

THE MYSTERIES THAT REMAIN:  
MICK NAMARARI TJAPALTJARRI

# Namarari In Focus

by Alec O'Halloran

This exhibition offers a turning point in our study and appreciation of the art of Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, but before we consider the paintings, let us remember their creator. Imagine for a moment we turn our gaze back in time and conjure Namarari sitting on bare ground at his desert outstation in the 1990s:

*The old man sits by a small campfire as the flickering flames bring warmth and comfort. A weathered hat shields his eyes from the morning sun's glare and his dusty jacket keeps the wind off his back. A blank primed canvas rests against his knee and pots of acrylic paint are at his side. Namarari rinses his brush in a tin can of clean water and flicks off the excess, singing quietly to himself, contemplating an image to bring to fruition. His left hand gently supports his right forearm as he leans forward and carefully applies a neat flowing line to begin the design he has imagined. Namarari strives to bring hand and eye into harmony... this is the artist in his studio.*

Namarari worked hard at his craft. He used his materials and imagination to produce paintings of quality in a variety of indoor and outdoor studio settings. He was patient and meticulous and willing to be adventurous with a brush in hand. Painting was a personally rewarding activity and a means of giving pleasure to others. And throughout his career, painting was an important source of income to meet family needs, though he personally accumulated few assets.

Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri (c.1923 - 1998) was a Pintupi man, born at Marnpi, a site about 330 miles west of Alice Springs. He learned essential survival skills in the desert with his family and later developed new work skills in the cattle industry. He spoke several Aboriginal languages and some English. His kinship and family networks were extensive, brimming with mutual obligations. Namarari was a traditional owner, a husband and father, a stockman (cowboy) and laborer long before he began making paintings at Papunya. In the 1980s he relocated to Kintore and an outstation near the important Dingo Dreaming site Nyunmanu, a short distance from Marnpi.

After visiting the Lutheran Mission at Hermannsburg as a child in the 1930s, Namarari began work as a stockman on Tempe Downs cattle station. He lived at Haasts Bluff during the 1940s and



*Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri. Image courtesy of Paul Sweeney.*



*Nyunmanu Outstation, Western Desert. Image courtesy of Alec O'Halloran.*



*Wallaby and Bandicoot Dreaming*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24." 1991.0006.001.

50s as it morphed from a rations depot into a small settlement of semi-permanent Aboriginal residents. Here he met his first wife, Wingulya Nakamarra, a widow with two young children. Namarari continued his cultural education with senior men and travelled to important sites in his traditional country that would later feature in his paintings.

The 1960s and 70s were a period of flux in the Australian Government's policies towards Aboriginal affairs. The government, which had committed itself to the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples, embarked on a program of social change. At the time Haasts Bluff's water quality was failing and the Commonwealth decided to relocate virtually the whole population to a settlement called Papunya. By 1960, Namarari and 400 others had been moved there.

Later in the 1960s, other Pintupi people continued to arrive from the west and Papunya's population spiralled to a thousand people. The crush of so many people and the assimilationist agenda made the place increasingly uncomfortable and unworkable, so Pintupi people agitated for a return to their traditional country. Consequently, the homelands movement sprang into life as assimilation was replaced with a more enlightened policy of self-determination. The transition serendipitously became enmeshed with a nascent painting movement locally and the land rights movement nationally. Beginning in 1971 with an enthusiastic schoolteacher named Geoffrey Bardon, several art advisors helped the men at Papunya to not only produce paintings, but crucially to market them beyond the confines of the community. In late 1972, with Bardon's pivotal support, a group of senior men established Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd, which remains the longest-running Aboriginal-owned art business in the nation. Namarari was a founding shareholder. As they do today, paintings affirmed and celebrated the mens' cultural affiliations to land and ceremony, which demonstrated that Aboriginal culture must be sustained, not subsumed. In addition to cultural and political meanings, painting itself was an enjoyable social activity that provided an escape from Papunya's tedium.

By the early 1970s, Papunya had become socially dysfunctional and many Pintupi people wanted to abandon the settlement and re-establish their families on traditional territory. Namarari and his close relatives departed Papunya in favor of outstations at Blackwater, Browns Bore and Mount Liebig, before finally relocating permanently to Kintore in the 1980s. All the while he continued to paint.

