



BEYOND DREAMINGS

The Rise of Indigenous Australian Art
in the United States



Cover top: *Beyond Dreamings* installation image at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing works by **MICHAEL NELSON JAGAMARA, SHORTY LUNGKARTA TJUNGURRAYI, MICKEY DURRNG GARRAWURRA, CHRISTIAN THOMPSON, UNIDENTIFIED ARTISTS** and **REKO RENNIE**. Photograph by Tom Cogill.

Cover bottom: *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* installation image at the Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1988. Photograph by Roman Szechter.

BEYOND DREAMINGS

The Rise of Indigenous Australian Art in the United States

APRIL 20, 2018 - JULY 7, 2019

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LISA UHL, *Karrkapi*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas. 59 1/16 x 59 1/16 in. (150 x 150 cm).
Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Museum Purchase, 2017.

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DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

It is impossible to tell the story of Indigenous Australian art in the United States without mentioning what is commonly referred to as the *Dreamings* exhibition. In 1988, the Asia Society in New York partnered with the South Australian Museum in Adelaide to produce a groundbreaking touring show, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. For many Americans, this was their first exposure to Aboriginal Australian art. For John W. Kluge, the artworks in the exhibition generated such enthusiasm that he began building a world-class collection.

I had several occasions to talk with John about why he chose to collect Aboriginal art. Foremost among his reasons was a profound appreciation of the exceptional talent of Aboriginal artists and the belief that the world should see their artworks. He also said, somewhat dismissively, "I could have collected post-Impressionists, but everyone has those." If it weren't for John's wish to create something truly unique, Kluge-Ruhe would not exist and the University of Virginia would not be the home of the only museum dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture outside Australia.

During the thirty years since the *Dreamings* exhibition, and the twenty years that Kluge-Ruhe has been at UVA, much has changed in the world of Indigenous Australian art. *Beyond Dreamings: The Rise of Indigenous Australian Art in the United States* invites us to learn about *Dreamings* and its legacies. It positions us to reflect upon the moment when Aboriginal art entered the world stage and appreciate the expansive world of Indigenous art that exists today.

We thank our many colleagues and friends who advised and consulted with Henry F. Skerritt and his students on the curation of this exhibition. We are also indebted to a number of private collectors, including Greg Castillo, John and Barbara Wilkerson, and James Wolfensohn, whose loans have enabled us to include iconic paintings from the *Dreamings* exhibition and works by artists who aren't currently represented in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection.

The nine graduate students who curated *Beyond Dreamings* as part of Henry's course, *History, Modernity, Indigeneity*, knew very little about Aboriginal Australian art at the beginning of the semester. The exhibition and their essays in this catalog show how far they have come in a very short time. While gratified by their accomplishment, we hope this is but a beginning to a lifelong engagement with Indigenous Australian art and culture.

MARGO SMITH AM, Director of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection

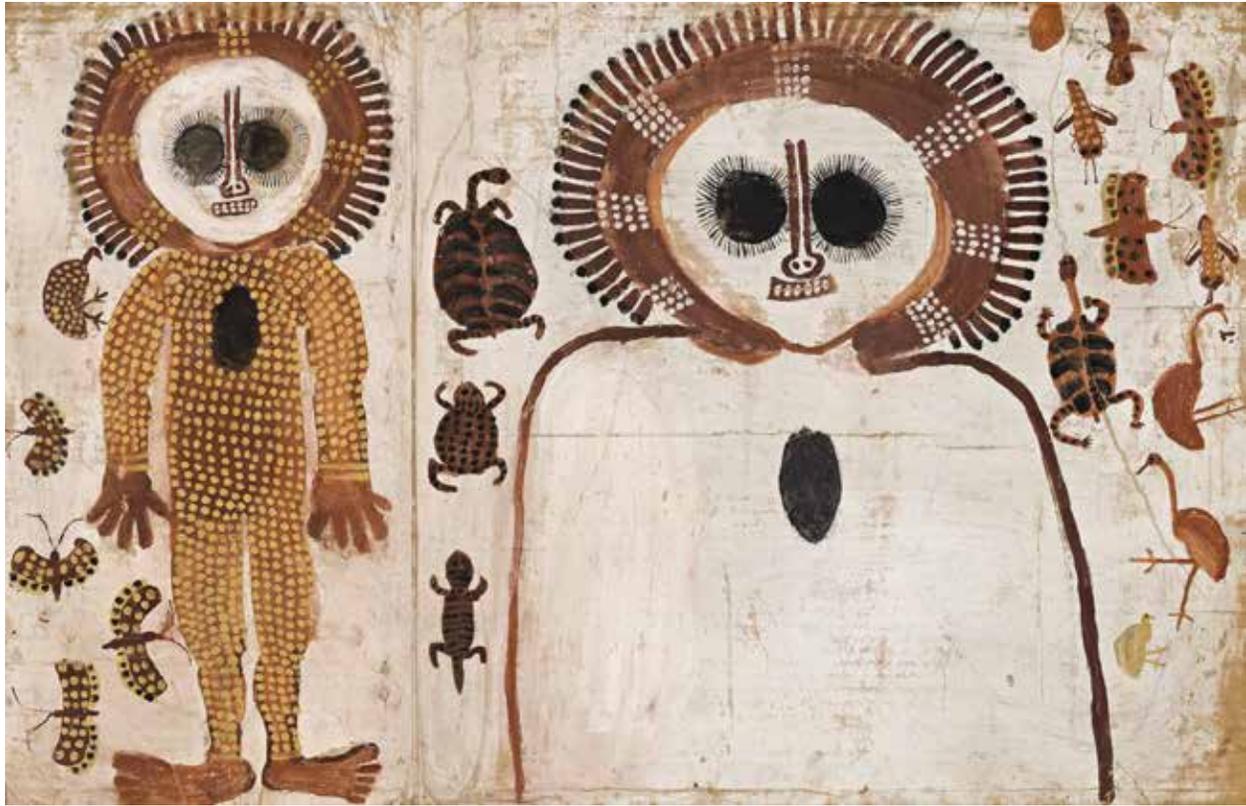
EDITOR'S PREFACE

The nine essays in this volume were produced as part of the graduate seminar *History, Modernity, Indigeneity* held in the McIntire Department of Art at the University of Virginia in Spring 2018. The seminar set out to critically examine the position of Indigenous arts in our current historical moment. Over the past three decades, a growing number of theorists have begun to discern that the changed cultural conditions of globalization have led to radically different models for understanding the world in which we live. Far from creating homogeneity—or “the end of history” that Francis Fukuyama predicted in 1989—our epoch has seen the rise of powerful counter forces, including post-colonial and Indigenous movements around the globe. Over the course of the semester, we attempted to critically situate Indigenous Australian art within the discourses of modernity and contemporaneity with the hope of developing a sharper understanding of the time in which we live.

One clear development of our time is the newfound appreciation of “curation” as a rigorous form of academic research. To this end, the students were asked to test their critical ideas through curating the exhibition that would become *Beyond Dreamings: The Rise of Indigenous Australian Art in the United States*. The prompt for the exhibition was to respond to the seminal exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, staged in 1988 by the Asia Society Galleries in New York in conjunction with the South Australian Museum.

Dreamings holds an important place in the institutional history of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, being the exhibition that introduced many Americans—and in particular, John W. Kluge—to Indigenous Australian art. Although it was something of a fortuitous coincidence that our seminar occurred in the lead up to the thirtieth anniversary of *Dreamings*, we could not have found a more pertinent subject for our endeavor. In 1988, the world stood on the precipice of global realignment—within the next year, the Berlin Wall would fall and the World Wide Web would be launched. In Australia, the bicentennial of the British invasion caused a profound reassessment of Australian identity. It is in this turbulent historical context that the legacies of *Dreamings* must be understood.

In reexamining *Dreamings*, our aim was not to produce an empty hagiography. Elements of the exhibition were clearly radical: most notably, its insistence on rejecting the false dichotomy of “art” and “ethnography.” Although curated by a team of non-Indigenous anthropologists, *Dreamings* set new benchmarks for community consultation and its catalog remains a foundational reference in the field. While recognizing these legacies, the essays in this volume also consider some of the exhibition's blindspots. Like any significant exhibition, time has served to both clarify its curators' foresight, while also revealing those developments that they either did not, or could not, have predicted. This in no way lessens the historical significance of *Dreamings*. In fact, I would argue, it is indicative of the complexity of the moment that *Dreamings* inhabited.



CHARLIE NUMBLEMOORE, *Untitled (Wandjinas)*, c.1970. Natural pigments on cardboard, 23 1/4 x 36 in. (59 x 91.5 cm). Collection of an anonymous charitable foundation.

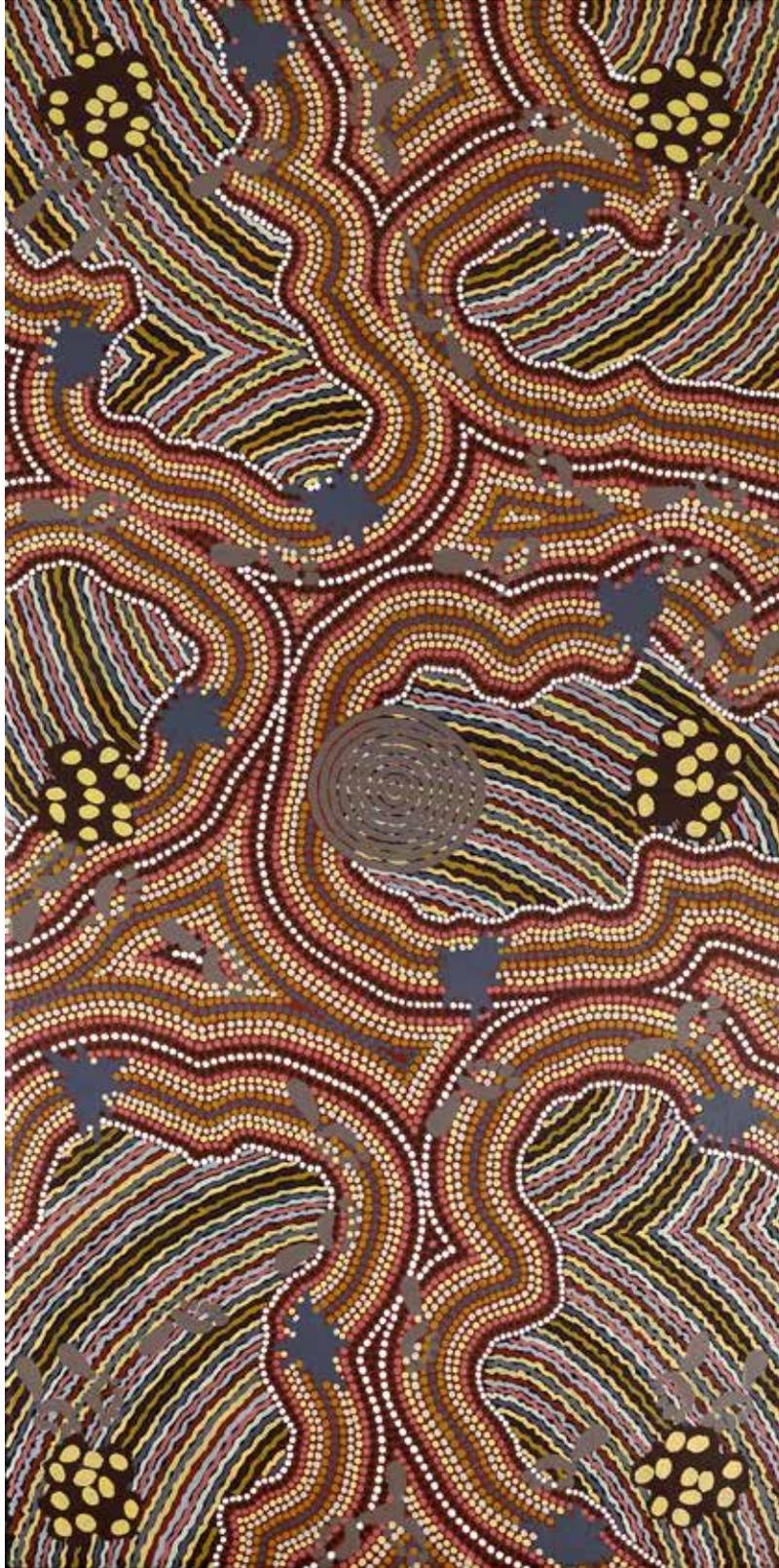
As part of the programming around *Dreamings*, the artists Billy Stockman Tjapaljtjarri and Michael Nelson Jagamarra created a sand painting in the auditorium of the Asia Society. During the performance, a befuddled viewer asked: “I’m going crazy. What am I viewing? Is this religion or art? Or a combination ... I’m in shock here.” In considering the legacies of *Dreamings* after three decades, the comments of this anonymous New Yorker seem particularly apt. When re-reading the catalog and reviews of *Dreamings*, and speaking to its curators and key interlocutors, a clear picture emerges. Everyone involved in the exhibition could feel the “historic” nature of the moment, but few could put their finger on exactly why. This is not surprising: the world was changing in ways that few could have imagined. It is only now coming into focus that this moment signaled not just the emergence of the new discursive paradigm of “contemporary art,” but also a new global condition of contemporaneity. If the essays in this volume suggest that this moment was neither stable nor singular, it is perhaps because the very terms of this new discourse were not only far from settled, but necessarily aporetic. If there is a defining feature of the contemporary epoch, it is our acute awareness that our world is composed of infinite and irreconcilable difference. The legacy of *Dreamings* might, then, lie less in its inherent radicality or conservativeness, than in its role in ushering a new era of indecipherability. “What am I viewing?” is a question whose relevance has only increased as contemporary art has become the paradigmatic art of our time. As we reflect on the past three decades of Indigenous art, we might consider how Indigenous Australian artists

have themselves embraced this paradigm, producing works that have expanded the boundaries of both Indigenous and global contemporary art.

I am deeply indebted to the nine graduate students who curated *Beyond Dreamings* for their commitment, energy and passion. During the course of the semester, we were privileged to be able to engage with a number of those involved in the original exhibition, as well as those who have followed in its path. We extend our sincere thanks to Peter Sutton, Christopher Anderson, Françoise Dussart, Fred Myers, Gabriel Maralngurra, Felicity Wright, Alex Ressel, Carol McGregor, Visessio Siasau, and James Tylor who offered their recollections, opinions, and guidance. Thanks must also go to the faculty and staff of the McIntire Department of Art who wholeheartedly supported this venture, particularly Larry Goedde, Carmenita Higginbotham, Douglas Fordham, Sarah Betzer, Sheila Crane, Laura Mellusi, and Amanda Wagstaff. This publication would not have been possible without the support of Edward Barnaby, Senior Assistant Dean for Graduate Programs and Phil Trella, Assistant Vice President for Graduate Studies at UVA.

Under the leadership of our director Margo Smith, the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection has committed itself to the principal that teaching and practical engagement is an integral part of our mission to expand knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian art and culture. *Beyond Dreamings* is the fifth student-curated exhibition staged at Kluge-Ruhe since 2015. Along with our robust internship program, these exhibitions are our contribution to shaping the museum professionals of the future. If *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* changed the ways in which Indigenous Australian art was viewed internationally, it is our hope that these emerging curators and art historians will continue this legacy, shaping a truly diverse, inclusive, and global vision of contemporary art. *Beyond Dreamings* suggests that the future is in good hands.

HENRY SKERRITT, Curator of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection



CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI, *Women's Dreaming at Napperby Lakes*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 27 in. (140 x 68.5 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997.

1988: The Scintillating Arrival of Aboriginal Australian Art in the U.S.

LUCIA COLOMBARI

The art world of the last thirty years has witnessed a proliferation of contemporary Indigenous Australian art in museum exhibitions, private and public collections, scholarly publications, and other cultural projects. “Aboriginal art is included today in the collections of every major art gallery and art museum in Australia,” wrote the anthropologist Howard Morphy, “and is one of the world’s most visible art forms. Its inclusion within the category of fine art is no longer challenged in Australia [...]”¹ It was not, however, until the 1980s that Indigenous Australian art was fully accepted as contemporary art. It was first necessary to frame it in aesthetic rather than ethnographic terms and to abandon the perception of Indigenous art as “primitive.” The shift in the art world’s attitude towards Indigenous art was a complex process that began decades earlier, finding its culmination within postmodern discourses on Western art. As the art historian Ian McLean suggests, “only after modernism itself was questioned during the 1970s and 80s, was the artworld in a position to see Aboriginal art in a new post-primitivist light.”²

Organized by the Asia Society Galleries in collaboration with the South Australian Museum, the exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, opened in New York in October 1988. The exhibition was instrumental in asserting the validity of Indigenous Australian art as contemporary fine art and nurturing its success on the international stage. *Dreamings* rapidly became the Asia Society’s most successful project to date. Following its New York showing, the exhibition traveled to four other major cities—Chicago, Los Angeles, Melbourne, and finally Adelaide.³ It was not the first time that Indigenous art from Australia was exhibited in an American institution.⁴ *Dreamings*, however, achieved a wider audience and was instrumental in changing the international regard for Indigenous Australian art.

Importantly, *Dreamings* occurred at the end of 1988, the year of the bicentenary of the British colonization of Australia. This was a historic moment when Australia was forced to reassess its colonial past, leading to a turning point in the recognition of Aboriginal cultures.⁵ In the wake of a postcolonial



Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia installation image at the Asia Society Galleries, New York, showing **TIM LEURA TJAPALTJARRI** and **CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI**, *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby Country*, 1980, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Photo by Roman Szechter.

phase following the Second World War, Australia sought to position itself within the Asian-Pacific region. The fashioning of a new national identity that included Aboriginal peoples became a necessary step towards repositioning Australia within this new geopolitical context. The 1988 bicentennial provided the opportunity for Australia to redefine itself as a diverse country that included European and Indigenous identities. Although several exhibitions took place in Australia for the bicentennial, most of which included Indigenous art, *Dreamings* at the Asia Society had a deeper international impact than any other national events occurring during the same year.

The curatorial process and the surrounding public programs of *Dreamings* played a pivotal role in Indigenous Australian art's conquest of the international art world. The exhibition design choices and interpretive materials guided visitors to appreciate the cultural background of the works, while simultaneously attempting to prevent the interpretation of the objects as merely ethnographic. The American anthropologist Fred Myers, a keen observer of the project, contends that thanks to the New York exhibition, "Aboriginal art emphatically acquired the status of fine art."⁶ By considering *Dreamings* in all its complexity, my intention is to show how the exhibition became a gateway through which Indigenous Australian art entered into Western-centric discourse, public reception, and, by extension, the art market.

Exhibiting Indigenous Australian Contemporary Art in New York

John Taylor, Consul-General of Australia in New York, and Andrew Pekarik, the director of the Asia Society, initially discussed the idea of an exhibition focused on Aboriginal Australian art. “I was initially skeptical of the idea,” wrote Pekarik in the catalog’s preface, “as I was completely ignorant of what Australian Aboriginal art is. Very little of it has been seen in America, and it is ignored in most histories of world art.”⁷ The opening of the exhibition at the Asia Society was not accidental but must be contextualized within the international commercial relations that Australia was developing. The Asia Society was a well-known New York non-profit institution founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller III. The initial intent was to promote in the U.S. a deeper understanding of Asian culture, and consequentially to assert its prominence in the new global political and economic scenarios. Four years later, the opening of the Asia Society Galleries allowed a further bolstering of the institution’s goal through the display of their art collections, the organization of temporary exhibitions, and other cultural activities.⁸ In a recent interview, the lead curator of the exhibition, Peter Sutton, recalled that the project concretely took shape in 1984. “The genesis of the project was probably a fundraising cocktail party in Manhattan hosted by the Asia Society, where Andrew Pekarik [...] met my sister Ruth Barratt [...]. He was thinking to do an Australian show [...], but he didn’t know anyone who he could rely on taking the task of curating it.”⁹ At the time, Sutton was head of anthropology at the South Australian Museum in Adelaide, and the two institutions soon started a fruitful collaboration. While Sutton focused on the curatorial project, Pekarik was in charge of the managerial aspects of the exhibition, including finding other institutions in the U.S. interested in hosting the show, and the fundraising campaign. The project received a significant grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and other American institutions provided additional support. Despite the difficulty in raising adequate funds for the exhibition, Peter Sutton deliberately avoided any money connected to the bicentennial celebrations, which most Indigenous Australians opposed.¹⁰

Under the guidance of Sutton, the curatorial team included the anthropologists Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, along with the historians Philip Jones and Steven Hemming. The fact that none of the curators possessed an art history specialization shaped the exhibition. “We saw the individual artists and the culture behind those works,” Anderson recently recalled, “and that was as interesting to us, if not more, than the work itself as a physical object.”¹¹ In 1987 the curatorial team organized a five-week-long trip to Aboriginal communities, in which Pekarik also participated.¹² It was a critical field trip to gather extensive documentation on the works and to consult with Indigenous artists and communities.¹³ The curators selected about one hundred objects for the exhibition, most of them from the South Australian Museum collection. *Dreamings* drew upon the best examples of bark and board paintings (Melville Island and Arnhem Land), acrylic paintings (Central Australia), shields (Central and South Australia), and sculptures (Lake Eyre region and Western Cape York Peninsula). Most of the works selected represented ancestral narratives commonly defined under the English term “Dreamings,” and most were created in the twentieth century.¹⁴ The strategy of the curators was to present bark and acrylic paintings as innovative contemporary art rooted in traditional practices. They also aimed “to explain the religious origins [of Aboriginal art], and also to develop a new, informed, and comprehensive understanding of the ways

that they communicate meaning and feeling, as well as of the significance of this art in the development of Aboriginal culture.”¹⁵ An appreciation of the objects’ aesthetic and forms also oriented the selection: “We wanted striking pieces,” Anderson noted, “ones that grabbed people’s attention without them necessarily even knowing any of the cultural backgrounds.”¹⁶ Although the curatorial intent was to focus on the best-known artistic regions and not to provide a complete survey as such, the exclusion of urban Indigenous artists was highly criticized. In this publication, Kelvin L. Parnell Jr. investigates this omission, examining the complexities of urban Aboriginality. The narrow parameters of the New York exhibition are also challenged by Eliza Hodgson, who analyzes how Indigenous artists have contemporized traditional practices such as shields and body ornaments.

Encountering the Exhibition

The monumental acrylic painting *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby Country* (1980) welcomed the visitors at the entrance of the Asia Society.¹⁷ (See page 10.) Created by Tim Leura Tjapaljarri with the assistance of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, it was one of the finest examples of artworks by the Papunya Tula Artist cooperative. Created using the “dotting” technique, elements of the landscape, like sand, leaves, and clouds constituted the backdrop to a sophisticated narration of the painter’s *Tjukurrpa* (Dreamings).¹⁸ The remainder of the exhibition was laid out over four rooms on two levels. The introductory panel specified that visitors would see “important examples of traditional Aboriginal painting and sculpture” and the overall display responded accordingly.

