; Scholes et al. 2017; Johnson 2010.

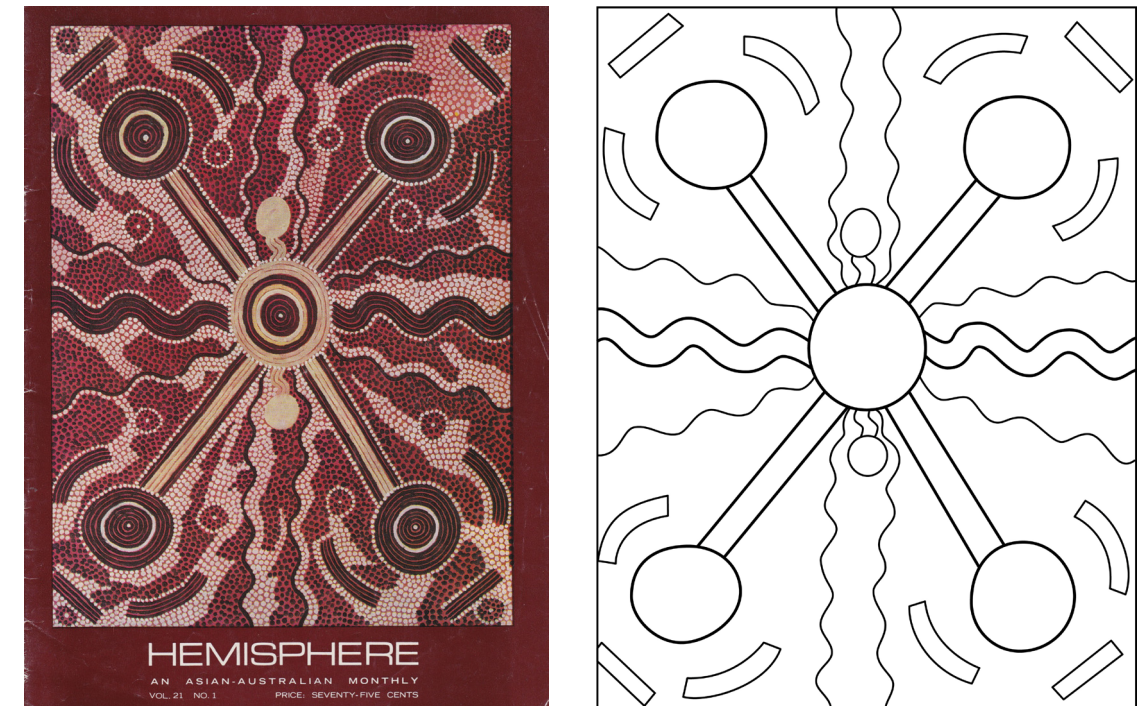


Fig. 32. *Hemisphere*, an Asian-Australian Monthly, Vol. 21, No 1, image, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Origin of the Wild Tomato*, 1974

Fig. 33. Schematic diagram of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa *Origin of the Wild Tomato*, 1974

Bardon wrote that Kaapa's *Budgerigar* paintings were "an authoritative definition of Aboriginal culture" and considered Leura's *Honey Ant* series to be "set out in the strict symmetrical order as is the tradition with Anmatjira [Anmatyerr]... artists".⁹² On analysis, it is apparent that these compositions were rather more exploratory than Bardon allowed. I have demonstrated that Kaapa and Leura engaged in a process of experimentation to arrive at compositions that interrogated the rectangular substrate on which they painted. Symmetry was not simply used as a means of recapitulating customary aesthetics but as a tool in their discourse with modernity. Kaapa's cruciform compositions resonated powerfully with the Christian Cross atop the Lutheran Church at Papunya adjacent to the Men's Painting Room where he worked. Inversely, Leura's grids were subtly embalmed by the meta-oval of Indigenous ontology. While referring to specific rituals, Kaapa and Leura's paintings sought pictorial solutions beyond the requirement of the particular totems they represented. These radical new paintings postulated ideal relationships between Indigenous icons in response to the rectangular format and its ontological consequence.

These formative paintings reach for geometric resolution, and can therefore be located at an early point on the ascending trajectory of desert art, before the full repertoire of expressive possibilities had been explored. The geometric precision of the *Budgerigar* series was rarely replicated beyond 1972, yet this and the *Honey Ant* series mark a significant moment in the stylistic development of Papunya painting.

92. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 280 & 337.

Kaapa's *Budgerigar* and Leura's *Honey Ant* series contributed a robust, yet flexible template to the lexicon of Papunya painting (Fig. 32 and 33). A variant, defined by Myers as the 'five-circle-grid', underpinned a significant proportion of later works by Anmatyerr, Luritja and Pintupi artists produced during the mature phase of Papunya Tula painting (from December 1972 to 1988). Importantly for the subjects of this thesis, the new pictorial geometry would provide the scaffolding upon which they could explore the representation of subtle spatial and temporal dimensions, which will be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight. Those elaborations were in turn reliant on the breakthroughs realised by Johnny Warangula as he improvised around the theme of an ancestral storm. The following chapter will therefore examine Warangula's immersive *Water Dreaming* paintings, made in the Men's Painting Room in the same period when Kaapa and Leura were absorbed in their rigorous experimental project.

Chapter Six

The Invention of the Dot (1971 to 1972)

Introduction

This chapter will expand focus from the representation of the ceremonial ground to encompass a wider field encapsulated by the Aboriginal English term 'Country'. It will be shown that, coincident with Kaapa and Tim Leura's experimentation with compositional harmonics discussed in the previous chapter, Johnny Warangula transformed the dot, from an adjunct used for embellishment, to a defining element in Papunya painting.¹ I argue that in Warangula's hand, the dot became a vehicle through which the particulate energy of the totemic landscape was cast in visual form.

Since the recognition of Papunya Tula painting, the dot has been inextricably identified with desert art.² I will demonstrate that, rather than being an inevitable outcome of a culturally-proscribed visual system, the nexus between the dot and Papunya Tula painting can be traced to Warangula's artistic improvisation. The curator Judith Ryan may well have been thinking of Warangula when she wrote: "Initially used sparingly to provide edging, graphic augmentation or texture, and subsequently extended into veils or phases of dots and expansive colour fields, the dot is integral to the visual language of the Western Desert painting".³ Ryan continues, observing that Warangula was "instrumental in pioneering the over-layering of masses of filigree dots to create atmospheric effects of light and shade, and tremulous optical qualities that have been likened to those of pointillism".⁴ This chapter commences with an assessment of Ryan's assumptions via analysis of the prevalence and use of dots in classical central Australian desert culture.

The chapter will also address the observations of anthropologists who worked in Central Australia before the advent of Papunya painting to ascertain how Warangula's dotted fields related to the ceremonial practices to which they refer. More specifically, I will show how Warangula's revolutionary approach arises from his engagement as songman and storyteller. Rather than restricting my analysis to the dot as a visual device, I propose that it is the trace of a meaningful gesture. Having discussed the dot in physical terms, I will follow the development of the mark in Warangula's early paintings, describing how his approach to dotting broadened the scope of Papunya painting from the representation of ceremony to encompass the representation of the totemic landscape.

1. Munn 1973a, pp. 163-164; Michaels 1994, p. 155.
2. For practical purposes, I use Johnson's identification of the 16th of November 1972, when the names of the founding painters were gathered, to be the become shareholders of Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd.: Johnson 2008, p. 2. The date is cognate with the acceptance by the wider painting group of the stylistic developments described in these chapters.
3. Ryan 2011a, p. 24.
4. Ryan 2011a, p. 25.

Warangula's artistic development will be traced through a series of *Water Dreaming* paintings (made between 1971 and 1972) produced in the communal setting of the Men's Painting Room. Warangula's status as a 'rainmaker' and his choice of the Water Dreaming theme during a period of persistent rainfall will be discussed. While acknowledging that Warangula's work was both innovative and highly personal, it will be argued that the visual effects for which he strived have their source in customary aesthetics, particularly the appreciation of refraction and iridescence in naturally occurring phenomena and crafted objects.

Having established that the production of 'brightness' is an intentional feature of Warangula's work, I will discuss how this fascination can be used to elucidate comparable qualities in other Indigenous artists, in particular the watercolour landscapes of Albert Namatjira.

"The Dot has a serious Art History"

Artist and theorist Nigel Lendon identified the ubiquity of the dot in the history of modern/contemporary art, insisting that the element should remain available to a variety of applications. He writes: "Nobody owns the Dot. Whether by Damien Hirst, by Indigenous Australians, by their PoMo Appropriationists, or as far back as the Pointillists, the Dot has a serious Art History".⁵ Lendon's observation is surprisingly provocative in the Australian context however, where dots are a key constituent of contemporary Aboriginal art. Symbols matter, and dots have come to connote pan-Aboriginal associations beyond the specific meaning given for the particular pattern of dots of any individual artwork.⁶ The furore swirling around Hirst's 'appropriation' of the style of dot identified with Utopia-based artists Polly Ngale and Emily Kame Kngwarreye is but one example of where the dot is understood as a signifier of cultural property in contemporary Indigenous culture.⁷

In spite of the cultural capital invested in the motif, I argue that the intimate association between the dot and the 'look' of contemporary desert art has its source in a decisive moment, when founding Papunya Tula artists made certain aesthetic decisions. The consequential application of the dotted field as a device by contemporary desert artists challenges researchers interrogating the development of Papunya painting to imagine the era before the dot became inextricably associated with desert art. I therefore examine material created before the advent of 'dot painting', to understand the constitution of Papunya Tula painting free of unchecked assumptions about the vocabulary on which the idiom is based.

5. Lendon 2017, accessed 23 November 2017, URL: <http://www.iconophilia.net/?s=Dot>.
6. Batty 1997, pp. 26-29.
7. Utopia is an Aboriginal homeland area, comprised of several outstations around an ex-cattle station in Easter Anmatyerr/Alyawarr Country: Boland & Branley 2018, accessed 9 April 2018, URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-29/indigenous-artists-claim-damien-hirst-paintings-similar-artworks/9592578>

The Dot in Classical Culture

An assessment of the prevalence of dots in classical desert art can be achieved through examination of material held in museum storerooms, a large proportion of which was collected before sustained Western contact. Further valuable evidence can be gleaned from ethnographic photography, reproductions of early artifacts in auction catalogues, and crayon drawings produced by Aboriginal 'informants' for European anthropologists.⁸ Each of these sources has been scrutinised during research for this chapter.

Of particular interest are *Kutitji* (softwood shields) whose convex surface is of a similar scale to the plywood boards used by founding Papunya painters in 1971 and 1972.⁹ *Kutitji* are a sign of manhood, which in addition to being used for defence, are decorated with totemic designs for the instruction of post-initiate novices (see Plate 63). The approach to shield decoration therefore provides a suitable comparison with designs applied to similar-sized artworks.¹⁰ The designs on 'classical' Central Australian *Kutitji* can be sorted into three categories: 1) unadorned linear designs, 2) designs highlighted with rows of white dots, and 3) designs with dotted 'infill' between iconographic elements and the edge of the shield. I found a similar proportion (about a third) of the designs applied to *Kutitji* conformed to each of these three categories. The use of two or more different coloured dots on a single shield was highly unusual, having only been identified on a single item.¹¹ In general, the approach taken to the application of dots to *Kutitji* was found to be quite different to that used in Papunya Tula painting after December 1972, when patterns comprising more than one colour had become typical and the layering of dots of different sizes and colours was commonplace.

Moreover, my examination of crayon drawings in museum archives and published records strengthens the conclusion drawn from decorated *Kutitji*: that dots were not a ubiquitous feature of desert art before the advent of Papunya Tula painting in 1972. The relative scarcity of dots in crayon drawings is particularly apposite, for like early Papunya paintings, these two-dimensional documents were produced for intercultural communication.¹² The application of an edge-to-edge dotted field, which became a distinguishing characteristic of contemporary

8. Believing that drawing could be used as an effective means of cross-cultural communication, researchers including Olive Pink, Mervyn Meggitt, C. P. Mountford, Ronald and Catherine Berndt and Norman B. Tindale routinely requested that their 'Informants' draw with crayons on brown paper: Sutton 1989b, pp. 387-399; Hinkson 2014, pp. 21-47.
9. The surfaces of softwood shields measure between 6 x 3 cm, and are carved from *inernt/ ininti* wood (*Erythrina vespertilio*).
10. Batty 2011, p. 7.
11. Item X48157 at Museum Victoria is patterned with large ochre and black dots, with white dotted infill.
12. For original materials, see: Berndt, Berndt & Stanton 1981; Mountford 1937a; 1937b; 1937c; 1976; Norman B. Tindale, Series AA346/10 (1930), AA346/11 (1931), AA346/12 (1932), AA346/23 (1956), South Australian Museum. For analysis, see: Sutton 1989b, p. 363; Hinkson 2014, pp. 22-30.

painting from late 1972, was sometimes evident on *Kutitji* but rarely found in other contexts. An exception is the generous application of feather down to produce an overall colour/texture in body decoration, ground mosaics or on ritual objects, such as shields. In these instances, overall covering is achieved by a gesture akin to dotting. The implications of this gesture and its relationship to the dot will be discussed later in this chapter. With this important proviso in mind, I contend that the dotted field became a signal feature of contemporary desert art as a result of conventions developed at Papunya, rather than it being a predestined attribute of contemporary Indigenous expression carried over from classical forms. The balance of this chapter will describe how and why Warangula initiated that process.

“numerous progeny”

The title ascribed to the first retrospective of Papunya painting, *Dot and Circle*, in 1985, indicates the importance ascribed to the dot by the first group of writers to study the movement.¹³ Identifiable, reproducible and at times anodyne, the dot came to signify a complex system of revelation and concealment.¹⁴ In light of Lendon’s estimation that “nobody owns the dot”, it is worth considering the significance of the mark in an autochthonous context, to establish how and why the dot gained traction as a key expressive element of desert art.

Just as a morpheme is the smallest unit of language, the dot is an indivisible, particulate element of desert visuality. It is therefore surprising that the founding semiotician of desert iconography, Nancy Munn, afforded the mark only passing attention. Instead, Munn commenced her analysis at the level of the ‘sign’, which she regards as constituting the “building blocks” of Warlpiri iconography.¹⁵ It was only later, in a close analysis of men’s ancestral designs, that Munn focused on “circle clusters” (dots), which she relegates as adjuncts to “core elements”, such as the paths of ancestral beings:

In contrast to the core elements, adjunctive features are generally numerous, often diminutive features such as ant swarms, grains of sand, sparks, leaves, pearl shells, stems and immature yams and footprints. In a number of instances these features were explicitly identified as the numerous progeny of the species that he “throws off” (gidi-ni) or scatters as he travels along, a notion echoing the concepts about ancestral potency being like bits of fluff shaken onto the soil by dancers in men’s ceremonies. For example, informants regarded small clouds (gudgudju) and pearl shells as progeny (gudu) or “little ones” (wida) scattered by the rain and rainbow snake respectively.¹⁶

13. Maughan & Zimmer 1986.
14. The use of to both reveal and conceal will be discussed in Chapter 7.
15. Munn 1973a, p. 59.
16. Munn 1973a, pp. 163-164.

Key elements of Munn’s research were conducted on ceremonial ground, among performers whose individual identity was disguised by the totemic signs (in the form of body decoration) she analysed. Unaware that portable art would emerge as a major form of cultural expression, Munn moved freely from sign to ceremony. I will argue that Warangula, while invested in ceremony, also used the painted dot to express the depth of his totemic associations.

The anthropologist Mervyn Meggitt, who also worked with the Warlpiri in the 1950s, animates Munn’s observations:

As the actors agitated their bodies, the down was dislodged and transformed into guruwari, immaterial particles that entered the surrounding trees, rocks and waterholes, where they still remain and affect the behaviour of living things.¹⁷ The particles, although amorphous as the down itself, are essentially of the same nature as the being who have produced them.¹⁸

Meggitt’s deliberate use of the verb ‘agitated’ is critical, for it infers kinetic multimodality of ceremony. In Central Australian culture, a performer’s decorated body is but one element of an interlocking set of sensory expressions – movement, materiality, icon, song, light and spatial sequence – all of which informed early Papunya painting.¹⁹ We should not assume therefore that paintings only refer to visual signs and spatial configurations.

Writing after the advent of Papunya Tula painting, and informed by the conclusions of Meggitt and Munn, the historian Philip Jones made a direct association between the acrylic dot and the “dislodged” fluff produced in ceremony.²⁰ He argues that dots painted on the Yuendumu schoolroom doors “are the *kuruwarri*, seminal elements of the key design, spreading into the country”.²¹ The correlation between dislodged floating *guruwarri/kuruwarri* and the dot is critical to my interpretation of Warangula’s painting. Warangula was a ‘rainmaker’ and the dots in his *Water Dreaming* series (1971 to 1972) refer to meteorological phenomena: the ‘little ones’, ‘scattered by rain’. T. G. H. Strehlow (whose turn of phrase is generally more poetic than his peers) described performers’ bodies as “quivering”, causing the down to scatter and thereby producing progeny in the form of totemic animals, plants and meteorological phenomena.²² I argue that the comparable quality of Warangula’s dots conjures the ineffable unfurling of the ancestral storm.²³

17. *Guruwari/kuruwarri* is a Warlpiri term for the marks, signs and designs produced by ancestral beings. The term also refers to the use of those elements in ritual and contemporary painting.
18. Meggitt 1962, p. 65.
19. Strehlow 1964; Kimber 2011.
20. Meggitt 1962, Strehlow 1964
21. Jones 2014, p. 39.
22. Strehlow 1971, pp. 200-221.
23. Ryan, J. 2011, p. 25.

The Dynamics of the Dot

For the viewer, the dot is constituted by its shape and defined edges. However, if the motif is considered as the visible trace of a gesture, new connotations emerge. Yet the critic Harold Rosenberg's notion that "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" does not comprehend the ontological breadth of early Papunya painting, especially in the case of Warangula's paintings, where a specific Water Dreaming 'story' was reproduced. Further, Rosenberg's understanding of the importance of gesture in "action painting" does not adequately encompass the subtle ways in which an artist's body can be implicated in desert art.²⁴ I prefer to apply an interpretation based on the work of the linguist Jennifer Green, who uses a multimodal analysis of gesture, sign and speech to trace the dynamics of Central Australian women's sand drawing.²⁵ By examining the transition from storyteller's gesture to the resultant mark in the sand, Green links what she refers to as "body-anchored and airborne action" to the production of a "visual unit" (a sign).²⁶ While the presence and voice of the storyteller is implicit in an ephemeral 'sand story', the corporeal reality of the painter can be lost when a portable work of art is removed from its point of production to be appreciated in the 'neutral' white cube of a gallery, or hung in a suburban living room. The capacity to isolate a completed artwork, as a frozen vestige of embodied processes, should not preclude the importance of the artist's whole body in the production of that work. I contend therefore that Green's analysis demonstrates a way in which the artist's presence and actions can be reinstated, enhancing our grasp of the painting's creation. By considering each dot as the result of a meaningful gesture, a painting can be appreciated as an embodied performance rather than just as resolved product. I argue therefore that gesture must be read back into Warangula's paintings. More specifically, I contend that his gestures can be inferred by the force and direction of his dots, particularly when expressed on the hard surface of his early boards.

Seen in the context of men's ritual, to which Warangula's paintings refer, the dot was often (but not always) produced by holding feather down or crushed plant material between the thumb and index finger and fixing it onto the prepared body of a performer, ritual object or ground design.²⁷ The gesture was repeated to constitute a sign (circle, line or track) or a textured field. The density of the field is a product of the 'fluffiness' of the material, and the proximity of each 'dotting' gesture. If the point of contact of every gesture was mapped with a generous point, an effect not dissimilar to a dotted field would emerge. When understood as being generated by "body-anchored gestures and airborne action", the dots of early Papunya paintings are analogous to the pinches of fluff applied to a body, shield or performer. While the dots the comprise a Papunya Tula painting may produce

24. Rosenberg 1952, p. 22.

25. Green 2014.

26. Green 2014, pp. 100-165.

27. As observed in Strehlow's films of Anmatyerr men preparing for the Honey Ant rituals: Strehlow Research Centre 2015.

a more or less uniform surface, they were in practice comprised of a sequence of gestures and it is through the confidence and embodied poetry of those gestures that we appreciate particular artistic sensibilities.²⁸

In other instances, when filamentous 'eagle-hawk' down is attached to a shield, or to the body of performer, or to the ground, the dotting gesture results in a sensual, ever shifting surface.²⁹ Following the lead of anthropologists Christine Watson and Jennifer Biddle, I argue that for Warangula, the act of painting was fundamentally informed by culturally-inflected multimodal performance.³⁰ Warangula's gestures were derived from the act 'painting' with pinches of fluff dabbed to the body of a performer, ritual objects, or to the ground to produce ceremonial mosaics. Exceptionally, Warangula took that gesture and applied it with great subtlety to the new media, and in so doing invented the 'articulate dot', which could be applied with greater or lesser force to hardboard and canvas.

Warangula's Precedence

Geoffrey Bardon claimed partial responsibility for Warangula's "most striking representational forms" which, as Bardon saw it, were inspired by his "talkings-out" with the artist.³¹ Unsurprisingly, given assertions of his co-authorship, Bardon regarded the "great Water Dreaming series", examined in this chapter, as "the finest achievement of the Western Desert Painting Movement".³² However, given Warangula's independence of mind and creative verve, I submit that Bardon overstated the extent of his influence. Yet, there can be no doubt that Bardon's enthusiasm bolstered Warangula, who he observed "was to paint longer and harder and more often than anybody at Papunya".³³

Bardon was in awe of Warangula's artistry, noting that he "was indefatigable and his great charm and strong style made him popular and also very influential among the other painters".³⁴ Bardon highlighted Warangula's physicality, writing, "the painter's great vitality in 1972, the dotting more like stippling and irregular hard force over the board; Warrangkula [sic] uses the board to suggest an incisement of the paint strokes, seemingly letting them run in an emotional determinacy and force and unfinishedness".³⁵ The 'irregular hard force' that Bardon

28. Also based on my observation of preparations for ceremony at Papunya in 1978 and 1979 and as coordinator of the creation of a sand mosaic at the Asia Society in New York: Kean 1989, p. 71. See also: Carty 2011, p. 232.

29. Most often collected from Wedge-tailed Eagle nestlings, though other raptor species are also exploited.

30. Watson 2003; Biddle 2007.

31. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 32.

32. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 32.

33. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 81.

34. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 81.

35. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 49.

noted can, I suggest, be better understood according to Green’s axiom of ‘body anchored and airborne action’. An early champion of the artist, the curator Judith Ryan wrote that Warangula’s brushstrokes produced “tremulous optical qualities” that were analogous to the ‘quivering’ movements of dancers as they approached the epicentre of the ceremonial ground. I contend therefore, that the shape and dynamism of Warangula’s brushstrokes can be traced to ontological forces, manifest in ritual but at a more subtle level than the restatement of sign or icon.

Like Bardon, I had the opportunity to watch Warangula at work and have subsequently written of his painterly attack, observing that Warangula’s brushstrokes come from the core of his body. In 2002, I wrote:

Johnny Warangula took the iconographic elements available to him through his inherited rights to country and reconfigured them as personal statements. Most notable is the iconography associated with the Storm Dreaming at Kalipinypa; the lexicon includes sinuous lines and short, percussive bars... Even in his most finely detailed works, the energy of his hand is evident – with its confident sinuous strokes, and with the varied pressure that animates every dotted gesture. Within months of taking up the brush at Papunya, Warangula had discovered the plastic qualities of the painting medium and had begun to establish an analogy between the dotted field – traditionally associated with ceremonial decorations – and the depiction of vegetation in the desert landscape. The use of dots to describe vegetation was a metaphor that would sustain him throughout his artistic career.³⁶

I will go beyond this brief summary of Warangula’s achievement to demonstrate how his ‘dotted field’ can be understood to have originated in the elemental natural forces summoned by Winpa the Lightning Ancestor, and the concatenation of meteorological phenomena associated with the eastward passage of the ‘Water Dreaming’ from Kalipinypa.

Becoming a Painter

Johnny Warangula and Kaapa were great friends. Whether painting, drinking, scheming or singing, their spirits lifted when in each other’s company.³⁷ Beyond the bravado, their relationship was founded on deeper links. They shared associations with a complex of interrelated songlines running from Kalipinypa near the border of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, in a wide band through to Kaapa’s ancestral Land at Mikantji on the western perimeter of the Anmatyerr-speaking area. While many ancestral paths traverse this Country, Warangula presented the Lightning Ancestor Winpa as its dominant creative force. Despite the terrifying violence of the storms unleashed by Winpa, the resulting floodwaters brought life to a parched Land. In Warangula’s cosmology, the storm

36. Kean 2001, p. 48.

37. Bardon referred to Kaapa as Warangula’s “closest friend”: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 81. Philip Batty recalls Kaapa ribbing Warangula about his “messy” painting style: Batty 2016, personal communication with the author.

at Kalipinypa created the conditions for other totemic species to flourish and it is that providential outpouring that is celebrated in many of his paintings.³⁸

Both Kaapa and Warangula were rainmakers who drew their power from their association with the Storm Dreaming; they also shared an attachment to Emu, Serpent, Kangaroo and Blue-tongue Lizard Dreamings.³⁹ Accordingly, Kaapa and Warangula chorused together, contributing their voices and verve to the *marliarra/arleyarr* ceremonies where they sang in the growling bass range characteristic of Aboriginal men of ritual achievement.⁴⁰ Yet, as artists, they could not have approached their work more differently. Despite deploying shared signs, drawn from common ancestral iconography, their images were configured according to radically divergent visual sensibilities. Where Kaapa was a gifted graphic artist, who brought meticulous, predetermined formality to the task, Warangula painted intuitively with inspired fluidity.