In the early years of Namarari's career, few collectors or galleries expressed significant interest in Pintupi painting. Fortunately, Papunya Tula's marketing network expanded in the late 1980s, beginning with Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne and Utopia Art Sydney in Sydney. They exhibited Namarari's art regularly and actively promoted Papunya Tula's output to private collectors and public institutions. Concurrently, gallery visitors, dealers and curators were being drawn to the aesthetics and the paintings' surface appeal rather than its ethnographic or cultural references. The market also yearned for stars, individuals who could stand apart from the group. Namarari grasped the creative challenge and took risks to leave behind the "traditional" iconography of Pintupi painting, such as concentric circles and lines, and forge a visual language that museum visitors more readily accepted as contemporary art. His career reflects a shift in Western Desert art history, when the original, culturally-dense iconography on small delicate boards gave way to more abstracted landscapes and narratives on large impressive canvases.

In the 1980s and 90s, Namarari attended exhibitions in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, acquiring first-hand a sense of how his paintings were displayed and received. Namarari's growing awareness that individuality was an advantage encouraged him, as he would say, to

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“paint ‘em different.” He realized that artists had a special freedom (in contrast to stockmen and laborers) to be innovative and to apply a personal touch to their work. His willingness to experiment and his capacity for masterly execution resulted in recognition, awards and sales. His success in the 1990s contributed significantly to Papunya Tula's reputation and expansion, and today he is rightfully regarded as one of their exceptional artists. His paintings are in significant public and private collections in Australia, America and Europe. He produced over 700 paintings across his career from early 1971 until his passing in late 1998.

In looking at the earliest work in this exhibition, *Man Corroboree* (1971-2), at the birth of the painting movement, two main forms dominate: an impressive cave structure with exquisite linear infill, representing men's body paint, and a less recognizable intricate web of dotting, line and circle work. Namarari's meticulous brushwork is evident here. The cave may be Mitukatjirri, an important ceremonial site south of Kintore. Early boards such as this carry references to ceremonial activity and the men often sang as they painted together at Papunya, calling up the *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) narratives that linked them to their distant sacred sites. In contrast to the cave's detailed form, *Sandhill Dreaming* (1972) has a parallel series of linked roundels that create a sense of rhythm and movement. Roundels typically indicate places such as caves, waterholes or hills. However, as is the case for so many of his early works, no further information was recorded at the time, and we are left with a nondescript title as our only guide.

In *Family Bush Tucker Dreaming* (1972) a prominent male figure faces the viewer. His hair, headband, beard and body paint are apparent. The negative space around the (assumed) family group remains blank, which serves to emphasize the people. This practice of leaving "empty space" later gave way to backgrounds of dotted and linear infill, which represented, in part, the artists' responses to Bardon's entreaty to "make 'em flash!" — that is, make the paintings dazzle and impress potential buyers. Dotted infill is apparent in the *Story of Corroboree at Tjilka* (1973). It portrays four *wati* (initiated men), an inclusion that was common in the early 1970s. Later, such paintings became rare due to a form of censorship based on concern that restricted imagery (sacred or secret) was being revealed to the uninitiated (women and children). In *Kangaroo Man Ancestor and Bush Tucker Dreaming at Walukaritji* (1973), Namarari depicts the kangaroo's footprints astride a flowing line that represents the animal's tail as it drags across the sand. This was his way of affirming the animal's presence in the narrative without drawing a detailed kangaroo figure, which might include restricted references associated with men's ceremonies.

In *Untitled* (formerly known as *Children's Story*) (1972) there are two scales at play. From a "bird's eye view" looking down, there is a place in the desert (the central roundel) and wavy traveling lines oriented to the four points of the compass, whereas the "close-up" perspective shows four sets of oval ceremonial objects called "boards" decorated with intricate designs. The scale from the bird's eye view is likely to be in miles; for the objects it may be inches and feet. Yet here Namarari has juxtaposed two perspectives in a confined space, suggesting that the place



*Man Corroboree*, 1971-2, acrylic on board, 25" x 18." 1991.0021.021.