The art historian Michael Baxandall has argued that the act of exhibiting objects generates new insights upon them: “To select and put forward any item for display, as something worth looking at, as interesting, is a statement not only about the object but about the culture it comes from.”¹⁹ By advocating for an alternative way of looking at the artworks exhibited, the curators of *Dreamings* made a strong statement about Indigenous Australian culture. The challenge was to strike a balance between an aesthetically captivating display and the scholarly and didactic intentions of the exhibition. At a conference a few years after the exhibition, Sutton recalled how the curatorial team and the Asia Society “tried to walk that difficult road somewhere between the scholarly and the widely accessible.” He shared with the audience that “I initially had nightmares in which half the recipients of our efforts thought *Dreamings* was too obscurely academic and the other half thought it was just shallow popularization.”²⁰ In New York, the exhibition design was mainly conceived by the Asia Society’s team, echoing the curatorial intention of emphasizing the objects’ status as fine art. Artworks, texts, and visual explanations (photographs and videos), were all combined in the exhibition design to lead viewers towards a specific interpretation and experience of the works as artistic expressions. This was evident in the way the objects were displayed according to rules commonly applied to a modern fine arts museum. Artworks were presented individually in glass cases and separated from texts and labels, while neutral colors were favored for the walls. Explanatory panels introduced the exhibition sections. A label including the name of the artist, the title and other brief information identified each piece. The attribution of authorship may seem the norm in



DOLLY GRANITES NAMPIJINPA, FELICITY WRIGHT, JUNE WALKER NAPANANGKA, JIMMY WULULU, DAVID MALANGI and FRANÇOISE DUSSART in New York City, October 1988. Photograph by Chris Anderson.

fine arts shows, but the curators' determination to include this information for Indigenous Australian artists helped further transcend the boundary between artifact and art.²¹ The catalog emphasized this point by presenting a section dedicated to biographies of the artists.²² A video directed by the Indigenous Australian filmmaker Michael Riley (1960–2004) transported the public to the Aboriginal world, as well as providing further insights for a comprehensive understanding of the artworks and their origins. *Artforum's* critic Ronald Jones pointed out that the exhibition wisely “treated the aboriginal artists neither as tribal shamans nor as presages of the avant-garde.”²³

Framing *Dreamings*: Exhibition Catalog and Public Events

The importance of *Dreamings* was also reflected in the enduring legacy of its catalog. Due to its extensive circulation, it became a significant contributor to the re-definition of Indigenous Australian art as fine art.²⁴ While the book was initially produced to accompany the exhibition, it soon took on a life of its own, becoming a standard reference on Indigenous art of Australia. Peter Sutton and the other authors

conceived the volume for a large non-specialized audience. The book provided exhaustive explanations of the various artistic traditions, focusing, in particular, on bark paintings, acrylic paintings, and sculptures.²⁵ It aimed to provide the public with a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indigenous art and its cultural background. “The book itself was an aesthetically pleasing book to look at,” Sutton recalls, “we put a lot of effort into the writing, to make it intelligent and possibly fancy.”²⁶ *Five Stories* (1984), an acrylic painting by Michael Nelson Jagamara, appeared on the front cover, contributing to the catalog’s visual appeal. The book was lavishly illustrated with more than three hundred images, including one hundred and fifty color plates, numerous drawings, maps, and charts. In a review of the book, Pearl Duncan called it an “illuminating narrative,” adding “the authors successfully (and uniquely) achieved a historical treatment of Aboriginal Art.”²⁷ In his review of the exhibition for *Time* magazine, the art critic Robert Hughes contended that the curators “have produced in their catalog what may be the best short introduction to the Aboriginal world view now in print.”²⁸ Not all reviews of the catalog and exhibition were so positive. Tony Fry, for example, while recognizing that the publication was helpful for increasing the general audience’s understanding of Aboriginal art, questioned that it did not address critically the socio-political struggles that Indigenous peoples were still facing.²⁹ Nevertheless, years after the exhibition, the catalog remained popular in the United States and Australia. In a letter from 1993, the publisher Penguin Books Australia Ltd requested that the Asia Society extend their license due to the significant sales. “We are very keen to keep the book in print in Australia,” wrote the publisher “[...] and our sales have been very good, in excess of 12,000 copies since publication.”³⁰

Two events were instrumental in engaging the American public and making accessible the exhibition themes: a symposium and a sand-painting performance by the Aboriginal artists Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Michael Nelson Jagamara.³¹ As Myers points out, by integrating “distinctive identities” into the same social context, exhibition events became critical for the acknowledgment of Indigenous art.³² Five Aboriginal artists traveled to New York to participate in the symposium alongside experts on Aboriginal culture. Dolly Granites Nampitjinpa and June Walker Napanangka, both women acrylic painters from Yuendumu, joined the symposium, along with the bark painters Jimmy Wululu and David Malangi. The urban artist Kerry Giles also spoke, despite the omission of urban art in the exhibition. Christopher Anderson and the other anthropologists mediated the dialogue between the audience and the artists. This approach was partially due to linguistic difficulties, but more importantly, it was an explicit request of the artists, who contended they were there to represent their culture and not to engage with the audience.³³ Nonetheless, thanks to the symposium the five artists were able to share their culture and to express who they were in a public context. According to Myers, their presence was also “an important statement about the right of painters to represent their work and the political context of this work.”³⁴

Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Michael Nelson Jagamara’s performance lasted two days, during which they created a sand painting in an auditorium at the Asia Society. One of the curators, Christopher Anderson, who was involved in the organization of both events, recalled why they chose Tjapaltjarri and Jagamara to represent Aboriginal culture through the performance: “Both were from Papunya Tula and were involved in the earliest days of acrylic painting, and both were prolific artists. They spoke English pretty well and had

the cultural rights to do a sand design.”³⁵ The performance mingled elements of cultural demonstrations, spiritual ceremony, and artistic performance. A video directed by Fred Myers shows that explanations by the anthropologists, silent observation of artists at work, and active participation from the audience through questions and comments interspersed the making of the sand painting. The way the performance was staged, the introduction by the Asia Society—“This is a sacred ritual which the Aborigines do in secret”³⁶—and the fact that the artists did not want to talk directly to viewers, contributed to the audience’s mixed reactions. One visitor asked: “I’m going crazy. What am I viewing? Is this religion or art? Or a combination [...] I’m in shock here!”³⁷ In this volume, Clara Ma highlights the tension between the audience receptions and the performers’ intentions. Ma shines a light on how contemporary Indigenous Australian photographers continue to respond to these historically complex questions of representation by critiquing Eurocentric assumptions about Aboriginality that are preserved in museums and archives.

Tjapaltjarri and Jagamara’s performance brought considerable attention to the exhibition. *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* on PBS reported on the show, including an interview with both artists by Joanna Simon. Media coverage from journals and newspaper in the United States and Australia was also strong. The Asia Society counted about 27,000 visitors, its most popular show to date. *Time* magazine and *The New York Times* published reviews by Australian-born critics, providing interesting perspectives on the New York exhibition.³⁸ “It is strange that in the U.S., where every kind of primitive art [...] has been exhaustively studied and consumed, so little attention has been paid to Aboriginal art,” wrote Australian critic Robert Hughes. “Something so old is very new — at least in America,” he continued, “[...] its importance lies in the link between ancestral Aboriginal painting and its contemporary forms.”³⁹ The director Andrew Pekarik explained in an earlier interview how Aboriginal art had “tremendously complex intellectual and spiritual content that is generally lacking in the Western art.”⁴⁰ Critics in the U.S., however, often used Western aesthetic terms while reviewing the exhibition and compared the artworks to more familiar Western contemporary art. “Aboriginal art at its best is as powerful as any abstract painting I can think of,” reported Kay Larson in *New York Magazine*, “I kept remembering Jackson Pollock, who also spread the emotional weight of thought and action throughout the empty spaces of his canvases.” Despite a Western-modernist approach, the critic recognized the complexity of an Aboriginal art where “every painting is a meaningful complexity containing—literally—the cosmos in a web of signs.”⁴¹ Publications in Australia also showed considerable interest towards *Dreamings* and the impact it had on the American public. Writing in *The Australian*, Susan Wyndham and Peter Ward focused on the artists who took part in the events at the Asia Society and the reverberations of *Dreamings* on the art market. Interestingly, the authors underlined the visitors’ naïve engagement with the artists: “everyone seemed to be looking for some personal revelation way beyond art appreciation.”⁴²

Australian Identity at the Intersection of Art and Politics

In many ways, *Dreamings* took place at the perfect moment. The bicentennial inevitably raised political issues. Understandably, many Indigenous artists and communities considered events celebrating



Beyond Dreamings installation image at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing works by **LAWRENCE PENNINGTON, ANATJARI TJAKAMARRA, CHARLIE NUMBLEMOORE** and **EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE**.

the invasion of their land to be highly problematic, and thus attempted to overturn the bicentennial's nationalistic undertone. Art historian Terry Smith argues that Indigenous peoples did not want to "fit into an imposed, colonial, fabricated nationality," and in doing so they "radically subvert[ed] Western modernity's model of nationality as such."⁴³ Nevertheless, many bicentennial events were characterized by the participation of Indigenous peoples. Michael Nelson Jagamara was invited to create a mosaic floor for the Houses of Parliament in Canberra, opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1988. The mosaic marked a significant encounter between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous cultures. As Smith points out, Jagamara's public art seemed to be "a confirming embodiment of a broad cultural process, unfolding since 1970, through which works of art made by Aborigines have led the way in securing political gains for Aboriginal people."⁴⁴ The tangible political impact that Indigenous Australian art has had since *Dreamings*, particularly in the area of Native Title and land rights, is charted in Meaghan Walsh's essay in this catalog.

For Aboriginal communities, participation in the art world has always served multiple agendas: artworks are a media through which they can valorize their culture for non-Indigenous people, earn a living from a product of their own culture, and gain political recognition.⁴⁵ Perhaps paradoxically, this

recognition was amplified by many of the bicentennial cultural events engaging with Aboriginal art, including two national traveling art shows and the Sydney Biennale, which exhibited *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1987–1988) by the artists of Ramingining. As scholars M. Ruth Megaw and J.V.S. Megaw pointed out: “Aboriginal art seemed to be the visual arts Bicentennial flavor of the year.”⁴⁶ The major national event in 1988 was the *Great Australian Art Exhibition*, organized by the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide.⁴⁷ It traveled for more than a year to several national venues and included around three hundred works by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists.⁴⁸ The show aimed to position Indigenous art within the broader framework of Australian art.⁴⁹ The exhibition *The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia* had a similar goal. It was organized simultaneously with the World Expo that opened in Brisbane and featured 35 nations.⁵⁰ Organized in collaboration with the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, the exhibition consisted mostly of bark paintings from Arnhem Land, as well as some Western Desert acrylic paintings. The then director of the Queensland Museum, Doug Hall, declared that the project intended to go beyond the Expo: “The Gallery has made a commitment to develop further its Northern Australian Aboriginal and Islander Collection and to give it greater presence within the development and the display of the permanent collection.”⁵¹

The Seventh Biennale of Sydney echoed the new interest in Aboriginal art on an international stage. By giving particular emphasis to Australian modernists, often in dialogue with European and American counterparts, the Biennale tried “to come to grips with crucial problems of identity and creativity.”⁵² The exposition included *The Aboriginal Memorial*, an installation of two hundred painted poles traditionally used as bone coffins, made by the artists of Ramingining.⁵³ Though limited to this one installation, Aboriginal participation to the Biennale was impactful. *The Memorial* recalled two centuries of white colonization and emphatically evoked a war memorial for all the Indigenous peoples killed since the British invasion. Attempting to define Australian art as rooted in Indigenous culture, Nick Waterlow, director of the Biennale, wrote that “it is the Aboriginal presence that nourishes our [Australian] spirit.”⁵⁴ Scholars have often discussed in terms of “cultural colonialism” the attempt to incorporate Aboriginal art in the broader discourse over a unified nation-state.⁵⁵ However, as McLean suggests, Indigenous peoples have been able to contrast this form of neocolonialism by walking the fine line between preserving their own ancestral identities and facing Australia’s new nationalist aspirations.⁵⁶ During the bicentennial, contemporary Aboriginal art rose in recognition and popularity independently from the generic Australian art category. When *Dreamings* opened at the Asia Society in October 1988, the exhibition functioned as a symbolic locus to affirm Indigenous peoples’ selfhood within and beyond an imposed national identity.

Indigenous Australian Art after *Dreamings*

Dreamings was instrumental in redefining Aboriginal art as contemporary art and shaping its art world appreciation. According to Anderson, in 1988, “I think we were at the early stage where Europeans were certainly discovering the beauty and value of Aboriginal Art. [...] For the first time, big sections of the art world realized that you could no longer divorce the aesthetic from the intellectual and the cultural values

and beliefs that are underneath that.”⁵⁷ *Dreamings* overcame the art/ethnography divide by acknowledging the objects as artworks and expanding the aesthetic perception through an anthropological frame.⁵⁸

The 1988 exhibition also had an immediate impact on the market. As Eleanore Neumann recounts in her essay in this volume, sales of Aboriginal art, in particular Western Desert acrylic paintings, increased rapidly. *Dreamings* inspired the American businessman John W. Kluge and other collectors to start acquiring Aboriginal art. It also had a role in changing museum practices, influencing how institutions engage with Indigenous artworks and present them to the public.⁵⁹ Indigenous people began to curate exhibitions of their own people’s art. In her essay in this volume, Audrey Li describes the shifting terrain of museum practices in which *Dreamings* took place. *Dreamings* was followed by several major exhibitions that included Indigenous Australian art, including *Magiciens de la Terre* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989) and *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians* (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 1993). Aboriginal art was also featured in the Venice Biennale in 1990, with an exhibition of works by Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls. Although Indigenous artists have always engaged with non-traditional artistic media, they progressively increased the variety of techniques and practices during the 1990s. In her chapter, Lauren Van Nest discusses Arnhem Land bark painters, who in the early 1990s embraced Western fine art materials like paper, to preserve and reinvigorate traditional knowledge in a contemporary world. Cecilia Gunzburger concludes this exhibition catalog investigating the artistic process that influenced the rise of more abstracted paintings, particularly among Aboriginal women artists in the 1990s.

The impact of *Dreamings* exceeded the American art world. As Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis suggested, “these external developments undoubtedly change perceptions of Aboriginal art within Australia.”⁶⁰ More than any other national event surrounding the bicentennial, the success of their art in a global art world boosted Indigenous Australians’ struggles for social recognition, land rights and self-representation. At the same time, these successes were both partial and incomplete: many of the essays in this catalog reflect on the complexity, contradictions, and challenges that Indigenous Australians continue to face at both home and abroad. In a recent interview, the curator Peter Sutton commented that “the thing that I would like most to be remembered about *Dreamings* would be the combination of aesthetic power with intellectual substance, and that the intellectual substance was the cross-cultural creation of two different traditions: the Aboriginal intellectual tradition and the necessarily European one that I and the others brought to the curation.”⁶¹ Thirty years later, the legacy of *Dreamings* still endures.

NOTES

¹ Howard Morphy, “Seeing Aboriginal Art in the Gallery,” *Humanities Research* 8, no. 1 (2001): 39.

² Ian McLean, ed., *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2011), 32.

³ Exhibition itinerary: Asia Society Galleries, New York, Oct. 6–Dec. 31, 1988; David and Alfred Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, Jan. 26–Mar. 19, 1989; Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, May 13–Aug. 5, 1989; Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, Sept.–Dec. 1989; South Australian Museum, Adelaide, Feb.–Apr. 1990.

- ⁴ For example, in 1946 the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized *Art of the South Seas*, displaying works from Oceanic cultures; between 1976 and 1978 the exhibition *Art of the First Australians* traveled to several cities in the United States.
- ⁵ McLean argues: "The official success of Aboriginal art was cemented in 1988, largely because the Australian bicentenary year induced prolonged reflections by Australians on their identity, its past history and future possibilities." Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge University Press: 1998), 128.
- ⁶ Fred Myers, *Painting Culture. The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 235. Fred Myers dedicated several other essays to Dreamings. See in particular: "Culture-Making: Performing Aboriginality at the Asia Society Gallery," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (1994): 679-99; "Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (1991): 26-62; "The Complicity of Cultural Production: The Contingencies of Performance in Globalizing Museum Practices," in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, eds. Ivan Karp et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006): 504-35.
- ⁷ Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings. The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: G. Braziller, 1988), ix.
- ⁸ <https://asiasociety.org/>; NEH grant proposal, section "The Asia Society: A profile." Thanks to Fred Myers for sharing these documents with me.
- ⁹ Peter Sutton, interview with the author, February 27, 2018.
- ¹⁰ Peter Sutton, interview with the author, February 27, 2018. For a more articulate account of the fundraising campaign in Australia, see Myers, *Painting Culture*, 243-45; Susan Wyndham and P. Ward, "Dreamtime in Manhattan", *Australian Magazine* (December, 17-18, 1988): 45-46.
- ¹¹ Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ¹² Andrew Pekarik later published an account of his trip. See Andrew Pekarik, "Journeys in the Dreamtime," *Archaeology* 41, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1988): 46-52.
- ¹³ Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ¹⁴ The term "Dreaming" describes the diverse set of cosmological beliefs that vary by language group in Australia.
- ¹⁵ NEH grant proposal, section "Narrative."
- ¹⁶ Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ¹⁷ Tjapaljarri and Tjapaltjarri's artwork has gone through numerous titles over the years. While *Possum Spirit Dreaming* is how it appears in the 1988 exhibition catalog, today it's probably better known as *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* or *Spirit Dreaming Through Napperby Country*.
- ¹⁸ Sutton, ed., *Dreamings. The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 225.
- ¹⁹ Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 34.
- ²⁰ Peter Sutton, "Dreamings: The Story Thus Far," *Bulletin of the Conference of Museum Anthropologists*, no 23 (1990): 178.
- ²¹ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83.
- ²² Sutton, ed., *Dreamings. The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 235-242.
- ²³ Ronald Jones, "Lifesaving in the Acrylic Age," *Artforum International* 27, (February 1989): 115.
- ²⁴ Fred Myers, interview with the author, March 16, 2018.
- ²⁵ Sutton, ed., *Dreamings. The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 1.
- ²⁶ Peter Sutton, interview with the author, February 27, 2018.
- ²⁷ Pearl Duncan, "Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia by Peter Sutton" *Aboriginal History* 12, no. 1/2 (1988): 199-200.
- ²⁸ Robert Hughes, "Evoking the Spirit Ancestors" *Time* (31 Oct. 1988): 80.
- ²⁹ Tony Fry, "Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia by Peter Sutton — Reviewed Work(s)," *African Arts* 23, no. 3 (July, 1990): 92.
- ³⁰ Letter from the publisher to the Asia Society, The Rockefeller Archive Center. Thanks to Henry F. Skerritt for sharing the records with me.
- ³¹ The symposium took place on October 22-23, 1988 and the performance by Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Michael Nelson Jagamara took place on November 4-5, 1988.
- ³² Myers, "The Complicity of Cultural Production," 510.
- ³³ Fred Myers, interview with the author, March 16, 2018. Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ³⁴ Myers, "The Complicity of Cultural Production," 517.
- ³⁵ Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ³⁶ *From the Dreamings*, a video by Elaine Charnov, Faye Ginsburg, Meg McCullough, Fred Myers, and Paul Parker.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Thomas Keneally, "Dreamscapes: Acrylic Lend New Life to an Ancient Art of the Australian Desert," *New York Times Magazine* 138 (November, 13, 1988): 52; Hughes, "Evoking the Spirit Ancestors," 79-80.
- ³⁹ Hughes, "Evoking the Spirit Ancestors," 79.
- ⁴⁰ *The Australian*, August 8-9, 1987, quoted in Nicholas Baume, "The interpretation of Dreamings: the Australian Aboriginal acrylic movement," *Art & Text* 33, (1989): 112.

- ⁴¹ Kay Larson, "Their Brilliant Careers," *New York Magazine* (October 24, 1988): 148.
- ⁴² Susan Wyndham and P. Ward, "Dreamtime in Manhattan", *Australian Magazine* (December, 17-18, 1988): 39.
- ⁴³ Terry Smith, "Public Art between Cultures: The *Aboriginal Memorial*, Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 636.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 629.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*; Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ⁴⁶ M. Ruth Megaw and Megaw J.V.S., "Black Art and White Society: Some Bicentennial Observations on Contemporary Aboriginal Art," in *Artistic Heritage in a Changing Pacific*, eds. Philip Dark and Roger Rose (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993) 162.
- ⁴⁷ Reference to the exhibition catalog: Daniel Thomas et al., *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art, 1788-1988* (Sydney: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1988).
- ⁴⁸ The Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788-1988, held at the Queensland Art Gallery, May 17-July 17, 1988, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Aug. 12-Sept. 25, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Oct. 21-Nov. 27, Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Dec. 21, 1988-Feb. 5, 1989, National Gallery of Victoria, March 1-April 30, Art Gallery of South Australia, May 23-July 16.
- ⁴⁹ McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 41.
- ⁵⁰ April 30-October 30, 1988. The formal title was: Brisbane Exposition and South Bank Redevelopment Authority (BESBRA). See Peter Carroll, "The Origins of Expo 88," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 48, no. 1 (1989): 41-52.
- ⁵¹ Margie K. C. West and Queensland Art Gallery, Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory and Expo (International Exhibitions Bureau) eds., *The Inspired Dream: Life As Art In Aboriginal Australia* (South Brisbane, Qld., Australia: The Gallery, 1988): 7.
- ⁵² Biennale of Sydney, 1988 *Australian Biennale: from the Southern Cross: a view of world art c. 1940-88* (Crows Nest, NSW: ABC Enterprises for the Australian Broadcasting Corp., 1988), 9.
- ⁵³ Thanks to the support of the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the exhibition was in Sydney from May 18-July 3, 1988 and later traveled to the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, from August 4 to September 18 of the same year.
- ⁵⁴ Biennale of Sydney, 1988 *Australian Biennale*, 230 and 12.
- ⁵⁵ McLean, *White Aborigines*, 116. Imants Tillers, "Locality Fails," *Art&Text*, 6, 1982, 53 (quoted in McLean, 116).
- ⁵⁶ Ian McLean, "Contemporaneous Traditions: The World in Indigenous Art/ Indigenous Art in the World," *Humanities Research* 19, no. 2 (2013): 60.
- ⁵⁷ Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ⁵⁸ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 93.
- ⁵⁹ Christopher Anderson, interview with the author, March 9, 2018.
- ⁶⁰ Tony Fry and Anne Marie Willis, "Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success?" *Art in America* 77, vol. 7 (1989): 111.
- ⁶¹ Peter Sutton, interview with the author, February 27, 2018.

Presence and Representation: The Rise of Indigenous Agency in 1980s Museum Exhibitions

AUDREY LI

When *Dreamings* opened at the Asia Society in New York City in October 1988, it achieved an unprecedented level of success.¹ It was the first major exhibition of Aboriginal Australian art in the US, and marked a milestone for its international reception. While the reasons behind the success of *Dreamings* and its role in bringing international attention to Indigenous Australian art are important aspects of the exhibition's legacy, the exhibition should also be situated within changing institutional attitudes towards the presentation of Indigenous and non-Western art forms. Understanding the legacies of *Dreamings* requires situating it within the broader context of exhibition history in the 1990s. In this context, two key concerns can be discerned: firstly, the repositioning of Indigenous objects as fine art; and secondly, the increasing agency of Indigenous peoples in the curation and development of museum exhibitions.

By the early 1980s, Euro-American modernism was giving way to what is now generally referred to as “contemporary” art.² For many commentators, one of the central characteristics of contemporary art is its responsiveness to global conditions rather than focusing on the Western canon.³ Art historian Ian McLean notes that “the escape from the Western modern to the global contemporary occurred at the same time that the art world discovered Aboriginal art.”⁴ But the world's “discovery” of Indigenous Australian art was not a “discovery” at all. McLean's argument suggests a co-option of Indigenous art into contemporary art, discounting the agency of the artists in infiltrating the contemporary art world. In fact, Indigenous artists have always been present in, and responsive to, the changing art world, finding innovative ways to engage with the present conditions of artistic production and reception.

While the agency of Indigenous artists in the contemporary art world should not be overlooked, it is also important to recognize the agency exerted by the presence of the artworks themselves. Possessing incredible visual appeal and conceptual sophistication, the presence of Indigenous artworks in the



Unidentified Māori visitor and New York Mayor Edward Koch engage in the traditional *Māori* greeting, the *hongi*, at the opening of *Te Māori* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, September 1984. On the right is the academic and politician Sir Pita Sharples.

modern museum often served to resist the curatorial forces that sought to subsume them. The insertion of Indigenous art into the world of fine art brought attention to the disjunctive ways in which these different traditions had been previously received, highlighting the colonial nature of Western conceptions of art. The very presence of Indigenous artworks in the fine art museum forced a discursive shift that allowed a type of visibility independent of the museum's curatorial agenda.

During the 1980s, the agency of Indigenous artists and their artworks became increasingly difficult to ignore in museum exhibitions. A series of 1980s exhibitions including "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984); *Te Māori: Māori Art from New Zealand Collections* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984); *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1988), and *Magiciens de la terre* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989) opened spaces for Indigenous self-representation that laid the foundation for an outpouring of Indigenous agency in museum exhibitions over the subsequent decades. While the shortcomings of these exhibitions have been well documented, they nevertheless provided an important new platform for Indigenous artists in the museum. Once the artists had established their presence, it became increasingly clear that their artworks needed to be read on their own terms. The ability of the artworks to speak for themselves exerted presence and forced the re-consideration of Indigenous objects as fine art.

“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern

Primitivism opened on September 27, 1984, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. Curator William Rubin organized the exhibition in conjunction with New York University Professor Kirk Varnedoe in an attempt to showcase the artistic influence of non-Western objects on modernist artworks. Included in the exhibition were around one hundred fifty European modernist works, with a particular emphasis on artists, such as Gauguin, Picasso, and Klee. Over two hundred so-called “tribal objects” from Africa, Oceania, and North America were also included. Critics denounced the exhibition for the ways in which it reinforced rather than reevaluated the colonialist relationship between Western and non-Western art.⁵ Nonetheless, as an influential institution, MoMA provided a significant platform for visualizing a relationship between Western and non-Western art. In addition, the works were put in the context of fine art, which demanded a reevaluation of their status. Works such as the Nukuoro statue from Caroline Islands and the Baining Mask were presented as exceptional examples of Indigenous fine art, evaluated for their own merit.⁶ While the recognition of individual Indigenous artists was not yet present in *Primitivism*, the agency of the artworks was impossible to overlook.

As these objects that were previously considered “ethnographic” were repositioned as fine art, they forced a discursive shift that “put non-Western art at the heart of the postmodern critique of modernism for the rest of the 1980s.”⁷ Despite going against the intentions of the curators, *Primitivism* pushed art away from a Western modernist discourse towards a global contemporary one. Despite its curators’ intentions, *Primitivism* challenged the Eurocentrism of Western modernism and initiated an important conversation about the intricate relationships between Western art and non-Western/Indigenous art.