Working in a Shared Atelier

Unsurprisingly, given his friendship with Kaapa, Warangula was among the first men to commence painting. Mike Warangula recalls that his father was part of the small group who joined Kaapa at his artists’ camp at “3 Mile” outstation near Papunya.⁴¹ Warangula would therefore have witnessed the creation of Kaapa’s revolutionary figurative boards, described in Chapter 4, either at 3 Mile or the Old Settlement Office.

Where Kaapa came to painting with a range of conceptual and drafting skills that suggest familiarity with paper and pencils, Warangula displayed little figurative finesse.⁴² Painting did not come automatically to him. His early boards displayed none of the flair that would characterise his later work (see Plate 64). Warangula had worked hard as a labourer, raising a large family on wages earned making roads, clearing airstrips and building fences.⁴³ Between paid jobs he had been a ‘dogger’, hunting dingoes in the Country west of Haasts Bluff, to be redeemed for a bounty of £1 per ‘scalp’.⁴⁴ Seen in light of his previous experience, Warangula’s transition from manual worker to artist of exquisite poise is astounding. Barrel-chested, Warangula’s nuggety physique was developed through years of arduous

38. Kean 2017a, pp. 139-144.

39. Warangula 2013, personal communication with the author, July, Yamunturrngu.

40. Mike Warangula Tjakamarra asserted that both Warangula and Kaapa “could fly”, recalling with regret that that they passed on this capacity to certain Warlpiri men, in preference to their own sons: Warangula 2014, personal communication with the author, Yamunturrngu.

41. Johnson 2010, p. 27.

42. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 20 & 80; Kean 2017b, p. 180.

43. Warangula was a labourer in the decades before award wages were introduced for Indigenous workers in the mid-1960s.

44. Kean 2017a, pp. 131-133.

physical labour with axe, crowbar and mattock.⁴⁵ It is ironic that his past physicality (for which he was poorly remunerated) resulted in paintings that were highly valued in the secondary art market.⁴⁶ Initially at least, Warangula was one of a group of unknown artists working on a small scale with found materials.

While Kaapa got his break in the Caltex Art Award, contemporaneous works by Warangula and his peers were sold privately to settlement workers, and those which remained unsold were gathered by Bardon in late 1971 as he scrambled to satisfy sudden demand for stock by Pat Hogan at the Stuart Arts Centre in Alice Springs.⁴⁷ Because details of the content and compilation of these first shipments remains unclear, the sequence in which works were painted, and the site of their production must be surmised from material and stylistic analysis.

My understanding of the evolution of Warangula's visual language – from awkwardly expressed icons to accomplished improvisations – was enhanced during detailed examination of fourteen early works, painted in 1971 and 1972, in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) collection.⁴⁸ This array comprises the best provenanced group of Warangula's early works. Warangula's first-known paintings were produced on small, salvaged hardboard with a variety of purloined house paints. The same materials can be identified in paintings of other artists, suggesting they were created communally, probably at Kaapa's *atelier* in the Old Settlement Office. The distinctive deep-red enamel used on Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula's *Water Dreaming (Kalipinyapa)*, 1971 (Plate 64), also appears on Walter Tjampitjinpa's *Water Story with Possum*, 1971 (MAGNT, WAL-46), Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri's *Untitled*, 1971 (MAGNT, WAL-2) and Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra's *Untitled*, 1971 (MAGNT, WAL-21).

Another material link between these early works is the mid-yellow background, evident in Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula's *Mala (Rufous Hare-wallaby Dreaming)*, 1971, Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri's *Untitled*, 1971 (MAGNT WAL-5), and Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra's *Ceremony Body Painting*, 1971 (MAGNT WAL-16). Intriguingly, this is the same background colour painted on Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's *Ceremonial scene (Mikantji)*, 1971 (MAGNT, WAL 148) and *The Ceremony at Waru*, 1971 (Plates 41 and 42). The occurrence of precisely the same materials — in a period of scarcity where salvaged constituents were garnered from settlement worksites — suggests the intriguing possibility that several artists (including Warangula) were present and painting, at the time that Kaapa produced the seven revolutionary

45. Kean 2017a, pp. 121-127. See also: South Australian Museum, AA 338/1/21/1. A journal kept on the *Anthropological Expedition to Central Australia – Haasts Bluff*, by Norman B. Tindale: Tindale 1956a, pp. 25-31.

46. *Water Dreaming at Kalipinyapa*, 1972, for example, was sold for AUD \$486,500 to an American collector in late June of 2000: Johnson 2010, pp. 169-171.

47. This material comprised consignments 1-4: Scholes 2017b, pp. 129 & 137-138.

48. Kean 2017b, pp. 187-190.



Fig. 34. *Rain approaching Papunya*, 2013, photograph by Helen Puckey

works taken to Alice Springs in August of 1971.⁴⁹ It is evident however that the diminutive scale of Warangula's boards, in combination with the sticky consistency of the available enamel paint, hampered his early efforts.

Warangula's conceptual breakthrough appears to have come in January or February of 1972, when painting his first large-scale work, *Rain, lightning and stars at night*, 1971 (Plate 65).⁵⁰ The board can be usefully compared with his tile-sized *Water Dreaming*, 1971 (see Plate 66), with which it shares key pictorial elements. Yet, it is evident that Warangula 'drawing' is much freer on the larger panel. The variation in dotting, which jarred on smaller works, suddenly results in visual interest; as the miscellany of textures, comprising sinuous lines, draped with skeins of dots, stretched and breathed. Each patch of dots was painted rapidly with the very tip of the brush, or obliquely, to create an irregular edge. Warangula's characteristic layering technique also made its first appearance in *Rain, lightning and stars at night*, as a veil of dots is suspended over a trackway (a sequence of red ovals) leading top to bottom at the extreme right of the work. *Rain, lightning and stars at night* is the earliest work in which the animating, expressive potential of the painted gesture became apparent in Warangula's work.

49. Johnson 2010, p. 33.

50. *Rain, Lightning and Stars at Night*, WAL-0039, was delivered to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory on 13 March 1972.

Moreover, *Rain, lightning and stars at night* is remarkable as the first Papunya board in which the dominant referent is ‘Country’ rather than ‘ceremony’. The painting’s sinuous lines evoke both forked lightning and flooding water cascading through swales, while the mosaic of the dotted patches resembles the configuration of plants emerging after rain from the dunes to the east of Kalipinya. It is timely to restate that desert paintings are frequently multivalent, and although Warangula called on the iconography of ritual practice, *Rain, lightning and stars at night* signalled a shift in emphasis from the replication of ‘ceremonial design’ to the manifestation of totemic forces within and acting upon Country. From this moment, the notion of Country, implicitly understood by the artists, was engendered in Warangula’s painting and in the work of those he influenced.

The analysis of early works by the Papunya painters is problematic, as many paintings resist classification into convenient Western taxonomies, such as landscape, map, history painting, portrait or icon. Warangula’s *Rain, lightning and stars at night* amply illustrates the anthropologist Alfred Gell’s observation that “images and maps flow one into the other in mutually related ways”.⁵¹ When examined semantically, *Rain, lightning and stars* is composed of signs and icons, just as a map is composed of symbols, to be interpreted with the assistance of a legend. Like a map, *Rain, lightning and stars* references the topography of the artist’s Country. Yet the painting also coheres as a single ‘image’, communicating how it ‘feels’ to be in the Country. At another level, *Rain, lightning and stars* is composed of a set of icons that constitute a narrative of the ancestral storm, perhaps making it more like a history painting. When compared with Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra’s *Kapi Tjukurrpa*, 1971–1972 (Plate 67), a painting that evokes the same Dreaming at the same site, the distance between Warangula’s evocation of *Country* and Phillipus’ depiction of *ceremony* can be appreciated.

Kapi Pulka (Big Rain)

From the beginning of 1972, men whose Country was located at all points of the compass shared their songs and stories in the hothouse-conditions of the Men’s Painting Room. The works created in this darkened space possess a special energy, derived from the excitement of experimentation, discovery and collaboration.

Images by the photojournalist Michael Jensen capture crowded scenes inside the room. Men sit cross-legged, painting. Completed boards lean against every surface. Photographs of artists and watercolour paintings are taped to the wall. The stylistic variety of paintings under production at a single moment is astonishing (see Plate 68).⁵² Benjamin, who reproduced the images in his

51. Gell 1985, cited in Sutton 1989a, p. 363.

52. See Michael Jensen, fifteen photographs from ‘men’s painting shed’ at Papunya, circa July 1972, URL: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/8073121?q&versionId=9303477>

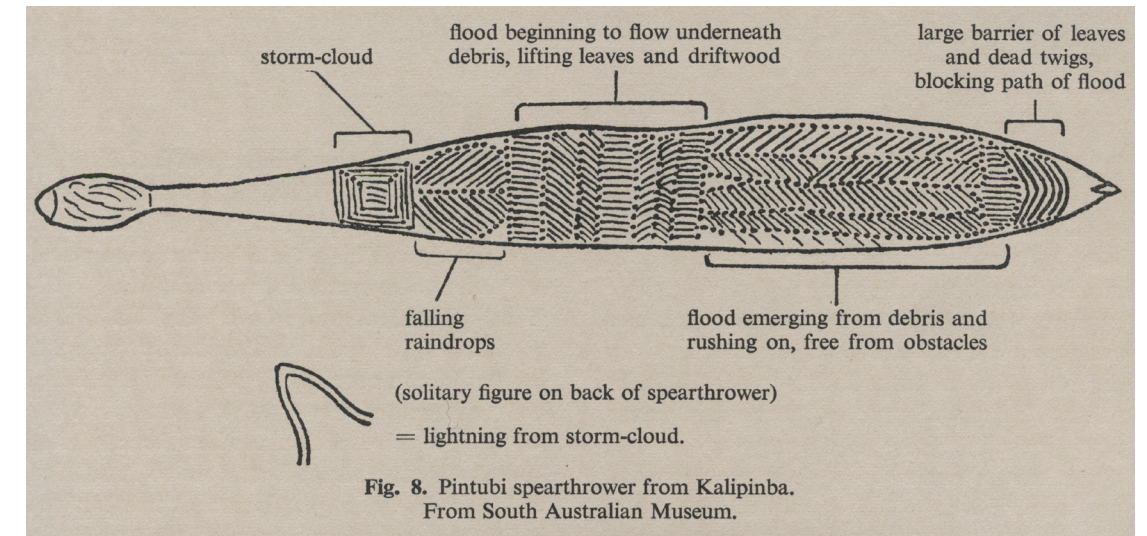


Fig. 8. Pintubi spearthrower from Kalipinba. From South Australian Museum.

Fig. 35. Schematic diagram of *Spearthrower*, Ngalpilala Purukulu, made before 1933, incised wood with kangaroo sinew, South Australian Museum, A21292, from T. G. H. Strehlow 1964, p. 27

introduction to the book *Icons of the Desert*, 2009, observed that Jensen’s visit coincided with “a period of very wet weather”⁵³. Benjamin continued, proposing the “preponderance of paintings with storms as their theme” could be linked to “the concurrent rains and storms”, and adding, in parentheses, “it could be argued that the paintings were working to *bring about* the wet”.⁵⁴ What is certain is that Warangula’s vision matured in the heart of the Men’s Painting Room while rain flooded the streets of Papunya.⁵⁵

Jensen’s photographs were taken in July of 1972, after Papunya received a record-breaking 282 millilitres of rain in March.⁵⁶ Soil moisture persisted throughout winter and a ‘boom’ season for plants and animals resulted.⁵⁷ The deluge bolstered Warangula’s sense of purpose, and the exuberant paintings he produced in 1972 evoked the conditions in his Country far to the west. It was during this period that Warangula painted *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa*, 1972 (Plate 69). The painting represents the creation of the storm — the flash of Winpa’s lightning captured by arcs, dots, dashes and sinuous lines — a tumult of massing clouds, pelting rain and the rush of floodwaters.⁵⁸

The inflected surface of *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* reprised the signs and parallel bars of the spearthrower made by Warangula’s father Ngalpilala Purukulu

53. Benjamin et al. 2009, p. 14.

54. Benjamin et al. 2009, p. 14.

55. Bardon’s 16mm film of 1972 shows the sodden earth outside the Men’s Painting Room: exhibition at *Tjukurtjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art*, 3 September 2011 to 12 February 2012, National Gallery of Victoria.

56. Bureau of Meteorology, Monthly Rainfall, Papunya, accessed 11 August 2015, URL: <http://www.bom.gov.au/>

57. See description of the ‘boom’ and ‘bust’ environmental cycles in arid Australia: Robin et al. 2009.

58. Winpa is a term associated with rainmaking rituals across the Western Desert: Tonkinson 1974, p. 85.

and sold to T. G. H. Strehlow at Hermannsburg in 1933 (Fig. 35).⁵⁹ Rather than only relying on the geometry of his father's spearthrower, Warangula also summoned the iconography of the ceremonial ground, combining elements from two contrasting pictorial regimes, as identified by T. G. H. Strehlow.⁶⁰ Warangula built a personal pictorial vocabulary, improvising with unprecedented freedom during the remaining months of 1972, producing a series of masterful evocations of the storm and its verdant aftermath.

Jensen's telling image shows Warangula sitting adjacent to Kaapa, Wartuma and Timmy Paynuku Tjapangati; the complex, imbricated florets of Possum's *Honey Ant Ceremony*, 1972, fill the foreground (Plate 68). Warangula is painting *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa*.⁶¹ Ever the songman, he has a pair of boomerangs laid at the foot of the board, ready to be clapped in accompaniment to verses from the *Water Dreaming*: stanzas intimately linked to his process.⁶² Intriguingly, the instruments correspond with the orientation of Winpa's boomerangs in Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra's *Kapi Tjukurrpa*, 1971 to 1972 (Plate 67).

Jensen's image also conveys the physical proximity of the artists, amplifying the sense that singing shared songlines drove artistic performance in the room. The image calls to mind Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's account of rainmakers *singing up* the elements of a storm, a responsibility that he shared with Warangula (of the Tjupurrula kinship subsection):

They are making rain, Tjampitjinpa, Tjangala.
They're singing Tjakamarra, Tjupurrula too.
After one week you'll see 'im cloud, [from] no cloud you'll see 'im cloud.
Every way lightning; then big wind from song.
Start 'im raining now, rain 'e'll come.⁶³

Kaapa's staccato statement expresses how men of the Tjampitjinpa, Tjangala and Tjakamarra, Tjupurrula patri-couples, with shared responsibilities for sites along the Storm Dreaming songline, forged bonds as they worked together to make rain.

Significantly, another of Jensen's images shows several artists holding their works-in-progress; Warangula supports his nearly-completed *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa*, on the left, while a large example of Kaapa's *Budgerigar* series, discussed in the previous chapter, fills the right of the photograph. The presence of both works in the same photograph indicates that they were created during the

same period, confirming that Warangula developed his distinctive approach to dotting coincident with Kaapa and Leura's compositional experiments. Yet, apart from the materials with which they were created, their paintings bare little formal relationship.

"the flash of light": Indigenous Aesthetics

While I have previously compared Warangula's paintings to his peers' painting in the western landscape tradition, it is to classical Indigenous aesthetics that I turn to better apprehend the purpose of Warangula's painterly investigation.⁶⁴ The play of colours that excites Western viewers of Warangula's work has its origins in Indigenous aesthetics (see Plate 70). The anthropologist Howard Morphy has written of the primacy of "brilliance", a quality referred to as *bir'yun* by the Yolngu (people) of north-east Arnhem Land.⁶⁵ *Bir'yun* is esteemed for its association with Ancestral power as well as its uplifting beauty. Manifestations, such as "refractions of light, the sun's rays, and to light sparkling in bubbling fresh water" are appreciated as *bir'yun*.⁶⁶ Significantly, the shimmering effect of finely-painted crosshatching is also considered to possess the same uplifting qualities:

As applied to paintings bir'yun is the flash of light, the sensation of light one gets and carries away in one's mind's eye... The bir'yun of a painting is the visual effect of the fine cross-hatched lines that cover the surface of a sacred painting: 'it's the sensation of light, the uplift of looking at this carefully carried out work. They [Yolngu] see in it a likeness to the wangarr' (Ancestral past).⁶⁷

The appreciation of scintillating optical qualities is not restricted to the Top End; refraction, iridescence and interference, arising from intense pattern, are admired across much of Aboriginal Australia.⁶⁸ In Central Australia, sparkling effects are associated with *ilpentye* (love magic):

Well, it was my friend Tony Kngwarray that told me that. Tony's Country is Arnka [Mount Leichhardt] and it features a 'lover boy' ringneck parrot that specialises in these things. The parrot's flashes of colour (bright green and yellow) attracted the ladies. Tony pointed out the 'flash' belt buckles and shiny trimmings of the [cowboy] hats of old men that were used to attract the eyes of women. He made a point of mentioning that one had to keep their buckles shiny if they wanted their love magic to work!⁶⁹

The affinity drawn between the buckles of stockmen and the iridescent feathers of the Australian Ringneck (*Barnardius zonarius*) is not incidental. Both naturally

59. Purchased from Ngarpilala by T. G. H. Strehlow at Hermannsburg in 1933, see: Strehlow 1964, p. 59.
60. Strehlow 1964, pp. 56-58.
61. See Michael Jensen, *Untitled* (Fig. 68). The remarkable trajectory of *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* from the men's painting room via Sotheby's to the John and Barbara Wilkerson Collection is described in: Johnson 2010, pp. 156-71, 180 & 200.
62. For a vivid account of the progress of Winpa the Lightning Boss and the development of the storm at Kalipinypa, see: Kimber 1988, p. 45.
63. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa interviewed by the author at Papunya, 1984.

64. Kean 2002, pp. 51-53; 2017a, pp. 146-154; Brody 1986, pp. 7-10.
65. Morphy 1989, p. 24; 1991, pp. 193-196.
66. Morphy 1989, p. 28.
67. Morphy 1989, p. 28.
68. Jones 2007, pp. 337-378; Ackerman & Stanton 1994, pp. 19-32; Jorgensen 2017, pp. 115-116; Sutton & Snow 2015, pp. 128-145.
69. Gibson 2018, email correspondence with the author.

occurring and manufactured products have related physical properties that enhance and refract light, especially when seen at certain angles, catching a viewer unawares (see Plate 71).

Such properties are of particular significance in men’s ceremony, where knowledge of their production is restricted to those who have endured rituals of revelation. Not only are designs associated with these rituals secret, but the language of their production can also be restricted to initiated men. In personal correspondence, Myers confirmed that “there is a special [Pintupi] word for these dots, distinguishing them from other parts of the markings. They have a special, cosmological meaning. They aren’t just something people decided to do. The word and the mark are tjukurtjanu [arising from the Dreaming]”.⁷⁰ As a consequence of the secrecy surrounding the ‘inside’ language of painting, scholars of desert art (including myself) have typically fallen back on the use of terms in English to parse Indigenous aesthetic concepts.

Luke Scholes, for instance, employed affective terms including “shimmer and gleam” to describe the optical dynamics produced by the contemporary Pintupi painter Warlimpirringa Tjapaltjarri. Like the myriad crystals clustered to create the shimmering rows of parallel watermarks at the edge of a great salt lake, Warlimpirringa’s concentric bands dazzle the eye, evoking ancestral potency.⁷¹ His precisely aligned dots also index the ‘flash’ of painted dots in the firelight on moving bodies at Tingarri ceremonies.⁷² Warlimpirringa’s paintings are now understood to exemplify desert minimalism: a reductive endpoint in the slow process by which the dot come to occupy the foreground, gradually replacing the iconicity for which Papunya Tula (and Balgo art) was previously celebrated.⁷³ I contend that the dance between the semantically meaningful icon and the affective dot has its modern roots with Warangula in the Men’s Painting Room in 1972. It was Warangula who grasped that the size, shape and distance between dots could be manipulated to stimulate the eye. Warangula also discovered that patches of dots could be enhanced if overlaid with smaller dots of contrasting tone or colour. When painting events at Kalipinypa for example, Warangula’s dots indexed particular meteorological phenomena and the resulting growth of ephemeral vegetation.⁷⁴ The anthropologist Eric Michaels once claimed that dots were “semantically empty”.⁷⁵ In contrast, I argue that Warangula’s marks were full of meaning, and that they are intended to transport us sensually and metaphysically into the heart of the storm at Kalipinypa. Warangula’s *Water*

70. Myers 2018, email correspondence with the author.
71. Scholes, in Myers & Scholes 2014, p. 136.
72. Myers 2018, Scholes, in Myers & Scholes 2014, p. 136.
73. For an extended discussion of the increasing abstraction in desert art, see: Carty 2012, pp. 217-272.
74. This assertion is based on the author’s experience of documenting numerous *Water Dreaming* paintings with the artist, who consistently referred to patches of dots as phenomena and the vegetation that resulted from the storm.
75. Michaels 1994, p. 155.

Dreaming series epitomises Munn’s assertion that “the bodily identification of a man with the ancestors takes place through sensory contact with ancestral *guruwari*”.⁷⁶

Where *rarrk* and the ceaseless concentricity of desert minimalism rely for their effect on precision, Warangula’s optical shifts arise from irregularity. Noting the affinity between some naturally-occurring phenomena and intentional irregularities, Sutton and Snow draw our attention to the iridescent nacre of pearl:

With iridescence, any visual assumption of continuity fails. Looking at a small part of the image is of little help in guessing what the next part of the image will look like. Simple regularities are absent, so extrapolation from one part to whole is difficult, to say the least. The eye wanders from surprise to surprise.⁷⁷

Just as light shifts unpredictably deep within an opal or the polished surface of a pearl shell, Warangula’s inflected field disrupts what Gombrich termed the “continuity assumption”.⁷⁸ Warangula found that if the expectation of iconographic legibility was unsettled with unpredictable dots and dashes, the eye would be stimulated to search deeper for the underlying structure.

The analogy between iridescence and the swathes of dotted patches that overlay Warangula’s painting is especially apt, for pearl shells are fundamental to rituals associated with ‘rain making’ in Central Australia and the Western Desert. Exchanged along extensive trade routes, the ultimate origin of this potent material was unknown to residents of the Western Desert, and unsurprisingly, lustrous pearl shells were imbued with increasing power (and danger) the further they were taken from their source on the Kimberley Coast.⁷⁹ The visual affinity between the iridescence of a pearl shell and the emergence of tiny rain clouds on the horizon, the prismatic light diffracted through a raindrop and overarching spectrum array of a rainbow, excite an assumption of equivalence across desert cultures. Rainmakers activate the affinity between these phenomena to conjure the elements of a storm:⁸⁰

Power is transformation, in that we only know it is real by its effects, when it becomes something else, such as movement or brightness... Rainbows and rain were to pearl shells as macro is to micro in just this sense, in the traditions of Central Australia. These unruly meteorological elements became literally manipulable, handleable by people.⁸¹

The association of pearl-like sparkling material with *Water Dreaming* icons is manifest in a compact and previously-overlooked object: Johnny Warangula

76. See Footnote 18: Munn 1973a, p. 30.
77. Sutton & Snow 2015, pp. 161.
78. Gombrich 1979, cited in Sutton & Snow 2015, p. 161.
79. Ackerman & Stanton 1994, pp. 14-17; Mountford 1976, pp. 273-278.
80. Mountford 1976, pp. 273-275.
81. Sutton & Snow 2015, p. 152.

Tjupurrula’s *Water Stone*, 1971 to 1972 (Plate 72). This water stone derives its potency from its ovate *Tywerrenge*-like shape, from the Water Dreaming icons that are applied (with acrylic) to its surface, and from the material it was hewn of. Fortuitously, the edge of the stone has been chipped to reveal the substrate, a glittering mica schist. The shifting prismatic qualities of the mineral are akin to pearl, suggesting ancestral presence. Understood within the context of desert ontology, the fusion of Water Dreaming icons with glistening stone is compelling. By selecting an already resonant material, Warangula intended to amplify the meaning, power and value of the object.⁸² Further, the Oval stone was selected (or especially created) to mirror similarly-incised *Tulku/Tywerrenge*, activated in ritual and represented in Warangula’s paintings of the period, for example *Egret Dreaming*, 1971 (see Plate 73).⁸³

Warangula discovered that paint could be used to generate a concatenation of elements analogous with the life-giving force of the storm. Just as light refracts unpredictably through the nacre of a pearl, Warangula produced an infinite array of shimmering effects to complement more literal signs for rain, hail, emergent vegetation or bush fruit (see Plate 74). Where Warangula’s uncle and senior custodian of the Kalipinypa, Walter Tjampitjinpa, transferred Water Dreaming icons from their ritual context directly onto board, Warangula became the ‘transformer’. His paintings are “unpredictable, busy, crowded, noisy not to be corralled”.⁸⁴ They enact the progress of the storm as separate elements: clouds, rain, hail, floodwaters and rainbows are ‘sung up’ by Winpa. They shine with a vitality that emanates from Warangula’s immersion in ritual, and his joyous identification with the profusion of growth that arises after drenching rain. During painting, Warangula is Winpa, the embodiment of the Lightning Ancestor (see Plate 75). His paintings are suffused with light, refracted by the elements of the original storm and reflected back into the atmosphere, as vibrant new growth emerged from the sodden earth after the storm and birds arrived to feast on the abundance of frogs and fruit.