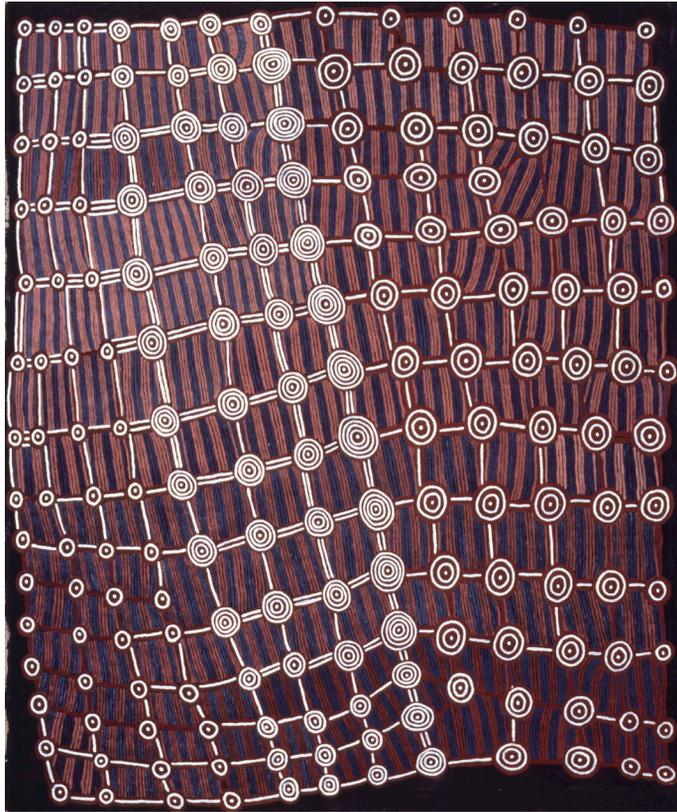
and traveling lines and the board designs are linked in his own mind, perhaps as aspects of the same *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming). Pintupi men such as Namarari learned to carve and design boards, among other objects, as part of their cultural education and ceremonial responsibilities. A man's ritual objects, the designs he inscribed upon them, his body paint designs, and the sites and *Tjukurrpa* with which they were intimately connected were elements of his authority, status and inheritance. They were interrelated aspects of his identity.

One of Namarari's strategies for producing large canvases was the repetition of a single motif. In *Two Kangaroo Dreaming at Marnpi* (1989), his composition is built upon the repetition of 106 skewed square shapes by first laying down a formative grid of wavy lines. The small skewed squares comprise alternating dotted bands in red and yellow, cascading into a central red block. A tiny patch of white dots reflects Namarari's penchant for establishing a pattern and disrupting it. He often used the repetition of a single motif as one of his departures from the classic Tingari circle-and-line compositions that dominated large 1980s Papunya Tula paintings.

The impact in *Wallaby Dreaming at Tjunginpa* (1990) is achieved through Namarari's linked white roundels foregrounded against darker infill. But rather than systematically linking all those roundels he leaves several floating free to create visual variety, entertaining the viewer's eye. Another Wallaby painting, *Wallaby and Bandicoot Dreaming* (1990) was painted at Mount Liebig, situated between Papunya and Kintore. The location alerts us to Namarari's mobility, as most records indicate he was residing at Kintore or its outstations through the mid-1980s and 1990s. This reflects one of Namarari's priorities: to be close to relatives and countrymen living at Mount Liebig. It also illustrates how paintings and their documentation are relevant to biographical research in addition to art historical purposes.

*Family Moon Dreaming* (1977) was one of six related works that Namarari produced as a commission during the making of the documentary film *Mick and the Moon* by Geoffrey Bardon in 1978. Bardon presented Namarari as the custodian of the Moon Dreaming and the paintings illuminated Bardon's proposition, though Namarari rarely painted Moon Dreaming works after that time.

In turning our focus toward Namarari's life and art, we see him more clearly. He constantly affirmed the value of his culture and painted with quiet determination for almost three decades.



*Wallaby Dreaming at Tjunginpa, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 53." 1990.7014.001.*

His working relationship with Papunya Tula created a comprehensive body of work and a rich legacy. As an artist living in a remote community, his cooperative manner earned him the encouragement and respect he needed to introduce his art to the nation. We acknowledge Namarari's contribution and his generosity as we appreciate his paintings. The mysteries that remain in the spaces between our questions and answers compel us to continue looking, wondering and enjoying, with gratitude and pleasure.

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Alec O'Halloran holds a Doctorate of Philosophy from the Australian National University and a Masters of Education, a Graduate Diploma in Adult Education, and Graduate Certificates in Art Curating and Indigenous Studies. He received Papunya Tula Artists' approval to research and write a biography of Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri. Alec interviewed members of Namarari's family and Papunya Tula art advisers who worked with Namarari between 1971 and 1998. Namarari's biography is due out in early 2018. Anyone with questions or interest may contact Alec directly at [alecopenhalloran@gmail.com](mailto:alecopenhalloran@gmail.com).



*Kangaroo Man Ancestor and Bush Tucker Dreaming at Walukaritji, 1973, acrylic on board, 34" x 23." 2008.0003.008.*

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