Te Māori: Māori Art from New Zealand Collections

The same month that *Primitivism* opened at MoMA, *Te Māori: Māori Art from New Zealand Collections* opened uptown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met). Organized by the American Federation of Arts in collaboration with the government of New Zealand, the Māori people, and several New Zealand museums, the exhibition was introduced as the “first international exhibition devoted exclusively to Māori art, one in which all of the objects have been borrowed from the land where they were created.”⁸ The exhibition included a total of 174 *taonga* (treasures) made of a variety of mediums including wood, jade, bone, and ivory. After successfully exhibiting at the Met, the exhibition toured several US cities including St. Louis, San Francisco, and Chicago, before returning to New Zealand in 1986. The Māori community saw the exhibition’s success overseas as a victory. When it returned back home, it was enthusiastically embraced by the Māori. *Te Māori* also marked a shift in which Māori objects were repositioned as fine art.⁹ Art historian Conal McCarthy noted, “The museum’s intention was clearly to display these objects primarily as art...[they] were displayed as primitive sculpture, placed against clear glass vitrines or white walls in such a way as to emphasize their formal qualities.”¹⁰ While the exhibition marked a significant turning point for Māori art, it did not escape criticism. Some critics thought displaying the works



MICHAEL NELSON JAGAMARA, *Five Stories*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 47.625 x 71.625 in. (121 x 182 cm). Collection of an anonymous charitable foundation.

as fine art was “cold” and “lacked life.”¹¹ Anthropologist James Clifford argued that the “Māori allowed their *taonga* to be appropriated as art in order to enhance their national claims.”¹² Clifford saw the repositioning of Māori works as fine art as a strategic step to assert Māori power in the political realm. It established Māori as an equal partner with the Pākehā (non-Māori) in the New Zealand political landscape, and spoke to the increase of Māori agency in their representation in the museum.

While the debut of Māori works as fine art was indisputably significant, the real revolution of *Te Māori* lay in the involvement of Māori voices in the planning of the exhibition. Māori scholars such as Hirini Moko Mead played a central role on the organizing committee, as well as authoring texts in the catalog and exhibition.¹³ Māori voices had a physical presence in the exhibition space as well. The exhibition employed Māori people as gallery guardians and guides—something which was particularly pronounced in the New Zealand versions of the exhibition.¹⁴ This produced a ripple effect that irrevocably changed how museums in New Zealand displayed Māori works in their galleries.¹⁵

Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia

As the first major introduction of Aboriginal Australian art to American audiences, *Dreamings* transformed the way Americans viewed Indigenous Australian art. It also marked a turning point in the reframing of Indigenous Australian art as contemporary art. Indigenous Australian artists were enthusiastic about the exhibition and what it could do for their communities.¹⁶ Like *Te Māori*, this speaks to the agency of Indigenous Australian artists in their representation. *Dreamings* also occurred at a critical moment of realignment in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.¹⁷ Following the criticisms leveled at *Primitivism*, it was no longer appropriate for exhibitions to exclude the involvement of the communities they were representing. The curatorial team led by anthropologist Peter Sutton undertook extensive efforts to consult Aboriginal artists and elders about the artworks in *Dreamings*, seeking permission to ensure to exhibit only works that were allowed to be made public by Aboriginal law.¹⁸

The timing of *Dreamings* was particularly critical. Australia had become increasingly popular by the 1980s, with the Hollywood film *Crocodile Dundee* (dir. Peter Faiman, 1986) showing in American theaters and inspiring a wave of tourism.¹⁹ In an interview, Sutton recalls that Andrew Pekarik, director of the Asia Society, had sought to expand the Society's repertoire of East Asian projects around this time by featuring a show with an Australian emphasis.²⁰ Pekarik himself acknowledged the role of America's predilection for Australia in the success of *Dreamings*. "Australia has a friendly image. Australia means koala bears, barbecues, Paul Hogan—all those nice things," he explained.²¹ Capitalizing on this newly sparked American curiosity and fondness for Australia, the Asia Society brought *Dreamings* to the world stage at the right time.

As part of the exhibition's programming, artists Michael Nelson Jagamara and Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri came to the Asia Society to perform a live sand painting. According to Fred Myers, an anthropologist who documented the event, "Their purpose in agreeing to go to New York was to show people the truth of the Dreaming and to gain recognition for their art and culture. In doing so they demonstrated their cultural authority and indicated the vital presence of Indigenous knowledge and its value in contemporary Australia."²² Performance became a way for artists to take control of how they presented themselves. It negotiated a level of agency for the artists that surpassed *Primitivism* and, in some ways, even matched *Te Māori*.

Magiciens de la terre

A year after *Dreamings*, the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* opened its doors to visitors at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, it was billed as the "first truly international exhibition, bringing together artists from all over the world."²³ The exhibition included fifty artists from Western countries and fifty artists from non-Western countries. According to the media release, artists were chosen based on these criteria: "those whose work has developed in a radical way within the context of their own



TOMMY LOWRY TJAPALTJARRI, *Two Men's Dreaming at Kuluntjarranya*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 47 5/8 x 71 5/8 in. (121 x 182 cm). Collection of John and Barbara Wilkerson.

tradition, those who have consistently reflected on relations between different cultures, [and] those whose methods of working can adapt themselves to the specific conditions of the exhibition."²⁴ In doing so, the exhibition encouraged a cross-cultural engagement among a diverse range of artists and artworks.

Some scholars have claimed that *Magiciens* responded to MoMA's *Primitivism* in a "diametrically opposed" manner.²⁵ Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud was taken with the fact that "for the first time in a long while, a curator has forced us to rethink art in time and space, re-examine our values and our understanding of the word 'art.'"²⁶ Bourriaud has debunked the assumption that Indigenous artists were unaware of what was happening in the exhibitions and institutions, and highlighted their agency in *Magiciens*. However, many scholars, such as Ivan Karp, do not hold a sympathetic view of the exhibition, noting the lack of curatorial progress from *Primitivism* to *Magiciens*. For example, Richard Long's *Red Mud Circle* was criticized for privileging the Western canon by being placed above the Australian sand-sculpture *Yam Dreaming* by artists from Yuendumu.²⁷ In contrast, Terry Smith, an Australian art historian, has maintained that despite the distinguishable flaws in the exhibition, there was merit in its attempt to provide a platform for non-Western artists to make their work visible. He noted that the exhibition offered "the first European foothold to artists from outside the West, one that they and many others have since built into a global platform."²⁸ Indeed,

while imperfect, *Magiciens* gave non-Western and Indigenous artists agency by giving them an opportunity to present themselves. Their artworks exerted agency in their ability to disrupt the museum and Western conception of art. This process of creating spaces in the museum to allow non-Western and Indigenous agency, although incomplete, helped destabilize the hegemony of the Western canon. *Primitivism, Te Māori, Dreamings*, and *Magiciens* facilitated the entrance of Indigenous artists to the world stage. McLean notes, since these exhibitions, “the global art of postcolonialism was suddenly on the scene.”²⁹

These four exhibitions from the 1980s were landmark exhibitions because they forced a reevaluation of Indigenous art while opening spaces for increased Indigenous agency and self-representation. The repositioning of Indigenous works as fine art and the increase of Indigenous voices in museum exhibitions enshrines these exhibitions’ legacies. Understanding this exhibition history is not only essential to any reconsideration of *Dreamings*, but sheds light on an important historical period of changing institutional attitudes towards Indigenous art. While *Dreamings* was curated by a team of non-Indigenous curators, it opened the door to a future of increased Indigenous curatorial involvement in their own representation. Today, most Indigenous public collections in Australia are led by Indigenous curators such as Nici Cumpston (Art Gallery of South Australia), Cara Pinchbeck (Art Gallery of New South Wales), and Carly Lane (Art Gallery of Western Australia). To recognize the enduring impact of *Dreamings* is to recognize the rise of Indigenous agency in Indigenous contemporary art.

NOTES

- ¹ See Paul Taylor, “ART: Primitive Dreams Are Hitting The Big Time,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1989.
- ² See for instance, Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012) or Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).
- ³ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 28.
- ⁴ Ian McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (Sydney, N.S.W: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011), 334.
- ⁵ McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 334.
- ⁶ MoMA, media release, August, 1984.
- ⁷ McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 53.
- ⁸ MoMA, media release, August, 1984.
- ⁹ McCarthy, *Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 145.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 142.
- ¹³ “‘Te Māori: Māori Art from New Zealand Collections’ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, September 11, 1984–January 6, 1985,” *Pacific Arts Newsletter*, no. 20 (1985): 33–36.
- ¹⁴ “Te Māori exhibition opens in New York”, URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/te-Māori-exhibition-opens-in-new-york>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 3-Aug-2017.
- ¹⁵ Amiria Henare, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange* (Cambridge, UK, New York: Cambridge University Press), 2005, 270–273.
- ¹⁶ Fred Myers, Video footage of the *Dreamings* exhibition, 1988.
- ¹⁷ Smith, “Public Art between Cultures: The “Aboriginal Memorial,” Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia.” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 629–61.
- ¹⁸ See the exhibition catalog by the Asia Society and Peter Sutton, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: G. Braziller in association with Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 2.
- ¹⁹ See “How ‘Crocodile Dundee’ Changed Tourism in Australia | Travel + Leisure.” n.d. <http://www.travelandleisure.com/culture-design/tv-movies/crocodile-dundee-australia-tourism>.

- ²⁰ Peter Sutton, Phone interview, 27 February, 2018.
- ²¹ See Taylor's "ART; Primitive Dreams Are Hitting The Big Time."
- ²² Myers, Video footage, 1988.
- ²³ See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's "The Whole Earth Show: An Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin," *Intense Proximity: an Anthology of the Near and the Far* (2012): 331-341.
- ²⁴ See Centre Pompidou, *Magiciens de la terre*, media release, January, 1989.
- ²⁵ See Hans Belting's *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe, Germany: Cambridge, MA; London, England: ZKM/Center for Art and Media; The MIT Press, 2013), 66.
- ²⁶ McLean, "Surviving 'The Contemporary': What Indigenous artists want, and how to get it," *Contemporary Visual Art + Culture Broadsheet* 42, 3 (2013): 169. McLean references Bourriaud's "Magiciens De La Terre" in *Flash Art* 148, 1989: 120.
- ²⁷ See Ivan Karp, "How Museums Define Other Cultures," *American Art* 5, 1/2 (1991): 10-15.
- ²⁸ See Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 118.
- ²⁹ McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 53.

Making Their Own Mark: Collecting Indigenous Australian Art in the U.S. since *Dreamings*

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Dreamings catalyzed the collecting of Indigenous Australian art in the United States. Donald P. Kahn, John W. Kluge, and Will Owen and Harvey Wagner all began acquiring Aboriginal art as a consequence of the groundbreaking exhibition. The anthropologist Fred Myers said, “The show was very significant for [Kluge], but also a lot of other buyers in that ... [it] produced this sort of ripple effect.”¹ Another wave of collectors emerged in the 1990s who, like their predecessors, were enthralled by the abstract acrylic paintings from Australia’s Western Desert. Alongside and in response to this swell of interest, by the late 1980s a flourishing art market arose first in Australia and then the U.S. As they acquired more work, the collectors directed their energy towards sharing Indigenous Australian art with the American public through exhibitions and catalogs that were influenced by *Dreamings*. Many of these collections have ultimately been given to university and public art museums in the United States thereby extending the institutional legacy of *Dreamings*.

Private Collecting in the 1980s

The first two major collections of Aboriginal art in the US predated *Dreamings*. Dr. Edward (Ed) L. Ruhe (1923–1989), a professor of English literature at the University of Kansas, began collecting while a Fulbright scholar in Australia in 1965.² By the time of his death in 1989, he had formed one of the largest private collections of Aboriginal art in the world. With bark paintings, sculptures, carvings, and artefacts dating from the 1950s through the 1980s, the Ruhe collection was also one of the most extensive.³



SHORTY LUNGKARTA TJUNGURRAYI, *Pattern in Sand*, 1980. Acrylic on composition board, 24 x 26 in. (61 x 66 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of Maria T. Kluge, 2012.

Richard Kelton, an attorney and real estate developer from Santa Monica, California, began collecting Aboriginal art in the late 1970s. Referring to his collection, Kelton said, “It all began because I love to sail.”⁴ Kelton made his first purchases after he and a group of scientists voyaged to Australia as part of a research expedition.⁵ Since 1983, his scientific expeditions and art collecting have been funded by The Kelton Foundation, which also supports the study and exhibition of his diverse collection of maritime art, navigational instruments, arts of the China Trade, and other related ethnographic materials.

What distinguished Kelton and the collectors who followed was their interest in contemporary Aboriginal paintings from the Western Desert. Kelton felt that he had encountered, “...a powerful contemporary art

that deserves recognition.”⁶ In 1980, he bought more than twenty acrylic paintings from Papunya Tula Artists in Alice Springs that were made between 1976 and 1977.⁷ His collection now includes a wide range of material, from early twentieth-century bark paintings from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory to contemporary urban art. After hearing about the exhibition *Dreamtime: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Collection of John W. Kluge* (1991) at the Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts, Kelton wrote to then director Ruth Appelhof stating that he believed his collection to be, “...second in scope only to Mr. Kluge’s collection in the United States.”⁸ By 2010, his collection had expanded to over 1,300 objects, making it the largest private collection of Aboriginal art in the United States.⁹

Donald P. Kahn, John W. Kluge, and Will Owen and Harvey Wagner all first encountered contemporary Aboriginal art in *Dreamings*. When philanthropist Donald P. Kahn (1925–2013) saw the exhibition in November 1988, he apparently made the decision to start collecting while admiring Michael Nelson Jagamara’s *Five Stories* (1984); Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri’s *Wallaby Dreaming* (1982); and Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula’s *Bushfire Dreaming* (c. 1976).¹⁰ Reminiscing about that moment, Kahn wrote: “These paintings...impressed me to a degree that I have not often experienced.”¹¹ Kahn was concerned not with the underlying meaning of the paintings, but the aesthetic elements. For him, the art spoke for itself.¹²

The impression was so great that Kahn immediately started collecting Western Desert paintings. As an heir to the Annenberg communications empire, he was surrounded by the arts. His mother, Janet Annenberg Hooker collected decorative arts and supported cultural institutions through her own philanthropy.¹³ Kahn, however, had not previously collected art so he sought advice from those involved in *Dreamings*. Françoise Dussart, an anthropologist who consulted on the exhibition, lent her expertise to Kahn.¹⁴ Andrew Pekarik, then director of the Asia Society, recommended that Kahn visit Tambaran Gallery in New York.¹⁵ Founded in 1979 by the Australian Maureen Zarembler, the gallery specialized in African, Oceanic, and Native American art from the Northwest coast. There Kahn purchased his first five paintings. He traveled to Australia six months later where he bought from the private galleries popping up in Sydney as well as Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation in Yuendumu, northwest of Alice Springs.¹⁶ He also purchased the masterpiece *Combination of Five Stories of Places in the Arnapipe Country from the Ngwarle Untye* (1988) by Norbett Lynch Kngwarreye from Sotheby’s in 1989.

In addition to admiring the paintings for their visual appeal, Kahn started acquiring Aboriginal art because he, “...wanted to make a little mark by collecting something excellent and allowing people to see it.”¹⁷ Kahn set out to build a collection that would be small enough to tour as an exhibition but large enough to provide a survey of Western Desert painting.¹⁸ He initially focused on offering the exhibition to university art museums in his home state of Florida. The Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami took the show (1991–1992) and produced an accompanying catalog.¹⁹ When it otherwise received a lukewarm response, he sent the exhibition to European cities such as Prague, Warsaw, and Salzburg, where he owned a home.²⁰ An exhibition was also held at the Museum Villa Stuck, Munich (1994), for which an extensive catalog was produced and widely distributed.²¹ Through both the exhibitions and catalogs, Kahn began to engage audiences with contemporary Aboriginal art.

John W. Kluge (1914–2010), founder of Metromedia, would have seen Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi's *Pattern in Sand* (1980) when he visited *Dreamings* in 1988.²² He later purchased the early Papunya Tula painting from Museum Arts International in 1993. Kluge was similarly attracted to the aesthetic of Western Desert paintings and, as a businessman, he considered it an appealing investment.²³ For Kluge, if, "...it wasn't safe art, that was part of the attraction."²⁴ Within three months he traveled to Australia and made his first acquisitions.²⁵

Maurice Tuchman, then head of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, traveled to Australia with Kluge and his third wife Patricia. Tuchman had started working with the Kluges as early as 1984 advising on their collection of contemporary art by California artists.²⁶ Tuchman had previously spent two weeks in Australia in 1988 studying Aboriginal art. He also visited *Dreamings* and attended the symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition where he met Djon Mundine, the arts advisor at Bula'bula Arts in Ramingining, Arnhem Land, along with the artists David Malangi and Jimmy Wululu.²⁷ By this time, Tuchman was already planning Kluge's trip—he surprised Mundine and the artists when he asked if Kluge would need a bodyguard during his upcoming visit to Ramingining.²⁸

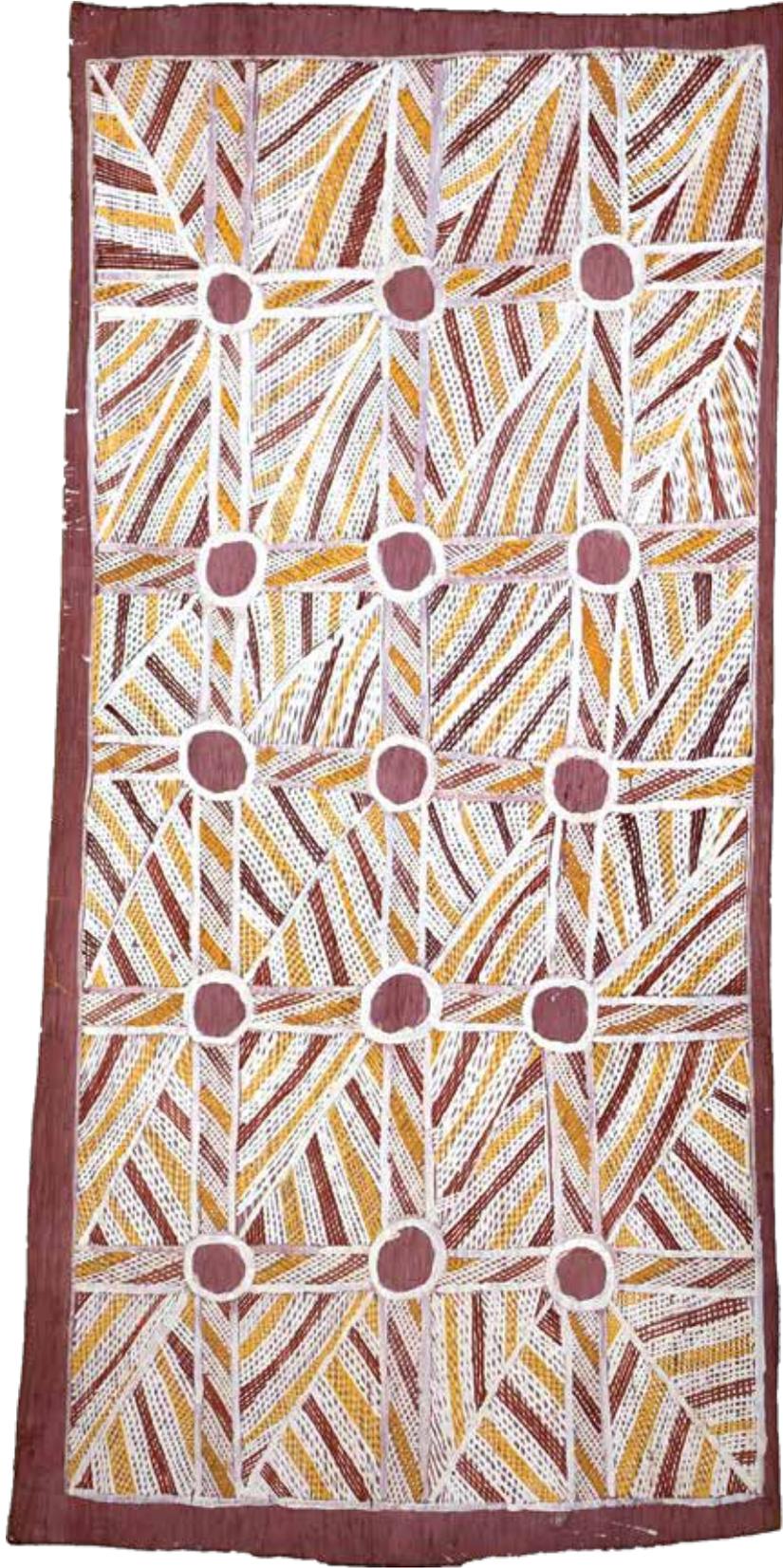
Recalling Kluge's first visit to Australia, Tuchman said, "He looked at some four thousand paintings while there."²⁹ Kluge eventually purchased around sixty works, including significant paintings such as Anatjari Tjakamarra's *Artist's Country Near Kulkuta* (1988) from Papunya Tula Artists as well as a large group of *pami-jini* (c. 1989), traditional armbands or headbands, from Tiwi Pima Art on Bathurst Island, Northern Territory. Kluge had encyclopedic ambitions for his collection: he was looking to acquire contemporary barks, as well as acrylic paintings, and bought historical works including early Papunya Tula boards when possible.

Kluge further expanded his collection through important commissions. On the same trip to Australia, his first commission was conceived when he met Mundine, minus a bodyguard, in Ramingining. Bula'bula did not have much art in stock so Mundine suggested a large commission of bark paintings based on clan designs from the Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties.³⁰ The Ramingining commission was hugely ambitious and most of the 123 works that resulted were monumental in scale. Mundine wrote in a letter to Kluge that, "Many are the largest bark paintings seen for quite some time, and the subjects are some not seen by the outside world before."³¹ The artists also produced small jewel-like barks, such as Mickey Durrng Garrawurra's *Djang'kawu Sisters' Waterholes at Gariyak* (c. 1990) and Charlie Matjuwi Burrarrwanga's *Ganiny* (1990). These were better suited for display at the Kluge's home in Charlottesville, Virginia, as opposed to the walls of the museum Kluge planned to build. His second commission began in February 1991 when he agreed to fund a project brought to him by David Cossey and Dorothy Bennett.³² At the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association in Oenpelli, Northern Territory, artists portrayed their ancestral narratives in forty-five paintings on paper. Among them was Thompson Yulitjirri's *Ngurlmarrk—The Ubarr Ceremony* (c. 1990–1991), which the Kluge's hung in the dining room of their Palm Beach home.

Kluge also made many acquisitions at galleries in Australia and the U.S. with Tuchman acting as his agent. By the late 1980s in Australia, a number of private galleries specializing in Indigenous art were



CHARLIE MATJUWI BURRARRWANGA, *Ganiny*, 1990. Natural pigments on bark, 59.75 x 14.25 in. (151.7 x 36.2 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997.



MICKEY DURRNG GARRAWURRA, *Djang'kawu Sisters' Waterhole at Gariyak*, c.1990. Natural pigments on bark, 45.25 x 22 in. (115 x 56 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997.

established in major cities.³³ Among these was Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne, opened by Gabrielle Pizzi (1940–2004) in 1987 with an inaugural exhibition of Western Desert painting.³⁴ Her gallery was among the first where Tuchman purchased art on Kluge’s behalf. Carol Lopes’ CAZ Gallery in Los Angeles was another where Tuchman acquired works such as Djakala’s bark painting *Kangaroo of the Ubarr Ceremony* (c. 1988). In 1988 prior to *Dreamings*, CAZ held an exhibition of around two hundred works that was heralded at the time as the largest grouping of Aboriginal art ever displayed in the U.S.³⁵ Tuchman said of it: “This [exhibit] is a major breakthrough, because it is being presented as it should be—as an art event rather than an ethnographic or museum of natural history event.”³⁶ This paved the way for the overwhelming success of *Dreamings* later that year.