Light and Paint

Warangula’s attentiveness to the optical qualities of atmospheric phenomena and vegetation was exceptional among the founding artists at Papunya.⁸⁵ Indeed, his preoccupation with the effect of light was so pervasive that his *Water Dreaming* paintings can be compared with the first master of Central Australian landscape painting: Albert Namatjira rendered the Land through the effects of light on rocks, water, vegetation and distant ranges. Similarly, Warangula produced

82. A similar instance was recorded when Balgo men “mixed ochres into acrylic paint and sang the songs of those ochres to invest the new medium with ancestral potency”: Carty 2012, p. 256.
83. The dates attributed to these objects are approximate only; I propose that both the paintings and the *Water Stone* were produced in 1972.
84. Sutton & Snow 2015, p. 161.
85. Kean 2017b, p. 187-191.

bright images of Country. When comparing works by both artists hanging on adjacent walls at Araluen Arts Centre, the artist Tom Nicholson observed, “Johnny Warangula is doing something related [to Namatjira] in his early paintings at Papunya: a speckling that bounces light off matter to evoke a landscape that is replete and alive”.⁸⁶ The phenomenologist Edward Casey may well have been describing Warangula when he wrote: “The primacy of perception is ultimately a primacy of the lived body—a body that... is a creature of habitual cultural and social processes”.⁸⁷ When called upon to describe his paintings, Warangula would routinely re-enact the ‘story’ of the Country, rather than describing the painting, story and man merging as one. Over and above the painterly energy of his attack, Warangula’s aim was to personify Country in a subjective, sensuous sense, not simply to render its appearance. Yet I contend that of all the founding Papunya artists Warangula’s paintings most vividly resembled the Land they signify.⁸⁸

It is telling that Warangula lived at Haasts Bluff during the period when Namatjira used the station as his base for painting expeditions from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s. In Chapter Three, I argued that it was probable that Warangula stood at Namatjira’s shoulder, a witness to the transformation of a sheet of white paper into an uncanny resemblance of the Land upon which the older man gazed. It is entirely possible therefore that Warangula’s appreciation of light was stimulated by watching Namatjira conjure the majestic profiles of distant mountains from paper and apparently inert blocks of pigment.

Rendering Brightness

Taking a specific example, I will show how the expression of whiteness/brightness as expressed in Namatjira’s work directly corresponds with Warangula’s *Rain Dreaming* paintings and that the sensibilities expressed by both Warangula and Namatjira can be linked to customary aesthetics. Alert to the aesthetic dimension of classical ritual, and writing before the inception of Papunya painting, T. G. H. Strehlow noted: “the best Central Australian artists may be gauged also from the skill with which they used four vivid colours available to them for their body decorations, ground paintings, and painted and down-covered cult objects”.⁸⁹ Continuing, Strehlow placed particular emphasis on the use of white pigment:

Occasionally white would be used on its own. Some of the most strikingly decorated actors in the Ilbalintja Bandicoot Cycle were men who wore patterns made in white down on upper bodies painted with pipeclay: these men were wearing what were called ‘the ghost gum’ pattern, ghost gums being among the prominent trees in the Ilbalintja landscape.⁹⁰

86. Letter to an imagined interlocutor in his artist’s book: Nicholson 2018, p. 27.
87. Casey 1996, p. 19.
88. I had the opportunity to spend time with Warangula at his outstation at Ilpili, and on an extended bush trip to Tjikarri, in 1978 to 1979: Kean 2001.
89. Strehlow 1964, p. 48.
90. Strehlow 1964, p. 48.

Often myopically focused on customary culture, Strehlow, needn't have looked beyond Namatjira's close-cropped 'portraits' of gums trees to see the relationship between the artist's parsimonious use of watercolour washes and the customary 'ghost gum' pattern of the performers at Ilbalintja.⁹¹ Namatjira was aware that whiteness was synonymous with pure light. A careful examination of *Ghost Gum*, circa 1945 to 1953 (Plate 76), for example, reveals how Namatjira worked the negative space around the powdery trunk to leave the sun-struck section paper-white.⁹²

On becoming an artist, Warangula strived to emulate the iridescent, prismatic objects associated with the creation of his Country.⁹³ In a process analogous to the construction of ceremonial ground paintings, in *Water Dreaming*, 1972 (see Plate 77) Warangula painted in layers, from an earthy ground towards scintillating whiteness. The freedom with which Warangula wielded his brush contrasts sharply with Namatjira's predetermined avoidance of areas where the light kissed the trunks of *Ghost Gums*, circa 1945-1953 (Plate 76) or the flare of sunlight was refracted through the creamy flowers of melaleuca *Flowering Shrubs*, circa 1939 (see Plate 78). While both artists exhibit a fascination with brightness, the means by which the effect was rendered was inverted: Namatjira was a master of transparent watercolour, where less is more and mistakes are irreversible. In contrast Warangula was unconstrained, overlaying skeins of closely toned opaque dots.

Interestingly, as Namatjira's facility grew in the early post-war period, his paintings were increasingly constructed with loosely-applied washes that were subsequently inscribed with a lexicon of fractal dots and dashes. While the marks delineated geomorphic features, they also interrupted the picture plane to evoke light refracted from a multitude of geometric facets. When inspected at close range, the surfaces of works such as Albert Namatjira's *Talipate, Western MacDonnell*, circa 1945 to 1953, break into abstract patterns that resemble the shimmering faceted surface of Johnny Warangula's *Egret Dreaming*, 1972 (Plate 73).⁹⁴ To paraphrase Nicholson: speckled light bounces off matter to evoke a landscape that is replete and equally alive in the work of both artists.⁹⁵

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91. French 2002, pp. 117-129.
 92. The Ghost Gum (*Corymbia aparrerinja*) has a pure white trunk and major branches, covered with a white powder.
 93. Sutton & Snow 2015, p. 128.
 94. Talipate is at the foot of Mount Palmer, 50 kilometres west of Haasts Bluff.
 95. Nicholson 2018, p. 27.

Conclusion

The dot is the smallest unit of the desert lexicon but rather than merely being 'adjunct' to more important iconography, or 'semantically empty', as has been claimed, this analysis of Warangula's paintings demonstrates that dots are charged with meaning and affect. The anthropologist John Carty wrote that the iterative "foregrounding" of the dot resulted in "abstraction" in which "the literal (but invisible) stories contextualise, the shimmering (and visible) presence of the figurative Dreaming on canvas".⁹⁶ The process of 'inversion' (wherein the dots embody the subject) observed by Carty at Balgo has its origins at the Men's Painting Room at Papunya where Warangula grasped the potential of the dot as a signifying gesture.

Warangula's artistic agency arose from his status as a rainmaker. Fortunately for the history of Australian art, the commencement of full-scale artistic production at Papunya in 1972 coincided with a period of consistent heavy rain, a powerful muse that added force to Warangula's inextinguishable creative urge. The variety and complexity of Warangula's paintings can in part be attributed to the inherently lyrical qualities of Water Dreaming iconography. However, instead of recapitulating customary icons, Warangula shattered the signs for lightning and running water to create a permeable space comprised of dots, sinuous segments and staccato bars which jostle and surge within a vibrant pictorial ecology.

Curator Judith Ryan has compared Warangula's paintings with those of Camille Pissarro and Paul Signac, whose pure dabs of colour animated the surface of the canvas.⁹⁷ Unaware of the optical theory that informed pointillism, Warangula plumbed the well of his repertoire as a songman to create his vision. Warangula's metaphysical prowess afforded him the agency to atomise elements of classical iconography, resulting in new forms of expression. As an embodiment of Winpa, Warangula summoned the *living light* associated with meteorological phenomena and emergent vegetation. Warangula's paintings can therefore be understood to 'make' light, via lightning, rather than merely replicating its effect on the material world as was the case with the French Impressionists.⁹⁸

Despite their divergent means, this chapter described how Warangula and Namatjira shared a fascination with light. Moreover, the light that refracts from their works can be understood to reflect a key attribute of Indigenous aesthetics. The incandescence of a pearl shell, traded from the Kimberley coast into Central Australia and the crystalline *rarrk* of bark painting from Yirrkala, share essential qualities with the unpredictable, gestural dotting of Warangula's *Water Dreaming* series of 1972. Dazzling the viewer, they conjure ancestral power.

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96. Carty 2012, p. 262.
 97. Ryan 2011a, p. 25.
 98. Gombrich 1968, pp. 29-54.

Where Kaapa and Leura refined their compositions according to spatial relations of the *ceremonial ground*, Warangula envisioned Country through the intuitive ‘performance’ of painting. He applied dots in combination with Ovals, arcs and dashes to initiate dynamic shifts in direction, transparency and hue, and thereby rendered the surface alive, as the dot became the vital element of his painterly inventory. The influence of Warangula’s technique can be sensed in many of the greatest works produced in the Men’s Painting Room, and the subjects of this thesis were foremost among those who seized the potential of his gesture. The next chapter will examine works created by Warangula’s Anmatyerr peers in the second half of 1972, to demonstrate how the poetic possibility of the irregularly dotted field was married to the geometric principles they generated, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Seven
To Reveal and Conceal

“The bodily identification of a man with the ancestors takes place through sensory contact with ancestral guruwari (designs and sacra)... men sometimes likened ancestral generative capacity to the fluff that is shaken onto the ground from the guruwari decorations of dancers...”¹

Nancy Munn, 1973

“It may be readily admitted that with all its excellences and in spite of its mass-appeal, “primitive verse”[or visual expression] needed to be freed from its bondage to music and dancing in point of form, and to religion and ceremonial occasions in point of themes and content, so that great poets could arise who could impress upon their creations their full individual genius without let or hindrance”.²

T. G. H. Strehlow, 1971

Introduction

The Men’s Painting Room was a cocooned workplace, protected from scrutiny by its vaulted corrugated ceiling; each man painted his own Country and consulted with others in the room as required.³ It was only as the works emerged into the public realm that the danger implicit in the painting project became apparent. Problems arose on two fronts. Firstly, a high proportion of the early boards depicted restricted sacred subjects, the viewing of which by uninitiated children and women was customarily punished with physical discipline or death.⁴ Secondly, the content of the paintings radiated along songlines through a constellation of related sites for which men in other communities shared custodial rights. Despite the impracticalities of communicating over distance, allied individuals expected to be consulted, and to share in any financial rewards accrued from the sale of such works, according to their proprietorial interest in the sites and songlines revealed. Tension arose as the project, nurtured in seclusion of the Men’s Painting Room, became public, and Papunya boards ventured unpredictably outward through time and space.⁵

1. Munn 1973a, p. 30.
2. Strehlow 1971, p. 696.
3. Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 27-34; Scholes 2017b, pp. 138-141.
4. Kimber 1995, pp. 125 & 129.
5. Centralian Advocate, 1974; Myers 2014a; 2017.

Almost half a century after their creation, these dual concerns continue to constrain the exhibition and reproduction of early Papunya paintings.⁶ However, issues raised by the continued circulation of early Papunya boards may be significantly different to the original anger expressed by joint custodians when Papunya paintings entered the public realm. Rather than examining the life of the Papunya boards in the contemporary setting, the focus of this thesis remains fixed on the motivation of the original artists and their response to the specific conditions in which they worked. My challenge is to peel back the assumptions of the present so as to interpret the past on its own terms. This chapter provides a close reading of specific works by the Anmatyerr artists, which were created at a critical juncture after the initial controversy resulting from the public revelation of restricted content. Chapter Seven will assess the extent to which censorship affected the development of Papunya painting.

The paintings examined in this chapter were produced in ‘the interregnum’, a poorly understood period of intense artistic activity commencing when Geoffrey Bardon left the Papunya community in August of 1972, and concluding on the appointment of Peter Fannin as art advisor for the newly incorporated Papunya Tula Artists company at the end of that year. The majority of boards produced during the period found their way into Consignment 19, a group of approximately 450 works, which Luke Scholes concludes “was made up of paintings that had accumulated over many months and that took many months to distribute”.⁷ The chaos surrounding the assembly and dispersal of Consignment 19 makes it impossible to determine the sequence in which the paintings were completed.⁸ Interpretation therefore demands fine-grained examination of the formal qualities of the artworks in relationship to other paintings from the same consignment. This chapter scrutinises a subset of artworks that I have designated ‘the white paintings’. The creation of this group is traced against external censorial events that, others have argued, altered the course of Papunya painting.

The Alice Springs-based historian Dick Kimber expressed concern about the public exposure of potentially restricted content on seeing Kaapa’s first boards on their initial exhibition in August of 1971.⁹ Alert to the potential for distress, conflict or even violence, Kimber observed how Aboriginal viewers received the display of Papunya paintings during the movement’s early development. A meticulous diarist, Kimber recorded discussions with Aboriginal men as

6. For example, Fred Myers and Dick Kimber were commissioned to consult with senior custodians to prepare a report on Papunya boards in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) collection. Of 17 boards by Kaapa, 13 were assessed to be ‘restricted’. Of 226 MAGNT boards by various Papunya artists, 63 were assessed as ‘restricted’: Kimber & Myers 2012, pp. VI & VII; Myers 2017.
7. Scholes 2018, email correspondence with the author.
8. Soon after his appointment, Fannin instituted a system in which the artist’s name, the year, month and number of the painting within that month was encrypted in a unique catalogue code allocated to each work. Fannin’s system has been maintained by Papunya Tula Artists to the present: Kean 2017a, pp. 119 & 157.
9. Kimber 1986, p. 44.

contention unfolded and was resolved. In 1995, Kimber compiled his observations of the concerns expressed by Aboriginal men from adjacent Aboriginal communities. Kimber’s notes provide the most comprehensive record of the first rumblings of an issue that persists to the present.¹⁰ Influenced by Kimber’s account, Vivien Johnson, Fred Myers and Judith Ryan have asserted that the responses of Aboriginal stakeholders resulted in the censure of the explicit representation of sacred objects.¹¹ Their assumptions will be evaluated and an alternative interpretation of the reason for formal developments proposed.

The proposal that contentious content was either omitted or obscured by a shroud of dots thrown over representations of more ‘dangerous’ objects, has become accepted as the basis on which major stylistic change during the interregnum occurred.¹² When art historian Sasha Grishin wrote *Australian Art: a history*, 2013, the purpose of the dotted field as shroud appeared settled: “The shimmering white dots become a symbolic as well as an effective visual formal device, which can also be employed to veil the levels of meaning”.¹³ While there is a compelling logic to this argument, and the interpretation corresponds (roughly) with reports of Indigenous men’s responses to the exhibition of Papunya paintings, I will demonstrate that the dates of specific events do not fit with actual artistic developments in the Men’s Painting Room.¹⁴ The following examination of works that foreground a dotted field, will be used to question whether the development of Papunya Tula painting was fundamentally shaped by the public response to exposure of dangerous imagery, or if it was driven by other, subtler impulses.

Scrutinising the theory that a veil of dots shrouded the secret content of Papunya painting, I will ask whether there is sufficient evidence to confirm that suppression and concealment determined the development of Papunya Tula painting. To open the enquiry to other possibilities, I will also address the question ‘How did the revelation of sacredness influence the development of Papunya painting?’ Where the elimination of certain objects and signs from Papunya paintings appears to provide an empirical basis upon which the first question can be addressed, determining a response to the second is more difficult. This question demands that indications of ‘sacredness’ be identified, a challenge for any writer looking from the outside into the heart of another culture. The task is made especially demanding in the Central Australian context, where the deeper levels of sacred law are expressed by means of encryption, learned through participation in physically exacting rituals in restricted ceremonial contexts. Notwithstanding hermeneutic impenetrability, I come to the task with relevant

10. Kimber 1995.
11. Johnson 1990, p. 13-14; 2000, pp. 190-191; 2010, pp. 127-130; Ryan 1989, pp. 27-280; Myers 2014a, p. 86
12. Anderson & Dussart 1988, p. 129-30; Crocker 1987, p. 21; Myers 2002b, p. 65; 2014; 2017, pp. 199-200.
13. Grishin 2013, p. 449.
14. For the most comprehensive account of Indigenous responses see: Kimber 1995.

experience, having worked in this contested cross-cultural space for a protracted period, and been privy to weighty material which can shed light on the translation of ritual experience into paint.

Omission Observed

Based on their own extended contact with the founding artists, in combination with sustained immersion in the archive, Johnson and Myers have both commented on disputation arising from the display of restricted content, and the consequential exclusion of dangerous detail from the ongoing corpus of Papunya painting.¹⁵ Anthropologists Anderson and Dussart have gone further, arguing that “symbols have been omitted altogether and some design elements have been deliberately obscured by [dotted] motifs such as smoke or clouds. These all represent attempts to reduce the overt meaning of paintings, thus protecting the artists from accusations by other Aborigines that they have revealed restricted information...”¹⁶ The emphasis on removal of sacred elements from painting is echoed by Kimber and Ryan who, in separate essays, use a succession of reductive terms including “cessation”, “removal”, “omission”, “hiding”, “disguising” and “masking” to describe the way in which they believe the circumscribed inviolability of sacred objects was protected.¹⁷ Ryan goes furthest in a melancholy assessment of the development:

Papunya Tula artists sought to camouflage overt references to ceremony and became reticent. They revealed less of the sacred heart of their culture. The openness of the Bardon era was at an end. Dotting and over-dotting, as an ideal means of concealing or painting over dangerous, secret designs, became a fashion at this stage. The art was made public, watered down for general exhibition, pointing to the uniqueness of the Bardon years — which like innocence cannot be rediscovered.¹⁸

Implicit is the assumption that the early, most comprehensive boards represented a natural state, compared to which, later manifestations were inferior, as they lacked ethnographic authenticity. Such claims reflect a belief that the significance of Papunya painting rests in its iconographic specificity, not in its painterly treatment. In contradistinction, I argue that dotted fields can also be interpreted as ‘additive’ elements wherein numinous phenomena associated with *Tywerrenge* (in the broader sense of the term) *remained* at the heart of Papunya painting.¹⁹

In the course of this investigation, I have come to understand that the roles of revelation and concealment are intimately intertwined with the formation of formal pictorial attributes; they are not merely a property that can be included

15. Johnson 2010, pp. 130; Myers 2002b, pp. 63-65; Myers 2014, p. 81.
16. Anderson & Dussart 1988, p. 30.
17. Kimber 1995, p. 126; Ryan 1991, pp. IX-X; 2011.
18. Ryan 1991, pp. X-XI.
19. I use the term *Tywerrenge* in its broadest sense to signify Country, Law and Dreaming.

or omitted. Myers eloquently teases out this dialectal dilemma, recommending a more nuanced approach that allows for the “willingness to show and the concern to control revelation”.²⁰ The proposition that the four artists of this study *either revealed* the secret content of the sites they painted, or *concealed* the restricted elements does not recognise the subtlety of the creative process in which they engaged. Before describing how the urge for revelation was grasped, I reprise key developments that bear on the question of *concealment*.

Reports from the Field

In August 1971, just days after gaining public recognition as joint winner of the Caltex Northern Territory Art Award, Kaapa was interviewed by Mary White, an advisor on Aboriginal projects to the Craft Council of Australia (who by chance was in the region). Seizing the moment, White found the artist at his base in the Old Settlement Office. She wrote of the meeting: “Karpa [sic], who is also a carver, explained to me that he is now telling the stories carved into tjuringas [*Tywerrenge*] in a different way using paint on boards”.²¹ Kaapa’s affirmation of the direct correlation between *Tywerrenge* and his paintings places the potential for contention on the record from the first days of the movement. Kaapa was not naïve, and understood that by evoking sacred elements from his ceremonial repertoire he was testing the boundaries of Indigenous Law. Sensing the Western fascination with *Tywerrenge*, Kaapa took a risk; for he was operating within an unstable regime, in which contesting ontologies were in flux. Kaapa’s transgression jibes with naïve notions of ethnographic purity, but he was a man of his times, who was anticipating that he and his family could take their newfound rights as citizens for granted. Nor was Kaapa the first of his people to trade in culture. Jason Gibson, for example, was struck by the extent to which Anmatyerr men shared their sacred knowledge with a string of travelling ethnographers who passed through Country.²²

As previously discussed, Kaapa’s daring depiction of *Tywerrenge* inspired his peers to paint comparable images of their own ceremonies. However, the experiments at Papunya did not go unchecked for long. Fortunately for the historic record, Kimber was present at a pivotal moment at the Yuendumu Sports Carnival in August of 1972 when a group of Pitjantjatjara men from Docker River were startled by a painting by Shorty Lungkata, hanging among an otherwise uncontroversial selection of ‘arts and crafts’. Recognising the image as a dangerous Kangaroo Dreaming for which they shared responsibility, the men erupted in “angry

20. Myers 2017, p. 201.
21. Report by Mary White, Craft Adviser on Aboriginal Projects for the Australia Council for the Arts, October 1971, Northern Territory, 9th August to 6th September 1971, p. 15. 93/344/1 Archive, design and craft, Mary White. Museum of Arts and Sciences, cited in Scholes 2017b, p. 134.
22. Gibson 2017a, pp. 70-84.

uproar”.²³ Kimber concluded that Lungkata’s painting was “perceived as a serious transgression, revealing to the uninitiated secret–sacred aspects of men’s law”. Although he did not record the offending attributes of the painting, we can assume, on the basis of contemporaneous works by the same artist, that it contained depictions of restricted objects and acts. According to Kimber, the outrage expressed by the Docker River men was heightened by their shared interest in the subject: their offence was compounded because they had not been consulted about the creation and display of a consequential subject for which they shared custodianship.²⁴

In his 1995 account *the Politics of the Secret*, Kimber chronicles other instances in which the display of ceremonial secrets on portable media was challenged, noting in particular exhibitions of Papunya paintings at Alice Springs in 1974 and Perth in 1977.²⁵ While the context of each incident differed, the requirement for secrecy was consistently articulated as the issue igniting offence.²⁶ In general, the protestors were senior men with a collective interest in the subjects depicted, and they sought to prescribe what could be revealed, particularly when paintings were displayed in settings where Aboriginal women and children could be exposed to danger. While Kimber’s account of the events remains undisputed, the date at which the first intervention occurred is telling, for it unfolded months *after* Warangula commenced using extensive, overlapping areas of dots in his depictions of the Water Dreaming. In the Chapter Six, I argued that Warangula’s fields of dots were not intended to shroud contentious content. Rather, they enhanced the powerful presence of phenomena associated with storms at Kalipinypa. Though the disapprobation of related custodians is often given as the reason for subsequent masking of sacred objects, it is clear that Warangula had perfected the technique *before* the first recorded dissent at Yuendumu. Further, the intervention of related custodians did not put an immediate end to the depiction of sacred objects by the founding Papunya painters.²⁷ I contend therefore that the development of extravagant layered dotting, and constraints on the explicit revelation of sacred objects, have been conflated to produce a cogent but misleading account of changes in the treatment and content of Papunya boards. Critically for the understanding of subjects of this thesis, the agency of Warangula and Anmatyerr artists has been subsumed in a culturally over-determined reading of events.

The disparity between cause and effect means that the dotted field was not necessarily adopted to *conceal* the explicit representation of restricted detail. If the causation, as assumed in the literature, is flawed, how and why was the shift from representation to dotted ‘abstraction’ achieved? Is it possible that the

23. Kimber 1995, p. 129.

24. Kimber 1995, pp. 128-129.

25. Kimber 1995, pp. 128-140.

26. Johnson 2010, p. 101-103; Kimber 1995, pp. 128-140; Myers 2014, p. 81; Myers 2017, p. 198.

27. Kimber 1995, p. 125.

dotted field was applied to heighten sacredness? If it was, the accepted history of the early development of early Papunya painting must be revised. Rather than assuming that the increase in dotting of Papunya Tula art was intended as means of *concealment*, I present a revised interpretation: that the dotted field was intended as a form of *revelation*, achieved through the innovative use of paint.