In New York, existing galleries dedicated shows to Aboriginal art and new galleries opened to showcase art from Australia. Howard Rower founded Australia Gallery and later hired David Betz who would go on to open the Postmodern Primitive Gallery.³⁷ The well-known contemporary-art dealer John Weber (1932–2008) held the exhibition *Papunya Tula: Contemporary Paintings from Australia’s Western Desert* in the summer of 1989. It included the work of Anatjari Tjakamarra who was then featured in a solo exhibition at the gallery that December.³⁸ Anatjari also had solo exhibitions at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne in 1989 and 1991, but his show at John Weber Gallery was the first solo exhibition of an Aboriginal artist in a New York gallery.³⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, subsequently acquired one of Anatjari’s paintings for their department of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Weber admitted that, “Although few corporations and private collectors have amassed significant holdings in the field, the collections are specialized and few cross-overs occur.”⁴⁰ Kluge was motivated to build not a specialized collection of Aboriginal art but a comprehensive one. When he had the opportunity to purchase the extensive collection, library, and archives of Ed Ruhe following his sudden death, he made sure to outbid all the other collectors and institutions. In 1993, Kluge officially acquired the collection from Ruhe’s estate.⁴¹ Combining his holdings with Ruhe’s helped Kluge to create what was then the largest private collection outside Australia.⁴²

Will Owen (1952–2015) and Harvey Wagner (1931–2017) also began collecting after seeing the Western Desert paintings in *Dreamings*. Owen was a scholar and librarian at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and Wagner was a scholar, professor, and former dean at UNC’s Kenan-Flagler Business School and a longtime consultant at McKinsey & Company. Encouraged by a friend who owned a gallery in SoHo, Manhattan, they visited *Dreamings* in late 1988.⁴³ Unlike Kahn and Kluge who immediately started collecting, Owen and Wagner waited two years before they traveled to Australia to make their first purchase. And they were more restrained—at the end of their trip they acquired only one painting by Wayne Bright Tjangala titled *Rockhole Dreaming* (1990).⁴⁴ They were attracted to the aesthetic of Western Desert painting as it aligned with their taste and collecting interests. In the 1980s, Owen and Wagner had collected color field painting and minimalist works by contemporary American artists.⁴⁵ They particularly liked acrylic paintings from Papunya Tula and so they commenced building their collection.⁴⁶

Over the course of the next twenty years, Owen and Wagner grew a comprehensive yet diverse collection of contemporary Indigenous Australian art that eventually totaled about nine hundred works.⁴⁷ Their first commission transpired in 1999 when they emailed Liam Campbell, the arts advisor at Warlukurlangu Artists.⁴⁸ Campbell encouraged the artist Paddy Japaljarri Stewart to make a painting in the style of his work on the renowned Yuendumu school doors, which resulted in *Possum Dreaming* (1999). Owen and Wagner were also encouraged to purchase Andrea Nungurrayi Martin's *Native Cat and Possum Dreaming* (2000), a painting of the same story in a different style by a younger artist. Every couple of years, they returned to Australia on purchasing trips. They bought directly from community art centers when possible, working closely with arts advisors like Daphne Williams and Paul Sweeney from Papunya Tula Artists.⁴⁹ They also acquired work from galleries in Alice Springs, Darwin, Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney. As opposed to large-scale works that could be exhibited in a museum, they focused on collecting smaller works suitable for their home.

Private Collecting in the 1990s and After

A second wave of collecting Indigenous Australian art in the United States began in the 1990s. These collectors were not directly inspired by *Dreamings*, but they benefited from the art market that grew in its wake. Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan of Seattle started collecting Aboriginal art together in 1991 after a visit to Sydney. A professor of political science and a lawyer, respectively, they had each collected contemporary art prior to their marriage in 1990.⁵⁰ Levi's interest in Aboriginal art was first sparked in 1984 when she was researching at the Australian National University in Canberra. She recalled admiring a painting by Dick Lechleitner Tjapanangka that a colleague owned: "I'd never seen anything like it. I just thought it was spectacular. And I'd always had a craving to be a collector—if I could find something I loved and could afford."⁵¹ Not long after she was hit by an Australia Post truck. When Levi finally received the settlement in 1992, she and Kaplan used the money to form their collection of Aboriginal art together: "We had a vision or a dream, after we got the settlement from Australia, that we might be able to build a collection of sufficient quality that some major arts institutions in the United States would be interested."⁵² Purchasing directly from Aboriginal art centers or galleries, their collection grew to more than five hundred early and contemporary works by artists from Arnhem Land, the Central and Western Deserts, the Kimberley, the Southeast, and the Torres Strait.⁵³

Barbara and John Wilkerson collected American folk art prior to Aboriginal art.⁵⁴ She is a former plant physiologist and he is a venture capitalist who served as president of the American Folk Art Museum in New York. The Wilkersons became captivated by Western Desert painting in 1994 when they traveled to Australia to visit their son.⁵⁵ On display in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin was an untitled early Papunya Tula board by Johnny Warangkula—the only one on view of the over two hundred early boards at the museum.⁵⁶ Barbara remembered thinking, "We don't like this—we love it."⁵⁷ John wrote down the artist's name in an "89 cent spiral notebook" he was carrying: "Johnny

Warangkula—learn about him.”⁵⁸ After this visit, they decided to focus their collecting on early boards painted by the original Papunya Tula artists, ultimately purchasing around fifty boards.⁵⁹

As Fred Myers said, “Kluge’s collection and standing probably reinforced John Wilkerson’s interest in buying [Aboriginal art] because ... he must have consulted with Kluge when he was starting to buy—he bought a lot of work on the secondary market.⁶⁰ The Wilkersons worked with the Australian dealer Irene Sutton of Sutton Art Gallery and Tim Klingender of Sotheby’s Australia.⁶¹ Sutton purchased numerous boards on their behalf at Sotheby’s Australia auction of Important Aboriginal Art in 1997, which showcased forty early boards—one of the largest groupings yet seen.⁶² They continued to acquire prime examples of the artists’ later work, such as Tommy Lowry Tjapaltarri’s superb *Two Men Dreaming at Kuluntjarranya* (1984) which was exhibited in *Dreamings*.⁶³ The Wilkersons’ passion for Indigenous Australian art also led them to amass an important collection of nearly fifty shields, including the three in *Beyond Dreamings*.

In 2004 after visiting the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Debra and Dennis Scholl decided to start collecting Indigenous Australian art.⁶⁴ Dennis, a former lawyer and current president of the ArtCenter/South Florida, later wrote that the paintings they saw possessed a visual complexity that was, “...so damn beautiful that we couldn’t live without it.”⁶⁵ For him, the work’s abstract style rivalled that seen in the West, which pushed it beyond its ethnographic constraints.⁶⁶ It was the same aesthetic that he and Debra were attracted to in the Western contemporary art that they first started collecting in the 1970s.⁶⁷ However, Dennis recalled that they, “... always felt of all the things we’ve ever collected, [Aboriginal art] might be the most important work.”⁶⁸ The Scholls first acquired art by contemporary Aboriginal artists from galleries and auction houses like Sotheby’s Australia, but they later began to purchase and commission work from artists and their art centers in order to direct their financial support.⁶⁹ Their collection eventually grew to around four hundred works of contemporary Aboriginal art.⁷⁰

Beginning in 2006, Agatha and Stephen Luczo of Silicon Valley, California, began collecting Indigenous Australian art. Agatha, a model, author, and former dancer, and Stephen, executive chairman and chairman of the board of Seagate, were drawn to the vibrant colors that Indigenous artists used to describe their relationship with the land.⁷¹ The Luczos worked closely with the gallerist Julie Harvey, director of Harvey Arts Projects in Ketchum, Idaho, to build their collection of around two hundred paintings and sculptures over the course of a decade.⁷² Their first acquisition was Betsy Lewis Napangardi’s *Women’s Dreaming—Karlangu* (2005), one of many contemporary paintings from the Central and Western Deserts that they purchased.⁷³ They also built a significant collection of carvings from Central Arnhem Land and the Tiwi Islands from the 1950s and 1960s. The aim of their collecting was to acquire objects that reflected not only the diversity of Indigenous Australian cultures but also the diversity of artists—women and men, young and old, remote and urban. As the Luczos have begun to cull their collection, they have devoted themselves to collecting in other areas of interest, including European modernism, contemporary American art, ancient Roman coins, and African sculpture.⁷⁴

Public Collections

The history of institutional collections is closely tied to that of the private collections amassed in the U.S. following *Dreamings*. A few collectors have held on to some or all of their art, while most have dispersed their collections in various ways. Some have divested at auction, many have gifted works to museums, and a few have done a combination of both. The result being that institutional collections have grown as the private collections of the post-*Dreamings* era have found new homes.

The collections of Richard Kelton and Barbara and John Wilkerson are still intact. Kelton has kept the entirety of his collection and has given no indication of his plans for the future. Regarding their various collections, John Wilkerson said in 2000: ““We can’t seem to say goodbye.”⁷⁵ He and his wife Barbara are still in possession of all the Indigenous Australian art they have acquired. Other collectors have also held on to a small number of favorite works for their own enjoyment.

Some have chosen to sell their holdings at auction. Donald Kahn previously insisted that he had no intention of selling his collection and planned to leave it to his children.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, at Sotheby’s Australia July 2010 auction of Aboriginal and Oceanic Art, Kahn sold ten works, including *Combination of Five Stories of Places in the Arnapipe Country from the Ngwarle Untye* (1988).⁷⁷ The painting was bought by the Scholls at what turned out to be one of Sotheby’s Australia biggest auctions of Indigenous art. In October 2016, the Luczos also sold ninety-seven of the nearly two hundred works from their collection with Deutscher and Hackett in Melbourne.⁷⁸

Numerous collectors have also given some or all of their collections to university and public art museums. Ed Ruhe was pioneering in his donation of a bark painting to the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas only to find that it was transferred to the university’s anthropology collection.⁷⁹ The collectors of Indigenous Australian art since *Dreamings* have been more successful in their gifts to art museums. The Scholls gave ninety works to their alma mater Florida International University in Miami, Florida, where they now reside in the Frost Art Museum.⁸⁰ From the start, they intended to donate the majority of their acquisitions to museums in the U.S. “We were shocked there was so little of this in the U.S. and so little in U.S. institutions,” Scholl says.⁸¹ Two of the biggest collectors, Kluge and then Owen and Wagner, gave the vast majority of their collections to university museums: the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

As early as 1989, John Kluge had planned to open a museum dedicated to Aboriginal art in the U.S.⁸² At first he considered building a private museum, but he decided that the collection would be best served at a university where it could be studied as well as exhibited.⁸³ So John Kluge gave the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal art collection to the University of Virginia in December 1997 and the museum opened a year later in January 1999.⁸⁴ The presence of Ruhe’s surname in the museum’s official appellation speaks to the two very different collecting practices that formed the institutional collection, but also the collectors’



Beyond Dreamings installation image at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing works by **MICKEY DURRNG GARRAWURRA, CHRISTIAN THOMPSON, CHARLIE MATJUWI BURRARRWANGA,** and **REKO RENNIE.** Photograph by Tom Cogill.

shared desire to educate the public about Aboriginal art. Subsequently, numerous donors have helped expand the museum's holdings. For instance, the Luczos donated 23 contemporary paintings in 2017. Totalling around 1,900 objects, the Kluge-Ruhe is now the largest institutional collection of Indigenous Australian art in the U.S.

The Hood Museum of Art became the second largest when Owen and Wagner donated their entire collection between 2009 and 2017. Through the highly influential blog started by Owen in 2005, *Aboriginal Art & Culture: An American Eye*, they met Brian Kennedy who later became the Hood Museum's director.⁸⁵ They saw that the Hood Museum would treat their collection not as ethnographic evidence but as contemporary art and so they worked with Kennedy to transfer it in installments.⁸⁶ Their donation of nearly nine hundred works has made the museum an important center for the study and exhibition of Indigenous art.

A variety of public museums have benefited from the gifts of major collectors as well. The Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, Connecticut, was given three hundred bark paintings and artifacts between 1995–1996 by the Australian Kate Flynn, then director of Australian Art Advisory in New York, and her husband Dr. Michael Flynn. A substantial number of works from the Levi-Kaplan collection have been promised to the Seattle Art Museum in Washington.⁸⁷ Selections from their collection were

first displayed in 1996, but it was not until 2000 that Levi and Kaplan donated three works to inaugurate the museum's collection of Aboriginal art.⁸⁸ The Seattle Art Museum was also given eight works by the Luczos in 2017. The Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, Nevada, started to amass a collection as a result of ninety works donated by the Scholls in 2017.⁸⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York received 19 works from Scholls in 2017 as well as eight paintings from the Levi-Kaplan collection between 2016–2017.⁹⁰ The following intuitions also have holdings: the American Museum of Natural History, New York, mainly from the Australian anthropologist Ronald Berndt; the de Young Museum, San Francisco, California, from the Australian collectors Carillo and Ziyin Gantner of the Gantner Myer Aboriginal Art Collection; the San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas, from museum trustee May Lam and her husband Victor Lam; the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C., from the 1948 AASEAL expedition; and the St. Louis Art Museum, Missouri, purchased from the local gallerist Mary Reid Brunstrom.⁹¹

Conclusion

From the first to the second wave, American collectors have expressed a common desire to share their collections of Indigenous Australian art. This can be seen in part through the donation of collections to university and public art museums. It can also be observed in the public exhibitions and associated catalogs undertaken by many of the collectors. The trend started with Ed Ruhe who exhibited his collection between 1966 and 1977 in over twenty U.S. venues and produced six catalogs.⁹² Donald Kahn was the first of the major private collectors from the 1980s to share his collection publicly. Perhaps inspired by the overwhelmingly positive public reception of *Dreamings*, he and nearly every other major collector has devoted themselves to presenting their collections. In 1994, Kelton exhibited his collection at the Pacific Asia Museum Pasadena, California, and published the catalog *The Evolving Dreamtime* (1994). In conjunction with the opening of the Kluge-Ruhe, the catalog *Art from the Land* (1999) was produced. And finally, Owen and Wagner's collection was featured in an exhibition and catalog titled *Crossing Cultures* (2012).

During the 2000s, many more American collectors developed exhibitions of their private collections of Indigenous Australian art. These included the Australian-turned-American investment banker James Wolfensohn, whose exhibition *Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Wolfensohn Collection* (2001) opened at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts where Wolfensohn had previously served as chairman.⁹³ Wolfensohn's collection includes significant paintings from the Kimberley such as Rover Thomas' *Lake Argyle* (1995) as well as paintings and sculptural work from the Western Desert. John and Barbara Wilkerson were the next to present their collection to the public with *Icons of the Desert* (2009) at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University.⁹⁴ It was the first exhibition in the U.S. to focus on early boards from Papunya Tula. The Levi-Kaplan collection was exhibited in *Ancestral Modern* (2012) at the Seattle Art Museum as Levi always said the idea underpinning their acquisitions of Aboriginal art was to promote it in the U.S.⁹⁵ The Scholls followed with twin exhibitions and catalogs at the Nevada Museum of Art: *No Boundaries* (2014) and *Marking the Infinite* (2016). Most recently,

the Luczos donation to the Kluge-Ruhe was the focus of the exhibition and catalog *Songs of a Secret Country* (2017).

The collectors were also united in their initial attraction to the aesthetic of Western Desert painting. From the first glance at an acrylic painting on the walls of the Asia Society Galleries in New York or museums and galleries in Australia, they were motivated to start collecting because the bright colors and patterns reflected their own aesthetic sensibilities. The collectors saw Indigenous Australian art as contemporary art. As Dennis Scholl said, “We’ve been very vocal about wanting this work to be thought of as contemporary art that stands on the same *terra firma* as Euro-American-centric art.”⁹⁶ Scholl went on to say that while the works provide joy on an aesthetic level, they also have a deep cosmological meaning.⁹⁷ Though the colorful markings on the surfaces of paintings may have initially pulled in American collectors, the underlying meaning kept them engaged and collecting long after *Dreamings*. The discovery motivated them to share their collections with audiences in the US thereby making their own mark on this history of Indigenous Australian art.

NOTES

- ¹ Fred R. Myers, Interview, mp3, March 16, 2018, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. See also Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 322.
- ² Howard Morphy and Margo Boles Smith, eds., *Art from the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1999), 6.
- ³ Morphy and Smith, *Art from the Land*, 2.
- ⁴ “Richard Kelton,” *Art & Antiques*, n.d., Morven Files, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Myers, *Painting Culture*, 364.
- ⁸ The exhibition was organized by the Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts (now the Taubman Museum of Art), Roanoke, Virginia, where it was shown from February 14–April 14, 1991. It later traveled to the Knoxville Museum of Art, Tennessee, from February 4–May 15, 1994, then the Palmer Museum of Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from July 18–September 17, 1995. Richard Kelton, “Letter to Ruth Appelfhof, Director, Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts,” April 1, 1991, Morven Files, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection.
- ⁹ Kerry Robin Smallwood, *The Painted Song: Australian Aboriginal Women’s Paintings from the Kelton Foundation* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Santa Monica College, Barrett Art Gallery, 2007), back page.
- ¹⁰ Jo-Anne Danzker, Ursula Haller, and Donald Kahn, *Dreamings: Aboriginal Art from the Western Desert; the Donald Kahn Collection [Published on the Occasion of an Exhibition of the Same Name in the Museum Villa Stuck, Munich from July 26 to October 16, 1994] = Tjukurrpa* (München: Prestel, 1994), 69.
- ¹¹ Geoffrey Bardon, *Australian Aboriginal Art from the Collection of Donald Kahn* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, Lowe Art Museum, 1991), 3.
- ¹² Christie Brown, “Outback Art,” *Forbes*, December 10, 1999: 296.
- ¹³ Enid Nemy, “Janet A. Hooker, Philanthropist, Dies at 93,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1997, sec. NY/Region, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/16/nyregion/janet-a-hooker-philanthropist-dies-at-93.html>. Accessed 4/18/2018.
- ¹⁴ Danzker, Haller, and Kahn, *Dreamings*, 69.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* Kahn worked with the dealers Rebecca Hossack and Carlos Hübner-Arteta, cited in Bardon, *Australian Aboriginal Art from the Collection of Donald Kahn*, 1.
- ¹⁷ Danzker, Haller, and Kahn, *Dreamings*, 70.
- ¹⁸ Presumably his collection is comprised of 36 objects as that number is listed in the Catalog of Works in the exhibition catalog Danzker, Haller, and Kahn, *Dreamings* and in the exhibition catalog Bardon, *Australian Aboriginal Art from the Collection of Donald Kahn*.
- ¹⁹ Brown, “Outback Art,” 297.
- ²⁰ Brown, “Outback Art,” 296.

- ²¹ Danzker, Haller, and Kahn, *Dreamings*, 70.
- ²² Morphy and Smith, *Art from the Land*, 2.
- ²³ Margo Smith, "Aesthete and Scholar: Two Complementary Influences on the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia," in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby, eds. (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 572.
- ²⁴ Peterson, Allen, and Hamby, *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, 559.
- ²⁵ Morphy and Smith, *Art from the Land*, 2.
- ²⁶ There is correspondence between Tuchman and Kluge's third wife Patricia dating to 1984 in the Maurice Tuchman Archive at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Correspondence with Kluge appears to date to 1988.
- ²⁷ Daniel B. Wood, "Art from the Outback: Paintings from Australia's Dwindling Aboriginal Population Are Finding Their Way into American Galleries and Museums," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 1998, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1988/1005/lab0.html>. Accessed 4/18/2018.
- ²⁸ Morphy and Smith, *Art from the Land*, 96.
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Old Archive, New Curators: Responses to Museum Collections in Contemporary Indigenous Australian Photography

CLARA MA

During the exhibition's run at the Asia Society Galleries, the curators of *Dreamings* invited Indigenous Australian artists Michael Nelson Jagamarra and Billy Stockman Tjapaljarri to construct a sand painting at the Asia Society. For two nights—October 22–23—the artists sat on an auditorium stage and applied acrylic paint and “fluff” (*wamulu*) to a sandy surface while performing ceremonial dances and songs.¹ As sand paintings are usually performed as part of the ritualistic reenactment of ancestral activities, the artists modified the songs and dance in the performance from their original context.² They also covered their bodies and faces with painted designs. But these designs did not relate to the sand painting on the ground.³ Instead of recreating a particular sand painting used in ritual practice, the artists performed a synthetic account of Aboriginal visual culture. In his conversation with anthropologist Fred Myers during the performance, Michael Nelson said, “I’m representing Aboriginal culture here.”⁴

Nevertheless, there was criticism about how the theatrical setting at the Asia Society reinforced the exoticization of Aboriginal art and people.⁵ The audience watched the performance from their seats in the auditorium while anthropologists Chris Anderson and Françoise Dussart answered questions in between the dances and songs.⁶ According Australian artist and art dealer Christopher Hodges, who was present for the performance, the way he and the other attendees looked down towards the stage, combined with the English interpretation, made the artists almost into another exhibit.⁷

The performance reignited longstanding questions regarding history and Indigenous identity. Indigenous Australian artists had been advocating for a diversified representation of contemporary Aboriginal

people since the 1970s, but Michael Nelson and Billy Stockman's performance brought the conversation to the fore.⁸ Their control over the subject of the sand painting performance reflected the rising agency of Indigenous Australian artists. The performance created an opportunity to challenge the conventional presentation of Aboriginal art as belonging to a static culture.

A similar dialogue about Aboriginal identity arose when nineteenth-century photographs of Indigenous Australians entered museum archives and state libraries in both Europe and Australia in the early twentieth century. According to Michel Foucault, an archive is the arrangement of things that holds together an order.⁹ It is a regime of knowledge composed of multiple relations that also blurs these relations. It formalizes individuals within the power structure and makes it possible to classify, form categories, and compare individual features.¹⁰ In the last thirty years, contemporary Indigenous Australian photographers such as Michael Cook (b.1968) and Christian Thompson (b.1978) have drawn inspiration from the historical photographs in these archives. Their projects assert Indigenous agency by formulating their own versions of history and Aboriginal identity. This inevitably raises many questions: how do Indigenous Australian photographers respond to the historical photographs in archives? How do archives stimulate the contemporary representation of Aboriginal people and culture? This essay seeks to answer these questions through an examination of Cook's *Through My Eyes* (2010) and Thompson's *We Bury Our Own* (2012), exemplars of the artists' respective approaches to the photographic archive.

Picturing Indigeneity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In the nineteenth century, British explorers and officials documented Indigenous Australian communities through photography.¹¹ It was used as a disciplinary apparatus and a form of surveillance.¹² By photographing Indigenous Australians, traveling photographers such as Charles Walter (1831-1907) registered their moment of contact with Indigenous Australians at reserve settlements and attempted to demonstrate the orderly, structured white policy in these settlements.¹³ Scholars have noted that this use of photography was a primarily Western practice that considers the photograph a mimetic device and its content a reflection of reality.¹⁴ On the other hand, Australian Historian Jane Lydon has argued that Indigenous Australians considered the process of being photographed a reenactment of their connection to their land.¹⁵ They appropriated the fictionalization and theatrical nature of photography to reproduce significant events in their culture.

In the twentieth century, Indigenous Australian artists took up the camera to re-create images of Aboriginal people. Concurrent with the rise of Aboriginal rights movements in the 1970s, urban-based artists began to dictate how Aboriginal people were represented through photography, film and video.¹⁶ In cities like Brisbane and Sydney, artists used photography to critique the historical representation of Indigenous Australians as primitive. They asked viewers to question Indigenous Australian identity.¹⁷ For example, documentary photographers Mervyn Bishop (b.1945) and Brenda L. Croft (b.1964) captured a wide range of contemporary Aboriginal life in their work. In *Girl Pours Tea, Burnt Bridge* (1988), Bishop



Joseph Cook - 1913-1914

MICHAEL COOK, *Through My Eyes #6*, 2010. Inkjet print on paper, 27.0625 x 22.5625 in. (68.75 x 57.3 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of the artist, 2016.

presents a woman and a child in a wooden house. At the dinner table, the woman pours tea into one of the cups while looking directly at the camera. Sitting next to her, a child plays with the tablecloth. Unlike numerous nineteenth-century photographs that place an Indigenous Australian subject against a plain background, the setting of the photograph reveals a dynamic living environment of a contemporary Aboriginal family.

Photographers like Tracey Moffatt (b.1960) and Leah King-Smith (b.1956) offered an alternative view of Indigeneity by rephotographing nineteenth-century photographs. King-Smith researched archival materials in state libraries and projected her photographs of contemporary landscape over the print of the historical photographs of Aboriginal people.¹⁸ Her work creates a space to connect Aboriginal people with contemporary land. In *Some Lads* (1986), Moffatt photographed black male dancers in a recreated nineteenth-century studio. In contrast to the documentary mode in the early photographs, Moffatt encouraged the dancers to stare at the camera and to intentionally pose and show off.¹⁹ By bringing historical and contemporary Indigenous Australian elements into direct conversation, these series shifted the static narration of Indigeneity by capturing the sensuous movements of Aboriginal people as well as their immediate connection with land.

Michael Cook: Creating an Alternative Archive

Urban-based Aboriginal photographers in the twenty-first century have continued the work of their predecessors. Michael Cook, a Brisbane-based photographer of Bidjara heritage, also uses historical photographs to interrogate the representation of contemporary Indigeneity. In *Through My Eyes* (2010), Cook combines historical and contemporary photographs to create an alternative archive of Australian history. Cook's imagery draws from the archive of mainstream white-Australian culture: in 2010 he purchased twenty-seven photographic portraits of former Australian Prime Ministers, from Edmund Barton in 1901 to Julia Gillard in 2010 from the National Library of Australia. Cook kept the whole set of photographs, retaining the size and most of the formal features of the portraits, including the black-and-white format and composition. He also left the printed name and dates of their terms in office in the bottom-right corner. All of these features help to maintain the legibility of the photographs as historical portraits. Cook then disturbed these prime ministers' faces by superimposing his own digital photographs of contemporary Murrumbidgee people from Brisbane, Cherbourg and Hervey Bay. The overlaying of images deformed the facial features of the original subjects. For example, in the photograph of *Through My Eyes #6 (Joseph Cook)*, the artist lightens the Prime Minister's face (see page 46) so that it is ghost-like and unrecognizable. The superimposed face of the Indigenous sitter then becomes the central focus as his eyes gaze directly at the viewer. By playing with the visibility and invisibility of the recognizable Prime Ministers' faces and the anonymous contemporary Indigenous Australians, Cook obscures the traditional power relationship embedded in nineteenth-century photographs that encouraged the direct observation of Aboriginal subjects. The composite photograph instead creates multiple relations: subject and object, past and present, or white and Indigenous Australians. The overlaid photographs never



CHRISTIAN THOMPSON, *Three Sisters*, 2012. C-print photograph on pearl metallic paper, 39.375 x 39.375 in. (100 x 100 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of Maria T. Kluge, 2013.

reconcile—along the border the viewer can clearly see that the image combines two distinct photographs.²⁰ As a result, it presents a history that is heterogeneous and always incomplete. The layering also grants Aboriginal people a prominent place in the discourse of Australian history.²¹

Taken together, Cook's photographs form a new archive stratified with meaning. The dynamic yet unsettling integration of historical past and present within the photographs breaks from the Western notion of photography as a mimetic record and thus an ideal archival object. By challenging the authority of the

medium, Cook's *Through My Eyes* questions the historical legacy of archival production. However, it does not overthrow the power relations embedded within system of the archive, it rather fragments its order, as art historian Hal Foster has argued.²² Hence, Cook's Australian history archive primarily proposes an alternative Aboriginal perspective of history of which past and present exist simultaneously.

Christian Thompson: Performing Indigeneity in Archives

Instead of creating an alternative archive, Indigenous Australian photographer Christian Thompson unpacks the iconography of nineteenth-century documentary photographs pulled from archives. An artist of Bidjara heritage, Thompson was one of the first Indigenous Australians to receive his Ph.D. in Fine Arts from Oxford University.²³ In *We Bury Our Own* (2012), Thompson created a series of self-portraits by appropriating archival images and using them to reconnect with the past.

At Oxford, Thompson worked on archival images of Indigenous Australians with assorted objects. Prior to the advent of photography, most images of Indigenous Australians created by European anthropologists, explorers and government officials were produced as watercolor paintings. In *Dreamings*, a number of early watercolors created by the English traveler, natural historian and artist, George French Angas (1822-1886) were exhibited (see page 50). These paintings depict warriors of the Ngarrindjeri, Mt. Barker, Coorong and Nauo groups, decorated with body paint and holding wooden shields, spears, spear throwers and clubs.²⁴ The lack of any spatial or temporal reference in the background of the images creates a false sense of these Indigenous Australian people as static and timeless.

Similar representations of Indigenous Australians were reproduced photographically and compiled in albums that circulated internationally. Generally, these images emphasize the subject's physique, portraying just their head and chest.²⁵ Furthermore, the pictures often depict Indigenous Australians with an assortment of cultural objects. In Charles Kerry's photograph of a man from Barron River, the Australian photographer represented the figure posing frontally with crude body markings. The bone piercing his nose as well as the kangaroo-tooth forehead pendant were staged and were not customary to any specific Aboriginal community.²⁶ Yet many of these images were collected by anthropologists as ethnographical data and eventually entered museum archives as such. Within the didactic context of the museum, these falsified images became the standard representation of Indigeneity.²⁷ In early natural history and ethnographic museums, these photographs were read as a record of the progressive cultural and technological evolution of Indigenous Australians.²⁸

Thompson encountered similar photographs while working with Dr. Christopher Morton, curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum's photograph collection, on the project "Globalization, Photography, and Race: The Circulation and Return of Aboriginal photographs in Europe, 2011-2015."²⁹ During the project, Thompson studied the museum's collection of historic materials related to Australia, including the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs and fieldwork records. The museum also held a set of Charles



GEORGE FRENCH ANGAS, *Portraits of the Aboriginal Inhabitants* 1844–45.
Watercolor on paper, 19.25 x 13.75 in. (49 x 35 cm). South Australian Museum, Adelaide.

Kerry's lanternslides, which are mounted photographic transparent slides of Aboriginal ceremonies from the collection of anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown.³⁰

Thompson's *We Bury Our Own* (2012) is a set of eight photographic self-portraits inspired by his research in the Pitt Rivers archives.³¹ In the series, Thompson wears his Oxford academic dress and blocks his face with objects often associated with Aboriginal people, such as colorful flowers, indigenous dots, crystal rocks or a toy-colonial ship. The portraits retain the atemporal quality, lack of spatial reference, and head-and-shoulder format found in the early photographs of Aboriginal people. Unlike the small images produced for portable albums in the nineteenth century, Thompson produced large-scale photographs. The large size asks the viewer to see each photograph as an individual image. Through these artistic choices, Thompson transforms the collective record of archival images into individual statements that question the power relationship embedded in the early photographs.

In one of the self-portraits from the series, *Three Sisters* (2012) (see page 48), Thompson covers his eyes and body with artificial flowers which prevents the viewer from making direct eye contact with him. The entire image is in black-and-white except for the three red candles placed in bottom center of the composition. The flowers recall the fallacy of viewing Indigeneity as an ensemble of natural objects, flora or fauna. By covering himself with flowers, Thompson reenacted the staging of photographs with Aboriginal people and fake props. The reenactments had a performative element, which held unique meaning for Thompson. For Indigenous Australians, the performance of rituals is a way of renewing the link between themselves, the land, ancestors and their creation narratives or "Dreamings."³² Their intimate connection with ancestors and land function as their major medium of expression. By "performing" the production of archival photographs, Thompson established a contemporary connection with his ancestors. As the title *We Bury Our Own* suggests, Thompson's photographs also create a theatrical space that enables him to perform his own lamentation over his cultural roots by lighting the red candles and covering them with flowers.

Conclusion

The performance of the sand painting at *Dreamings* in 1988 exposed the tension between the increasing agency of Indigenous Australian artists and the Western reception of their art. Thirty years after the exhibition, artists have continued to explore similar tensions visible within the historical photograph collections of museum archives. According to Foucault, the theoretical modern archive does not simply store historical information, but structures the particular expressions of particular period.³³ To a large extent, collections of nineteenth-century photographs of Indigenous Australians housed in natural history and ethnographic museums are exemplars of Foucauldian archives. The images of Indigenous Australian were confined to a static representation of the past that survived into the present.³⁴

Contemporary Indigenous Australian photographers Michael Cook and Christian Thompson both attempted to offer an alternative ordering of contemporary regimes of knowledge by reinterpreting and

restaging the visual features of archival records. Hal Foster has argued that contemporary archival art is not simply a cynical response to archives.³⁵ Archival art also attempts to expose what was originally invisible in historical discourse and to suggest other ways of ordering of information.³⁶ Although both projects retain many formal features of the early photographs, they transformed them in different ways. In *Through My Eyes*, Cook layered in images of contemporary Aboriginal people to disrupt the faces of Australian politicians.³⁷ In *We Bury Our Own*, Thompson examined the iconography of historical photographs, covering most of his body with those symbols.

In comparison to the theoretical Foucauldian archive, both artists mixed Western ways of making archival photographs with Indigenous Australian visual traditions in order to propose alternative discourses of history and Indigeneity. Christian Thompson's integration of symbols from nineteenth-century photographs not only enabled him to reconnect with the past, it also allowed him to integrate the past into his contemporary self-representation. Similarly, Cook proposed a concept of history that narrates the past and present simultaneously. The interaction between Western museum archives and contemporary Indigenous Australian photographs in both projects demonstrates that there is no single discourse of history and Indigeneity. As both Cook and Thompson illustrate, differences between Western and Indigenous visual traditions can be coexisting yet unsettling. By inhabiting this volatile space in photography, as Homi Bhabha argues, these contemporary Indigenous photographers undertake "a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience."³⁸ Instead of aligning to either Western and Indigenous cultures, they have strategically found an alternative space to express their view of history and Indigeneity.

NOTES

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² *Ibid.*, 682.

³ *Ibid.*, 686.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 686.

⁵ Hetti Perkins, "Seeing and Seaming: Contemporary Aboriginal Art," in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writings by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michele Grossman (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 99.

⁶ Christopher Anderson, "Old Galleries, New People," in *Art and Performance in Oceania*, edited by Craig Barry, B. Kernot, and Christopher Anderson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸ Stephen Gilchrist, "Daguerreotypes, Stereotypes, and Prototypes: Reframing Indigeneity." In *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist (Lebanon, USA: University Press of New England, 2012), 314.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 101

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Punishment*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), 190.

¹¹ Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument." In *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography and Steidl, 2008), 11-12.

¹² Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," 11-12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶ Marcia Langton, *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television ...: an essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things*. Melbourne: Custom Book Centre, 1993.

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- ¹⁹ Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 43.
- ²⁰ Christine Dauber, "Michael Cook-Through My Eyes: A dream of things to come" *Art Monthly* 245 (Nov 2011): 24–26.
- ²¹ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110 (2004): 4.
- ²² Ibid, 21.
- ²³ Jessyca Hutchens, "Losing the archive: Julie Gough at the MAA, Cambridge and Christian Thompson at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford" in *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, edited by Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean (Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2017), 298.
- ²⁴ Peter Sutton et al. *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: George Braziller, 1991), 229.
- ²⁵ Marianne Riphagen. *Indigenous cosmopolitans: up-and-coming artists and their photomedia works in Australian and international visual art worlds* (Oisterwijk: BOXPress, 2011), 97.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
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- ³² Lydon, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians*, 26.
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- ³⁶ Ibid, 21.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 4.
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The Politics of Painting and the Painting of Politics: Indigenous Australians Battle for Land Rights

MEAGHAN WALSH

Country is spoken about in the same way non-Aboriginal people may talk about living human relatives: Aboriginal people cry about country, they worry about country, they listen to country, they visit country and long for country. Country can feel, think and hear, it can accept or reject and be difficult or easy, just as living people can behave towards one another.

—Nici Cumpston¹

As Indigenous Australian artist and curator Nici Cumpston states, Indigenous people's relationship with country is akin to one's relationship with another human. It is deeply personal, rooted in the land, and tied to creation narratives of the ancestral beings.² As a result, country is the predominant motif in Indigenous Australian paintings, sculptures, and photography. However, as is also suggested in Cumpston's quote, the issue of how to translate the significance of country to non-Indigenous viewers remains a central challenge for many Indigenous artists.³

A significant stride in relating the importance of country to international audiences came in 1988 with the watershed exhibition, *Dreamings*. The curators of the exhibition capitalized on the existing public interest in global Indigenous art and all things Australian to bring Aboriginal art to the world stage.⁴ The show sought to give audiences an appreciation for Aboriginal aesthetics, diffuse a knowledge of Indigenous culture and communities, and teach viewers how to "read" Aboriginal paintings and interpret its iconography.⁵ As a result, audiences could not only see what country meant to Aboriginal people, but also begin to *understand* the interconnectedness of Aboriginal art, culture, and the land. The rising prominence of Indigenous Australian art had a powerful impact on the success of native title claims in the 1990s.



Various artists, *The Yirrkala Bark Petitions*, 1963. Natural pigments on bark and type-written paper, 23 x 13.375 in. (59.1 x 34 cm). Presented to the Australian House of Representatives on 14 August 1963 and 28 August 1963. Australian Parliament House, Canberra.

In the decades leading up to *Dreamings*, Indigenous Australian communities fought a series of legal battles for formal recognition of their custodianship of their ancestral lands (although the High Court did not formally grant native title until 1992). In *Milirrpum v. Nabalco* (1971), leaders of the Yolngu people living in Yirrkala petitioned the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory for official recognition of their rights to their traditional lands on the Gove Peninsula.⁶ While the court ruled against the Yolngu, *Milirrpum* had a number of significant consequences that aided in the future success of Aboriginal native title cases. Most notably, it led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission in 1972, which resulted in the drafting, and eventual passing, of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) in 1976.⁷ The Aboriginal Land Rights Act served as a turning point for the success of both Aboriginal land and sea rights claims in subsequent decades.

Proceedings such as *Milirrpum* signaled to Indigenous Australians that visual proof of their rights to the land would assist in validating their claims. As anthropologist John Carty argues in his discussion of contemporary desert painting, art is a form of evidence for Indigenous peoples.⁸ He contends that in painting their creation stories, Indigenous Australian artists assert their claims of authority over the land and attempt to relate those claims to both non-Indigenous and Indigenous audiences alike. Carty notes that

even though the painted narratives were not understood by all viewers, the power of the ancestral narrative and the visual proof of Indigenous land rights were still present in the works: “[The] iconography [of Western desert painting] was an index of Aboriginal cultural content. It was evidence of a story, and the story was in turn evidence of the Dreaming.”⁹

While Carty’s statement specifically refers to contemporary desert artists, his notion of “art as evidence” applies beyond the desert, to the ways in which Indigenous artists across the country have utilized painting as proof of their land rights in judicial cases in the latter half of the twentieth century. Yolngu artist Djambawa Marawili describes his paintings as “title deeds” and requests that his viewers “look at my paintings and recognize our law.”¹⁰ Indigenous Australian artists, like Marawili, use art as a political tool to demonstrate the significance of country for Indigenous peoples; document native title claims to their ancestral lands; and assert their artistic, cultural, and physical presence in the global archive. The prominence Indigenous Australian art achieved through internationally-acclaimed exhibitions like *Dreamings* contributed to non-Indigenous audiences’ awareness of the validity of Indigenous claims to their traditional lands. This essay argues that the increased visibility of Indigenous Australians’ ‘painted evidence’ in international exhibitions and museums, as well as non-Indigenous viewers’ improved understanding of Indigenous Australian art and culture, contributed to the successful outcome of Indigenous land rights battles after 1988.

Painting Politically: The Yirrkala Bark Petitions and Native Title Claims

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière claims that for communities outside the established order, politics is a battle to receive equal respect within the recognized hierarchies.¹¹ Aesthetics becomes part of the community’s struggle for equality, as art pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable within the limits of hegemonic thought. Rancière’s understanding of politics succinctly summarizes the legal status of Indigenous Australian peoples and evokes their battle for land recognition.¹² As a community with a different worldview from their colonizers, Indigenous peoples have found achieving political equality challenging. As Rancière surmises: “Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.”¹³ The success of native title claims required Indigenous peoples not only to prove their ownership of the land, but also explain an entirely different concept of ownership to a non-Indigenous court. This made the translation of the Indigenous Australian worldview an urgent necessity.

In 1963, the Yolngu community at Yirrkala learned that the government had granted the mining company Gominco (later renamed Nabalco) the rights to strip-mine bauxite in a parcel of land excised from the Aboriginal Reserve in Arnhem Land. In response, Yolngu leaders drafted a petition imploring the government to allow representatives of their community to voice their concerns before a court-appointed committee. In the appeal, known as the Yirrkala bark petitions (1963), Yolngu artists affixed their typed requests—written in both English and Yolngu-matha—to barks featuring the clan designs of the Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties. By framing the written document with their traditional motifs, the Yolngu artists



DJAMBAWA MARAWILI, *Yathikpa*, 2015. Natural pigments on bark, 61.5 x 24 in. (156.2 x 61 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Museum purchase, 2016.

attempted to communicate their understanding of country to a non-Indigenous audience and stressed the spiritual and ancestral importance of the land and sea to their community through an artful intertwining of text and image.

The requests in the Yirrkala bark petitions went unheeded and mining commenced in 1971. Despite this loss, the panels marked a significant turning point in the battle for native title claims, formalizing the practice of using clan designs, images of country, and Indigenous iconography for political purposes. While Indigenous artists had asserted their own laws and relationship with the land in their art for decades before the Yirrkala bark petitions, after *Milirrpum*, artists and art communities consistently employed painting as a tool to assert native title claims, relate Indigenous understandings of country to a broader audience, and emphasize Indigenous presence in their ancestral lands. This is what Rancière would call the eruption into the sensible through aesthetics—or, more specifically, how Indigenous artists utilized aesthetics to make the unthinkable (e.g. Indigenous ideas of country) thinkable to non-Indigenous courts and audiences. In doing so, Indigenous Australian artists brought incommensurate ideas into dialogue through paint and irrevocably changed non-Indigenous understandings of the land.

While the recognition of the Yirrkala bark petitions marked an important moment in land recognition for Indigenous peoples, it was not until almost three decades later, with *Mabo v. Queensland* (1992), that Indigenous Australians won a native title claim. In *Mabo*, leaders from the Mer Islands in the Torres Strait contested previous judicial decisions, notably the doctrine of *terra nullius*, that prevented Aboriginal clans from owning and reclaiming their traditional lands.¹⁴ At the conclusion of the proceedings, the court ruled in favor of the Meriam people and granted them legal rights to the Mer Islands.¹⁵ This verdict was a significant victory not only for the Meriam community, but also for other Indigenous Australians who wished to assert native title claims. In their decision, the court stated that native title could coexist with Australian law, acknowledged Indigenous claims to their traditional lands, and recognizing Indigenous laws regarding the treatment and custodianship of the land. Even though the Meriam people did not employ painting as a political tool, as the Yolngu community had in *Milirrpum*, the decision in *Mabo* would have been unthinkable without the changes the painting movement had brought in non-Indigenous understandings of Indigenous views of the land.

Reclaiming Rights to the Sea: The Yolngu and *Saltwater*

For Indigenous Australian people, country not only encompasses the land, but also the seas and skies. The success of *Mabo* not only served as a turning point in Indigenous Australian land recognition, but also played a pivotal role in Aboriginal groups reclaiming rights to the sea. As with the native title claims to the land, the Yolngu faced opposition in obtaining rights to the water. In 1976, the Australian government instituted the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, which allowed Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory to present evidence of native title claims.¹⁶ In response to the bill, members of the Yirrkala community issued a claim. In their statement, the Yolngu asked the Australian court to grant them the right to privacy of their



LAWRENCE PENNINGTON, *Mituna*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 55 in. (137 x 140 cm). Collection of Greg Castillo.

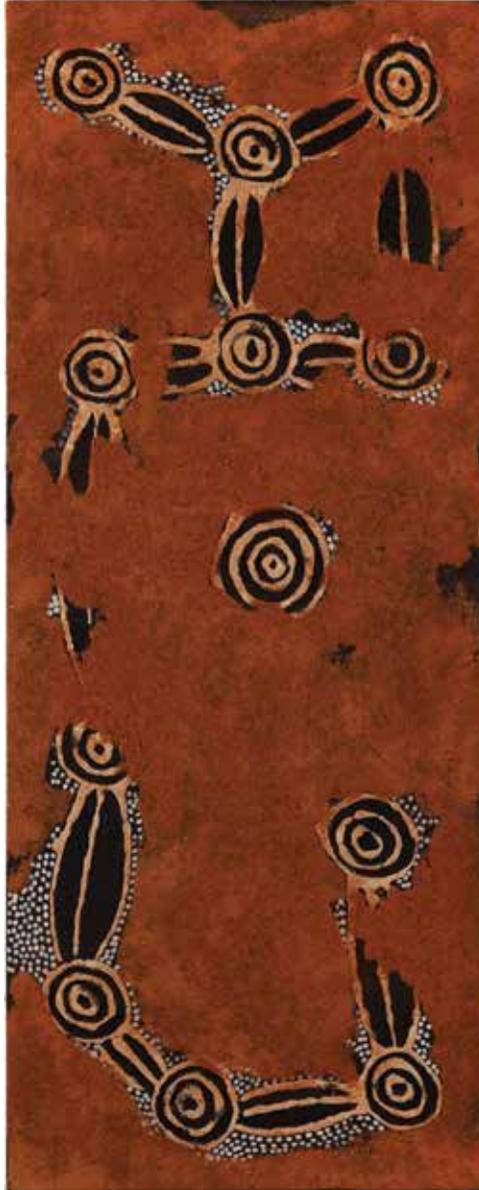
ancestral lands (which included the sea), to prevent commercial fishermen and tourists from entering their sacred bays, and to preserve traditional fishing rights.¹⁷ While the judge ruled against their requests, he did stipulate that the Yolngu lands extended as far as the low water mark on the beach, indicating, at least, a partial acknowledgement Yolngu rights to the sea.¹⁸

Following a series of failed legal cases and harmful treatment of the Blue Mud Bay by poachers and trespassers, Yolngu artists mounted an exhibition in 1999 to reassert their claim to the sacred waters of their country. The show, *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country: Recognising Indigenous Sea Rights*, featured eighty barks depicting their ancestral clan designs (*maḍayin miny'tji*). One of the artists who spearheaded the exhibition was Djambawa Marawili, who has continued to assert Yolngu rights to the sea in his more recent works. In *Yathikpa* (2015), Marawili depicts the ancestral crocodile, Bāru, who created fire in Madarrpa country. In the image, Marawili renders the moment where Bāru carries the fire from the beach into the sea of Yathikpa. Unlike the Yirrkala bark petitions, Marawili removes all figural elements from the bark, allowing the *miny'tji* (sacred designs) to do the performative work. On the top half of the bark, Marawili paints thin, elongated diamond chains in alternating colored strands of red, yellow, black, and white ochres in an oblong shape. Beneath the elliptical form, a central cluster of diamond links bisects rippling strands of ochre lines that appear to undulate on the bark.

In this abstracted work, Marawili activates the *miny'tji* to elicit the energy of Bāru moving from the beach and diving into waves of the sea, as well as conjure the image of the crocodile's scales. In utilizing the Madarrpa *miny'tji*, Marawili asserts his community's custodianship of the waters and lands that Bāru travels through. As Henry Skerritt states: "Painting the *miny'tji* is an assertion of one's knowledge, ownership, and identification with particular clan estates. This is not a model of ownership that views land as human property, because it comes with a reciprocal sense of also *belonging to the land*."¹⁹ Skerritt continues: "By painting the *miny'tji*, Djambawa declares his embodied right to speak *as part of his land*."²⁰ In employing their clan designs in their bark paintings, Marawili and other artists in *Saltwater* not only stress the inextricable ties between Indigenous Australians and their country, but also assert their authority to speak for their land. In *Yathikpa*, Marawili provides the evidence needed to document his community's claim to the sea, and importantly, attempts to translate his community's laws to a non-Indigenous audience—"look at my paintings and recognize our law." It is due to these strategic decisions to use the *miny'tji* as a political tool that the Yolngu and other Aboriginal groups along the coast of Australia successfully obtained native titles to the sea and sea-beds in their country in subsequent years.²¹

Painting Critique: The Spinifex Arts Project

By the end of the 1990s, many Indigenous Australian groups began to document their native title claims in paint. In 1997, senior traditional land owners from the Great Sandy Desert painted a large-scale communal work, the *Ngurrara* canvas, to lay claim to their lands in northern Western Australia. Other Indigenous Australian communities capitalized on public interest in Indigenous Australian art and their preexisting



JONATHAN KUMINTJARA BROWN, *Maralinga*, 1994. Acrylic, sand, and ochre on canvas.
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth. Gift of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner.

relationships with the art market to document and validate their land and sea claims. Not all Indigenous peoples had ties to the market or painted for non-Indigenous viewers, though, as was the case for the Pila Nguru (more commonly known as the Spinifex people). As with many other Indigenous communities, the Spinifex people were displaced from their country—in their case, to make room for a nuclear test site. In the 1950s, the British-Australian government forcefully relocated Spinifex people to missions in order to test atomic weapons in remote parts of Australia, such as Maralinga.²² Over the course of the next decade, the government conducted seven atomic tests at Maralinga, irrevocably damaging and poisoning Spinifex lands.²³ However, beginning in the 1980s, two decades after the last nuclear tests, the Australian

government determined that the country was once again “safe” to inhabit and allowed the Spinifex people to return to their ancestral lands.

In the aftermath of the atomic program and set against the success of *Mabo*, the Pila Nguru community established the Spinifex Arts Project in 1997 and began painting their native title claims. In a series of works, including two large community canvases, Spinifex artists painted their ancestral narratives and important sites in their community as evidence of their rights to these land.²⁴ After completing their “government paintings,” the Spinifex artists gifted the canvases to Western Australia as a symbolic exchange of land until a formal agreement could be reached.²⁵ Shortly thereafter, in November 2000, the Spinifex community became the Traditional Owners of the Spinifex Native Title Determination Area.²⁶

While their objectives and outcome were similar to the goals and success of the Yolngu in the Yirrkala bark petitions and *Saltwater* paintings, the Spinifex artists’ title claims appear different—at least on the surface. Unlike the Yolngu who had an existing tradition of painting barks for the market, the Spinifex people had purposefully abstained from the art market, as they regarded painting for the general public to be irreverent.²⁷ However, after *Milirrpum*, *Mabo*, and other successful native title claims, the Spinifex community understood the importance of providing visual evidence of their land rights and decided to paint proof of their claims.²⁸ The Spinifex artists elected to render abstracted designs of their sacred sites and stories. Unlike the Yolngu who utilized natural ochre paints on bark, the Spinifex artists employed synthetic acrylic paints on canvas.²⁹ As art historian Greg Castillo notes, since Spinifex painters preceded the development of a commercial market for their works, the artists were able to develop their vivid style of vibrant, acidic colors, large canvases, and distinctive iconography, without oversight from the market.³⁰ It is important to note, however, that even though Spinifex paintings differ from Yirrkala paintings in their bright, kaleidoscopic surfaces and iconographic symbolism, they likewise attempt to translate the importance of the land through their depictions of the *Tjukurpa* (Dreamings) and sacred sites.