The White Paintings

For several years, I have been fascinated by the similarity in surface treatment of certain paintings by Warangula, Kaapa, Leura and Possum. Considered together, these paintings constitute a crucial group of works, referred to here as ‘the white paintings’ for reasons that will become apparent. I was perplexed that a group of works produced at the same time (during the interregnum) should have so much in common despite depicting the divergent themes of Fire, Rain, Bush Onion and Small Snakes.²⁸ I had tentatively interpreted the shimmering veils of white dots, hovering over the ‘iconographic bodies’ of the paintings, to be akin to the treatment of a goddess from the balustrade of the *Temple of Victory* in Athens, whereon a woman’s lucid beauty was rendered all the more alluring for the translucence of the chiton draped over her torso. On witnessing films of the type of ceremony from which Papunya paintings derive, a previously unrecognised phenomenon, perceptible via the medium of moving image, demanded attention. I therefore propose that the ‘veil’ is in no way supplementary, or merely alluring; rather, the field of dots is a manifestation of *Tywerrenge*, where the affective power residing within the site is brought to the surface in the form of numinous particles that contact our senses. Dismissive of any account of the dotted surface of the white paintings as a “*parergon*”, or supplementary to the raw meaning of the work, I interpret the inflected brushstrokes as direct and positive trace of the artists’ deepest intentions.²⁹

Seeing the Strehlow Films

In September 2014, I gained permission to view Pintupi, Kukatja and Anmatyerr rituals that had been filmed by T. G. H. Strehlow in 1955 and 1965 and were held in the Strehlow Resource Centre (SRC). Much of the material at the SRC relates to restricted men’s ritual, and because of its gravity, access to the inner realms of the collection is carefully guarded by the SRC Board on behalf of its custodians.³⁰ I was granted access on the strength of my relationship with relevant custodians and a familiarity with the protocols of ritual practice. The status of my project (PhD research at a respected institution) also carried weight. Most significantly, I committed to not reveal the specific details of the performances I was to witness,

28. Johnson 2008, p. 73; Johnson 2010, p. 48.

29. Derrida 1987, p. 55.

30. As a consequence of their restricted status, little has been written about Strehlow’s films. See Cohen 2001; 2004; Dunlop 1979; Gibson 2017a, pp. 340-341.

but rather to refer to the material in general terms and to the extent to which these rituals informed the works of the artists of my study. As a consequence of that trust, I cannot reproduce the images of ritual that substantively affected my understanding of the development of Papunya Tula painting.

The rituals, as recorded in Strehlow's film titles, include: *Revelation of the Possum at Erguljagata*, 1953; *Honey Ant Sire's Travel from Tatata to Papunya*, 1954; and *Honey Ant Rituals at Korbula and Arambea, comprising of 22 acts including 18 separate ground paintings, 16 of which pertained to the Inner Cycle at Korbula*, 1965.³¹ These ceremonies featured totemic ancestors painted by Kaapa, Leura and Possum, the protagonists of my thesis. The films are a unique record of ceremonial preparation and performance, and they convey the esoteric realm of men's ritual on colour film. Strehlow sponsored the ceremonies and supplied many of the materials, including a large bag of highly-prized down collected from Wedge-tailed Eagle chicks, the deployment of which is critical to my findings.³²

Preparations for ritual were customarily made in daylight hours. Only after the sun had travelled beyond the horizon, in the crepuscular light, did festooned 'actors' emerge from windbreaks, to dance towards the focal point of the ceremonial ground.³³ As a concession to the contingencies of ethnographic filmmaking, preparations commenced early in the day so that the performance could be concluded in daylight for Strehlow's camera. As a result, the light is bright and details visible. While ceremonial 'bosses' occasionally acknowledge Strehlow's presence, his proximity to the action does not appear to inhibit proceedings, nor do the performers play to the camera. As 'participant-observer', we must acknowledge that Strehlow fundamentally affected proceedings, yet the films are a uniquely reliable, if inaccessible source. So, for the purposes of this study, I have assumed that the general form of the rituals closely resembles those first experienced by the Papunya artists selected as novices, and later enacted as *merék-artwey* (owners) and *Kwertengerl* (caretakers/workers). Further, I assume that aesthetic qualities evident on film are comparable to those which informed

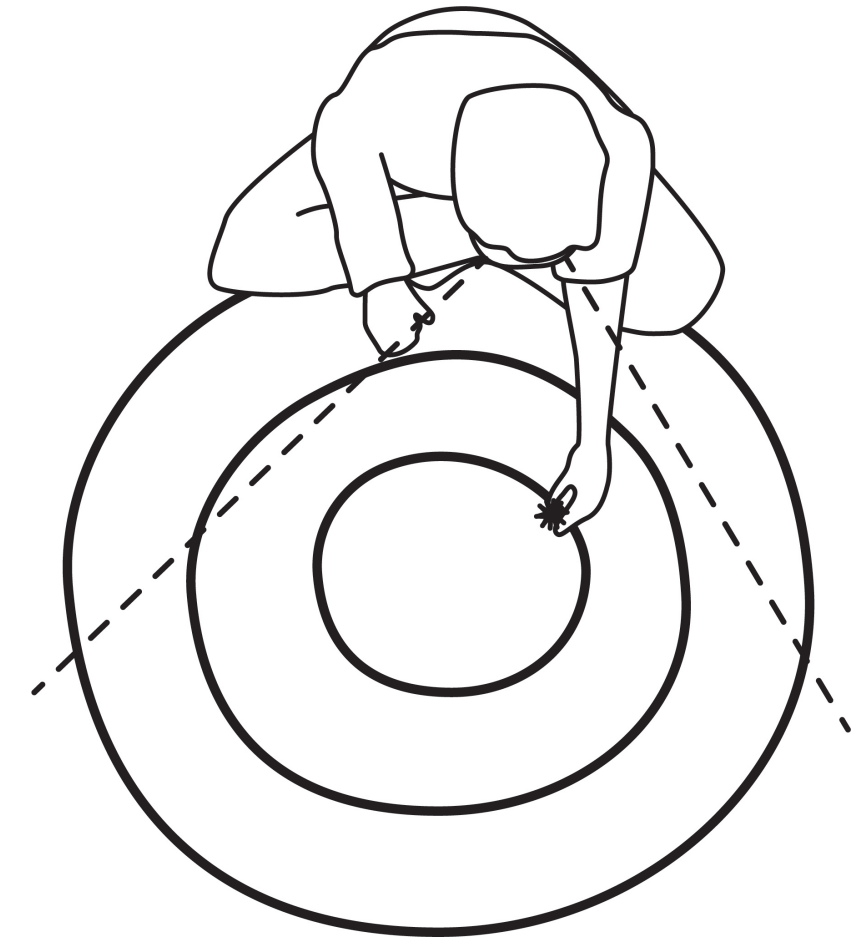


Fig. 36. Schematic diagram of the field of vision of the maker of a ground mosaic

the artists, and which they strived to emulate in later works, especially the 'white paintings' discussed in this chapter.

Importantly, the films feature the creation of numerous ground mosaics, 16 of which relate to the inner cycle of ceremonies at Akwerrperl (Korbula).³⁴ The ceremonies were enacted in narrative sequence over 16 days, to reveal successive episodes of the Yerrampe/Honey Ant Ancestors' actions at the site of a small rocky outcrop on Amburla Station to the near east of Leura and Possum's Country. The rituals at Akwerrperl are of particular interest, for they track each 'act' of what Strehlow refers to as a localised "Inner Cycle" of ceremonies, documented for the first and only occasion on Anmatyerr Land.³⁵ The enactment of an inner cycle comprises the display of an entire suite of ceremonies pertaining to a particular estate.³⁶ The subtle variations between progressive acts at Akwerrperl may, in part, explain how artists such as Leura and Warangula could extract an apparently infinite number of visual variants from a single site, that an outsider would otherwise assume is a single episode on a much longer 'travelling' songline. The investigation into the extent to which knowledge of these inner cycles drove the pictorial variety of early Papunya painting is beyond the scope of the current

31. The term 'ground paintings' does not convey the variety and complexity of ground-based forms. The so-called 'ground paintings' involve pigments and pigmented fluff applied to hardened earth. The ceremonial ground may be comprised of mounds, furrows, holes and objects buried into the earth. See: Kimber 1977. Complex structures are embedded into the earth at key points, while hair-string may be used to create elaborate structures above the ground. Sometimes also referred to as 'ground mosaics' this expanded definition goes part of the way in conveying the skill required in their construction. Terms such as assemblage or installation also convey the range and complexity of 'ground paintings' however, these descriptors are associated with contemporary art, and they carry their own assumptions. For this reason, I will retain the somewhat arcane and inadequate term 'ground painting' as it conveys the sense of graphic design, and 'ground mosaic' when referring to multi-media constructions created as for the enactment of ephemeral ritual.

32. Gibson 2017a, p. 137; Strehlow 1965, Field Diary (34), Strehlow Research Centre.

33. The creation of props and body adornment, which are customarily accompanied with singing related verses, are regarded as integral to the ceremony, rather than 'backstage preparations' as can be the case in Western traditions.

34. Akwerrperl is a site on the extensive network of Honey Ant songlines that link to Papunya.

35. Gibson 2017a, p. 149; Gibson 2017b, p. 256-258.

36. Gibson 2017a, p. 138.

research; rather, my interest was fixed on the preparations of the Akwerrperl ground paintings, for seeing their creation in real time, on film, revolutionised my understanding of the creative leap taken by Leura and his Anmatyerr peers.

Strehlow's films show the sequence of religious practice, from the assembly of ritually-charged equipment to the completion of the related ceremony. Importantly, they show 'workers' creating ground mosaics and the activation of clan objects in the course of post-initiatory ceremonies.³⁷ The intrinsic multi-modality of Anmatyerr men's ceremony contrasts with the limits of two-dimensional media (ethnographic photography and the 'School of Kaapa' paintings) through which information about these ceremonies had previously been communicated to the outside world. Witnessing the films therefore highlighted the challenge faced by the founding Papunya Tula artists, who set out to convey the spatial and temporal dynamism of ceremony, with paint, on a two-dimensional surface. The ambitious scale of the Anmatyerr rituals, together with the clarity of their design and elegantly distilled materiality, shed light on the formal qualities of clarity and symmetry of the Budgerigar and Honey Ant Dreamings discussed in Chapter Five. The films also provided vital evidence for the comparison of classical desert aesthetics and the evolving aesthetic intentions of the Anmatyerr artists. Strehlow's films are a critical source for the current research, which seeks to understand the creative process undertaken by founding Papunya Tula artists as they revived performance, transforming ritual into art.

To Veil or Reveal

With his tripod poised behind the ochred backs of Anmatyerr men, Strehlow's camera focused on the workers' hands as they leaned forward to apply pinches of *anteth* (in this case, down from Wedge-tailed chicks) to the ever-increasing circles of a great *irlpanter* (ground mosaic).³⁸ The particles of down adhered to the earth did not look like, or perform like, an acrylic dot applied to the edge of a concentric circle. While forming discernible rings, each application was subtly different in form and transparency. Moreover, the ground paintings created at Akwerrperl used a high proportion of white material in preference to red ochre, yellow ochre or black down. The surface shone with degrees of whiteness. A further insight came as a breath of wind passed over the nearly completed *irlpanter* and the circles of *anteth* responded to the breeze — the texture and transparency of the whiteness shifted with the direction of the wind — soft down undulated and its refractivity fluctuated as filaments alternately relaxed and realigned. I imagined the makers' visual field filled with this shifting phenomenon. When seen obliquely, from the workers' perspective, the *irlpanter* would appear semi-transparent, fractal and constantly shifting: a tissue through which fragments of the richly pigmented

37. *Kwertengerl* are often referred to as 'workers' as they do much of the preparation for ceremony for the *Merek-artwey* (owners).

38. Literally, *irlpa* (ear) and *anter* (fat) — a metaphor for 'knowledge'.

earth would be revealed like the serried rows of a ploughed paddock, as the breeze ebbed and gusted under the burning clarity of the desert sun. The planar iconicity normally associated with Papunya art would, from the makers' point of view, be subsumed into an overwhelmingly sensory experience; ocular saturation, desiccating heat, with rounds of verses narrating the actions of the Yerrampe Ancestors rising as the rings of the *irlpanter* of Akwerrperl inexorably grew.

An apposite comparison for the experience of witnessing the ground design, constructed with down, at close range, is the swirling phenomenon of a strong spring wind passing over a field of heading wheat. In the last year of his life, Vincent van Gogh (1853 to 1890) was moved to capture the fecund fields outside his asylum window at Saint Rémy and again when placed under the care of Dr. Paul Gatchet at Auvers. While the turbulent, shifting surfaces of his wheat field paintings have been associated with the turmoil of van Gogh's mental illness, it is apparent from the clarity of his gaze that the effect of wind and light provided the direct inspiration for some of his most affecting works.³⁹ The lucidity of van Gogh's vision enabled others to perceive in a still image, a phenomenon that had previously been experienced as transient. Just as walking through a field of long grass on a windy day may bring van Gogh to mind, I contend that the Anmatyerr artists, on seeing Warangula's phenomenological evocation of the Storm at Kalipinypa, experienced comparable realisations. Having experienced the exquisite ephemeral qualities of *irlpanter* as makers and performers, I contend that Anmatyerr artists grasped the potential of Warangula's inflected, rhythmic brushstrokes, cast over the entire surface, to recreate their own immersive experience of preparing for ceremony.

Bardon confirmed Warangula's influence, writing: "Warrangkula's [sic] dotting or stippling technique was used very much by many painters of the other tribal groups".⁴⁰ Critically, Warangula's invention enabled Kaapa, Leura and Possum to move beyond the representation of ceremonial kit, as described in Chapters Four and Five, to embrace a more animated style of painting. Where they had previously treated ceremony as a subject for translation into a graphic form, the new approach enabled the Anmatyerr artists to apprehend the work of painting (with synthetic polymer paints on board) as analogous to, but not the same as, preparing totemic designs for ceremony. I maintain therefore that the infinitely varied brushstrokes of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's *Ngalyipi* (*A Small Snake*), 1972, (Plate 79), Tim Leura's *Bushfire Dreaming at Napperby*, 1972 (Plate 80) and Clifford Possum's *Bush Fire I*, 1972 (Plate 81), refer to the material qualities of *anteth* as applied to the earth in designs that refer to actions of totemic ancestors.⁴¹ The

39. Heugten 2017, pp. 48-59.

40. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 25.

41. I acknowledge that there are multiple levels of meaning at which dots operate, as is the case with other signs and icons. For an account of "polysemous" applications of "symbols", see: Anderson & Dussart 1988, p. 90.

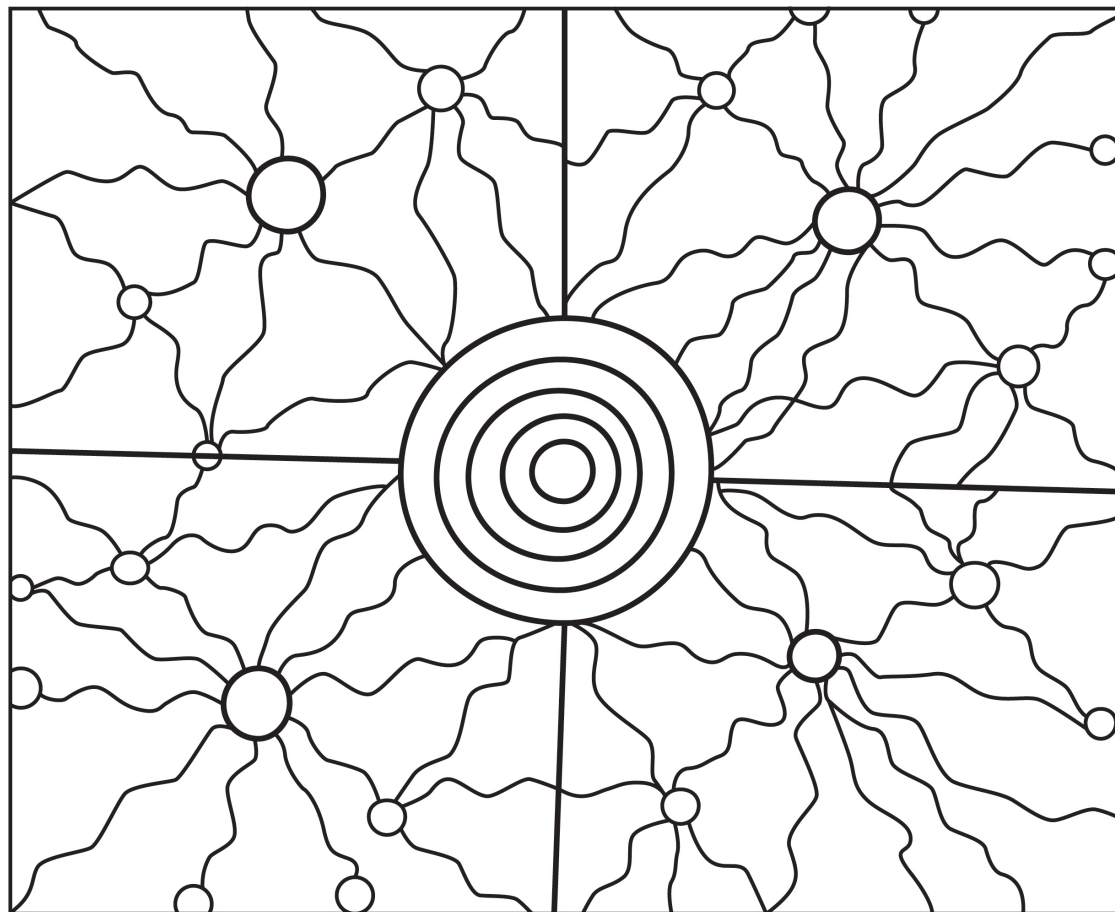


Fig. 37. Schematic diagram, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Untitled*, 1973

veils of dots, emblematic of the white paintings are, I contend, simulacra for the very essence of the ancestral beings depicted.

Tribal Phenomenology

Jennifer Biddle and Christine Watson have used phenomenology as a lens to understand the work of the women artists of Central Australia and the Tanami Desert.⁴² Both writers made the case that the artists they studied drew directly from the visceral and spiritual experience of ceremony when painting for the booming market for Aboriginal art in the 1990s. Biddle wrote:

These works, which are about country, which are about Ancestors and their activities as they made and marked the country, literally serve to bring the country into being again. Ancestral potency arises within these paintings and is actively produced by them. The Dreaming portrayed is evoked; a performance that enlivens literally: animating, impregnating, infusing.⁴³

Biddle and Watson both emphasised the tangible religious connections between designs rubbed into the arms, shoulders and breasts of performers, and the contemporary canvas paintings those same performers produced. Biddle stresses that the traces left by the dancers' feet are perceived as ancestral imprints in the ceremonial earth and are emulated as such when painted on canvas. Watson

42. Biddle 2007; Watson 2003.

43. Biddle 2007, p. 54.

draws an analogy between dancers piercing the earth with their digging sticks to engender a cycle of revitalisation, and painters "piercing" the canvas with their brushes to precisely the same effect. Contemporary painting, they argue, is a continuing manifestation of ancestral practice.⁴⁴ While acknowledging the looping power of Indigenous ontology, and that Biddle and Watson's claims may accurately describe the approach of certain female artists, the subjects of this thesis did not approach their artistic practice with the same degree of naïve ethnocentricity. They are not "absolutely working within the constraints of the Dreaming as Law" as Biddle claims of her informants.⁴⁵ Recall for example, the exposure that Kaapa, Leura and Possum had to modern art, when as young men they witnessed Namatjira and his sons painting tinted images of Country, tailored to European taste. Later, as craftsmen, they fashioned life-like polychrome carvings of reptiles, which they sold directly to customers. Just as significantly, the Anmatyerr painters were enthusiastic consumers of cowboy culture and comparable transcultural media. Rather than working within the strict parameters of Indigenous Law, the Anmatyerr painters were operating as modern artists, with transgressive bravado, in a slippery contact zone. While their knowledge of customary culture is undisputed, the Anmatyerr painters were modern men who exercised their agency at the intersection of Indigenous and intercultural spheres, first as stockmen, then as contemporary artists. Vitally, they maintained a critical posture in relation to their activity as independent artists in the cash economy.⁴⁶ Further, I contend that the changes to perspective (from elevation to planar) and focal length (from middle distance to immersive) were intentional choices made according to artistic judgment and a canny knowledge of the market for which they painted. Like van Gogh, they worked with an awareness of the art history of their region, developing a dizzying range of styles in quick succession.⁴⁷

Surface and Scaffold

Looking beneath the seductive waves of semi-transparent dots sweeping across the white paintings, icons indexing particular ancestors are firmly anchored below the shimmering surface (see Plate 82). Although the subtle, layered quality of the white paintings was new to Papunya painting, the effect was not without precedent in the inventory of classical form. In some instances, including the Yerrampe ceremonies filmed by Strehlow at Akwerrperl, the treatment of shields bore a striking similarity to the layered effect of the white paintings. The surfaces of the *kutitji* (shields) were smeared with red ochre before totemic designs, resembling those used for Leura's white paintings, were applied to the convex outer surface. Shields were then adorned with feather down, forming a delicate filamentous layer. Far from being protective weapons, these delicately

44. Biddle 2007; Watson, 2003.

45. Biddle 2007, p. 55.

46. See for example: Leura in Johnston 2007b, pp. 31-32; Possum in Johnson 2003, pp. 163-177.

47. Greer 2017.

embellished forms were integrated into the body of the ceremony; their shifting, feathered surfaces bent with the same gusts of wind that effected the larger surfaces of the ground mosaic. The iconography and the surface treatment of both ground and shield indexed the sacredness of the Yerrampe Ancestors.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the size of the *kutitji* approximated that of the boards selected and painted by the founding artists. It is not surprising therefore, that the icons applied to their Oval surfaces could be readily transposed onto a rectangular format. Leura appeared particularly intrigued by the relationship between the Oval form of classical objects and the rectangular format of the West. Throughout his career he would marshal shields (and similarly-scaled Oval vessels), which he painted with Honey Ant, Possum and *Mulga* Seed designs (see Plate 40). Influenced by the design elements of shields, Leura adapted those icons to create the scaffolding for his paintings. Though the signs may have been the same, Leura skilfully articulated elements of the design to achieve balance and dynamism within the ratio of a given rectangular format. As established in Chapter Five, the resolution of classical iconography within the grid was achieved through concerted experimentation, and Leura's *Honey Ant* series was the proving ground upon which bilateral symmetry was eventually enhanced by the introduction of diagonals that pushed into each corner. Thus, the compositional templates that underpinned his white paintings called on the geometric principles Leura realised at the culmination of his *Honey Ant* series. Although the surface of the new paintings was composed entirely of diaphanous shifting dots, the underlying structure was derived from the cast-iron order strived for, and achieved, in the first half of 1972.

Leura generally used a modified, radially-symmetrical template arranged around a large central roundel for his white paintings; it was an economic composition that achieved a balance of stability and dynamism reprised throughout his career. The template epitomised the symmetry for which Anmatyerr art was later acclaimed, and which I have demonstrated was an artefact of rigorous studio practice. Geographic orientation is as critical to understanding one's place in relation to the totemic landscape as it is in everyday life in desert culture.⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly, when viewed perpendicularly to the picture plane, Leura's radial motif resembled the face of a compass, with clear cardinal points, north-south-east-west. Moreover, radial expansion from a central point perfectly encapsulated the Indigenous understanding that the spread of a species across adjacent Country can be assured through performance of correct rituals at an increase centre, such as Papunya, the totemic home of Honey Ant Ancestors.⁴⁹ Rosalind Krauss, in her landmark essay on grids in modern art, described comparable compositions as "centrifugal", for they posited "theoretical continuity of art with the world"

48. Green 2014, pp. 20-23; Myers 1986, p. 54.

49. Such sites are referred to as 'increase centres' in anthropological parlance: Biddle 2007, p. 73.

beyond the image.⁵⁰ According to religious understandings discussed previously, the dots were "essentially of the same nature as the beings that have produced them".⁵¹ So, just as ritually-charged fluff is blown, from the ceremonial ground, across Country to enter trees, rocks, and waterholes; notionally at least, the dots/numina of the white paintings continued into the landscape beyond the artificially constrained edges of the two-dimensional substrate on which they were painted. In addition, and from an Indigenous perspective, Leura's cardinal lines can also be understood as "centripetal", for ancestors travelling from distant sites towards major sites (marked in Leura's paintings by the large centrally located roundels), where their powers would be revived.⁵² To summarise, Leura brought totemic design and the dotted field together to create a perfect marriage of function and aesthetic effect: a utopian balance between Indigenous ontology and the governing grid of Western order.

Of the Anmatyerr artists, Leura appears to have been the most entranced by the expressive possibilities presented by semi-transparent overdotting. In *Bushfire Spirit Dreaming at Napperby*, 1972 (Plate 80), he played with multiple levels that seem to mix and flow into each other; space expands and contracts, as we become immersed in a vibrating field of brushstrokes. If we were to strip the surface dots from *Bushfire Spirit Dreaming at Napperby*, a perfectly-executed, centrally-located cluster of concentric circles would be revealed. Sinuous lines lead our eyes from the centre of the board towards the perimeter, where they appear to be repelled, looping back gracefully, to pass over themselves on return to the centre. The visual elements of *Bushfire Spirit Dreaming at Napperby* pulse from centre to edge to centre, in a complex sign that seems to suggest eternal movement and renewal. The painting's bushfire theme also infers the cycle of destruction and regeneration, but rather than being directly taken from ground design or body painting, the design was graphically reconfigured for the rectangular substrate on which it is aligned. In this instance, initial rows of dots follow the sinuous lines, as if tracing the heat of the fire. The negative space between lines brims with irregular patches, each overpainted with between 15 and 25 dots. Within the patches, each of the dots is of diminishing transparency, as the viscosity of the paint is exhausted on the brush, an attribute that was consciously exploited by the artist. The overall effect is of immersion in the smoke of the bushfire. For all their sensual vitality, the white paintings were highly conceptualised, designed to maximize effect on a rectangular format. Although they relied on embodied expertise and spontaneous brushwork to generate their affective surface (the so-called 'veil' of white dots), they are conceptually distinct from the more loosely composed, 'haptic' works of the Warlpiri and Kutjanka women described by Biddle and Watson.⁵³

50. Krauss 1979, pp. 12-13.

51. Meggitt 1962, p. 65.

52. Meggitt 1962, p. 64.

53. The term *Kutjanka* (being as one) is used to describe the identity of people from diverse language groups who now live at Balgo: Watson 2003, p. 16.