Having witnessed the pivotal political and legal battles that took place in previous decades, Spinifex artists engaged in explicit critiques of non-Aboriginal peoples’ treatment of their country. In Jonathan Kumintjara Brown’s *Maralinga* (1994), the artist presents the viewer with a provocative reaction to the British-Australian government’s treatment of Spinifex land. In the painting, Brown depicts a series of concentric circles connected though parallel lines to represent the main pathways, important birthplaces, and vital water sources of the Spinifex land. On top of the abstracted landscape, Brown renders amorphous swatches of crimson paint, which pool on the surface of the canvas like a gaping wound. In doing so, Brown suggests the physical damage that the nuclear tests inflicted on Spinifex country, reminding the viewer—and the Australian government—that even though the visible trauma may not be readily apparent, the land will forever be “poisoned” by the government’s thermonuclear decisions.

After the success of their native title claims, Spinifex artists continued to paint as evidence of their traditional custodianship of the lands.³¹ Some artists, like Lawrence Pennington, moved beyond the more traditional iconography of the community canvases, to represent the land in an even more abstract and

distinctive way. In *Mituna* (2017), Pennington portrays the country in which he was born. Through variegated shapes, expressive strokes, and bright shades of red, orange, yellow, and cerulean pigments, Pennington portrays his country as a vibrant place with life-giving qualities. He emphasizes the generative powers of water sources, trees, and other land formations by setting these symbolic forms against a black background. In doing so, the vibrant hues of the warm and cool colors burst from the background with energetic splendor. And yet, Pennington's use of ebony paint for the land perhaps also suggests the aftermath of the nuclear tests, like Brown's *Maralinga*. Rather than paint the land with a bloody lesion, Pennington elects to paint an obsidian ground that is tainted with the radioactive particles of the earlier bomb tests. He stresses that despite the mistreatment of the Spinifex country, the ancestral lands continue to thrive, and the *Tjukurpa* continues to exist as it always has—in the past, present, and future.

Conclusion

It is time for non-Aboriginal people to learn about this land, learn about the waters. So if we are living the way of reconciliation you must learn about the Native Title and Sea Right.

—Djambawa Marawili³²

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, Indigenous Australian artists employed painting as a political tool. Through their depictions of the *miny'tji*, creation narratives, and ancestral lands, Indigenous artists provided visual evidence for their enduring presence in their country and assert their native claims. However, as the outcomes of Yirrkala bark petitions and other unsuccessful legal cases revealed, the path to obtaining official recognition of traditional lands would be long and hard. At the heart of this political battle were the issues of inequality and translation. As Rancière emphasizes, marginalized communities such as Indigenous Australians, cannot achieve equality until the established order is altered. In order to achieve equal footing, as Rancière suggests, Indigenous groups needed to bring the incommensurability of their worldviews with non-Indigenous perspectives to light.

To translate their epistemologies to a non-Indigenous viewer, Indigenous Australian artists began by stating their beliefs in a strategic blend of text and image. As seen in the Yirrkala bark petitions, Yolngu artists presented their written claims in parallel statements penned in English and the Yolngu language with clan designs framing the document. While the petitions ultimately failed, the bark panels established a tradition in which Indigenous motifs and narratives might be utilized in order to assert political entitlements. Decades later when the Yolngu sought sea rights and the Spinifex people documented their native title claims, artists employed their sacred designs and ancestral narratives as pictorial proof of their longstanding relationship with the land. In doing so, the Yolngu and Spinifex peoples were able to reclaim some portion of their lost territory and receive legal recognition as traditional owners of their country. On the international stage and in the national courts, the Indigenous Australian artists and communities demonstrated the power of art and Dreamings to effect real change.

NOTES

- ¹ Cumpston, *Desert Country* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2010), 12.
- ² Peter Sutton, "Dreamings," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller, 1988), 15.
- ³ Robyn Ferrell, *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2012), 18.
- ⁴ For further discussions of international interest in Australian art and exhibitions of global Indigenous art, see essays by Lucia Colombari and Audrey Li in this catalog.
- ⁵ For a discussion of Aboriginal iconography, see chapters 2, 3, and 4 of Sutton, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. The various authors provide descriptions and diagrams on how to read Aboriginal bark and acrylic paintings.
- ⁶ Djon Mundine OAM, "Saltwater," in *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country: Recognising Indigenous Sea Rights* (Neutral Bay, NSW: Buku-Larrnjgay Mulka Centre, 1999), 22.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ John Carty, "Rethinking Western Desert Abstraction," in *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2012), 108.
- ⁹ Ibid., 108.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in: Henry F. Skerritt, "A Stitch in Time: How Aboriginal Australian Artists Are Reweaving Our World," in *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2016), 34-35. For more on Aboriginal paintings as "title deeds," see Vivien Johnson's discussion of desert paintings in: Vivien Johnson, *Papunya Painting: Out of the Desert* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2007), 32-33.
- ¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013), 47-48.
- ¹² It was not until 1967 that Aboriginal people were counted in a census. See: Mundine, "Saltwater," 22.
- ¹³ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreements: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 42).
- ¹⁴ The concept of *terra nullius*—a Latin phrase meaning "nobody's land" – has been used in territorial claims throughout history. In Australia, the government employed the doctrine to assert that the land was not owned by any "civilized" group/individual before colonization. However, the court's ruling in Mabo led to the reversal of the court's original standing on *terra nullius*. See: Noni Sharp, *No Ordinary Judgment: Mabo, the Murray Islanders' Land Case* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996), 3-4.
- ¹⁵ For more information on the Mabo proceedings and the impact of the case on Aboriginal land rights, see: Peter H. Russell, *Recognizing Aboriginal Title: The Mabo Case and Indigenous Resistance to English-Settler Colonialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); M.A. Stephenson and Suri Ratnapala, eds., *Mabo: A Judicial Revolution, The Aboriginal Land Rights Decision and Its Impact on Australian Law* (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1993); Noni Sharp, *No Ordinary Judgment: Mabo, the Murray Islanders' Land Case* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996); Lisa Strelein, ed., *Dialogue About Land Justice: Papers from the National Native Title Conference* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2010).
- ¹⁶ Mundine, "Saltwater," 26.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Henry F. Skerritt, "Marking the Infinite," in *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia from the Debra and Dennis Scholl Collection*, ed. Henry F. Skerritt (Reno, NV: Nevada Museum of Art, 2016), 11.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ The first case that recognized sea rights was the Croker Islands Sea Case (2001). In the hearing, the Yarmirr people were granted native titles to the sea and sea-beds, the government still allowed fishing rights to non-Aboriginal fishermen. See: Mundine, "Saltwater," 26.
- ²² Greg Castillo, "Spinifex People as Cold War Moderns," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 4, no. 1 (2015): 85, and Nici Cumpston, "Spinifex Arts Project and Maralinga Tjarutja People," in *Desert Country* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2010), 127.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 75.
- ²⁵ Cumpston, "Spinifex Arts Project," 127.
- ²⁶ Louise Allerton and Peter Twig, "Spinifex Arts Project," in *Australian Contemporary Indigenous Art Now* (Santa Fe, NM: Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, 2010), 16-17.
- ²⁷ Castillo, "Spinifex People," 88-89.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 88.
- ²⁹ Spinifex Arts Community Coordinator Louise Allerton contends that the Spinifex artists possibly used acrylic paints as another layer of protecting their sacred narratives from uninitiated viewers. She argues that by using modern materials, like acrylics and canvas, the artists make the depicted scenes "safe" for non-Spinifex viewers. See: Louise Allerton, "Recollections of the Spinifex Arts Project," in *Spinifex: People of the Sun and Shadow* (Bentley, WA: John Curtin University, 2012), 30.
- ³⁰ Castillo, "Spinifex People," 89.
- ³¹ John Carty, "Seeing the Desert in the Trees: The Gift of Spinifex Art," in *Spinifex: People of the Sun and Shadow* (Bentley: John Curtin University, 2012), 43.
- ³² Djambawa Marawili, quoted in: Allison Meier, "Bark Paintings That Were Pivotal Documents in an Aboriginal Sea Rights Case Go on View," *Hyperallergic*, November 28, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/412659/sea-rights-bark-paintings-australia/> Accessed April 30, 2018.

Absence and Presence: Contesting Urban Aboriginality

KELVIN L. PARNELL JR.

Dreamings propelled Aboriginal Australian art onto the world stage, making it a pivotal moment for both Aboriginal Australian and global contemporary art. The exhibition's curator, anthropologist Peter Sutton, included works from Central Australia (acrylics), Arnhem Land (bark paintings), Cape York Peninsula and Lake Eyre region (sculptures), and various works from southeastern Australia. Despite this range, the exhibition and its catalog effectively ignored one of the largest spheres of Aboriginal art production: urban centers.¹ Why were urban-based artists excluded from the exhibition? In the catalog, Sutton explained that the absence of urban Aboriginal art in *Dreamings* was due to the lack of "quantity and quality" of their works in comparison to artists working in the country's more remote areas.²

In doing so, Sutton failed to acknowledge a crucial moment in the history of urban-based Aboriginal artists: the increased production of urban art that resulted from the establishment of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative. Founded in 1987, Boomalli advocated for the acceptance of art by Indigenous Australians from urban centers and mixed ancestry, many of whom worked in new media. The cooperative also afforded urban artists a space where they could showcase their work as galleries throughout Australia excluded them.³ *Dreamings* was complicit in these exclusionary practices and the effect was a further promulgation of the distinction between "traditional" and "urban" artists.

Sutton's exclusion of urban-based artist's work, and the way in which distinctions were made between "traditional" and "urban" artists, as well as the very deployment of these problematic terms, are all illustrative of a larger cultural and historical problem. Adelaide-based Indigenous artist James Tylor (b.1986) argues that the phrase "urban Aboriginal artist" fails to address the nuance and diversity of contemporary Indigenous Australian identity. For Tylor, the term "urban" creates distinctions between different Indigenous peoples, while denying them the agency to define themselves. As Tylor does not identify as "urban," he notes that it, "means different things to different people depending on who you

ask. It is a flawed term because there is not a better word for it. It is almost like a scientist need[ed] to come up with a term, so they use[d] that rather than just go with that you are Indigenous.”⁴ What may first appear as a simple locational descriptor—distinguishing between artists working in remote or urban centers—the term has its roots in the history of colonialization and assimilation policies in Australia.

According to sociologist Tony Bennett, the primary motive behind the forced relocation of Aboriginal peoples to cities went beyond their assimilation into European culture. Such relocation efforts were premised upon gaining biological dominance over Indigenous peoples. The goal was to create an “absolute otherness” between the Indigenous Australians now living in cities and their remote brethren.⁵ In doing so, assimilationist policies paved the way for, “ethnography and assimilation to come together around a bipolar opposition in which ‘part-aborigine’ automatically meant ‘non-aborigine.’ The transition from ‘full-blooded’ to ‘half-caste’ could be equated with a transition from pre-history into history.”⁶ As a result, “full-blooded” and “half-caste” became synonymous with “traditional” and “urban” respectively, causing a rift among Indigenous peoples who remained in remote communities and those forcibly relocated into cities, many of whom were mixed race. These signifiers thus go beyond locational distinctions and today carry racial signification with them.⁷

Consequentially, issues regarding authenticity of identity (and artistic production) continue to be a matter of contention. The sociologist Tim Rowse posits that the qualifier “urban,” “seems to invoke something measurable and objective—place—in order to assure us of other meanings which have something to do with culture and social organization.”⁸ With authenticity often equated with tradition, “urban” has become an important cultural and artistic signifier, thus polarizing Indigenous Australians both within and outside of the art world.⁹ Espousing these sentiments enflame and perpetuate the narrative that Aboriginal artists from urban centers and their art are inauthentic in comparison to the “traditionalist” paradigm established in *Dreamings*.

The aim of this essay is not to criticize Sutton for excluding urban-based Aboriginal artists from *Dreamings*. Instead it seeks to question and problematize the notion of “urban Aboriginality” and the relationship of the term “urban” to Aboriginal art and artists. Doing so will allow for recognition of the shared “Aboriginality” amongst Indigenous peoples as expressed in their art. Using a multitude of media, “urban” Aboriginal artists explore Aboriginality. Their incorporation or motifs and themes found in more “traditional” Aboriginal art production allows them to examine, recover, express, and assert their Aboriginal cultural heritage in their “urban” art. This essay will explore how the art practices of Aboriginal artists labeled as “urban” and those working within urban areas exemplifies the continuation of cultural and ancestral practices. As art historian Wally Caruana asserts, “The work of urban and rural artists continues to refer to traditional forms and themes as part of the process of cultural enhancement.”¹⁰

Art historian Ian McLean defines “urban Indigenous artists” as those who are in touch with or in direct conversation with their Indigenous culture as expressed through the employment of Indigenous Australian subject matter. The work of such artists, “engages in an argument about the cultural

interstices of contemporary life.”¹¹ Specifically, this essay will focus on three contemporary “urban” Aboriginal artists—Nici Cumpston (b. 1963), James Tylor, and Reko Rennie (b.1974)—to explore the ways in which they engage in conversations about Indigenous identity and its effect on their contemporary lives. In doing so, we can chart a commonality of themes between Aboriginal artists living in urban centers and those in rural and remote areas—primarily land, tradition and temporality.

Concepts of identity, social and political activism and advocating for one’s Aboriginality have come to define urban-based Aboriginal artists, yet the exploration of their identity does not make their work any less “Aboriginal” compared to “traditional” artists. Conversely, defining remote artists as “traditional” is equally problematic insofar as it dissociates these artists from modernity. Doing so suggests that they and their works are stagnant continuations of traditional practices disallowing more nuanced conversations regarding the potential multiplicity of Indigenous modernities. Urban-based Indigenous artists, like their remote and rural counterparts, address contemporary issues. According to Professor Marcia Langton, in the 1980s only a fraction of Aboriginal people identified as “urban.”¹² The potential reasons for this are two-fold: on the one hand, many came from non-urban areas; on the other hand, artists who have been identified as “urban” often make artworks that represent a multitude of subjects, which may not relate in any way to an “urban” experience.

Nici Cumpston: Reconnecting with the Land

Adelaide-born Aboriginal artist, writer, and curator Nici Cumpston has come to be defined as an “urban” artist. However, her work exclusively relates to rural subjects so that she can explore her ancestral identity and cultural values. Although Cumpston’s art practice is contingent upon the traditionally Western medium of photography, her work is a product of both European and Aboriginal art practices and visual languages.¹³ During her six-year tenure at the South Australia police department, Cumpston honed her photographic eye and began her hand coloring technique while working in the forensic division.¹⁴ As anthropologist Sabra Thorner explains, though photography was once a colonial visual technology used to govern and subjugate, it has become, “a medium of Indigenous self-determination, re-signifying Aboriginality in Australia’s visual lexicon.”¹⁵ Beginning in the nineteenth century, European colonists used photography to typify, other, and stereotype Indigenous Australians. These photographs were eventually placed in museum and library archives. This resulted in an infection of the Australian national consciousness that manifested as racist and assimilationist rhetoric, empowered by detrimental government policies not ameliorated until the 1970s and 1980s.

During these decades, the Aboriginal civil rights movement gained momentum and urban-based Indigenous artists used photography to raise awareness and instigate social reform.¹⁶ This moment was transformative for both Indigenous people and politically active artists such as Cumpston. She and other urban-based artists such as Michael Riley (1960–2004), Tracey Moffatt (b.1960), and Brenda L. Croft (b.1964) began to use the camera to reexamine the archives and express the diversity of Aboriginal



NICI CUMPSTON, *Settlement View*, 2011-13. Inkjet print and acrylic paint on canvas, 25.5 x 69 in. (65 x 175.25 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Museum purchase, 2014.

artists and peoples.¹⁷ Through her reliance on photography, Cumpston invokes the power that the medium has maintained in defining and redefining Aboriginality.

In 2011 with the assistance of Paakanty elder and artist Badger Bates, Cumpston navigated the boundaries of her ancestral country near the western desert in New South Wales, Australia. This journey led to the creation of the series *Having-Been-There* (2011), which is part of the larger project *Settlement View*. It deals with the tension between absence and presence as she explores her family's Aboriginality by reconnecting with her ancestral lands.¹⁸ *Settlement View* is reminiscent of photographic, landscape stills shown in Ricky Maynard's (b.1953) *Portrait of a Distant Land* series as well as Albert Namatjira's (1902–1959) watercolors that feature “distinct horizons and unaffected naturalism.” Cumpston has cited both Indigenous Australian artists as inspirations.¹⁹

Settlement View is a large-scale, digital photographic print on canvas that displays a panoramic view of Cumpston's ancestral country from a raised viewpoint. Instead of placing herself as the central figure in the work, she represents her sister. By evoking the picturesque—through the depiction of calm, blue skies—as well as the sublime—by the addition of shadows on the edges of the canvas—she alludes to the landscape as a place of both hope and mourning. Hope evidenced in the vibrant colors and expansive landscape as the central figure looks towards to horizon with reverence. Hope in the sense that she can manifest the presence of those closest to her as she recoups her Aboriginal identity through her artistic practice; mourning in the sense that her familial ties to ancestral culture, knowledge and land are partially absent and severed—a sentiment expressed through the differentiation of her sister's grayscale body from the polychromatic environment.

“Cumpston's large-scale panoramas,” curator Una Rey argues, “perform as cinematic trompe l'oeil, their sparing beauty is designed not to trick the eye, but to transport the body.”²⁰ Her images are derived

from photographic negatives, but the digital printing technique allows her to enlarge the images to enhance the viewer's sensorial experience. She then hand-colors the images much like Aboriginal artists from remote areas who paint their Dreamings. Through this process she recounts her ancestral stories to make a spiritual connection between herself and Indigenous peoples. Through *Settlement View*, Cumpston temporally conversed with her ancestral past, creating a bodily experience in which the artist emphasized cultural absence.

James Tylor: Filling the Void

While Cumpston's focus on rural landscape complicates the problematic "urban" label, James Tylor incorporates themes of land and temporality to further confound "urban" Aboriginality. His series *(Deleted Scenes) from an Untouched Landscape* (2013) (see page 71) questions both cultural and physical Aboriginal absences to assert their presence in Australian history. *(Deleted Scenes)* are photographs printed digitally in black and white. Each image displays various ambiguous landscapes across Australia visited by Tylor. Although unmarked, each represents a point of contact between European colonists and Indigenous Australians that resulted in either genocide or forcible removal and the subsequent loss of culture. Tylor creates three-dimensional objects by excising either circular or square voids from the prints and placing them atop a black felt background. Doing so illustrates the artist's desire to engage the viewer in an ephemeral, sensorial interaction with the work that elicits the subject's historicity. While alluding to metaphorical absences, Tylor's work also refers to physical absence by emphasizing the three-dimensionality of an object from which holes have been cut thereby evoking the removal of Indigenous Australians from their country.

Like Cumpston, Tylor uses photography as a form of political activism—a tradition established by early urban-based Indigenous artists. Historian Jane Lydon explains that, "Photos help constitute technologies of Indigenous memory through a range of practices that construct the past in the present, including by revealing unknown ancestors lost during the displacements of colonialism, and substantiating Indigenous stories and experiences formerly hidden from view."²¹ Tylor, like his artistic predecessors, uses his camera to highlight the visibility of contemporary Aboriginal peoples whereas the medium was previously used to depict Indigenous peoples as a dying race.²² By employing a medium typically understood to convey truth and objectivity, he calls attention to the fact that there is a missing or redacted component of his image. Although *(Deleted Scenes)* does not reveal the ancestors who once inhabited the land that he depicts, his photographs speak to unaddressed histories of Australia.

Whereas some urban-based Indigenous artists are characterized as "urban" because their subjects are Aboriginal and they emphasize identity politics, Tylor's work does something quite different. His exploration of absence, removal and genocide alludes to the history of urbanization of Indigenous Australians because of European colonization. Tylor's work shows urbanization not as an identifying signifier, but as a systematic and violent historical process enacted upon Aboriginal peoples. He addresses the history

of governmental practices and assimilationist policies designed to eradicate Aboriginal culture to draw a linear narrative between past actions and their continual effects in the present.

Tylor's work critiques the colonial narrative of *terra nullius* (land without people). The black voids created by Tylor also materialize the paradox of the "untouched" landscape narrative promulgated by European colonizers, which justified the theft of Aboriginal lands—a history Tylor wants to correct.²³ In Tylor's photograph the viewer can see how "absence" works on multiple levels. On the one hand, there is a lack of visual information as some of it has been physically removed, hindering a reading of the work. This refers to a more significant epistemological absence between Indigenous ancestral knowledge and its connection to land, echoing Western European attempts to eliminate Aboriginal culture. Through his art practice, Tylor examines and reconnects with both his European and Indigenous ancestries, both of which assist him in his endeavor to conjure a sense of personal presence and refill the void.²⁴

By exploring the legacy of colonialism and its effect on Indigenous Australians, Tylor follows in the conceptual footsteps of Brisbane-based artist Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) and Sydney-based artist Tracey Moffatt, both of whom used their work to expose the malicious nature of colonialism and its repressed histories. However, Tylor's work is indicative of a continuing problem regarding Aboriginal art and artists characterized as "urban." As curator Stephen Gilchrist posits, "When Indigenous artists disrupt the operation of the 'settler' narrative, they are subjected to reflexive accusation of in-authenticity."²⁵ Both Bennett and Moffatt experienced the effects of such sentiments, causing them to advocate in the 1980s for the status of contemporary artists rather than "urban" or even "Aboriginal" artists. As a result, McLean suggests that, "No sooner had Boomalli raised the flag of urban Indigenous art than Bennett and Moffatt (a founding member of Boomalli) tore it down."²⁶

When asked about how he identifies as an artist, Tylor simply states that he is, "an Australian artist with Indigenous ancestry."²⁷ In conjunction with his *(Deleted Scenes)* series, this statement provides a way in which to understand the term "urban" not as a signifier of Aboriginal culture, but rather of product of Western modernism and colonization. Consequentially, applying the term generally to Indigenous Australian artists living and practicing in urban centers promulgates an assimilationist narrative and denies any agency to interpret their Aboriginality on their own terms.

Reko Rennie: Asserting Aboriginality

Described as a "street artist," New South Wales-born artist Reko Rennie employs graffiti and stenciling to display his works in primarily public arenas. His work expresses his Aboriginal identity and engages his viewers in cross-cultural conversations. By relying on such media and practices, Rennie physically binds Aboriginal identity to the cityscape and presences Indigeneity by alluding to its organic association with the urban space. Many of Rennie's works employ Aboriginal and secular iconography and motifs that



JAMES TYLOR, (*Deleted Scenes*) *From an untouched landscape #6*, 2013. Inkjet print on paper with holes removed to a black velvet void, 19 5/8 x 19 5/8 (50 x 50 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of the artist, 2014.

speak to the social and cultural histories of Indigenous Australians. In doing so, Rennie, “creates a hybrid visual language with which he can resist the fixity of false identity constructions in relation to Aboriginal people, art and culture, while mobilizing a new one.”²⁸ Rennie imbues his work with layers of signification which speak to different aspects of his Indigenous ancestry and traditions. Unlike Cumpston and Tylor, land is not an integral part of his work. He rather advocates for the visibility of Aboriginal peoples living in urban environments. Unlike the aforementioned artists, Rennie describes himself as both urban and



Beyond Dreamings installation image at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing works by **REKO RENNIE**, Unidentified artists and **JAMES TYLOR**. Photograph by Tom Cogill.

Aboriginal. However, in identifying himself as an urban artist he recognizes the stigma that has been associated with the term and aims to re-signify the term under his own conditions.

Rennie's work reflects how contemporary Indigenous Australians living in urban centers construct and maintain Aboriginal identities in urban spaces. "Far from accepting the status quo," Caruana suggests, "today's urban artists continue to use every means available to them to express contemporary realities through their art."²⁹ Rennie's art epitomizes these sentiments, illustrating that Aboriginal peoples live in urban centers and that their identities are not defined by those spaces. Even within primarily white urban centers, Rennie's works suggests Aboriginal Australians have maintained and continued to define their sense of self without abdicating their Aboriginality to Western society. In advocating for urban Aboriginality, Rennie shows that Indigenous culture has endured within urban areas despite decade-long attempts to strip Indigenous Australians of their cultural heritage.

Stephen Gilchrist explains that, "Disassociating Aboriginal people from the urban centers is a way to erode their cultural and historical legitimacy and to re-inscribe these spaces as wholly Australian."³⁰ Even after decades of forcible removal and migration to coastal cities, Rennie emphasizes Indigenous visibility

to illustrate that Aboriginal peoples have both maintained a sense of self and have been active agents in forming new identities within these spaces. His art practice rejects the notion that urbanity is synonymous with being European or only the result of assimilationist policies.³¹

Both formally and conceptually, Rennie's large-scale canvas, *Message Stick (Pink)* (2011) (see page 72) engages in cross-cultural conversations. "Message sticks" are traditional Aboriginal objects that were used to communicate between clans or language groups in order to travel safely through country.³² By working on canvas, Rennie's street-art can enter museum spaces, elevating it to the status of high art. In doing so, it performs the intended function of a message stick. As it travels to various exhibitions, *Message Stick (Pink)* interacts with diverse cultural groups outside of Australia offering viewers a means by which they can begin to understand his Aboriginal identity.³³ The concentric design of hand-pressed, metallic foil emanating from the central screen-printed spray-paint alludes to Rennie's Kamilaroi ancestry. The alternating colors of pink, gold, and orange form diamonds that entice and disorient viewers, due to their shimmering effect and varying sense of depth. The Kamilaroi people from New South Wales incised this diamond pattern on wooden objects like message sticks, shields, and trees.³⁴ Rennie channels his ancestral traditions by incorporating a shield icon on the spray-paint can which bares the same polychromatic, diamond pattern—connecting traditional Kamilaroi visual culture with Rennie's contemporary canvas.

The incorporation of traditional clan designs reflects his Aboriginal identity and affirms that this heritage and cultural values are not lost. While on the one hand Rennie's work references cultural exchange between Aboriginal peoples and the world, it also signifies resistance. The use of this shield design connects the viewer with the history of defense, offense, and protection against colonial rule and European invasion. It is both a representation of the physical as well as the symbolic struggles that he, his people and Aboriginal peoples more broadly have faced. In the last decade, Rennie has gained international acclaim as a contemporary artist, displaying his Kamilaroi designs in cities around the world.

Conclusion

Throughout the early- to mid-twentieth century, socio-economic and locational conditions defined urban Aboriginality. Due to their forced relocation or migration, Aboriginal peoples were forcefully inducted into Western social and economic value systems. Governmental policies fostered class and racial stratifications including "quarter-caste-half-caste-full-blood classifications of Aboriginal people's validity through the legislative and administrative oppression of Aborigines."³⁵ The efforts to enforce these racial and class distinctions caused some to question their Aboriginal identity and authenticity. Consequentially, these distinctions effectively demarcated the people believed to be assimilated and of mixed ancestry as "urban" and those living outside city limits and "full-blooded" as "traditional."³⁶

In an art historical context, the classification "urban Aboriginal art" echoes those sentiments and thus typifies, generalizes, and differentiates Indigenous Australians and their art practices based not on

aesthetic or stylistic conventions, but rather their location, themes, and media. As a result, art historians who promulgate that sentiment are not making a statement about “urban” versus “traditional” art; they are defining the “authenticity” of Aboriginal art. To do so disregards the common histories and shared cultural knowledge that blur the lines between “urban” and “traditional.” Langton explains that, “In the study of urban Aboriginal cultures this emphasis must be reserved, to concentrate on the internal social structure rather than the external social structure.”³⁷ In order to progress beyond their differences—whether they be artificial or substantial—a common Aboriginality should instead be disseminated among the cultural groups. If the term must be employed, it should be reexamined within the context of each artist and that artist should be able to define “urban” means to them.³⁸

“Urban Aborigines from southern and eastern Australia,” Sutton explicated, “have been exposed for a much longer time to non-Aboriginal society and culture and have experienced much more profound culture changes, yet they have not lost their sense of Aboriginal identity.”³⁹ Sutton is correct in that assessment: Aboriginal peoples living in urban centers have been exposed to Western cultures longer than those living in remote and rural areas. However, they have never ceased to be Aboriginal, nor stopped trying to recoup or reconnect with their ancestral roots. They have adapted to and integrated—not assimilated—into white Australian society. Like those from remote areas, Aboriginal artists living in urban landscapes are, and always have been, contemporary peoples who express and maintain their own identities. Through their varying art practices, Indigenous Australian artists labeled “urban” have continually adapted their ancestral culture to define “urban” Aboriginality on their own terms.

NOTES

- ¹ These urban centers include: Melbourne, Perth, Darwin, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Sydney.
- ² Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1991), 2.
- ³ Stephen Gilchrist, ed., *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art*. (Lebanon, USA: University Press of New England, 2012), 57.
- ⁴ James Tylor, interview with the author, March 5, 2018.
- ⁵ Tony Bennett, “Evolution Ground Zero: Colonialism and the Fold of Memory,” in *Pasts beyond Memory: Evolution Museums Colonialism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 157
- ⁶ Ibid, 157. This was based on an Australian assimilationist policy of “let live and let die.” “Let live in the sense that extinction was no longer seen as the evolutionary ordained destiny of Aborigines, and ‘let die’ in the sense that their continued existence was only contemplated on the condition that—at both the cultural and epidermal levels—they were to become progressively white.” The impetus behind this policy was multifaceted. The common position is that if you could sow difference culturally between Aboriginals living in remote areas and those in urban areas that the disconnect would lead to their eventual cultural eradication. Additionally, by focusing their efforts on miscegenation, Australians attempted assert biological power over Indigenous Australians which, in their hope, would lead to the genetic eradication of “full-blood” Aboriginal peoples.
- ⁷ Ibid, 158.
- ⁸ Tim Rowse, “Transforming the Notion of the Urban Aborigine,” *Urban Policy and Research* 18, no. 2 (2000): 171.
- ⁹ Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 194.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 218.
- ¹¹ Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (London: Reaktion Book Ltd, 2016), 225.
- ¹² Marcia Langton, “Urbanizing Aborigines: The Social Scientists’ Great Deception,” *Social Alternatives* 2, no. 2 (1981): 16.
- ¹³ Cumpston’s non-Aboriginal heritage is English, Afghan, and Irish while her Aboriginal ancestry is Barkindji from South East Australia.

- ¹⁴ Cumpston did not only receive her training while working with the South Australian police department, although that is where she derives the technique used in some of her landscape works. Cumpston says artists Kate Breakey encouraged her to continue the hand coloring technique. She received formal training at the North Adelaide School of Art, graduating in 1989 with a degree in Applied and Visual Art.
- ¹⁵ Sabra Thorner, "Two Exhibitions Re-signify Aboriginality and Photography in Australia's Visual Lexicon," *American Anthropologist* 110, no. 1 (2008): 66-70.
- ¹⁶ Jane Lydon, "Aboriginal Transformations of the Photographic Archive," in *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, ed. Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean, 2017, 365.
- ¹⁷ Una Rey, "Presences in the Land: Nici Cumpston," *Artlink* 32, no. 2 (2012): 104.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104-105. The themes of absence and presence are evident in Cumpston's other works like her 2009 Attesting series where she illustrates the devastating ecological effects of her ancestral lands and river systems (the Murry-Darling River system). The economic devastation like the devastation to her ancestors and Aboriginal peoples across Australia were the result of governmental policies. While Cumpston's photographs illustrate the decline of this fragile ecosystem, paradoxically they reveal evidence of Indigenous occupation, sites previously concealed by the partial flooding of Nookamka by irrigators in the early 1900s.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ²¹ Lydon, 377-378.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 364.
- ²³ Tylor, interview with the author.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Gilchrist, *Crossing Cultures*, 60.
- ²⁶ McLean, 224.
- ²⁷ Tylor, interview with the author.
- ²⁸ Stephen Gilchrist, "Reko Rennie: Pattertnation" (Charlottesville: Kluge-Ruhe Museum of Aboriginal Art, 2011).
- ²⁹ Caruana, *Aboriginal Art*, 219.
- ³⁰ Gilchrist, "Reko Rennie: Pattertnation."
- ³¹ Langton, 16.
- ³² Nerinda Sandry, "Message Sticks: Rich Ways of Weaving Aboriginal Cultures into the Australian Curriculum," *The Queensland Museum Network Blog*, 2012.
- ³³ Gilchrist, "Reko Rennie: Pattertnation."
- ³⁴ Gilchrist, "Reko Rennie: Pattertnation."
- ³⁵ Langton, "Urbanizing Aborigines," 17.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ³⁸ Rowse, "Transforming the Notion of the Urban Aborigine," 173.
- ³⁹ Sutton, *Dreamings*, 32.

Cracking Confines | *Dreamings* and Cultural Continuity

ELIZA HODGSON

Dreamings signaled a profound change in the perception of Indigenous Australian material culture from being considered ethnographic artifacts to works of fine art. And yet, the charge was incomplete. The postscript to the *Dreamings* catalog reads: “In this book and the exhibition that it accompanies we have focused mainly on the kind of Aboriginal art that is firmly rooted in the classical, pre-European past of Aboriginal tradition, even though we have demonstrated the continuing vitality of that tradition over much of Australia.”¹ In focusing on this narrative of direct cultural continuity with pre-colonial traditions, Sutton and his team overlooked, and even intentionally excluded works that they did not see as fitting with this linear narrative.

Beyond Dreamings challenges the narrow parameters of representation presented in the original exhibition by placing Indigenous Australian art that was featured, or would have fit within the 1988 exhibition framework, in dialogue with contemporary Indigenous Australian artists whose work would not have fit within this curatorial rationale. In doing so, *Beyond Dreamings* makes room for alternative narratives of progress. While the works of contemporary Indigenous Australian artists Janet Fieldhouse (b. 1971) and Reko Rennie (b. 1974) were not available in 1988, their practices would have conflicted with Sutton’s linear model of cultural continuity, which reinforces old-fashioned notions of “authenticity.” Such twentieth-century frameworks were contested by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture*, published in the same year as *Dreamings*.² Clifford’s book challenged Western systems of museum collecting and display in an effort “to displace any transcendent regime of authenticity,” and “to argue that all authoritative collections, whether made in the name of art and science, are historically contingent and subject to local reappropriation.” Clifford also contended that non-Western historical experiences, “are hemmed in by concepts of continuous tradition and the unified self.”³

In *Beyond Dreamings*, three nineteenth-century decorated shields selected from the collection of John and Barbara Wilkerson acknowledge the Indigenous cultural practices of the past, while also highlighting the present and future of Indigenous Australian artistic innovation. The placement of the nineteenth-century shields in relation to Reko Rennie's *Message Stick (Pink)* (2011), illustrates how traditional Indigenous clan designs, art practices, and markers of identity can inform works in contemporary mediums such as spray-paint and stenciling. Shields from the same South Australian region and timeframe were celebrated in *Dreamings*, but arguably for dubious reasons. The seminal exhibition did not include any contemporary shields to indicate the continuity of the practice after European contact. To make this predicament worse, the accompanying exhibition catalog reveals that the curators of *Dreamings* were aware of the revival of shield-making in the Lower Murray River by wood carvers John Lindsay and Colin Cook. These contemporary artists created shields using traditional methods, materials, and designs they had learned from Aboriginal elders, and rediscovered in museum collections.⁴ Yet, despite mentioning the work of John Lindsay and Colin Cook in the exhibition catalog, the 1988 curators excluded the contemporary shields.

The curators' justification for their simultaneous acknowledgement and exclusion was that contemporary shields failed to "represent a direct continuation of that region's tradition."⁵ In other words, the shields were seen as not being rooted in the pre-contact Aboriginal tradition, and were therefore "inauthentic." This episode distills the inadequacies at the heart of attempts made by museums and galleries to present a robust view of the contemporaneity of Indigenous art. As Clifford suggested, modernity made it impossible to find a truly "authentic" culture, yet even this acknowledgement concedes to Eurocentric and linear frameworks.⁶ Shelly Errington likewise demonstrated that twentieth-century notions of "authenticity" and descriptors such as "primitive" failed to present anything but an inadequate and Western lens on art from other cultures. Errington argued that these notions, like the qualifiers offered by the curators of *Dreamings*, stem from the Western fixation on linear time and the metanarrative of progress.⁷ Seen in this light, the exclusion of contemporary shields in *Dreamings* may be understood as a symptom of the works' failure to validate the exhibition's "progress narrative," a narrative to which other works included in the exhibition, such as the Western Desert acrylic paintings, more neatly conformed to. After all, according to the exhibition's curators, the practice of shield-making in the South Australia was a discontinued practiced before Lindsay and Cook's revival in the 1980s. When considered from the expectation of unbroken historical development, contemporary shield-making lacked the kind of "authentic" innovation of other contemporary Indigenous artistic practices, such as the Western Desert acrylic and bark paintings included in *Dreamings*. Although the Western Desert acrylic paintings depart from traditional Indigenous materials and mediums, the paintings derive from "classical Aboriginal religious and intellectual systems," and thus satisfying the curator's desires for a "continuation" of tradition.⁸

Is it not, in fact, the case that Lindsay and Cook offered a "regeneration" of the classical Lower Murray traditions?⁹ Shields were essential to ceremonial identity and protection. The deep ochre decoration and scars in Lindsay and Cook's works reflect this Indigenous Australian shield-making tradition. The narrow

long-bodied parrying shield protected against the threat of hand-wielded weapons such as clubs during combat. The broader shields offered protection against spears, clubs, and other flying weapons. Not unlike Indigenous ceremonial dances, Philip Jones noted that Aboriginal warfare including shields was “often theatrical and orchestrated.”¹⁰ In this respect, and as the decoration signifies, the shields were as much weapons as they were markers of Indigenous identity. This aspect is further complicated by Sutton’s statement in reference to contemporary bark and acrylic paintings, that “the design—not the object itself—is what has continuity.”¹¹ While the physical practice of Indigenous shield making in South Australia may have been temporarily suspended before Lindsay and Cook’s “regeneration,” the culture that the shields and their markings reflected continued.

Beyond Dreamings proposes a different view onto these relations. In the current exhibition, the three decorated shields from the Lower Murray River frame historical continuities in the bold work of contemporary artist Reko Rennie, while the collection of Tiwi ceremonial body ornaments activate Janet Fieldhouse’s porcelain armbands—displayed on the same plinth. The Tiwi *pamijini* and the decorated shields at once represent the profound legacy of *Dreamings*, even as it reframes the more problematic aspects of the exhibition’s notions of continuity.

Southern Australian Decorative Shields

The framework of *Dreamings* is further challenged when looking at the historical context surrounding the nineteenth-century shields. British settlement of the Lower Murray River began in the mid-nineteenth century and decorated shields would have been widely seen by Europeans during the first years of settlement.¹² Shields were depicted in British watercolors documenting Aboriginal culture and artefacts from this region, such as *Portraits of the Aboriginal Inhabitants* (1844–45), which was exhibited in *Dreamings* (see page 50).¹³ In his introduction to the 1984 exhibition, *‘Primitivism’ in the 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, William Rubin defined an “authentic object as one created by an artist for his own people and used for traditional purposes.”¹⁴ Rubin’s definition stipulates that authentic artworks and artists arrive without any outside influences or contact with outsiders. This framework becomes inadequate when dealing with contemporary Indigenous Australian artists such as Fieldhouse and Rennie inasmuch as they are constantly looking to the past, or in Rubin’s words, the now endangered “authentic,” but also to the present and to the future. In other words, for Fieldhouse and Rennie indigeneity does not require such confines. Clifford offers a critique of the 1984 MoMA exhibition for its ahistoricizing and essentializing of cultures through the display of “authentic” or “primitive” art objects.¹⁵ Rennie and Fieldhouse use non-Indigenous materials, mediums, and techniques in order to position their Indigeneity in the contemporary world. In curating *Beyond Dreamings*, we sought to activate older works by juxtaposing them with contemporary works in an effort to demonstrate how innovation in contemporary Indigenous Australian art can manifest in many ways and through many mediums, be it photography, porcelain, or spray paint.



Top: **JANET FIELDHOUSE**, *Memory Series 2*, 2014. Porcelain, 7.875 x 10.25 x 6 in. (20 x 26 x 15 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of the artist, 2017.
Bottom: Unidentified artists, *Pamijini*, 1988. Natural pigments, feathers, resin, plant fiber and Arbus berries, dimensions variable. Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997.

Janet Fieldhouse: *Memory Series 2*

The contemporary shields from the Lower Murray River were criticized by the curators of *Dreamings* for their reliance on European records and materials in museum collections. Ironically, Janet Fieldhouse's contemporary practice is celebrated for this very reason. It relies on research of the Haddon Collection of Torres Strait Islander material culture at the Cambridge University Museum and the British Museum. These collections exposed Fieldhouse to the woven armbands, baskets, and mats made by Torres Strait Islander women and subsequently led her to study the traditional weaving practices of her ancestry on Erub Island.¹⁶ But by no means is Fieldhouse's practice restricted to a past traditions, a fact most clearly revealed by her mobilization of the non-traditional indigenous medium of porcelain.

Like contemporary shield artists, Fieldhouse's practice is rooted in her desire to reconnect with and to explore her indigenous identity. Fieldhouse's *Memory Series 2*, demonstrates not only her dedication to research and adherence to traditional Indigenous techniques, but also her exploration and mastery of non-traditional materials. No native ceramic traditions existed in Australia prior to colonization, nor was porcelain an Indigenous Torres Strait Island art material. This is not say that clay was not used; in fact, it played a central role in medical and ceremonial practices and was an essential ingredient of ochres for rock and body painting.¹⁷ These practices link Fieldhouse's material to her Indigenous cultural heritage. Clay may be a non-traditional Indigenous material, but her innovative porcelain weaving technique—in which the artist cuts strips of porcelain and weaves them using a Torres Strait Island weaving method—still engages with traditional Indigenous processes. Her practice is innovative, too, in her recognition of women, both in her research and her final products. Her porcelain armbands are derived from techniques used and carried on by Torres Strait Islander women. This is significant when considering that the information presented in institutional collections, and the information relayed to Fieldhouse when conducting research on female practices and female-made art objects, are bound to the authority of the Torres Strait Islander men.

Tiwi *Pamijini*

The Indigenous identity and tradition captured in Fieldhouse's ceramics are augmented by their placement on the plinth next to a selection of Tiwi *pamijini* collected by John W. Kluge in 1989. The rich colors and materiality of the *pamijini*, made from woven pandanus, decorated with ochres, feathers, and seeds fixed with native beeswax, provide color against Fieldhouse's white porcelain armbands. Yet the Tiwi *pamijini* require the body to activate their movement, whereas Fieldhouse's armbands seem to actively support each other. In Tiwi culture body ornaments supplement the full-body and face paintings worn by men and women during the Pukumani and Kulama ceremonies.¹⁸ Dancing and ceremonial movements activate these ornaments.¹⁹ Fieldhouse uses similar language when describing how, during the firing process, her porcelain pieces "dance in the kiln."²⁰ Both sets of arm bands were created for display, yet for very different settings; Fieldhouse created an art object derived from the movement of the body but

devoid of any human touch whereas the *pamijini* were created to be worn, touched, and activated by the body, not purely the gaze.

The Tiwi *pamijini* presented in *Beyond Dreamings*, would have undoubtedly fit within the *Dreamings* curatorial framework. Their ceremonial use was known to outsiders as early as the 1910s and certainly by the 1980s, when Nguiu (Bathurst Island) women became cognizant of the value of traditional craft to the market, and the importance of display to “outsiders.”²¹ It is possible that the twentieth-century shield making practices in Lower Murray River region were a response to the same desires to display traditional crafts to the market. These factors again challenge the definitions of authenticity imposed by contemporary curators.

Complications associated with these traditional art practices in Tiwi and Bathurst Islands as well as the Lower Murray River region, also speak to collecting practices and habits of Westerners, and their perspective on Aboriginal art, in the wake of *Dreamings*. Traditionally, a strong emphasis was placed on the collection of utilitarian artifacts, such as weapons and tools, than upon decorative Aboriginal pieces. This is especially evident when Aboriginal Australian material culture is compared to other Pacific regions.²² The reframing of Aboriginal art after *Dreamings* inspired modern collectors such as John W. Kluge and the Tiwi *pamijini* on display represent part of Kluge’s first acquisition during his inaugural trip to Australia.²³

Reko Rennie: *Message Stick (Pink)*

Like Fieldhouse, Rennie asserts his Indigenous identity in non-Indigenous art mediums. Rennie’s work is not a repetition of the past but a contemporary manifestation of past practices in the present. Rennie’s work challenges contemporary fixations on “authenticity,” and engages traditions as active and continuing rather than locked in old-fashioned taxonomies.

Rennie employs non-traditional materials and processes to defend Indigenous symbols in contemporary, and, importantly, non-traditional Indigenous settings. In one particularly vivid instance, the diamond patterning designs in *Message Stick (Pink)* originate from Rennie’s clan, the Kamilaroi of New South Wales. These patterns enabled Kamilaroi clan members to express ceremonial, land, and marriage rights.²⁴ While the spray paint canister in *Message Stick (Pink)*, speaks directly to Rennie’s diverse practice—which spans a diverse range of mediums and materials and “enables him to continue to explore what it means to be an Aboriginal man in today’s urban Australia”—his re-contextualization of Kamilaroi symbols allows the artist to reconnect with an Aboriginal identity forever transformed by colonialism.²⁵ As the artist noted, “I cannot recreate traditional practices but what I can do, is draw from my own experiences and express my identity from what I know. I am an urban Aboriginal man, I am comfortable with my identity and this is what I try to show through my work.”²⁶ In the context of the conceptual framework of *Dreamings*, Rennie’s work would have been left out not only as a result of geographic constraints,



Beyond Dreamings installation image at Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing the works of **ROVER THOMAS JOOLAMA** (Wolfensohn Family Collection) and **MICHAEL COOK**. Photograph by Tom Cogill.

but also due to the fact that his art-making does not represent a clear continuation of his Indigenous culture, an approach that would moreover be impossible due to colonization of his people and his land. Displayed in proximity to the nineteenth-century shields in *Beyond Dreamings*, the patterns signal a protection of a tradition, but also a powerful assertion and display of contemporary identity.

Conclusion

If innovation was recognized as a continuation of culture by the curators of *Dreamings* in reference to acrylic translations of traditional Aboriginal bark, rock, and body paintings traditions, then the work by Janet Fieldhouse, which draws on the past and propels the Torres Strait Island techniques into the present, and the work by Reko Rennie, which asserts what it means to be a contemporary urban Aboriginal artist, should have fit solidly within the exhibition's stated remit. And if cultural continuation formed the crux of the curatorial narrative, the absence of contemporary shields from the Lower Murray River stands as a glaring omission of the exhibition proper.

Dreamings helped to position Aboriginal art into the realm of fine art, a space where innovation is celebrated, yet paradoxically not by the curators of *Dreamings*. In *Beyond Dreamings*, the inclusion of Fieldhouse and Rennie in dialogue with the nineteenth-century decorative shields and Tiwi *pamjini* signals a continuation and expansion of the charge catalyzed by the watershed 1988 exhibition. The

connections established by the proximity of the Tiwi *pamijini* and Fieldhouse's *Memory Series 2*, as well as the three shields and Rennie's *Message Stick (Pink)*, raises questions about the varied forms of cultural continuity in contemporary Indigenous art.

NOTES

- ¹ Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, (New York: G. Braziller, 1988), 213.
- ² James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- ³ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴ Sutton, *Dreamings*, 187.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ⁶ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 12.
- ⁷ Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1998), 5.
- ⁸ Sutton, *Dreamings*, 81.
- ⁹ Sutton, *Dreamings*, 185.
- ¹⁰ Philip Jones, *Shields: power and protection in Aboriginal Australia*, SA Museum, (2016)
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ¹² Philip Jones, "Broken Shields," in *Ochre and Ruse: Artefacts and encounters on Australian frontiers*. (Mile End: Wakefield Press, 2007), 51-89.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.
- ¹⁴ William Rubin, "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 76.
- ¹⁵ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 195.
- ¹⁶ Joanna Bosse, "Janet Fieldhouse: the sensibility of ritual," *Janet Fieldhouse: Body Ornaments*, (Charlottesville: Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, 2017), 10.
- ¹⁷ Christine Nicholls and Naomi Sharp, *Earth Works: Contemporary Indigenous Australian Ceramic Art* (Adelaide, South Australia: Flinders University Art Museum, 2012).
- ¹⁸ Kathy Barnes, *Kiripapurajuwi: Skills of Our Hands: Good Craftsmen and Tiwi Art* (Darwin: K. Barnes, 1999), 149.
- ¹⁹ Jennifer Isaacs, *Tiwi: Art, History, Culture* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Publishing, 2012), 57.
- ²⁰ Janet Fieldhouse, as quoted in Bosse, "Janet Fieldhouse: the sensibility of ritual," 10.
- ²¹ Isaacs, *Tiwi*, 62.
- ²² Philip Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A History," in *Dreamings*, 155.
- ²³ Evelyn Westfall to Michael Requier, December 16, 1989, "Art purchases made by Mr. and Mrs. Kluge in Australia."
- ²⁴ Jirra Lulla Harvey, "Rekospective," *Artlink* 33, no.2 (2013): 80.
- ²⁵ Vincent Alessi, "Wearing his own crown: The work of Reko Rennie," *ArtAnd* 52, no.1 (December 2014): 114.
- ²⁶ Reko Reni, as quoted in Jirra Lulla Harvey, "Rekospective," 78.