Conclusion

The paintings examined in this chapter are notable for their characteristic scrim of white dots, extending edge-to-edge across the full extent of the picture plane. This schema has been cited as a strategy used to ‘veil’ or ‘mask’ contentious and restricted objects. I have argued that this reductive account of stylistic changes during the second half of 1972 does not account for the artists’ painterly intentions. In Chapter Six, I discussed Warangula’s invention of the dotted field as a means of describing meteorological phenomena. Decisively, Warangula produced a series of white(ish) paintings in the months preceding the Yuendumu Sports weekend of August 1972, when the first censure of Papunya boards was recorded. Further, Bardon, who left Papunya weeks before the exhibition of a Lungkarta’s controversial *Kangaroo Dreaming*, recalled that Warangula’s ‘dotting or stippling technique’ had already exerted a pervasive influence on many of the founding artists. It is clear from my account of events that the invention of the dotted field preceded the censure which has been elsewhere cited to explain the emergence of the phenomenon.

I proposed an alternative interpretation of the purpose of the dotted field. My argument is based on evidence observed watching Strehlow’s film of the inner cycle of the Yerrampe Ancestors, at Akwerrperl. The film shows Anmatyerr men as they reached forward to apply pinches of chopped eagle down to the ever-growing set of concentric circles of a large ground mosaic. Critically, the mosaic filled the makers’ entire field of vision. Likewise, Leura’s painted dots extend to the very edge of the boards on which they are painted, implying that the artist was focused on one centrifugal element of a larger whole. Further, the stuff of the ground mosaic, filamentous *anteth*, succumbs to the slightest breeze, causing sensuous waves to pass across its surface. Where ground mosaics and shield design are widely understood to have influenced the form of Papunya painting, the impact of the mosaic’s dynamic surface has not previously been considered.⁵⁴ Leura and Warangula held their brushes obliquely, giving their dots directionality. Moreover, they modulated the viscosity of their paint to enable more or less of the background hue to suffuse into the semi-transparent brushstrokes that emphasised the ephemeral qualities of their numinous subject. The fluent, irregular and semi-transparent dots characteristic of the white paintings can be therefore be understood as an avatar of *anteth*, representing specific totemic ancestors.⁵⁵ I maintain that the effect was intended to reflect the power of the ceremonial ground more expansively, not (as claimed in the literature) to veil *Tywerrenge* associated with those rituals.

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54. An assertion that has been made since the first extended description of Papunya painting: Kimber 1977. Note that mosaics made of pounded flowers do not shift in the wind as do those made of Eagle-hawk down.
55. In my experience as Art Advisor from 1977 to 1979, artists repeatedly interpreted dots as *anteth/wamulu* when describing their paintings.

I have argued that the cast of dots over the white paintings had an instrumental function, for it embodied the supremacy of the Dreaming rather than merely drawing attention to its presence. The perfectly executed concentric roundels in *Bushfire Spirit Dreaming at Napperby* signified the tremendous power of the Dreaming, and Leura’s veil of dots conveyed the pulsing force of fire. All lines emanate from the circle and return to its core, like a caldera that consumes its own lava. Leura embraced the sensual realm of the dotted field, while maintaining the integrity of the underlying iconographic structure that he and Kaapa developed in the first half of 1972. The stature of Leura’s white paintings derives from the conjunction of these dissimilar elements, a rigorously symmetrical totemic icon, perfectly aligned to a rectangular grid of the substrate that is then overlaid with a semi-transparent mantle of dots. Instead of Kimber’s assertion that dots are “rarely in themselves more than very generally significant”, I have shown that Leura’s inflected surface was integral to the creative concept, and that the shifting surface reinforced and heightened the affective correctness of the whole.⁵⁶ Both icon and surface were indices of the sanctity and the stuff of the subject, be it Fire, Honey Ant or Possum. Simultaneously, Leura’s adherence to the rectangular grid (of Western art) demands that his white paintings be understood as contemporary artworks intended for transcultural transmission.

In the final chapter, I will trace the artistic trajectory of Leura and Possum, to demonstrate how they tapped the lessons of the white paintings to construct a comprehensive, analytic system of spatial representation from the ultimate constituents of desert visuality.

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56. Kimber 1981, p. 8.

Chapter Eight

A New Pictorial Space

“The red earth is burning incessantly like fire:
This is where they have been living.
They are flaming forever like blazing fires:
This is where they have been living.
They are forever performing ceremonial quivering with their chests:
This is where they have been living”¹

A verse from a Northern Arrernte Honey Ant song.
Free translation by T. G. H. Strehlow, 1971

“This sort of attention, I feel — moving over the picture surface piece by piece, paradox by paradox — that Cubism was designed to elicit... It shows us a summer’s effort at sustained visual articulacy... It means to insist on painting’s consistency and density, on the look they have of sharing a language and pressing that language on to new and more difficult discriminations; and it imagines a viewer able and willing to tune into the least particulars of the articulation...”²

T. J. Clark, 1999

Introduction

This chapter will follow the wind over the feathered surface of the ceremonial ground, tracing the course of fecund fragments of down to lodge in the earth. The expansion of scope – from ceremony to Country – will be tracked via the artistic trajectories of Tim Leura and Clifford Possum, two brothers who pushed the boundaries of representation to encompass the subtle ecological relationships that animated the desert environment. I argue that Leura and Possum built on Johnny Warangula’s pictorial inventions, recasting the ultimate constituents of inherited iconography to construct a novel *pictorial* space. More specifically, Leura and Possum devised a method in which individual phenomena were indexed, embodied and reconstituted in precise spatial relationships to other environmental constituents. Rather than creating an illusionistic representation of elevated topographical features (like Albert Namatjira and his followers), Leura and Possum formulated a code in which the totemic landscape could be imaginatively traversed. The majority of the paintings discussed in this chapter refer to the expansive *mulga* woodlands characteristic of Anmatyerr Country, for it was in the representation of this environment that the syntax of their new idiom was refined.

1. Strehlow 1971, p. 690.
2. Clark 1999, p. 173.

Leura and Possum’s pictorial works were built upon the schematic armature discussed in the previous chapters, and therefore maintain a rigorously horizontal plane and reiterate the cardinal directions that underpin desert orientation. While the indexical potency of signs is maintained (roundel for site, and line or track for travel), more is asked of the viewer. Calling on William Rubin’s term “abstract illusionism”, I argue that Leura and Possum invited the viewer to resolve the tension between shallow pictorial space and the meaningful illusion of depth.³ Where a scrim of dots in Warangula’s paintings provided a scintillating, osmotic membrane laid over ritually-charged iconography, Leura and Possum’s abstract illusionism is more specific. They proposed a precisely conceived painted world and presumed a level of curiosity on the part of the viewer that responded to the intellectual engagement of their creation.⁴ Innovations in this critical phase of Papunya painting include the deployment of irregular patches of coloured dots to signify specific topographic, geological, vegetative or atmospheric properties and secondly, the overlaying of passages of paint to suggest depth. Thus, customary iconography and the novel coded zones are juxtaposed and layered to create a depiction of space (and time), comparable to but distinct from a map in the Western sense of that term. The viewer must search for, or be informed of the code, to enable these cryptic works to be navigated. Indeed, the tension between cryptography and exposition animated the work of Leura and Possum just as surely it did Pablo Picasso and George Braque from 1908 to 1912, when they collaborated to produce Analytic Cubism.⁵

References to Analytic Cubism in this chapter are made deliberately and with two distinct aims. Firstly, the dynamic collaboration between Picasso and Braque is deployed to provide a well-documented comparison to the creative partnership of Leura and Possum during the early 1970s. Secondly, I argue that the respective projects of Analytic Cubism and ‘Analytic Desert Art’ can be compared at a formal level. Just as Picasso and Braque articulated line, tone and form to unlock a complex pictorial realm where space and time were shown in flux, so too did Leura and Possum create revolutionary allusions of space/time – using sign, colour and interval – on the autonomous surfaces of their paintings. It will be argued that both idioms, created in Paris and Papunya, open previously hidden spatial realms.

3. See discussion of Rubin’s term: Clark 1999, pp. 176-179.
4. Possum expressed satisfaction when the code to his illusions was cracked: personal communication with the author, 1984.
5. Staller 2001; Rubin 1989.

The Possum Brothers

Vivien Johnson has written that collaboration was central to Leura and Possum's practices the early 1970s (see Plate 83).⁶ She was in no doubt that their interwoven creative practice issued from fraternal relatedness.⁷ Leura and Possum were both born at Alherramp and grew up on Napperby station, where they shared formative experiences. Although they had different fathers, their mothers were sisters from Warlukurlangu, so Leura and Possum were regarded as brothers. It was not just their biological relatedness that led to their partnership however, for the brothers also shared totemic relationships in the immediate environment in which they were conceived.⁸ Alherramp is associated with the *Rrpwamper* (Brush Tail Possum, *Trichosurus vulpecular*) and therefore Leura and Possum were both inextricably associated with the Rrpwamper Ancestors.⁹ The numerous depictions of Rrpwamper Ancestors painted by the Possum brothers attest to the intensity of their totemic affiliation, and at one level, can be understood as family portraits.¹⁰ Such totemic affinities are not simply metaphysical; they are as embodied in daily life as in artistic expression.¹¹ For instance, I recall Leura accounting for a painting of a particularly lascivious Possum ceremony of his youth: he convinced me that the painting reflected his own sexual experience as a 'Possum', codified in the formal iconography of his people.

It was during a period of ongoing collaboration in the early 1970s that the Possum brothers made a series of conceptual breakthroughs that, on reflection, are unlikely to have occurred by either artist working alone. The scope of their shared achievement is rare, even in the often-collaborative area of Indigenous painting, for the partnership of Leura and Possum came about at a critical juncture when the opportunities for the new artform were uncharted and therefore potentially infinite. Their collaboration was also exceptional for the depth of their intellectual enquiry, and the sophistication of the formal methodologies they instituted. Together, Possum and Leura created a radical new way of world making that called on their encyclopaedic knowledge of Anmatyerr law, and a cosmopolitan understanding of pictorial space expressed through virtuosic technique. The consequence of their artistic dialogue is exceptional and still being felt. Accordingly, I have reached beyond the discourse on desert art to find a relevant precedent that resulted in the formation of a sophisticated pictorial language developed collaboratively by two individuals over such a brief period.

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6. Johnson 1994, p. 47; Johnson 2003, pp. 70 & 88; Sayers, Engledow & Caruana 2008, p. 16.
 7. Johnson 2008, pp. 33 & 44.
 8. Johnson 2008, pp. 33 & 44; Gibson 2019, p. 21; Kean 2011b, p. 44; Kaapa and Bill Stockman also grew up in the same camp with Leura and Possum.
 9. Strehlow 1970, pp. 92-105.
 10. This point was explicitly illustrated by Clifford Possum in *Possum Dreaming*, 1996 (private collection), which shows the artist's realistically rendered hand with a brush, painting the track of his Possum Ancestor to touch the central circle. By painting himself painting a Possum Dreaming the artist unequivocally proclaims his identity as 'Possum'.
 11. See observation of *Wuta Wuta* (or *Uta Uta*) Tjangala: Myers 2002b, pp. 43-47.

Paris and Papunya

The partnership of Pablo Picasso and George Braque, between 1908 and 1912, is the most influential and exhaustively analysed collaboration in modern art.¹² The critic T. J. Clark commended their formulation of Analytic Cubism as "the idiom of visual art in the twentieth century", arguing that Picasso and Braque's way of "organizing a picture was borrowed, adapted, or fought against by almost all subsequent art, and very often taken as the still point of modernism — the set of works in which modernity found itself a style".¹³ Although the construction of Analytic Cubism is a singular event, Clark's identification of the idiom as a 'still point' has relevance to the Australian context where the recognition of Papunya Tula painting is regarded as the juncture at which Australian art history began to turn attention from the 'white' artists of the eastern seaboard to encompass cultural heterogeneity.¹⁴ If the most commonly reproduced images in recent meta-histories of Australian art can be regarded as evidence, Leura and Possum's paintings are central to this still point.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the revolutionary impact of their innovations, it is notable that both pairs of artists called upon their particular visual heritage as the basis from which to create a new language. Leura and Possum advanced a lexicon gained through participation in exacting ceremonies, whose iconographic elements boasted an antiquity greater than 10,000 years.¹⁶ Picasso's vision was informed by the popular culture of his native Málaga in Andalusia,¹⁷ while Braque shared a "profound kinship" with Paul Cézanne, who was in turn embedded in visual and scientific discourse that reached back via the Renaissance to ancient Rome and Greece.¹⁸

Initially I look to the literature on Analytic Cubism as a means of interrogating the degree to which collaborative endeavour can contribute to the invention of new forms of "world-making".¹⁹ Working on opposite sides of the globe – Picasso and Braque in Paris, Leura and Possum in Papunya – and separated by six decades, both pairs of artists engineered new ways of constructing their world. Both devised spatial strategies that were more complex and ambitious than their predecessors. Yet, despite their status as major figures in the emergence of desert art, the scope and nature of Leura and Possum's collaboration is poorly understood. This chapter therefore seeks to identify how the brothers

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12. Rubin 1989, p. 41. For a representative sample of scholars interested in the area, see: Rubin 1992, symposium papers.
 13. Clark 1999, p. 175.
 14. See for instance: Kerr 2001, pp. 31-33 reproduced in McLean 2011, pp. 164-166; Smith, T. 1991, pp. 495-517; Farrago 2013, pp. 1-5; Sayers 2001, pp. 201-204; McLean 2011, pp. 333-340.
 15. In 2001, Andrew Sayers wrote the first international art history that included Indigenous art as a continuous presence in Australia from 'the Dreaming' to the present. Significantly, he chose works by Possum and Leura to open his discussion on Contemporary Aboriginal Art: Sayers 2001, pp. 201-204.
 16. Morwood 2002, p. 96.
 17. Staller 2002.
 18. Rubin 1989, p. 25.
 19. Clark 1999, p. 180.

worked together to construct a new kind of pictorial space. Before embarking on that analysis however, I cite Braque, who, on the basis of the intensity of his collaboration with Picasso, signposted the limits of such investigation:

During [the Cubist] years, Picasso and I said things to one another that will never be said again... that no one will ever be able to understand... things that would be incomprehensible, but that gave us great joy... All that will end with us.²⁰

I acknowledge that my task is especially challenging, as unlike Picasso or Braque, who were active correspondents, Leura and Possum did not leave a written account of their collaboration. Moreover, those who have written of their collaboration did not speak Anmatyerr, the artists' first language.²¹ Accordingly, Leura and Possum talked to their European interlocutors in Aboriginal English, a creole that was their fifth language, and one in which the ambition of their artistic intent could not be fully conveyed.²² Although I was fortunate to have known both artists, and to have visited their desert studios on numerous occasions, I was not privy to the intimate details of their creative interaction.²³ Rather, as Papunya Tula Artists art advisor, I was employed to commission their work and, once it was finished, document the associated 'story' with an ethnographic focus on the identification of signs, icons and locales. The context was not right; neither did I have the authority, as a young man, to embark on a detailed interrogation of their formal artistic goals. I have therefore turned to William Rubin's analysis of the chronology of Picasso and Braque's collaboration as a model for my own assessment of the creative interaction of Leura and Possum. Despite the depth of his scholarship, Rubin was acutely aware of the limits of the archive, arguing that an understanding of the "complex, intimate exchanges and transpositions between the two artists" must in part "be intuited from the permutations of Picasso's and Braque's particular works, [because] it is hard to imagine the terms of their dialogue will ever be known".²⁴ This chapter will therefore also balance what is known of Leura and Possum's collaborative practice with a formal assessment of several paintings, to reconstruct how they realised their exceptional grasp of pictorial space.

My assertion of a reasonable correlation between the collaborative working practices of the Possum brothers (1972 to 1976) and Picasso and Braque (1908 to 1912) extends beyond the comparability of their creative dialogue, to argue that their artistic projects also bore much in common. Both pairs of artists built a new visual language, and engaged various "morphological, configurational and iconographic possibilities" to describe the spatial, personal and poetic

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20. Georges Braque cited Rubin 1989, p. 41.
21. Johnson 2003, pp. 150; Sayers, Engledow & Caruana 2008, pp. 15-16; Kean 2011b, pp. 53-54.
22. Both artists were fluent in Anmatyerr, Arrernte, Warlpiri and Luritja.
23. They generally worked in a cleared patch of earth, and depending on the season, they may have built a windbreak or erected a shade if they were working on large canvases.
24. Rubin 1989, p. 41.

dimensions of their worlds.²⁵ Likewise, they collaborated to develop a cerebral, multivalent system of representation. For instance, Picasso's *The Architects Table*, 1912 (Plate 84) proposes the sensory world of a Parisian café, complete with brands, calling cards and braided tassels.²⁶ The privilege of a seat at Picasso's table is not available to all-comers, however. Viewers may, figuratively speaking, squeeze past the bustle of graded planes and solid forms, careful not to overturn the table on which the tokens of bohemia are precariously balanced: but they do not share the intoxicating, aromatic delights known to the artist. That pleasure belonged to an elite few who sat at "a round wooden table" on which rested "a glass with strainer and sugar and bottle written Pernod Fils with in the background posters mazagran café Armagnac [coffee served in a glass in the style of the Algerian town Mazagran]".²⁷ 'Insiders', including Braque, Gertrude Stein and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, would chuckle with delight at Picasso's cryptic references to taste and fashion, whereas 'outsiders' (including the latecomers of the 21st century) must remain at a perplexed distance, impressed by the sophistication of the conceit, but unable to grasp the precise rules of the game. A similar inside/outside game characterises desert art, wherein uninitiated outsiders may deduce the broad meaning of signs and spaces but only initiated insiders can interpret their deeper significance. Fred Myers argued that "a particular person's perception of his or her places" produces "a perspective [that] transforms landscape from an undifferentiated visual scene to a socially organised 'patchwork'"²⁸. Continuing, he writes of the work of Pintupi artists: "the experience of the landscape is organized by the social relations and activities through which people engage with it".²⁹ Those who do not know an artist's Country and its associated history and rituals, are therefore denied precious 'inside' knowledge encrypted in the syntax of materials and signs. All is not lost however, for just as the awareness of the conceit of Cubism does not deny the prospect of a meaningful (and pleasurable) interpretation, neither does the presence of encrypted meaning eliminate the possibility of a nuanced reading of paintings by desert artists. On the contrary, our awareness that there exists a deeper, largely inaccessible level of meaning adds mystique. As uninitiated but willing viewers, we are seduced by the game of cryptology as we attempt to decode painted signs on the surface of a canvas.³⁰

At a more formal level, both pairs of artists realised their aims through a radical fragmentation of objects and symbols, and their reconfiguration within the implied grid of a pictorial space.³¹ Georges Braque's *Woman Reading*, 1911 (Plate 85), for example, approaches abstraction by dissolving the distinction between figure and

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25. Rubin 1989, p. 20.
26. Clark 1999, p. 180.
27. A letter from Picasso to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler dated 25 August 1918, cited in Clark 1999, p. 183. See also Braum & Rabinow 2014, p. 143.
28. Myers 2016, p. 58.
29. Myers 2016, p. 58.
30. Staller 2001, pp. 213-235.
31. Rubin 1989, p. 26-27.

ground. Comprised of multiple shaded facets, the painting’s vertical components responded to the edge of the rectangular canvas more decisively than they do the actual form of the sitter, her presence voided except for the suggestion of a pair of knees aligned to the acute angles of a generously upholstered chair. Similarly, Leura’s *Bush fire over kangaroo camp*, 1974 (Plate 86) presents a totalised world in which the background and foreground are united by firelight, while small arrow-like tracks of the Kangaroo Ancestors animate the picture plane like the black lines that define Braque’s facets. T. J. Clark’s reference to the “ambition for obscurity” that lies at the heart of Analytic Cubism is also relevant to Leura’s paintings.³² Braque for instance atomised the centre of *Woman Reading* exactly where, in a traditional portrait, we would anticipate the weight of a subject. In place of a corporeal representation, Braque infused abstract forms with intense light. Seventy years later, Leura devised a comparable construction, obscuring the largest concentric circle, at the nucleus of *Bush fire over kangaroo camp* with backlit floating smoke. Rubin’s observation that the “inner light” of Analytic Cubism “is ultimately a metaphor for human consciousness” has equal relevance to paintings by both Braque and Leura, especially so in those works where we are denied a conventional focal point.³³ Rather, our eyes search for meaning, fixing on any unattached detail that may help navigate and understand the whole. Both works epitomise Clark’s assessment of Picasso’s *The Architects Table*:

Painting has taken hold of the world again. It has opened toward a new totality, one grasped and articulated in every square inch of the oval [or rectangle]. The grasp is there in the paint.³⁴

Both Picasso and Braque in Paris, and Leura and Possum in Papunya, created a robust yet mysterious approach to world making that not only encompassed the particular physical characteristics of their respective environments, but also shed light on their ontological dominions. In turn, they recast the cosmopolitan cafés of pre-WWI Paris, and the rich red earth of *mulga* Country, as exquisitely lit, socially-organised cryptograms. Appropriating a phrase from Rubin, I argue that Leura and Possum’s reconstruction of desert art, like Analytic Cubism “is a mysterious mental creation deeply tempered by lyricism and poetry”.³⁵

Layering the Landscape

The layered spaces discussed in this chapter arise from Leura and Possum’s reworking of two key constituents of ceremonial production: firstly, icons that signify totemic ancestors and their deeds, and secondly, the field of dots that afforded gravitas to those designs. Warangula had shown that pictorial space

could be animated with the dots that evoked meteorological phenomena and replicated the patterns of emergent vegetation. Leura and Possum went further, arranging Warangula’s free-flying phenomena into coded layers. Their innovations were achieved by populating an imagined three-dimensional pictorial space within which the actions of travelling ancestors were expressed in both vertical (up/down) and lateral (across and around) dimensions. Spatial articulation in the new, ‘illusionistic’ paintings was achieved through the distribution of dotted patches (commensurate with the graded facets of high Analytic Cubism) whose colour and degree of transparency were calibrated to the phenomena they sought to represent. Where in customary practice, dots played a subsidiary role (emphasising the shape and meaning of signs and icons, or as infill between those elements), the dots in Leura and Possum’s illusionistic paintings are semantically precise.

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of particular paintings, a further disclaimer is required: as previously discussed, the sequence of paintings produced at Papunya in 1972 is difficult to determine. The paintings were produced in a period of rapid development, before Peter Fannin instated a formal numbering system in 1973. The difficulty of ordering works is compounded by Leura and Possum’s choice to paint in more than one idiom at once. Although I have set out developments in a linear order for the sake of clarity, there is some degree of overlap of the paintings analysed in this chapter with those described in Chapters Five and Seven.³⁶

Though the date of production for many works can be debated, it is certain that Tim Leura’s *Butterfly Dreaming* (Plate 87) was painted in the second week of May in 1972.³⁷ Leura and his classificatory brother Keith Namatjira had been selected as artists-in-residence at the *Dinkum Fair*, presented at the David Jones Sydney emporium. In addition to on-site painting demonstrations (at which *Butterfly Dreaming* was produced) Papunya boards were exhibited, adjacent to watercolour landscapes. These works from Central Australia were shown with an assortment of crafted items intended to highlight a “wide range of activities and displays depicting various national achievements”.³⁸ The event is notable, not only as the first interstate presentation of Papunya painting, but for the way in which the movement was summarily conscripted into a larger nationalist agenda, a function that Papunya Tula art has played consistently through the decades.³⁹ Though the boards may have been represented as ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnographic’ within a kitsch

32. Clark 1999, p. 174.

33. William Rubin cited in Clark 1999, p. 178.

34. Clark 1999, p. 219.

35. Rubin 1989, p. 43.

36. Rather than assessing works from each idiom, I have identified particular works that lay on the critical path towards the consolidation of a Papunya Tula style in 1973. Possum also pursued the graphically precise ‘imbricated’ style, while Leura produced many works on a plain background that employed narrative iconography.

37. Bardon 1991, p. 119.

38. National Archives of Australia, F133, 1977/175 PART 1, cited in Scholes 2017b, p. 146.

39. For instance, Michael Nelson Tjakamarra’s design was produced as a mosaic in the forecourt of the new Parliament House in Canberra in 1988; *Genesis and Genius* was presented as the Major Australian exhibition for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.



Fig. 38. *Mulga Country*, 2019, photograph by Stephen Williamson

setting, Warren Smith (Chairman of the recently-formed Papunya Tula Painters Co-operative) proclaimed their contemporary status, explaining to the display's organisers that "It is a genuine gallery art comparable with that being created by the modern European artists..."⁴⁰ Smith's assertion had particular weight, for as he wrote, a crop of Sydney abstractionists were striving to assert the 'flatness' of the picture plane implicit in most Papunya painting. Leura's *Butterfly Dreaming*, for instance, rhymes with contemporaneous work by David Aspden, whose minimal colourfield canvases had been exhibited at the Australian pavilion of the *XI bienal de Sao Paulo*, Brazil, the previous year. Remarkably, Leura and Aspden employed consonant interlocking patches that, when hung in the gallery, achieved flatness by similar means. While Leura had cosmopolitan interests, it must be restated that neither he, nor any of his peers would have visited a 'contemporary' art gallery before May 1972.⁴¹ Accordingly, Leura's modernity must be ascribed to other factors, including his exposure to popular media, the availability of modern self-levelling paints and, I suggest, his youthful familiarity with military camouflage.⁴² Most significantly, the inherently planar aspect of desert visuality, where tracks

40. Smith's principal role was as the government Superintendent at Papunya: Scholes 2017b, p. 146.

41. For a useful discussion of the value and pitfalls of comparing contemporary Aboriginal art to apparent cognates in the Western canon, see: Skerritt 2014, pp. 11-17.

42. Leura worked in Northern Australia at the conclusion of WWII, where he would have had extensive exposure to camouflage patterns: personal communications with the author, Papunya, 1978 to 1979. Leura's service was confirmed in email exchange with Dick Kimber, 28 September 2019.

and traces on the flat earth are privileged over the representation of elevation, must also be credited for the 'modern' look of much Central Australian art.⁴³

Painting *Mulga Country*

The *Butterfly Dreaming* painted in Sydney by Tim Leura can be understood as a stepping stone from the *Honey Ant* series (discussed in Chapter Five), whose compositions were arranged around a large centrally-located Oval. *Butterfly Dreaming* is built around a comparable 'meta' Oval, on this occasion, embedded within an interlocking 'camouflage pattern' overlaid with a scrim of fine black dots (see Plate 87). Where the outer edge of the early *Honey Ant Dreaming* series had been clearly demarcated, the dots around the perimeter of the Oval in *Butterfly Dreaming* merged with the 'background' to suggest that this ceremonial area was embraced within a much larger landscape. I contend that the change in demarcation signifies a critical shift in register whereby Leura aspired to represent Country in its fullest sense.

Leura's Country is in the heart of expansive *mulga* woodlands and many of the works he produced in 1972 refer to aspects of that habitat. These works frequently emphasise subtle ecological relationships, often involving invertebrates that are as much a part of the Dreaming as the dominant vertebrate Ancestors (such as Kangaroos and Possums) whose heroic actions are more readily understood by those unfamiliar with desert ecology. It is therefore essential to be open to the environmental complexity of Leura's vision, for the representation of naturally-occurring phenomena directly and specifically informed his painterly approach.

Geoffrey Bardon's notes on *Butterfly Dreaming* indicate that Leura's arrangements of dots represented trees, leaves, grass and the earth typical of *mulga* woodlands.⁴⁴ The habitat is so widespread that Anmatyerr people are sometimes referred to as speaking '*angkety artety-nwanth*' (*mulga* expanse language).⁴⁵ According to Jason Gibson, the butterfly is likely to be *Ilcilius Blue* (*Jalmenus icilius*): a species observed fluttering at the bases of *mulga* (*Acacia aneura*) trees.⁴⁶ Works such as *Butterfly Dreaming* initiated a form of representation in which particular attributes of a specific local habitat were indexed by the arrangement of coloured patches of dots; in this case the intensely dotted surfaces convey the confined space within a *mulga* grove. Vision through the grove is limited to about 200 metres and the ground beneath the airy canopy reveals a tracery of fallen phyllodes (flattened stalks that function as leaves). The fallen phyllodes aggregate to form miniature levee banks, each a few metres apart. The

43. Brody 1986, p. 9. For a description of the importance of "looking down on the landscape from above", see: Strehlow 1951, p.3.

44. Bardon 1991, p. 119.

45. Gibson 2017a, p. 25.

46. Email correspondence with Jason Gibson, 4 May 2018.

network of levees impedes runoff during heavy downpours, thereby maximising percolation to the roots of the *mulga*. The levees form contour lines that correspond to the micro-topography of the red loamy earth favoured by *mulga*, which I suggest also informs the apparently random tracery of Leura's patches. I propose therefore that the pictorial space of *Butterfly Dreaming* represents a terrestrial zone to a height of about three metres that references ecological systems of the *mulga* expanses that dominate Anmatyerr Country; the presence of flowers and butterflies suggest the bush had been enlivened by recent rain.⁴⁷ Leura's search for a new way of painting Country is emblematic of the challenge faced by other Aboriginal artists of an exploratory bent, who extemporise using elements of customary design to illuminate particular environmental features.

In 2012, the Yolngu artist Mulku Wirrpanda embarked on a suite of taxonomic studies of plants with local economic and religious importance. Unusually, she chose to paint species for which she did not have ancestral affiliation. The authority to represent the sacred designs for these species rested with other clans. Mulku overcame customary prohibitions by opening herself to the form and life-force of her subject stating, "Once I started painting food plants without reference to their sacred identity I had to find a new way to paint... So I let the plants tell me what their secular identity was. By the way they grow or the way they look and express themselves. They gave me their rhythm or their pattern".⁴⁸ The art historian Henry Skeritt recognised that although Mulku's disembarkation from a traditional proscription enabled her to grasp and communicate particular attributes of plants, their expression reflected culturally determined forms, most strikingly, the use of secular *wakinju* (ordinary) cross hatching. He wrote:

...they are attempts to create new relations drawn from observation, albeit an observation conditioned by a particular way of seeing and representing the world. ...Mulku was forced to confront the boundaries of Yolngu [Yolngu] systems of representing (and by extension, knowing) the natural world. And yet, Mulku's botanical works might represent a 'new way of painting', but they might not necessarily entail an entirely new ontology. Rather, I think we might see these paintings as offering a complex allegory for the way in which the natural world influences its own representation.⁴⁹

Skeritt's description of a two-way creative process between 'culture' and 'nature' assumes that the 'natural world' directly informs cultural expression. It is a way of understanding innovation and continuity that a man of Leura's poetic sensibility would have recognised.

47. For a more extended discussion of the representation of *mulga* woodlands by Papunya artists, see: Kean 1991, pp. 122-123.
48. Mulku Wirrpanda, cited in Skeritt 2017, p. 18.
49. Skeritt 2017, p. 20.

Painting *Rrpwamper* (Brush Tail Possum)

To avoid confusion in the next section, I will refer to Clifford Possum by his kinship subsection 'Tjapaltjarri', as one of the works concerns the travels of the ancestral *Rrpwamper* (Brush Tail Possum). The potential for confusion is neither incidental, nor is it unusual, as Possum's name, like that of many Central Australia men, references his primary totemic affiliation.⁵⁰ It should be noted that Tjapaltjarri was, at this time, an occasional visitor to Papunya, on holidays, while he worked as head stockman at the neighbouring Narwietooma Station. Although Tjapaltjarri painted less often than other founding Papunya-based artists, his exceptional technical skills were immediately recognised.⁵¹ Tjapaltjarri's works from the period, though relatively scarce, benefitted from his capacity to cast an acute eye over developments, synthesize key innovations, and extrapolate on what he saw in the Men's Painting Room. More specifically, his works reflected his association with his brother Leura, his cousin Kaapa and his father-in-law, Johnny Warangula.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Bush-fire I* and *Bushfire II*, both 1972 (Plates 81 and 88), are illuminating examples of the artist's intellectual grasp and innovative drive. The rapid transition from the cryptic white paintings he observed Warangula creating, into a more illusionistic form of representation, becomes evident when examining the differences between this pair of thematically related works. *Bush-fire I* was influenced by Warangula's *Water Dreaming* series (discussed in Chapter Six), but Tjapaltjarri chose to work within more tightly defined parameters than his father-in-law; like many modernists, he determined a self-imposed set of rules.⁵² Picking up on the tendency for clusters of dots to aggregate towards iconicity, Possum introduced broad dotted bars and arcs that cut swathes through the smoke of the bushfire to create a tight, yet turbulent space. Despite their dynamism, these elements are strategically aligned to the grid inferred by the rectangular format on which the painting is created. Where Warangula's gestures were impetuous, the weight of the dotted lines in *Bush-fire I* was consistent and controlled. Possum's calculated approach to the technical and spatial parameters within which he chose to operate is reminiscent of the North American artist Jasper Johns, who like Tjapaltjarri, wove in and out of a shallow picture plane. Indeed, *Bush-fire I*, closely resembles Johns' *Corpse and Mirror II*, 1974 to 1975 (see Plates 81 and 89) though the American painting was created two years after Tjapaltjarri's work. Where Johns had settled into a mid-career phase, Tjapaltjarri's work as a painter had just begun, and the conceptual distance between *Bush-fire I* and *II* exemplifies his restless curiosity.

50. Kean 2011b, p. 44.
51. Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 82.
52. The credo "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" can be applied to Possum's mature work in which "the artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem": LeWitt 1967, pp. 79-83.

Although they describe the same fire, and are painted on the same sized board, *Bush-fire II* demonstrates a conceptual leap from the previous work. Whilst *Bush-fire I* emerged from an *idea* of smoke swirling over an ash bed, *Bush-fire II* proposed a *narrative* that demands interpretation. If *Bush-fire II* is to be understood on the artist's terms, it is vital to parse the mythic events to which it alludes, for they bear directly on the pictorial challenge and the personal significance of the locale depicted. The painting concerns a bushfire ignited by Lungkarta, a Blue-tongue Lizard Ancestor from Warlukulangu (the artist's grandfather's Country).⁵³ Angered by the transgression of his sons, who had speared and eaten a sacred Kangaroo, Lungkarta unleashed the fire of vengeance that pursued the young men mercilessly as they fled.⁵⁴ The particular section of the songline chosen for *Bush-fire II*, describes the place where the fire front advanced over the tracks left by a group of travelling Possum Ancestors. Enticed by the artistic possibilities of an intersection traversed by ancestors from both sides of his family, Tjapaltjarri juxtaposed the traces of his mother's father's Fire, over his father's Possum tracks.

Bush-fire II was audaciously conceived and cropped, its ragged provisional juxtapositions breaking new conceptual ground. The painting shows the traces left by two Possum Ancestors as they traversed the Country, dragging their heavy tails across the red earth. Significantly, the image assumes the intimate perspective of a hunter (or perhaps the artist as a child, on hands and knees), tracking possums. Traditionally, tracks are shown in their entirety, however Tjapaltjarri partially masked the paw and tail prints of the Possums.⁵⁵ I contend that this approach was not undertaken to obscure secret information: on the contrary, Tjapaltjarri demonstrated how the animal moved, and how its tracks were partially obscured by the smoke and ash of Lungkarta's fire. While Tjapaltjarri's intention was revelation, his means, paradoxically, required that he partially conceal the Possums' tell-tale tracks. Of Cubism, Clark writes "the play between obscurity and obviousness was one feature of the style that was meant to appeal immediately to viewers; and this was not just beguiling but necessary".⁵⁶ Just as Picasso provided the most fragmentary clues (a raised eyebrow, receding hairline and pursed lips) to create a veritable *Portrait of Wilhelm Uhde*, 1910, Joseph Pulitzer Collection), Tjapaltjarri's purpose was engagement, rather than secrecy.⁵⁷ By pulling focus on the minutiae of a personally significant mythological intersection, Tjapaltjarri edited and occluded the signs (here *Rrpwamper* tracks) of his inherited visual language. In place of an icon, Tjapaltjarri produced close-cropped forensic images. Moreover, he provided evidence of the fire *passing over* the tracks of Possum

53. Possum's grandfather was Wanatjukurrpa: Genealogy F.T. XII, 1968, Strehlow Research Centre. The site is on Anmatyerr Country and gives its name to Warlukurlangu Artists based at Yuendumu.
 54. Possum cited in Johnson 1994, p. 50.
 55. Munn 1973a, pp. 119-128
 56. Clark 1999, p.217.
 57. Rubin 1989, p. 21.

Ancestors who (as insiders would know) had *previously* traversed the area to create what Johnston referred to as a "progressive narrative sequence".⁵⁸ Rather than celebrating a major totemic centre, as was usual for the Papunya based artists, Tjapaltjarri drew attention to an apparently minor but telling incident. Although it was inspired by mythic 'text', *Bush-fire II* was a premeditated study of time and space. The effectiveness of its illusion relied on a lifetime of practiced observation. Moreover, the abrupt juxtaposition of two dissimilar storylines in space reveals more than a passing affinity with modern image making, such as the radical cropping of 'frames' in cartoons.⁵⁹

The potency of this ancestral crossroad appears to have prompted Tjapaltjarri's protracted contemplation of time and space. *Bush-fire II* was merely the first of many extrapolations on this episode, for the epic narrative was both existentially momentous and intellectually intriguing. The episode was included in two of Tjapaltjarri's most celebrated works: *Warlugulong* (with Tim Leura), 1976 (Art Gallery of New South Wales) and *Warlugulong*, 1977 (National Gallery of Australia) (Plate 90), which together represented the culmination of the artist's thinking about the mythic narrative in expansive 'topographic' space.⁶⁰ When compared with these later works on a similar subject, *Bush-fire II* appears clumsy and ill refined.⁶¹ Yet the painting's significance must be understood in relation to the context from which it emerged, for like Picasso's preliminary studies for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1906 (Museum of Modern Art, New York), nothing like this had been produced before: excited and working fast, Tjapaltjarri was on the brink of major visual discovery.

Where the dots of the white paintings (discussed in Chapter Seven) index *anteth* (ritual down) activated in ceremony to 'impregnate' adjacent Land with the spirit of the particular totemic ancestor, the dots in Tjapaltjarri's new works took on additional iconicity. The dotted patches in his *Bush-fire* paintings both resembled and represented specific phenomena, whether the friability of red earth, the opacity of ash or the shifting translucence of smoke. Writing of his paintings of the period, Johnson referred to the artist as building a "personal pictorial code".⁶² Tjapaltjarri described using "different different patches" (of dots) to signify phenomena in his paintings, thereby identifying a key innovation that arose from this collaboration with Leura who, as we have seen, employed interlocking patterns to signify specific qualities of *mulga* Country in *Butterfly Dreaming* (Plate 87).⁶³

58. Johnson 2003, p. 70.
 59. Kean 2017b, pp. 191-92.
 60. Each of the 'map' paintings covers an area of Country roughly equivalent to a cattle station. Leura uses the term "topographic" to refer to large map-like paintings. For an extended discussion of these works, see: Johnson 1994, pp. 47-78.
 61. Possum was an accomplished figurative draftsman, a skill he may have learned as a stockman borrowing materials from jackaroos. Intriguingly, Bardon suggests that "this way of painting seemed to have developed over a period of time from drawing": Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 82.
 62. Johnson 2003, p. 74.
 63. Clifford Possum interviewed by the author, Trucking Yards, Alice Springs, April 1984.

“Under the ground — that’s the one”

Having refined the means of describing the passage of time on the surface of the Land, the brothers’ artistic journey took them into the red earth of *mulga* Country where they explored the subterranean realm, a zone that is underrepresented in Australian art. In spite of the economic dominance of the extractive industries since the gold rush of the 1850s, the paucity of underground subjects suggests a blind spot in Australian art.⁶⁴ Even *Fire’s On*, 1891 (Art Gallery of New South Wales), by Australia’s most acclaimed mine painter Arthur Streeton, appears to be more interested in the bleaching intensity of the Australian light than the interiority of the tunnel excavated by the mine’s doomed workers.⁶⁵ Streeton’s depiction is emblematic of European ‘settler’ cultures that have either regarded the subterranean realm as an inert zone to be exploited commercially, or to be feared for its claustrophobic confines. In contrast, Indigenous Central Australians are as alert to life below ground as they are to the creatures that move across its surface. The earth itself is regarded as a generative creative force.⁶⁶ Clifford Possum may have been thinking of the presence of the Yerrampe (Honey Ant)

Ancestors when he asserted the relevance of the subterranean realm to the Indigenous conception of Country:

Under the ground — that’s the one. Everybody [Aboriginal people] knows about this — some Dreaming go underneath and then come out again here. ...These [non-Aboriginal] people gotta school their eyes. They gotta think about it. Some Dreaming you can follow: this one, then go to another soakage, then stop. And sometime, Dreaming go underground. All the way.⁶⁷

The Yerrampe are an archetypal subterranean species that are understood to “go underground. All the way”. The eternal presence of the Honey Ant Ancestors is therefore sensed as a vast network of invisible passages, their occasional emergence from the earth marked sporadically by rounded hills — landforms like Warumpi near Papunya — redolent of the distended abdomens of the ‘honeypot’ ants that cling to the roofs of innumerable underground cavities. Significantly, the species is closely associated with the deep loamy soil and *mulga* groves of Anmatyerr Country where the subterranean architecture of living Honey Ants is familiar to *Arelh* (Anmatyerr people). Despite the depth of the hole that must be dug to gather the honey pots, a colony of Yerrampe can provide a rare bounty. In addition to powerful totemic association with the species, the presence of a subterranean world — beneath their feet as it were — provided Leura and Possum with a compelling conceptual challenge as they sought to “follow” the journey of the Ancestors, along subterranean tunnels to their underground chambers.⁶⁸

64. A rare exception was the *Artlink* special edition ‘Mining: Gouging the Country’, Issue 33:4, December 2013.

65. Thomas 2013.

66. Strehlow 1964, p. 44; Munn 1973a, p. 29.

67. Possum cited in Johnson 2003, p. 174.

68. Munn 1973a, p. 131.

The expression of the invisible realm beneath the earth’s surface encouraged the investigation of formal and philosophical possibilities, the intriguing resolution of which highlights the contrasting sensibilities of the Possum brothers.

Leura and Possum had responsibilities for the Yerrampe/Honey Ant Dreaming connecting Papunya to sites near Yuendumu, and Mount Allen and Napperby stations.⁶⁹ Prompted by affinity in the treatment of early Yerrampe paintings by the brothers, Vivien Johnson compared Possum’s *Honey Ant Dreaming*, 1972 (Plate 91) and Leura’s *Honey Ant Dreaming*, 1972 (Plate 92), and in so doing she revealed a startling example of the brothers’ collaboration, and the exact point of their divergence.⁷⁰ Possum’s painting was known from reproduction, most notably from the dust cover of Bardon’s 1979 debut book, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert*. Although asymmetrically cropped, the work employed a classic Honey Ant motif (similar to the 1971 *Honey Ant Mural* at Papunya School) painted on a plain red ochre background. This signifying motif was largely obscured by a carefully planned ‘camouflage’ pattern of discreet white and yellow ochre patches over which Possum added a layer of fine black dots, effectively ‘holding down’ the painting’s surface. As a result, the work resolved into two distinct layers. Firstly, the red ochre earth, through which the Honey Ants travel, shown as a schematic black icon arranged around a series of three concentric circles. Secondly, the irregular opaque patches representing flowers and foliage within which the worker ants feed. Turning to Leura’s painting, Johnson identified an identical underlying structure, except for the presence of a semi-transparent red ochre wash covering the entire picture plane.⁷¹ It was only after detailed examination that Johnson realised that despite the asymmetrical cropping of Possum’s work; the paintings were in fact one and the same.⁷² On reflection, I contend that Bardon took Possum’s *Honey Ant Dreaming* from the darkness of the Men’s Painting Room into the light where it was photographed. Later and unbeknownst to Bardon, the board was given to, or claimed by, the older brother, who saturated the apparently completed board with a dense all-over glaze, dissolving Possum’s hard spatial

69. Leura painted more variations of the Honey Ant songline than any other Papunya artist in the 1970s, while Possum chose to focus on Yerrampe Country for several of his largest commissions.

70. Bardon claimed that Possum’s painting was created in April 1972: Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 332-333.

71. Leura’s painting was among the so-called Papunya Tula Artists’ Permanent Collection, that remained uncomfortably stacked in the PTA office in Alice Springs. It was during this period that Dick Kimber applied for a grant to document the collection. On learning of his success, Kimber engaged Leura to assist in confirming the themes and artists for each work. Leura was a logical choice, as he had been in the room when most of the paintings were painted, was a good English speaker and an experienced intercultural broker. The collection contains four *Honey Ant Dreaming* paintings that Leura identified as his own, including the work in question. In 1983, the collection was sold to the Australian Museum where it has languished, rarely exhibited, into the present: Khan 2016, accessed 1 November 2019, URL: <https://journals.australianmuseum.net.au/khan-2016-tech-rep-aust-mus-online-25-195/> accessed 01.11.2019.

72. Johnson 2003, p. 70.

distinctions and placing emphasis on the glowing underground presence of the Honey Ant Ancestors.⁷³ Where Possum had constructed a fractured illusion of three-dimensional space, Leura subsequently reunited any disjunctions, introducing an intense red veil to create a liminal, Rothko-esque space. While Possum’s intent was conceptual, Leura encouraged the viewer to feel the earth through which Honey Ants travelled, sensing underground chambers and following cardinal directions to further underground chambers. By commandeering and painting over Possum’s immaculately conceived work, Leura asserted that he was, to use Sol LeWitt’s terms, a perceptual rather than conceptual artist.⁷⁴

The subtle exchange that occurred between the brothers is remarkable, for it was sustained through successive periods of innovation and individuation, first as stockmen carvers, then through the School of Kaapa into this period when (like their precursors Picasso and Braque) they pursued a radical reorganisation of pictorial space. Recognising the significance of the moment, Johnson argued, “The layered grounds of these works provide a striking visual metaphor for the co-existence of strong traditionalism and innovativeness in the artist’s mental landscape”.⁷⁵ I add to her assessment, asserting that Leura and Possum’s *Honey Ant* paintings also offer a seamless blend of traditional motifs with the experimentation made possible with introduced materials and formats. Like the best improvised jazz, the brothers created a vital new form that stayed true to its performative roots.

Concavity

Leura’s saturation of the Honey Ant motif, initially inscribed by Possum, is notable as the final act in an iterative process. But unlike the *post factum* moustache that Marcel Duchamp sketched on a reproduction of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, Leura’s gesture was not intended to call into question the meaning of the underlying image. On the contrary, it added an additional level of truthfulness. In desert art, even their faintest signs are for following, like the symbols of a map. Possum’s icon therefore remains fundamental to the work’s meaning, despite Leura subsequently embalming the whole in monochromatic redness. To an informed viewer, the faint traces of a site-path icon signify the passage of Yerrampe Ancestors *inside the Country* — the icon itself connoting concavity and depth.

Nancy Munn’s analysis of the syntax of “enclosed” spaces in classical Warlpiri visual systems sheds light on the interpretation of potentially puzzling spatial relationships. She wrote: “This visual ambiguity cannot be taken to indicate that the graphs are ‘abstract’ or in any sense ‘non-pictorial’; on the contrary, it results

73. The painting provides an apt illustration to the verses translated by Strehlow at the head of the chapter.
 74. LeWitt 1967.
 75. Johnson 2003, p. 74.

from a recasting of the three-dimensional world into the spatial premises, or organizational possibilities of two-dimensional, linear forms.” Munn continued:

Let us consider the site [concentric] circle in terms of this framework. As we have seen, the circle is typically conceptualized as a place consisting of a hole or waterhole with a surrounding camp. On the one hand, the enclosed item is simply a topographical feature on the surface of the country...on the other hand, the waterhole is a concave object with its bottom under the water, and below the surface of the country. It is a hole that penetrates the country.⁷⁶

According to Munn, concentric circles such as those in the *Honey Ant* icon were used for conveyance from the surface of the earth, ever deeper until the smallest circle reached the deepest point “at which the Dreamings [in this case the Honey Ants Ancestors] are localized...” Munn continued: “In this sense, the outer circle represents the top and surface of the country... while the central circle is the bottom, *inside the country* [authors’ emphasis]”.⁷⁷ The capacity of concentric circles to convey concavity or penetration is therefore critical to the illustration of the underground realm within which Ancestors dwell. Possum and Leura’s investigation of the way in which the subterranean realm could be expressed remains exceptional, even in the history of desert art, for it relied on fluency in classical iconography in combination with an eagerness to explore subtle possibilities presented by the new media.⁷⁸ Following a period of intense collaboration in 1972, the brothers continued to explore the expression of underground subjects individually, in ways that reflected their divergent sensibilities. As a ‘perceptual’ artist, Leura for instance muted the darkness with works such as *Honey Ant Dreaming (Papunya Story)*, circa 1973, while as a ‘conceptual’ artist, Possum pursued more complex conceptualised representations of subterranean space, culminating in the labyrinthine masterpiece *Yuelamu (Honey Ant Dreaming)*, 1980.

Digging in with New Materials

The exploratory trajectory taken by Leura and Possum can be traced through their active investigation of transcultural materials. Driven by their interest in creating an effective illusion of earth, ash, smoke and the spaces between these elements, they paid close attention to the viscosity of paint, its interaction with water as a thinning agent and the attendant reaction of diluted paint when applied to specific substrates. Leura’s affinity with the Arrernte watercolourists appears to have sparked a particular interest in the properties of paints and substrates, for he tested the limits of paint more actively than any Papunya painter (see Plate 93).

76. Munn 1973b, p. 207.
 77. Munn 1973b, p. 207.
 78. The perfection and number of Leura and Possum’s concentric circles evince their intention to go ‘deep’. Claiming “They got their city underground”, the Martu artist Yunkurra Billy Atkins has painted subterranean scenes at Kumpupirntily (Lake Disappointment) but without the layered specificity of Possum and Leura: Carty 2010, p. 10.

The inventory of materials used by the Papunya artists during the period was limited, but deserves recounting, for it proscribed what was possible. Works discussed in this chapter were either painted with synthetic polymer paints or mixed on-site with commercial oxides and polyvinyl acetate (PVA).⁷⁹ Additional synthetic polymer and poster paints were sourced at the Arunta Bookshop and acrylic house paint was purchased from a hardware supplier in Alice Springs.⁸⁰ The substrates used also varied: chipboard (of various thicknesses) and Masonite were used most commonly in 1972.⁸¹ Leura and Possum preferred lighter chipboards to Masonite, presumably because its surface was suggestive of the porous grain of *inert* (bean tree) with which the artists were familiar as carvers of polychrome sculptures. Alternatively, the weight of thinner chipboard may have recalled the feel and semi-absorbent quality of fashion board, a substrate favoured by their Arrernte relatives, including Keith Namatjira and Walter Ebatarintja who were both active at Papunya in the early 1970s. Large cotton canvases were first stretched at Papunya in 1974, and Leura took up the opportunity to soak paint into the warp and weft of the material's unprimed surface. It was also at this time when pre-primed canvas boards became the most common substrate for smaller works. Armed with a selection of these materials, Leura and Possum explored the possibilities of transparency, opacity and juxtaposition. While Possum considered how to reveal that which is known, but cannot be seen, Leura pondered the expression of extra-visual phenomena, such as the numinous presence of Honey Ant trails in the darkness of chambers deep within the earth.⁸² Thus the exploration of invisibility and semi-visibility led Leura and Possum to experiment with paint as a malleable, and at times, a transparent material through which fugitive phenomena could be summoned and ancestral agency evoked.

A comparison with the Hermannsburg watercolour painters is especially telling, for while they operated in a comparable physical and ontological environment, their works were produced with very different 'optical instruments'. Namatjira and his heirs represented the totemic landscape receding from the viewer, silhouette by silhouette, into blueness, and at this prosaic level their compositions belonged to the Western landscape tradition of Claude Lorrain. In contrast, Leura and Possum created spatial relations on the horizontal plane. They employed a plan view, rather than elevation, and it is vital here to reiterate that their images were not conceived from an elevated one-point perspective or 'bird's-eye view'. Works by Leura and Possum were based on knowledge of Country, and the beings that left their trace on and below the earth. Despite 'optical' dissimilarities between

79. For further discussion of Bardon's recipe, see: Kean 2017b, pp. 184-185.

80. Personal communications with Scholes after his sighting of original receipts in the Northern Territory Archives, Darwin, December 2015; Bardon & Bardon 2004, p. 37.

81. Personal communications with Lisa Nolan, Conservator at Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, May 2018.

82. Leura's imaginings can be sensed from the restricted verses of the Yerrampe Dreaming at Lyappa: Strehlow 1971, p. 685-689.

elevated landscapes painted after the style of Namatjira and the plan view of Leura and Possum, there were powerful commonalities connecting the idioms. Both landscape and dot genres were intended to provide a representation of the Land, and focus (in most cases) on sites of personal significance. Although outside the scope of this thesis, it can be argued that Leura and Possum's pictorial genre had more in common with watercolour landscape painting than it did with other concurrent genres of Papunya painting, such as the highly schematic 'Tingarri' paintings of Pintupi artists.⁸³

Transparency and Leura's Liminal Vision

Leura is a singular figure, not only for the affinity he developed with a succession of art advisors with whom he worked in the 1970s, but also for the particularity of his approach to painting.⁸⁴ Where most of the founding Papunya painters embraced the opacity of acrylic paint, Leura consistently diluted that purity, effectively sabotaging iconographic implacability. Johnson referred to Leura's "loose watercolour-style brushwork, showing the artist's Hermannsburg background".⁸⁵ Elsewhere she wrote that Leura's "techniques like the washes of colour he uses to create atmospheric effects of mist and smoke... indicate his exposure to the Namatjira School".⁸⁶ While recognising the source of his influence, Johnson did not discuss how Leura's tonal impressions differed from the light-filled, sharply focused landscapes favoured by Namatjira. I suggest that, in part, the difference issued from the media used. While the fillers and medium in acrylic paint favour opacity, they can be stretched toward transparency, albeit never attaining the sheer purity of watercolour. Leura's unique approach to painterly dilution arose from his understanding of the full range of his new medium, exploiting the spectrum of expression from the conviction of opacity to the wavering instability of semi-transparent washes.

Leura and Possum were active agents within their intercultural *milieu* and as a consequence they were affected by the various strands of modernism they encountered. Despite the fact that they did not paint in the tradition established by Namatjira, I contend that there was no more profound influence on their approach to the act of painting than watercolour painting, a medium that Wenten Rubuntja reminds us "came out from the whitefella's hand".⁸⁷

83. Kean 2017b, pp. 183-184.

84. Johnson 2010, p. 43.

85. Johnson 2015, p. 114.

86. Johnson 2010, p. 24.

87. Rubuntja in Rubuntja & Green 2002, p. 159.

Conclusion

The artistic relationship between Leura and Possum is central to the story of Papunya Tula painting. Not only did the brothers co-produce several of the movement's best-known paintings; they also created a comprehensive new way of describing their world. In recasting the ultimate constituents of their inherited iconography, Leura and Possum produced a novel *pictorial* space that was every bit as capable of describing the Central Australian environment as the school of watercolour painters who had preceded them. More specifically, Leura and Possum devised a method by which individual phenomena could be indexed, embodied and reconstituted into layers, to signify spatial relationships via the distribution and overlain dotted patches whose density, colour and degree of transparency were calibrated to the phenomena they sought to represent. Where Namatjira used one-point perspective to construct a layered vision of Country (foreground, middle ground, background), Leura and Possum conceptualised the Land in plan: below the earth, at surface level, in the atmosphere above.

The brothers' choice of subjects is telling, for it appears to have been driven by the urge for conceptual extrapolation, as well as the expression of themes of personal significance. For instance, Possum's close-cropped *Bush-fire II* presents a sequence of events, wherein the ash and smoke issuing from Lungkarta's fire obscures the tracks of travelling Possum Ancestors who had traversed the area: a juxtaposition that described both space and time. The representation of Honey Ant Ancestors under the earth's surface, *inside* Country, posed a further representational challenge. In response, Possum called on the capacity of the concentric circle to signify concavity, making the invisible palpable through new ways of painting based on Indigenous ontology. Leura's saturation of Possum's carefully constructed *Honey Ant Dreaming* with a dense red-ochre wash was interpreted as a poetic gesture. I argued that Leura augmented Possum's image with the essence of an ancient songline, rather than an attempt to obscure his brother's precise conceptualisation of the earth below. While Possum considered how to reveal that which is known but cannot be seen, Leura responded viscerally to the numinous presence of Yerrampe Ancestors that "ever dwell" in dark chambers deep within the red earth.⁸⁸

The assurance of the brother's collaboration does not mean that Possum and Leura's paintings are synonymous; on the contrary, their approach tended to diverge, especially when they were not working on a shared project. Leura found that by diluting paint he could achieve subtle variations in tonality. As is the case in classical verse, Leura considered his subjects obliquely through poetic allusion rather than overt description.⁸⁹ His paintings derived *frisson* from the dialectical interplay between the symmetry of religious iconography and the liminal

properties of diluted paint. While Possum used dots with precision to specify space and time, Leura realised the potential of elastic spaces to create an atmosphere tempered by lyricism and poetry. His washes and inflected fields responded to the feel and flow of the media, a simile for the vigour of the Dreaming.

Where the first Papunya boards were produced on plain backgrounds, the patches of dots in Leura and Possum's works were interwoven into the body of the canvas. Leura's painterly gestures rose and fell to achieve a dynamic balance between the certainty of iconography and indeterminacy of atmosphere. While Possum produced more concrete illusions, both artists paired customary iconography with the dotted field, to blur the distinction between figure and ground. Having tackled the tension between shallow pictorial space and deep illusion, the autonomous territory of the canvas opened itself to nuanced expression. Not only could ancestral narratives be described with semantic precision; ephemeral phenomena could be evoked with affective visual poetry. Just as in Paris, where Picasso and Braque's dialogue produced a mysterious pictorial language in which the dimensions of visual experience found new expression, Leura and Possum, created "the set of works in which [desert art] found itself a style".⁹⁰ That style called on the reinterpretation of the ultimate constituents of desert art, informed by the transcultural flow of images interpreted with new materials to produce paintings that balanced precision and mystery.

88. Strehlow 1971, p. 687.

89. Sutton 1987, p. 39.

90. Clark 1999, p. 175.

Conclusion

I commenced this thesis with an account of some of my first encounters with Papunya art and artists, including seeing Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's *Winparrku Serpent* in an obscure college gallery in Gippsland in 1976. The following January I met the artist, just minutes after arriving at the desert community. I omitted to say that one of my first tasks after being employed by Papunya Tula artists was to negotiate, with Kaapa, the terms by which the Victorian Tapestry Workshop could reproduce the work. Now, as a city resident, I visit this magnificent tapestry regularly at the Arts Centre Melbourne, and on each occasion, I marvel at the exquisitely poised, yet muscular composition. It was only during research for this thesis that I have come to understand how Kaapa was able to create this work, one that, curiously, has travelled a parallel journey to that which I have made (see Plate 94). To say that those early encounters at Papunya were life changing is an understatement. Now, more than four decades after meeting Kaapa, I am still grappling with the consequence of that youthful adventure. While I jest that I conjure Kaapa and his peers as I write, the men with whom I was closest at Papunya are long gone. Yet, they remain present through the balanced poetry of their work. Likewise, when I visit Papunya, Haasts Bluff or Yamunturrngu, I am transported to that time spent with the painters, my mentors. In those places the artists are also present, through resemblance, in the faces of their children and in the traces of old campsites. Middle-aged men, who were young children when I worked at Papunya, remember and value the time I spent with their fathers and recognise that my being with these remarkable men, as they painted in secluded camps under bough shelters, is a gift that I must share.

This thesis has provided the opportunity to revisit experiences with many of the artist's children, my peers, who are now older than the painters were when I worked with them as a naïve young art advisor. Research has also enabled me to spend time with the works, taking what I know of the artist's techniques and combining it with what I have learned over the decades through immersion in exhibitions, literature and collections, to come to a more conclusive understanding of the artists' processes and intentions. Rather than tracking Papunya Tula's remarkable globalising trajectory, my focus has remained on the works and how painting developed in place in the years preceding my arrival at Papunya in 1977. Research during the period of my candidacy has taken me deeper into the past than anticipated, as I strained to decipher how the contingencies of individual artists' lives intertwined with determining historical events, but my process was led by the conversations recalled with the many artists with whom I travelled in the Country to the west of Alice Springs. My research has taken me back to that Country, for it is only in those locations where the validity of various propositions

can be evaluated. It was at Papunya, in the company of the artists' descendants, where the academic process of decipherment and interpretation has felt most real and consequential.

Environmental, Historical and Artistic Context

This thesis began its narrative in the late 1920s, when Kaapa, Leura and Warangula were born. This period coincided with a sequence of cathartic events that re-shaped the socio-cultural configuration of the region. The first and most prolonged of these trials was a decade-long drought that made life even more precarious for those in the contact zone to the west of Alice Springs. The second was the Coniston Massacre(s) resulting in the further dispossession of Anmatyerr and Ngaliya survivors. Finally, the de-sanctification of *Tywerrenge* at Manangananga, near Hermannsburg, brought the incipient conflict between Indigenous religion and Christianity to a head. The searing word of this iconoclasm reverberated across the region. The combined effect of these environmental, social and spiritual crises resulted in a new set of conditions where most Aboriginal people in the region sheltered from frontier violence at the mission or adapted to life under the pastoral regime. Far from encouraging the expression of customary belief, these new conditions required the subjugation of traditional practices and accommodation of alien governance. I have worked from the assumption that if art from this contact zone it is to be better understood, it must be interpreted in relation to the contested social context in which it was produced.

Coming to notice as a 'camel boy' and craftsman, Albert Namatjira created curios for a nascent tourist industry. Poignantly, the humble wooden plaques he scarred with a hot poker embodied the ontological tensions experienced by the residents at Ntaria (Hermannsburg). Namatjira's juxtaposition of Christ's Cross on an Oval form (redolent of the Indigenous *Tywerrenge*) brought the paramount forms of Christianity and Indigenous religion into the same pictorial field. While the accompanying text "*Other refuge have I none*" proclaims a convert's faith, it may also allude to the abject conditions under which Indigenous Australians were compelled to live during the 20th century.

Far from being a sporadic or trivial occurrence in minor artefacts, such as Namatjira's plaque, the concurrence of Western geometries (Cross/square/rectangle) and Indigenous forms (Oval/circle) recurred in a variety of contexts at the mission. Works on paper, attributed to Namatjira, reveal the artist's effort to locate Indigenous icons within the governing rectangle of Western art. Namatjira's

Yalka Dreaming paintings marshalled Oval objects on a two-dimensional plane to achieve visual balance. The symmetrical configuration of the objects (around a cruciform axis) preceded the creation of comparable works by Kaapa, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum. Convergent solutions to the formal problem of balancing the symbols of Indigenous beliefs within an exotic rectangular format, highlights the emphasis on the reconciliation of different worldviews by Central Australian artists.¹

The co-location of diverse groups of Aboriginal people at Haasts Bluff (a ration station established by Hermannsburg-based evangelists) resulted in prolonged encounters between Arandic, Western Desert and Ngarrkic people. While sharing songlines, the people from these adjacent cultural blocs spoke different languages and arrived at the station after diverse post-contact experience. Despite these differences, a new cultural space opened in which individuals from different cultures could interact. From the mid-1930s Namatjira used the ration station at Haasts Bluff as a base for his painting expeditions. Young Pintupi men such as Warangula had the opportunity to witness Namatjira painting in Country. Namatjira's mentor and teacher Rex Battarbee presented at least one impromptu exhibition at Haasts Bluff. It was comprised of local landscapes and portraits of Pintupi immigrants: Warangula's family. Battarbee was one of a string of southern visitors attracted to observe and sketch local residents. The leader of Warangula's Ilpili clan, Kamutu Tjungurrayi, played to the visitors' expectations, presenting himself adorned with body paint but meeting the European gaze with emplaced authority. Kamutu's self-possession, translated into paint by artists such as Kaapa and Warangula, became a defining property of Papunya Tula art.

When Namatjira returned as the owner of a series of American pick-up trucks, each with ALBERT NAMATJIRA – ARTIST emblazoned on the driver's door, the advantages that could arise from that profession became obvious to those who, like Warangula, laboured in the dust, making roads and running fence lines. While associated with the church, Namatjira remained conversant with his pre-existing traditions, travelling widely through Kukatja Country, painting sites of ancestral association and observing the *ulerenye* ('strangers' from the Western Desert) who maintained a hunter-gatherer lifestyle west of Haasts Bluff.

This thesis stresses the importance of Haasts Bluff as a crucible where the people and ideas which would contribute to the formation of Papunya Tula art first comingled in an intercultural environment. It was at this frontier station where transcultural images, including cowboy and superhero comics were consumed; pages from Eric Joliffe's *Witchetty's Tribe* were pasted to the window of the clinic; illustrated gospels were studied; and biblical posters were raised in front of assembled congregations.

1. My thinking here has been influenced by Hinkson 2014, pp. 137-152; Hinkson 2017.

Images of Country painted by Namatjira and his followers were also influential. Not only did they represent key sacred sites; they were also exchanged for considerable sums in a growing cash economy. Yet, the perception of the significance of watercolour landscapes painted by Western Arrernte makers was distinctly different to their reception by non-Indigenous consumers. While distanced viewers were enchanted that an Aboriginal man could achieve such remarkable technical facility, none of the artists who followed in his footsteps strove for photograph-like realism. Rather, they were affected by the underlying meaning of the work. It is notable that instead of aiming for verisimilitude, Namatjira's followers emulated the old man's capacity to capture the *inner truth* of Country, and it is at this level that the substantive connection between the watercolour landscape painting and Papunya Tula painting can be divined.

Wenten Rubuntja, who learned the watercolour technique by observing Namatjira painting in Alice Springs, argued for an epistemological equivalence between "landscape" and "dot painting".² Rubuntja's contention was tested by the analysis of a diverse array of images, by a range of artists from Winparrku, a towering rock, 30 kilometres west of Haasts Bluff. Significantly, Kaapa painted Winparrku in both landscape and dot painting genres and the fluidity with which he moved from one idiom to the next reinforces Rubuntja's insistence on the congruence and complementarity between two superficially distinct genres of Central Australian art. I argue that the intimate relationship between genres provides a solid basis upon which a history of art in Central Australia can be assembled. This history is not based on the exceptional intervention of Rex Battarbee at Hermannsburg and Geoffrey Bardon at Papunya, but understands that Central Australian artists' abiding association with the Land is what propelled their artistic expression. I therefore compare the history of art in Central Australia to an apparently dry inland river whose water runs below the surface, and is only occasionally visible at key sites: like hidden water running under a dry river, pivotal Central Australian artists were connected through history, culture and Land.

Having established significant concurrence of intent in superficially dissimilar genres, it was shown that the process of framing a scene, implicit in Namatjira's perspectival projections, is not exclusive to the 'representational' idiom in Central Australian painting. I argued that the notion of framing can also be applied to certain Papunya painters who similarly defined and delimited the scope of their representation within the pictorial frame. The term 'cropping' can therefore be applied to Papunya Tula painting wherever a locale or tract of land is systematically excised from the unbounded totemic landscape. Just as scenes were selected and 'framed' to compose a landscape painting, salient signs and icons are assembled, with a sense of their geographical relationship to each, on the rectangular 'image field' to produce a Papunya Tula painting.

2. Rubuntja & Green 2002, pp. 91-92 & 161.

Making Papunya Tula Art

Having established aspects of the environmental, historic, cultural and artistic context of mid-20th century Central Australia, Part Two of the thesis focused entirely on the analysis of events at Papunya, a new settlement established on Honey Ant Country, 30 kilometres north of Haasts Bluff. The convergence of 20 men, from diverse cultural backgrounds, who worked together at the Men's Painting Room in 1971 and 1972, had already received considerable attention both in scholarly publications and the public arena.³ I looked beyond the notion of Geoffrey Bardon as a singular prophet to establish an expanded history of cultural exchange at Papunya. Far from emerging from an artistic vacuum, craftsmen (including the subjects of this thesis) sold their wares door to door within Papunya's administrative hub, and European educators encouraged their students to express their cultural interests with images on paper. Despite the prevailing policy of assimilation, an undercurrent of Indigenous cultural revival and political engagement was afoot in Central Australia before 1971.⁴

Kaapa Tjampitjinpa thrived in the intercultural rough at Papunya, audaciously procuring materials from the school and adjacent construction sites to represent Indigenous ceremony in a bold new representational genre, hailed 'the School of Kaapa' by the chronicler of Papunya art, Vivien Johnson. Commencing with semi-perspectival recreations of the ceremonial ground, which called on the artist's familiarity with ethnographic photography, Kaapa quickly refined his vision. By August 1971, Kaapa was conceiving his images from a planar perspective. Icons were painted on unadorned backgrounds in a manner akin to the ground mosaics to which they referred. The graphic clarity and insistent materiality of Kaapa's paintings brought them to the attention of government patrol officer Jack Cooke. Delivered to Alice Springs, Kaapa's *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi* (1971) was awarded joint winner of the Caltex Northern Territory Art Award (see Plate 45). Meanwhile, the six remaining paintings of Cooke's consignment were sold on a single weekend. Word of Kaapa's success spread like wildfire at Papunya, where men who had already made modest paintings with recycled materials at Kaapa's studio in the Old Settlement Office, were joined by a cohort of senior Pintupi men, who together turned out numerous works for an imagined market of curious 'whitefellas'. Geoffrey Bardon and the settlement administration redoubled their support, doing what they could to supply art materials and provide a dedicated place for the increasing number of painters to work.

Early Papunya painting has previously been examined as the collaborative endeavour of 20 men; in contrast, I have examined the work of a sub-group who contributed several of the movement's most influential innovations. Rather than

3. For such accounts, see: Sayers 2001, pp. 202-203; McLean 2011b; Grishan 2013, pp. 445-446; Keneally 2013, pp. 33-35; Caruana & Cubillo 2013, p. 46.

4. Carmichael & Kohen, 2013.

looking at the output of the Men's Painting Room *en masse*, I examined particular series that demonstrate intentionality and experimentation on the part of the selected artists.

Paintings by the Anmatyerr artists have been defined by their symmetry. Testing the origin and applicability of this assumption, I analysed the composition of Kaapa's *Budgerigar* and Leura's *Honey Ant* series in relation to the application of symmetry in tourist curios and classical artefacts. Rather than being the natural or expected outcome of Anmatyerr aesthetics, as others have postulated, I demonstrated that the series mirror-like symmetry reflected the personal preferences of the artists, expressed through a mastery of transcultural materials. I demonstrated that in the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series, Kaapa and Leura collaborated in a rigorous process of compositional experimentation to interrogate potential harmonies within the (Western) rectangular substrate on which works were painted.

I drew particular attention to the works that concluded each series, in which objects were precisely aligned with the substrate's diagonal axes, a pictorial strategy that enhanced the integrity of the picture plane. Paradoxically, the directionality of these transverse axes also inferred connection to related sites beyond the corners of the frame. Though the geometric precision of the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series was rarely replicated beyond 1972, these works marked a significant moment in the development of Papunya painting. They established a geometrically robust template that was replicated as the scaffolding upon which artists such as Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula (a Pintupi speaker) and David Corby Tjapaltjarri (a Ngaliya/Warlpiri speaker), from a variety of cultural groups, applied their own inherited icons (see Plate 95).

Like many of the works painted during the first half of 1972, the backgrounds of the *Budgerigar* and *Honey Ant* series were unadorned, lacking the dots that would later come to characterise the genre. Meanwhile, Johnny Warangula developed a distinctly different approach to painting. A sequence of work he produced in 1971 was analysed to show that instead of merely recapitulating customary icons, Warangula shattered the signs for lightning and running water, resulting in an energised space composed of sinuous segments and staccato bars which jostle and surge within a vibrant pictorial ecology. Where Kaapa and Leura refined their compositions according to spatial relations of the *ceremonial ground*, Warangula called upon his status as a rainmaker, summoning the elements of an ancestral storm. Thus, Warangula envisioned Country through an intuitive 'performance' of painting in which the qualities of paint referred to the particulate energy of

meteorological phenomena. The dot, which had previously been used to embellish icons or provide infill between lines, was elevated by Warangula to become a vital, spirited element in his painterly inventory.

Warangula's invention of the dot was noted by his peers, many of whom emulated his painterly surfaces. Kaapa, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum appeared entranced by the capacity of the dot to simulate the effect of ephemeral phenomena, particularly the kinetic quality of *anteth* (feather down applied to objects, the body and prepared ground in ritual). Having watched T. G. H. Strehlow's film of the ceremonies of Yerrampe Ancestors at Akwerrperl, where men prepared a sequence of large ground mosaics, I argued that the field of inflected dots in 'white paintings' produced by the Anmatyerr artists referred to the phenomenal effect of these comparable ground mosaics. Where previous scholars have written that a 'veil' of dots was summoned to *conceal* references to restricted objects, I proposed that the effect was intended to *reveal* the power of ceremony.

Leura embraced the sensual realm of the dotted field, while maintaining the integrity of the underlying iconographic structure that he and Kaapa developed in the first half of 1972. The stature of Leura's white paintings derived from the conjunction of dissimilar elements: a rigorously symmetrical totemic icon, perfectly aligned to a rectangular grid that was then overlaid with a semi-transparent mantle of dots. Where several authors have proposed that dots are symbolically inert, I have shown that the delicately inflected surface of Leura's paintings was integral to his creative concept, and that the shifting surface reinforced and heightened the affective correctness of the whole. While both icon and surface are indices of sanctity, Leura's adherence to a governing rectangular grid demanded that these works be understood as contemporary artworks intended for transcultural transmission.

For Leura and Possum, the use of dots to represent phenomena opened new possibilities for representation. Working collaboratively, they devised a method by which particular phenomena could be indexed by discrete patches of dots and assembled in layers, to represent spatial relationships. Dots of various hues were calibrated to embody particular elements, soil types, vegetation and atmospheric occurrences. Having observed the watercolour landscape artists, Leura modulated the degree of transparency of his dots to evoke the phenomena he sought to represent. Coloured patches were arranged in relationship to the painting's iconographic armature: where, for example, a canopy of *mulga* foliage shaded the underground tunnels of Honey Ant Ancestors, that section of the icon was obscured. Thus, in my estimation, techniques that have elsewhere been interpreted as occluding content, actually encode ecological and religious information.

The capacity to represent space, below, at surface level and above the Land, opened new possibilities for representation and extracting personal meaning from common lexical elements. The brothers had in effect created a representational system in which objects and actors could be located in both time and place. Possum grasped this potential most explicitly, showing his ancestor the *Rrpwamper* (Brush Tail Possum) moving from site to site across the landscape. When these tracks were overlain with the ash from a fire, created by *Lungkarta* (Blue-tongue Lizard), a sequence of events in time would become evident. The location where these songlines intersect was of particular significance to Clifford Possum, for it represented the intersection of his mother's father's and father's father's Dreamings. More than a typological element drawn from ceremony, Possum evoked a nuanced episode from his ancestral history. Framed with cerebral clarity, *Bushfire II* conveys a deeply personal meditation, however the fullness of the painting's meaning can only be fully fathomed by those who know the artist's ancestral origins, and are familiar with that section of the totemic landscape (see Plate 88).

I have purposefully traced the development of Papunya painting through its various wellsprings, to its inception in 1971 and then on to a phase when key formal constituents were trialled and had just begun to congeal as a substantial body of work. At the time of the movement's foundation, the artists of this study could not have known where their experiments would lead. Kaapa and Tim Leura died in the 1980s, before the extent to which their inventions would influence the course of Australian art could be perceived. Clifford Possum and Johnny Warangula continued painting but never again attained the technical and poetic heights achieved when all four artists were alive and had the opportunity to be inspired by each other's work.

The artists of this study are individually notable, over and above their influence. They worked at the leading edge of an artistic frontier. Kaapa, Leura, Possum and Warangula could not know what was over the horizon as they explored the potential of their inherited iconography with new materials. Throughout the 1970s, the gang of four stretched to discover new pictorial possibilities that could not have been imagined when Kaapa executed a detailed representation of the *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo at Gulgardi* in the first half of 1971. The achievements that followed came as a result of intensive studio practice, collaborative effort and the capacity to evoke the 'muse' of Country, with the passion and clarity of a well-rehearsed song. The expressive possibilities of the emergent genre were, in the early 1970s, infinite. I contend that like Picasso and Braque during the formulation of analytic cubism, each of these artists went further into imaginative territory than has been achieved by the artists who have continued to paint in the

tradition they established. I do not mean to infer that desert art is static or has been in decline since their achievements, for recent developments among the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara/Ngaanyatjarra areas have astounded observers with the freshness of artistic vision. Rather, I propose that by 1975 (at the conclusion of the period of greatest artistic exploration) conventions had been established and essential parameters in which many Central Australian artists continue to work had been mapped.

The principal and most influential achievement of the selected artists was to bring the lexical elements – sign, icon and figure – into dialogue with painted ground and dotted effects. By the mid-1970s, each of the selected artists had developed their approach to brushwork and the control of viscosity to establish a personal slant to this visual dialogue. Where the artists worked in several interlocking styles during the period, for the purposes of this conclusion, I evoke just one painting by each to represent their artistic divergence (and individual mastery).

Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's *Winparrku Serpents* (1974) epitomises that artist's 'heraldic' effect (see Plate 35). Iconographic elements associated with the Tjartiwarra ritual are arrayed around a representation of the *Yarripirri* (Inland Taipan snake). The image is rigorously symmetrical, recalling the artist's earlier experimentations with *Budgerigar Dreaming*. The background infill is comprised of discs, denoting bush plums (derived from related body paint design) on a dark background. A series of sand ridges over which the party travelled are evoked by bands of yellow dots which, I contend, were derived from a map of Yarrapirri's songline published in Mountford's *Winbaraku: And the Myth of Jarapiri*, 1968, a copy of which Peter Fannin had purchased just before Kaapa commenced this painting.⁵ Having known Kaapa, I have no doubt that the artist absorbed Mountford's map of the songline over a cup of tea and biscuits at the art advisor's house. Thus, the disparate sources of Kaapa's inspiration were drawn together in harmony. A final element, shining amidst a highly resolved composition, is a pair of white roundels, each composed of 12 perfectly executed concentric circles, the ground mosaics created by the travelling party at the top of two sandhills. The striking execution of the painting, and Kaapa's willingness to draw inspiration from surprising sources, exemplify two seemingly contradictory aspects of his personality: the capacity to transgress cultural boundaries and that his artistic virtuosity stemmed from his unquestioned ritual attainment.

5. The book is noted by Fannin in his annotation of the painting, Papunya Tula Artist archive, KT Box, 74008K.

Leura's exploration of liminal spaces was furthered by the introduction of large-scale canvases to Papunya in 1974.⁶ Where other artists regarded canvas as a 'ground' to be prepared with a single colour, and onto which subsequent opaque layers (comprising of icons and dots) could be applied to achieve graphic clarity, Leura soon sensed the canvas was a space *into which* paint could be infused. By staining unprimed canvas, rather than coating it entirely with an opaque layer, Leura could 'weave' his imagery through the body of the material. The most dramatic example of Leura's distinctive approach, *Trial by Fire*, 1975 (Plate 96), is a monumental painting that combines the hypnotic mystery of a Rorschach test and the materiality of ground painting.

Unusually, *Trial by Fire* was painted on a pure white background, onto which Leura applied a row of three perfectly executed concentric circles along the central horizontal axis. Sinuous lines extend from the circles to the painting's peripheral edges, anchoring the iconographic armature symmetrically within the rectangle. The next and most radical markings evoked a shadow world conjured with a "mystic uneven grey wash".⁷ This layer is remarkable for the *bravura* of the freely brushed treatment from which two figures materialise, seemingly trapped in a web of ash and smoke, a liminal zone hovering between the ground and the viewer's imagination. The figures appear to be dancing; each man holding a garland of leaves, their hair bound into chignon to signify their status. The negative (white) spaces around the figures are marked with charcoal dots and over-dotted with semi-transparent yellow ochre. These inconspicuous yellow dots lift the negative spaces though the picture plane, to be read as positive, thereby reckoning the figures as a spectral afterimage. The relationship between positive and negative spaces is unstable, and "terror" is induced as ghostly figures fight for space, rising and subsiding according to the viewer's point of focus.⁸ Leura's *Trial by Fire* uses paint and the metaphor of fire to consider the nature of mortality with the naked intensity conjured by Hannah Arendt's estimation of the function of art. She wrote:

In the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration, a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames. Works of art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things... this reification and materialization, without which no thought can become a tangible thing, is always paid for, and that the price is life itself: it is always the "dead letter" in which the "living spirit" must survive...⁹

6. Leura was appointed as a delegate to an Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) meeting in Alice Springs in January of 1974, where he argued that rather than having its grant from the government increased, the AAB should commission works from the company. His proposal was adopted, leading to the introduction of canvas: Johnson 2007b, pp. 31-32.
7. Fannin, 1975a, file note accompanying, PTA Archives. TL Box. TL75631
8. Fannin, 1975a, file note accompanying, PTA Archives. TL Box. TL75631
9. Arendt 1959, pp. 168-169.

Peter Fannin, in his original documentation of the work, sensed a palpable expression of “terror” rarely expressed in paintings by ritually-mature male artists. The expression of unguarded emotion is, I contend, a defining quality of Leura’s paintings.¹⁰

The assurance of Possum and Leura’s collaboration does not mean that their paintings are synonymous. On the contrary, their approach tended to diverge, especially when they were not working on a shared project. The capacity for both time and space to be expressed on a single plan increasingly became Possum’s guiding interest. The first of his paintings I documented when I commenced working for Papunya Tula Artists was *Warlugulong*, 1977 (Plate 90), a magisterial work purchased in 2007 by the National Gallery of Australia for a still-unsurpassed record price for a work by an Indigenous Australian artist.¹¹ Possum was a master of the realistic representation of tracks, and this work exemplified that skill. The paths of emus, possums, humans and dingoes are traced over a carefully coded range of landscape, red dots indicating *mulga* Country, yellow for sandy plains and white for limestone. Representing the intersecting songlines of ten ancestral parties, this work epitomises Possum’s matchless capacity for spatial representation and the embodiment of Indigenous knowledge of Land in all its ecological and mythic complexity.

The final work I wish to evoke is humble in scale in comparison to the previous paintings; Johnny Warangula’s *Water Dreaming*, 1974 (Plate 97). Where his works on a similar theme (described in Chapter Six) featured a permeable scrim of white dots, dashes and arcs, this work affords equal emphasis to iconographic elements and the variously dotted areas. Painted at speed and with great fluency, the work sings. Created during a La Niña year, when much of Australia experienced record-breaking downpours, *Water Dreaming* reveals a maker at one with the prevailing wet. Where the dots in Leura and Possum’s paintings signify particular phenomena, in Warangula’s paintings they conjure a concatenation of meteorological activity and the abundance that emerges after the storm’s passing. Warangula’s fluency disregarded the distinction between icon and dotted gesture as he rushed, with floodwaters in the swales between parallel dunes, to the east of Kalipinyapa.

This thesis has shown how the iconography and multi-modal textures of the three-dimensional ceremonial ground were harnessed and brought into service within the rectangular frame to generate a new pictorial space. Developing swiftly over the first eighteen months of painting at Papunya, ritual iconography was balanced against another element derived from ceremony, but one that underwent much more radical transformation. Instigated by Johnny Warangula, the dot was multiplied, articulated and freed from its customary fastening to the edges

10. Fannin 1975b, PTA Archives. TL Box. TL75631.
11. Coslovich 2007.

of signs and icons, and emerged as of equal importance to the icons in image making. The relationship between the calligraphic iconography in *Water Dreaming* and the membrane of dots and patches that float across the picture plane was spontaneously enacted by the artist, like the singing of verse, despite (by the time of its creation) having been rehearsed numerous times on other, similarly scaled surfaces. The white lines were over-dotted, not regularly, but via individual gestures with the tip of the artist’s brush. White rings of fine dots conform more precisely to the roundel, representing Winpa’s home at Kalipinyapa. These tiny marks comingle at the same pictorial level as the scrim of fine white dots, and together they sparkle, like light through raindrops, across the entire surface of the work. The customary hierarchy of icon-over-adornment, having been atomised, was replaced by “the grasp of the paint”.¹² In short, it was through the performance of painting that Warangula discovered his artistry.

The attention customarily paid to the extrapolation of specific meanings from the symbols in Papunya Tula art is doomed, for it denies the semantic complexity and implicit multivalency of the artform. As Hannah Arendt expounded: “Works of art are thought things”.¹³ Over and above their capacity to recall and replicate customary icons with particular finesse, it is through the process of painting, and thinking about painting, that the subjects of this thesis created works of particular consequence. For Tim Leura, paint became the media through which he could reflect upon the philosophical questions of his time: not only the nature of the Land and his association with his ancestors, but the nature of his existence in a knotty, intense, hybridised time and place.¹⁴ He was a Christian, painting in a Nissen Hut, sandwiched between the institutions of Church and School, with the soft body of Warumpi Hill (the sacred home of the Honey Ant Ancestors) on the horizon to the immediate north-east, connecting him to his ancestral home at Alherramp. As Geoffrey Bardon recognised, Leura reflected on his *whole* life while painting.¹⁵

The Papunya painters inhabited a stark intercultural landscape characterised by opposed or contradictory institutions. Rather than simply recapitulating imagery learned on the *corroboree* ground, I have shown that the selected artists were profoundly affected by the flow of transcultural imagery of an increasingly globalised 20th century world. They lived through a period of rapid change, the emergent cash economy of post-WWII Central Australia, where the soft shadows of *mulga* canopies projected on the red earth resembled military camouflage. In this world, the dynamically conceived frames of superhero comics, passed around at stock camps, reinforced the ruinous episodic chases recounted in the songlines over which the stockman travelled, like the fire of vengeance Lungkarta the Blue-

12. Clark 1999, p. 219.
13. Arendt 1959, pp. 168-169.
14. Wolseley 2000.
15. Bardon 1989b, pp. 46-49.

tongue Lizard sent after his two Tjangala sons, a scene played out graphically across the central, monochromatic passage of Possum’s *Warlugulong*, 1977. Comencing with an explosive motif that shouts “KAPOW!” (Plate 98) nothing like Possum’s “progressive narrative sequence” had been painted before in Central Australia.¹⁶ Surely the representation of the brothers’ eventual consumption, and reduction to bleached bones where they fell, owes something to the comic artists who portrayed the Phantom at his ancestral home of Skull Cave? Correspondences between and across cultures were the stuff of desert discussions, whether they be on the syncretism of Indigenous religion and God’s creation via Leura’s personalised epistemology, or an analogy drawn by Kaapa between the tall poles erected at the centre of the ceremonial ground and telegraph poles, both of which, in his view, sent messages across the land to distant receivers.¹⁷ Papunya in the 1970s was a complex intercultural contact zone and the art generated by Kaapa, Leura, Possum and Warangula reflected both the complexity of the outback settlement and the artists’ extraordinary lived experience before they made Papunya their home.

This thesis does not aspire to be a comprehensive account of the development of Papunya Tula art. As has been acknowledged, the parallel impact of the Western Pintupi artists has not been considered, leaving a substantial outstanding facet for future study. Instead, I have documented key artistic episodes that trace the Central Australian strand of desert art history. Most of the artists concerned are Arrernte and Anmatyerr speakers from the Arandic cultural bloc, in the heartland of Central Australia. The presence and indeed the enduring reciprocal influence of the people of the Western Desert has been highlighted through a focus on Johnny Warangula, who, like Kaapa, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum, enriched Central Australia with their vision.

The abiding and intertwined subjects of Papunya Tula art — men’s ceremony and the artist’s association with Country — has its source in historical action. I traced the generation of the subjects, to the intercultural environment at Haasts Bluff where Albert Namatjira observed *ulerenye* (strangers) from the Western Desert, and visiting artists of European descent came to see and portray a “real black fellow” epitomised by Kamutu Tjungurrayi “in his natural state”.¹⁸ It was Kaapa who recognised the potential appeal of representations of the ‘real black fellow’ to a new generation of non-Indigenous workers at Papunya. His earliest paintings, such as *Gulgardi*, 1971, were conceived as if observing ritual at ‘ethnographic distance’, from the edge of the ceremonial ground. Next, Kaapa adjusted his point of view to produce planar icons that referred to totemic mosaics, painted directly onto a coloured ground. Following this breakthrough, Kaapa continued to experiment without the hindrance of Western perspective.

Residents of Haasts Bluff (and later Papunya) were familiar with Albert Namatjira and his sons and relatives as ‘landscape’ painters, and specialists in the representation of that other great subject of Central Australian art: Country. Through a process of inspired improvisations, Johnny Warangula pursued the evocation of his Land, far to the west, to establish another, more expressive strand in Papunya painting. Sometimes indivisible and at all times multivalent, the interplay of icons in light-filled compositions evoked the phenomenological experience of being on, in and continuous with Country.

This thesis demonstrates that the formation of Papunya Tula art resulted from the efforts of many individuals over the historical period. Rather than being stimulated by a single moment of ‘genesis’ (like the Caltex Art Award or *Honey Ant Mural*), I have demonstrated that the sophisticated pictorial language now associated with the Central Desert came about through cumulative collaboration and occasional sparkling innovation. The inventions of Kaapa, Leura, Possum and Warangula established conventions that have since been shared and adopted so widely that the individual effort behind their original creation has been lost in the overall recognition of Papunya Tula art. Over and above their instigation of this persuasive new way of representing Country, this thesis recounts how Kaapa, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum and Johnny Warangula reconfigured their inherited iconography to create compelling images according to their individual poetic sensibility.

16. Johnson 2003, p. 170.

17. Kaapa in discussion with the author, Papunya, 1984.

18. Battarbee cited in Hardy 1992, p. 150.

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Appendix 1

Glossary of Terms in Indigenous Languages*

Term	Language	Meaning
<i>akiw-arenye. akiwe'</i>	Anmatyerr	bush camp where men learn from the ritual experts; <i>arenye</i> means 'denizen of' or 'belonging to'
<i>amarleyarr</i>	Anmatyerr	post -initiate ceremonies; literally, 'travelling ceremonies'
<i>anteth</i>	Anmatyerr	blossoms dried and crushed, used for men's ceremony, and/or feather down used in decorations for men's ceremony
<i>Anangu</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	Aboriginal person
<i>anyenhenge</i>	Western Arrernte	clan estate
<i>apmere kwetethe</i>	Western Arrernte	literally, 'place eternal'; home
<i>arelh</i>	Anmatyerr	Aboriginal people/person
<i>arleyarr</i>	Anmatyerr	a young man who has just been through initiation ('young man') ceremony; a newly-initiated man
<i>artwe</i>	Western Arrernte	initiated man
<i>bir'yun</i>	Yolngu Matha	brilliance
<i>engwura</i>	Central Arrernte	post-initiatory ceremonies (archaic orthography).
<i>guruwari</i>	Warlpiri	marks or designs originating from ancestors (archaic orthography); now spelt <i>kuruwarri</i>
<i>ilpentye</i>	Anmatyerr	love magic
<i>irlpanter</i>	Anmatyerr	ground painting; ground mosaic
<i>kapi pulka</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	torrential rain; literally, 'water big'
<i>kanala</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	ceremonial ground

<i>kerenbanga</i>	Anmatyerr	ceremonial ground
<i>kuka</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	meat
<i>kutungula</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	manager of Country
<i>kutitji</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	softwood shield
<i>kwertengerl</i>	Anmatyerr	manager of Country
<i>kiirta</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	owner of Country
<i>merek-artwey</i>	Anmatyerr	owner of Country
<i>maliyarra</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	post-initiate ceremonies; 'travelling ceremonies'
<i>mer</i>	Anmatyerr	country/home/place
<i>mulga</i>	Kamilaroi	<i>Acacia aneura</i>
<i>ngurra</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	country/home/place
<i>rarrk</i>	Yolngu Matha	cross-hatching
<i>tjartiwarra</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	a ceremony of reconciliation associated with the site of Winparrku
<i>tjilpi</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	senior man/elder
<i>tjilpi tjuta</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	a group of old men
<i>tjukurrtjanu</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	arising from the Dreaming
<i>tulku</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	sacred; sacred object
<i>tywerrenge</i>	Anmatyerr	sacred; sacred object
<i>ulerenye</i>	Western Arrernte	stranger
<i>wamulu</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	blossom, dried and crushed for men's ceremony; feather down used for decoration in men's ceremony
<i>Winpa</i>	Pintupi/Luritja	Lightning; the Lightning Ancestor

*Terms for animal and plant species, site names, and kinship terms are not defined in this glossary. Indigenous terms used in quotations from other sources are not defined in this glossary unless they reappear in the text.

Appendix 2
Representative Sites Painted by Albert Namatjira
in Kukatja Country, 1936 to 1959*

Site Painted	Title of Painting	Collection	Date
Winparrku	<i>Kangaroo</i>	National Gallery of Australia	1936
Karinyarra	<i>Central Mount Wedge from MacDonnell Ranges</i>	National Gallery of Victoria	c1937
Iantji Spring	<i>Ajantzi waterhole, south of Mt Liebig, Western MacDonnell Ranges</i>	National Gallery of Victoria	c1937
Mereenie Range	<i>Mereenie Bluff Range, Western MacDonnell Ranges</i>	National Gallery of Victoria	c1937
Ulunparru (Mt Edward)	<i>Illum-baura (Haasts Bluff)</i>	Art Gallery of South Australia	1939
Mangeraka	<i>Mangeraka and the hunter</i>	Private Collection	1939
Ulunparru (Mt Edward)	<i>Central Australian Landscape</i>	National Gallery of Australia	c1944
Karinyarra	<i>Central Mount Wedge</i>	Queensland Art Gallery	1945
Talipate	<i>Talipate, Western MacDonnell</i>	Benalla Art Gallery	1945-1953
Ulunparru (Mt Edward)	<i>Haasts Bluff Range</i>	National Gallery of Australia	1948
Unyali (Haasts Bluff)	<i>MacDonnell Range</i>	National Gallery of Australia	1950
Ulunparru (Mt Edward)	<i>Haasts Bluff</i>	National Gallery of Australia	1956
Ulunparru (Mt Edward)	<i>Alumbaura northside from Papunya</i>	National Museum of Australia	1959

* See Map 2 for geographic locations of sites portrayed

Appendix 3
Artist's Studios and Painting Camps at and
Around Papunya, 1959 to 1975

Studio	Period	Artists
Namatjira's 'cottage', Papunya	1959	Albert Namatjira
Artists' camps on Country	1960s to 1971	Keith Namatjira, Joshua Ebatarinja and various watercolour landscape artists
Adult Education Facility	1964-1970	Unknown
'3 Mile' Outstation	Early 1971	Keith Namatjira and various watercolour landscape artists
'3 Mile' Outstation	Early 1971	Kaapa, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum, Johnny Warangula
The 'Old Settlement Office'	April – August 1971	Kaapa, Johnny Warangula, Long Jack Phillipus, Bill Stockman, Mick Namarari, Charlie Tarawa, Nosepeg Tjunkata Don Ellis
Veranda of Geoffrey Bardon's flat	July 1971	Uta Uta, Shorty Lungkarta, Timmy Payungka, Yumpululu, Anatjarri Tjakamarra and other Pintupi artists
Geoffrey Bardon's schoolroom	September 1971	Kaapa, Long Jack Phillipus
Men's Painting Room	Oct-Nov 1971	Various artists
Various camps around Papunya	Continuous	Various artists
Men's Painting Room	Feb-Nov 1972	Various artists
Yai Yai Outstation	1973	Pintupi artists

Appendix 4
Proposed Sequence of the First Consignment of Paintings by
Kaapa Tjampitjinpa Dispatched from Papunya to Alice Springs,
August 1971 (first to last)*

Title	Dimensions (cm)	Substrate	Collection
<i>Ceremonial scene (Mikantji)</i>	45.9 x 85.9	Yellow stained plywood	Museum and Art Galley of the Northern Territory
<i>The Ceremony at Waru</i>	47.5 x 60.5	Yellow stained plywood	Araluen Arts Centre
<i>Wana and Puliaba</i> [pulapa/public ceremony], <i>Or, Goanna and Corroboree at Mirkantji</i>	56.5 x 33.5	Opaque grey paint on plywood	National Museum of Australia
<i>Men’s ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi</i>	61 x 137	Opaque grey paint on plywood	Araluen Arts Centre
<i>Untitled</i> (signed KoYAA)	121.6 x 99	Opaque black on composition board	Art Gallery of South Australia
<i>Untitled</i> (signed KoYAA)	91.3 x 55.5	Opaque black on composition board	Art Gallery of South Australia
<i>Mikantji</i> (formerly untitled)	91.4 x 91.2	Blackboard paint on composition board	John and Barbara Wilkerson, New York

*This sequence is provisional and may be revised upon further detailed research. Moreover, there is a strong possibility that other works, such as Kaapa Tjampitjinpa’s *Untitled*, 1971, Queensland Art Gallery, and *Untitled* (signed “KoYAA”), 1971-2, Art Gallery Western Australia, were created in this sequence, but, as they were purchased by private customers at Papunya, they were not included in the first consignment.

Appendix 5
Sequence of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa’s Budgerigar Dreaming Series,
1972 (first to last)

Title	Sequence proposed in Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 278-281	Sequence proposed by this thesis
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 1	Version 3
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 2	Version 4
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 3	Version 8
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 4	Version 1
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 5	Version 2
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 6	Version 10
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Not illustrated by Bardon	n/a
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Not Illustrated by Bardon	n/a
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 7	Version 9
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 8	Version 7
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 9	Version 6
<i>Budgerigar Dreaming</i>	Version 10	Version 5

Appendix 6
Sequence of Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri’s
Honey Ant Dreaming Series, 1972 (first to last)

Title	Sequence proposed in Bardon & Bardon 2004, pp. 278-281	Sequence proposed by this thesis
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 1	Version 1
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 2	Version 3
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 3	Version 6
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 4	Version 7
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 5	Version 2
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 6	Version 4
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 7	Version 5
<i>Honey Ant Dreaming</i>	Version 8	Version 8

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Oral History

The author conducted a series of interviews with Papunya-based artists between 1984 and 1989 (listed below) in order to research and record biographical, cultural and art-related personal histories. This work was conducted under the auspices of the Arts Centre Melbourne and Tandanya: National Aboriginal Arts Centre and the resultant documentation is, at the time of writing, lodged in the South Australian Museum.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Interviewee</u>	<u>Interview Location</u>
1994	Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri	Trucking Yards, Alice Springs
1994	Kaapa Tjampitjinpa	Papunya
1994	Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra	Papunya
1994	Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi	Kintore
1989	Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri	Yamunturrngu

DOT, CIRCLE AND FRAME:

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Tim Leura, Clifford Possum
and Johnny Warangula
created Papunya Tula art**

VOLUME TWO

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John Malcolm Stewart Kean

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