“The Stories Will Never Be Forgotten”: Reframing Contemporaneity and Authenticity in Western Arnhem Land Paintings

LAUREN VAN NEST

*Our art and our culture are not separate; they are a part of us: one country, one skin,
one blood.¹*

—Gabriel Maralngurra, Manager, Injalak Arts and Crafts Association

Since the explosion of Aboriginal art onto the Western art market in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars have struggled to reconcile contemporary Aboriginal art-making with current conceptions of contemporary and modern art. While acrylic painting from Western Desert centers like Papunya were quickly embraced by the market, it was slower to welcome media categorized as non-Western, including bark paintings.² Market reception has been dependent on the perceived authenticity of the artworks. Acrylic painting was praised for its similarity to abstraction found in the Western contemporary art world, while objects like bark paintings and ceremonial objects were viewed as cultural artifacts. Linking specific media to notions of authenticity or tradition not only denies the presence of Aboriginal epistemologies in acrylic painting, but also characterizes art made in non-Western media as emerging out of the murky waters of the distant past rather than as evidence of a vibrant, creative present tradition.³ Art and life in western Arnhem Land are inextricably layered realities. Contemporary Aboriginal art can be interpreted as a continuation of a historical tradition, as well as an active negotiation with and reformulation of that tradition. This essay aims to redress such disregard for ongoing Aboriginal artistic creativity and the imposition of Western primitivist views of media onto Aboriginal art. Viewing tradition as an ever-generative, ever-present activity expands interpretations of “authentic” art-making to a wide variety of innovative media and styles. This essay will first explore the contemporaneity and historicity of western Arnhem

Land art in order to then counteract the long history of collectors, anthropologists, and museums casting western Arnhem Land bark painting as representative of a disappearing traditional past. The latter half of this essay will look at two specific works both featured in *Beyond Dreamings* and originating from the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association in Kunbarrllanjja (Gunbalanya): Djakala's *Kangaroo of the Ubarr Ceremony* (circa 1987–1989) and Thompson Yulidjirri's *Ngurlmark—The Ubarr Ceremony* (1991), from the John W. Kluge commission of works on paper from Injalak in 1991–1992. Encapsulating different approaches to media, style, and the market, these two works embody the multiple and active contemporaneities operating in western Arnhem Land art-making. By rooting authenticity in people and practices rather than in the works' media, this paper strives to highlight Aboriginal agency and creativity.

Aboriginal Contemporaneity

Debates about the contemporary or modern nature of Aboriginal art join broader postcolonial meditations on how to incorporate “outsiders” into the history of modern art without erasing important and integral distinctions. Applications of “multiple modernities” to Aboriginal contexts would necessitate a clear rupture between a traditional past and the development of a desacralized present.⁴ By contrast, “contemporaneity,” as Terry Smith defines it, allows for more complex and multivalent interpretations of Aboriginal art, artistic practices, and temporalities. Instead of insisting upon an absolute break with the past, contemporaneity indicates an understanding of temporality as relational and situational. In Smith's words, this shift allows a consideration of “ways of being *in* or *with* time, even of being *in* and *out* of time at the same time.”⁵ The “presentness” of contemporaneity complements the active formulation and reformulation of Aboriginal tradition and worldviews via art-making. Rather than a “singular simplicity of distanced reflection” that separates the Aboriginal person from their ruptured past, contemporaneity stresses the “direct experience of multiplicitous complexity.”⁶

The Kunwinjku people of western Arnhem Land have a deep sense of history and time that links them directly to the creators of the land. The actions of ancestral beings shaped the earth during the creation period. At the end of this period, these beings transformed into sacred objects or features of the landscape.⁷ The land traversed by Kunwinjku peoples today, the sacred objects crafted and used in contemporary ceremony, and the ancestors of today's clan groups were all created by ancestral beings.⁸ These creation narratives trace the connections between land, objects, and people as well as relationships between the past, present, and future of Kunwinjku tradition and life. The underlying ancestral framework of Kunwinjku creates a complex and layered world.

Within western Arnhem Land, the passing of knowledge to apprentices and youths serves as a primary catalyst for art-making. Images form an integral component in Kunwinjku epistemology, in which the layering and selective revealing of “inside” and “outside” knowledge is conducted via art practice and apprenticeship.⁹ Different members of Kunwinjku society are inaugurated into deeper levels of knowledge and layers of meaning depending on the individual's maturity, moiety, gender, and place of origin.

Smith's understanding of contemporaneity acknowledges the continued existence and navigation of disjunctures of perspectives and asynchronous temporalities.¹⁰ Kunwinjku art practice inherently contains combatting and multiple layers—this very “jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities” ensures its continued contemporaneity.¹¹ Aboriginal artists are consistently relating themselves to the world around them by means of their cultural practices, including art. Art-making is significant not because of the authenticity of any particular material, but because the continued encoding and dissemination of Indigenous traditions via art practice guarantees this tradition's vitality. Tradition becomes contemporary by its continuous renewal and re-creation. In the words of Marc Augé, “the world's diversity is recomposed every moment; this is the paradox of our day.”¹²

Back to the Beginning: Twentieth-Century Reception

Twentieth-century Western ideas about the primitive and ahistorical character of Aboriginal art were first overlaid onto the art of western Arnhem Land by the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, whose collections of, and publications on, western Arnhem Land art prompted institutional interest in bark painting for its supposed highly authentic nature (and thus, ethnological value). Upon his visit to Kunbarrllanjnja (Oenpelli) in 1911–1912 during his tenure as the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Spencer became interested in the paintings on rock and bark done in the region. Before commissioning new works from local artists, he excised several bark paintings “incidentally” from the walls of bark shelters.¹³ This removal of artistic forms from the immediate living environment of the Indigenous peoples evocatively demonstrates how twentieth-century anthropologists appropriated and extracted artistic and cultural expressions from contemporary Aboriginal life.¹⁴

In addition to exporting existing designs, Spencer also commissioned “portable” barks: strips of bark with images meant to mimic those of the existing rock and bark art. Over a period of eight years and with the assistance of Paddy Cahill, Spencer collected around two hundred examples of western Arnhem Land art for the Museum of Victoria.¹⁵ Despite the commission of new works, the same writings and publications that bolstered interest in the market for Aboriginal art characterized these works, as well as Aboriginal peoples, as primitive and representative of the first stages of the evolutionary development of humans. Therefore, in the same moment that museums began to collect bark paintings, the very medium of bark paintings (and the rock paintings which they were assumed to mimic) came to signal their primitive nature.¹⁶ In this framework, Aboriginal peoples' agency can only prove the authenticity of their culture and work in terms of past tradition. Spencer claimed the bark paintings he commissioned were products of traditional and internal cultural work in order to avoid claims of inauthenticity by institutions collecting these works.¹⁷ As much as Spencer wanted to suppress any changes in subject matter or style due to intercultural communication and encounter, the bark paintings were inevitably a result of negotiations between Spencer and the Aboriginal artists, whether consciously or unconsciously.¹⁸ Commissioning new art, rather than continuing to cut out portions of existing bark shelters or removing slabs from the decorated rock faces, automatically situated the resulting work in a contemporary,



Rock art on Injalak Hill, Kunbarllanjja. Photograph courtesy of Injalak Arts.

intercultural dialectic. By ignoring the contemporaneity of the art-making he was commissioning, Spencer created an ahistorical time frame for the resulting work.¹⁹ This separated Aboriginal culture from the broader world, but also encouraged the understanding of Aboriginal society as static. Extracting art from its context, whether physically removing it from bark shelters or textually evacuating its historicity and interculturalism in scholarly publications and exhibitions, denies contemporary Aboriginal peoples access to the lived, active history of their lands and culture—and, more distressingly, the agency to engage with and enact it in the present.

Subsequent collectors and anthropologists, particularly Ronald and Catherine Berndt who visited the region in 1949, conducted more thorough research that spoke to the broader lived experience of the Kunwinjku peoples. This shift in scholarship, however, was still primarily bound by the disciplinary assumptions of anthropology, and therefore characterized the art and culture of western Arnhem Land Aboriginal peoples as cultural artifacts.²⁰ Despite the positive attention it drew to Aboriginal Australian art, *Dreamings*, for example, still classified bark painting from western Arnhem Land as representative of a relatively passive and constant tradition.²¹ The 1988 exhibition and catalog featured many bark paintings from the 1980s, but, like Spencer's characterization of his commissions, bark artworks from western Arnhem Land were received by the broader public as ahistorical cultural artifacts. In a *New York Times*

review of *Dreamings*, for example, Roberta Smith argued that the bark paintings granted the acrylic works in the show “a necessary degree of credibility.”²² Smith viewed the introduction of new materials to these communities as inauthentic, an opinion echoed widely in the art market.²³ Bark remained an indicator of cultural authenticity. In the catalog, these objects were scientifically mined for visual information, such as curator Peter Sutton’s classification of the typical portrayals of various species, which he then attached to a string of images: for example, “Birds are shown in profile, wings folded.”²⁴ The bird representations Sutton cited span the entire Arnhem Land region and encompass a range of works from 1877 to 1967. This range is not necessarily shocking in a section that offers a general treatment of Arnhem Land bark paintings, but the implied conflation and lack of differentiation amongst them further implies that there is a lack of diversity or creativity across time and space.

Twenty-First-Century Reception of Western Arnhem Land Art

While more recent work has acknowledged the efforts and creativity of contemporary Aboriginal artists and makers, several exhibitions from the last twenty years have continued to elevate bark painting as the most authentic form of Aboriginal art.²⁵ Restricting authenticity to a single medium disregards the power of art-making to enact tradition. Such an exaltation of bark is found in the 2004 exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* and its associated catalog. This exhibition traced the evolution of bark painting from a figurative, narrative style to contemporary abstracted paintings by Kuninjku artists like John Mawurndjul.²⁶ *Crossing Country* acknowledged inventiveness within Aboriginal art-making, and therefore veered away from Spencer’s ahistoricization. However, in its celebration of the material of bark, *Crossing Country* continued to elevate particular media like bark as more authentic.²⁷ This present essay is not a denial of the power of media in Aboriginal art-making, but rather a re-orientation toward the production of art and the actions of the artists in diverse media. *Crossing Country* does important recuperative work on the contemporaneity of bark, yet by tracing the evolution of bark painting style from figuration to abstraction, the exhibition and catalog undervalue the history of art-making in other media in western Arnhem Land. The John W. Kluge Commission of works on paper from Injalak in 1991–1992, for example, is largely overlooked in this narrative because it contrasts the shift toward abstraction noticeable in other works in the 1990s and 2000s that were featured in the exhibition.

Privileging one medium or style over another ignores the complementary and contrasting multiplicities operative in Aboriginal contemporaneity and epistemologies. The strict assignation of authenticity to bark also contradicts conversations within the broader contemporary art world regarding medium. Contemporary art has recently been defined by its engagement with difference, often through hybridity or transcultural conversations. The act of revealing and reveling in the jostling multiplicities and differences of the contemporary condition is a central feature, regardless of the use of typically contemporary or non-contemporary media.²⁸ Consigning Aboriginal art to medium specificity—something that is a hallmark of modern art—thereby excises it from the contemporary art world and also ignores the internal



DICK DJAKALA, *Kangaroo of the Ubarr Ceremony*, c.1988. Natural pigments on bark, 49 x 27 in. (124.5 x 68.6 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997.

complexity of Aboriginal art. In Kunwinjku society both past and present, artwork visually maps out and enacts these competing levels of Aboriginal epistemology. The act of painting serves as a way to convey cultural and spiritual knowledge, critically linked to other modes of knowledge including oral history, ceremonial performance, and sacred objects.²⁹ Shifting focus away from the passive presence of a “traditional” material such as bark and toward artistic production and creativity might allow the bounds of contemporary art to expand and embrace Aboriginal art across varied media.

Injalak Arts and Crafts: A Counter-Narrative

Since its official formation in 1989, the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association has fostered Kunwinjku artistic output in varied media while maintaining a focus on community and cultural development. Injalak began as a screen printing workshop in Kunbarrllanjja in 1986 and metamorphosed into an art center that now supports the production of bark paintings, works on paper, limited-edition prints, jewelry, screen-printed fabrics and clothing, fiber products, didjeridus, and artifacts.³⁰ The art center has provided the space for artistic innovation—innovation wrought through community building and new collectives.³¹ Fueled by the relationship between painting and education in Kunwinjku society, Injalak has become a center for training and education related to both art and cultural knowledge.³²

Since the early 1990s, the innovation and experimentation at Injalak has been overseen by senior artists, a practice that emulates the traditional apprenticeship system of painting in Kunwinjku society. In the late 1980s bark painting became more prevalent at the center and several young painters began painting imagery in the style of older painters of the region, instead of more communally-shared images not related to sacred knowledge, lands, or ceremonies held by particular regional groups. This caused tension and confrontations, as this new practice was violating long-held cultural and artistic protocols concerning who had the right to depict certain images.³³ Thompson Yulidjirri (c.1932–2009), painter of five of the forty-five works featured in the John W. Kluge Commission of works on paper from Injalak in 1991–1992, including *Ngurlmarrk—The Ubarr Ceremony* (1991), played a major role in monitoring this new compromise between experimentation and tradition.

Yulidjirri came to Injalak in the early 1990s and began to work there. Following the long tradition of teaching through painting, Yulidjirri started to teach the young men gathered around him as he painted, including those with no close blood relation to him or his country. Gabriel Maralngurra remembers this period at Injalak:

His [Yulidjirri’s] role was he was a senior artist. He taught us how to cut bark and prepare it, how to use ochre; that’s what he’s been doing at the time. He was the only old man who came down to the arts center—outside the verandah he sat and paint. That’s how he started. A bunch of artists coming in and paint, so today.³⁴



Installation image at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing works by **DICK DJAKALA**, **THOMPSON YULIDJIRRI** and **ROVER THOMAS JOOLAMA**.

As Yulidjirri painted, cultural stories and protocols were passed along to the burgeoning artists at the center—protocols taught to Yulidjirri by Paddy Compass Namatbara (c.1890–1973), a famed western Arnhem Land bark and rock painter.³⁵ Yulidjirri taught these young men how to paint both for the market and as a mode of cultural development. For Yulidjirri: “...the physical painting is simply a gateway to the stories—in an apparently simple depiction of an animal may lie an important story of ancestors, cultural protocols, and land—as also depicted in dance and song.”³⁶ In the process of painting, these stories and their layered meanings are gradually divulged.

Yulidjirri was prolific, commercially successful, and showed no preference for a specific medium or format. The meaning and significance of his works are not found in the specificity of the medium (be it bark, paper or rock), but in the community and culture formed and reaffirmed through his art production. This community radiates outward, into the past and into the future. Maralngurra recounts how Yulidjirri learned from Namatbara and subsequently taught Maralngurra: “I watched him paint and tell the stories...so I learned from him and he gave me all that to understand. That’s what I’ve been taught. Now I’m passing it on to my kids.”³⁷ This is the act that makes tradition contemporaneous—a tradition interactive with its people and its environment, with the market and with traditional epistemologies, and adaptable to media ranging from rock to dance to paper.

Stories of the lives of ancestral beings are characterized by arrival, encounter, and either departure or transmutation into the landscape or another form.³⁸ The Ubarr ceremony is one of these stories characterized by ancestral arrival; depending on the specific group, it was either established by the ancestral kangaroo being Nadulmi, or the ancestral snake being Yirrbardbard.³⁹ As one of the important ceremonies of the Kunwinjku people, this subject was depicted many times in various media. Djakala's bark painting *Kangaroo of the Ubarr Ceremony* (circa 1987–1989) attests to the production of such work at Kunbarllanjna before the Kluge Commission and provides a contrasting representation to Thompson Yulidjirri's work on paper.

Diverse approaches to style and medium at Injalak demonstrate ongoing conversations about how to represent and convey traditional knowledge. Paper was introduced to Kunbarllanjna as part of the Kluge Commission, largely for pragmatic reasons. Whereas bark is primarily harvested in the rainy season and only available to artists for around half the year, paper is easy to handle, access, and transport. This medium was also looked favorably upon for the ease in framing and conserving works on paper as opposed to paintings on bark. Like bark, the surface texture of paper is receptive to the ochre paints used by Kunwinjku artists.⁴⁰ In addition to pragmatic concerns, the artists applied backgrounds to emulate the surfaces of the region's rock art galleries. The paper was dampened with water, then layered initially with dark coatings of gouache and followed subsequently with lighter coatings to build up a unique, mottled surface.⁴¹ The apprenticeship system that guaranteed the transmission of cultural knowledge was deeply entangled with these more pragmatic, technical concerns. Young artists at the time of the commission who were observing their teachers, such as Maralngurra learning from Yulidjirri, listened to the stories told by their elders about the sacred content while also learning artistic techniques, including how to mix ochre and helping to prepare and create the backgrounds.⁴² Teaching and art-making serve as the unbreakable links between technical and sacred (and market) concerns—paper was accepted at Injalak because it fit into this system. Characterizing his choice of media in his own practice, Maralngurra explains, “I paint both [bark and paper], even log coffin, didjeridu. I really like doing what I really like doing; but I paint, even on canvas sometimes.”⁴³ Medium serves as the vehicle for telling, teaching, painting, and selling stories. The stories themselves endure with the people, even when the paintings are sent to the market or collecting institutions, as attested by Maralngurra:

The land and the country belongs to my people. Stories stays in the country, in the land itself....Tradition is important because...my uncle's background [Thompson Yulidjirri] was that he tells the stories and he kept it in the mind for himself from his father who taught him those stories, kept not in books but in mind. We still can tell those same stories to the young, the kids, and to the families so that stories won't be forgotten....It will be kept in an archive or put in a place or something where it is kept safe. That's all. These days now these stories have to be written and kept in a safe place. But the stories are still in our head, our heart, and our mind. So the stories will never be forgotten.⁴⁴

The ontological meaning remains stable between media because it is constructed in the process of art and memory making. Shared knowledge is inherent in and emanates from the artists and their actions, not from the materials.

Unlike media, the divergent choices in style evident in Yulidjirri and Djakala's respective presentations of the *Ubarr* ceremony makes a statement about the artist's relationship to the market and contemporaneity in Kunwinjku society. Yulidjirri's style, sometimes associated with the family of artists around Barrdjaray Bobby Nganjmirra (c.1915–1992), who were also heavily involved in the Kluge Commission, is characterized by multi-colored bands of *rarrk* (cross-hatching) and long-limbed figures with beak-like mouths. *Rarrk* is derived from the designs painted on the body during the Mardayin ceremony, which consist of geometric patterns of dotted, dividing lines populated with multi-colored crosshatched lines.⁴⁵ The incorporation of this *rarrk* style into contemporary art-making is traced to experimentation with bark painting by this senior group of artists in the 1970s.⁴⁶ The "Yulidjirri mode" is the most pervasive style at Kunbarrllanjanja today, as many of the practicing senior artists today were trained by Yulidjirri in this style, including Maralngurra.⁴⁷ Yulidjirri's crosshatching relates to the Mardayin ceremony; therefore, its presence in works like *Ngurlmarrk—The Ubarr Ceremony* indicates underlying, encoded meaning about the artist's clan lands.⁴⁸ Ancestral beings wore these crosshatched designs on their own bodies and transmitted them to humans to ensure correct ceremonial performance.

The *rarrk* designs point to an intertwined, charged historical power, recognized in Yulidjirri's representation by the shared space of ancestral beings, contemporary ceremonial participants, and stencils of the artist's hands.⁴⁹ The *rarrk* designs on the body of Nadulmi the kangaroo, the ceremonial participants, the ceremonial implements, and the other featured ancestral beings creates a unity across Yulidjirri's *Ngurlmarrk—The Ubarr Ceremony*. While the commission was underway, Dorothy Bennett, an ethnological researcher, visited with the artists at Injalak and recorded the stories associated with their paintings as told by the artist.⁵⁰ Yulidjirri's accounting of the *Ubarr* ceremony speaks to the entwined nature of art-making and ceremonial performance, as well as the interconnectivity between ancestral beings, the landscape, and contemporary Aboriginal peoples. Plotting to kill his wife and mother-in-law during the creation time, the hunter and magician Yirrbardbard "went up into a cave in the escarpments of Gunbalanya and drew a large figure of his wife on the wall, with a smaller one of her mother alongside. A snake in the act of striking was depicted at the foot of each woman." Yirrbardbard then transforms into a snake and murders them—afterwards he decides to start "planning a new ceremony to commemorate his actions" and calls upon Nadulmi, a kangaroo, to become the "Keeper of the new ceremony, which would be called 'Ubarr.'" Yulidjirri continues: "During the ceremony the sound of the stick tapping the drum would simulate the scratching of a goanna or bandicoot in a hollow log [how Yirrbardbard had tricked and subsequently murdered his wife and mother-in-law in his snake form]...The ceremony was to begin at the end of the dry season."⁵¹ Yulidjirri's oral recounting of the *Ubarr* ceremony highlights how the ancestral beings themselves created art and enacted ceremonies simulating past actions. The inclusion of contemporary ceremonial participants in his painting conflate the contemporary moment with this ancestral time. Yirrbardbard as a snake, Nadulmi the kangaroo, the ceremonial implements, and the

contemporary ceremonial participants are all depicted on the same plane in Yulidjirri's *Ngurlmarrk—The Ubarr Ceremony*. Using *rarrk* designs as the unifying factor points toward the critical role art plays in engaging these temporalities. Yulidjirri's art practice resonates with Terry Smith's conception of contemporaneity as a "direct experience of multiplicitous complexity"—art, ceremony, indeed the everyday life of western Arnhem Land Aboriginal peoples consist of intertwined contemporaneities.⁵²

Djakala's *Kangaroo of the Ubarr Ceremony* speaks to a different way to manifest Kunwinjku contemporaneity. Djakala's depiction of the Ubarr ceremony lacks the distinctive *rarrk* crosshatching seen in Yulidjirri's work. The figures in Djakala's painting instead feature parallel-lined *rarrk*. His style aligns him with other artists including Bardayal "Lofty" Nadjamerrek (c.1926–2009) and Dick Ngulangulei Murrumurru (c.1920–1988), who were inspired by the styles of painting found in rock art.⁵³ The distinction between these two groups, represented by Yulidjirri and Djakala, asserts the ongoing development and differentiation of styles within western Arnhem Land art. Tradition is both a continued presentation of knowledge and a continued negotiation of how to present and frame that knowledge. Djakala chooses to engage with the market by removing sacred material from his work. Whereas Yulidjirri's style connotes the layered temporalities operative within the Kunwinjku landscape, Djakala's style attests to the layered epistemologies present in Kunwinjku society. By removing sacred *rarrk* designs, Djakala places the market, and its largely Western audience, on similar grounds as those in the Kunwinjku community excluded from certain levels of sacred knowledge—young people, women, uninitiated men, and so on. Deeper meanings about the Ubarr ceremony are concealed from view. In this manner, Djakala activates Indigenous understandings of "inside" and "outside" knowledge and applies them to the market, enfold-ing non-Indigenous audiences into a Kunwinjku worldview.⁵⁴

The Ubarr ceremony has not been conducted in western Arnhem Land since the mid-twentieth century.⁵⁵ Bark and paper paintings are now the main source of its stories and lessons, guaranteeing its transmission to the next generation.⁵⁶ The performance of the ceremony both recalls the time of the ancestral beings, but also ensures the continued fertility of their world. The Ubarr ceremony was linked to the cycles of seasonal rejuvenation enacted by Ngalyod (the Rainbow Serpent).⁵⁷ Kunwinjku temporality is not linear, but rather a "sedimentation of the past in the thickened present."⁵⁸ Past, present, and future are all activated in this ceremonial sequence. As the snake of Djakala's representation seems to wind around the kangaroo Nadulmi and as the participants of Yulidjirri's depiction encircle the ancestral beings and ongoing ceremony, tradition (this "sedimentation") is continually concealed and revealed, activated and re-activated, untangled and re-tangled. The world is continually made anew, evidenced by the continuing arrival of the wet monsoon season and the dry season. Aboriginal art-making enfolds these jostling temporalities into an enlivened and contemporaneous world-view. Yulidjirri and Djakala's different presentations of the Ubarr ceremony demonstrate Terry Smith's interpretation of contemporaneity as "the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world."⁵⁹ While activating different ontologies and epistemologies, both Yulidjirri and Djakala negotiate their contemporary experience and relationship with the world around them through their art-making. As performances of the Ubarr ceremony disappear from

Kunwinjku society, the drawing and telling of the stories by artists like Thompson Yulidjirri and Djakala become the performance. From a Kunwinjku perspective, tradition, by its very nature, adapts, grows, and becomes contemporaneous continually. The key to tradition is not the specificity of the material, but the people and their practice.

NOTES

- ¹ Gabriel Maralngurra, quoted in Henry F. Skerritt, "Is Art History Any Use to Aboriginal Artists? Gabriel Maralngurra's *Contact Paintings*," in *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 239.
- ² Quentin Sprague, "Why Bark Painting is Contemporary Art," In *Art Collector: 2013 Guide to Indigenous Art Centres*, 20–21 (Art Edited Pty: 2013), 20–21.
- ³ Fred Myers has since reasserted the authenticity of Western Desert acrylic painting, arguing that while the medium of expression has shifted, the ontologies have remained steeped in the land; Fred Myers, "Emplacement and Displacement: Perceiving the Landscape through Aboriginal Australian Acrylic Painting," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78, no. 4 (2013): 441.
- ⁴ Scholars including Ian McLean and Partha Mitter have argued that modernism marked a singular temporal rupture; Ian McLean, "Aboriginal Modernism in Central Australia," in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, ed. Kobena Mercer, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 72–93; Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531–548.
- ⁵ Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 7.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷ Luke Taylor, "Flesh, Bone, and Spirit: Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting," in *Art from the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art*, ed. Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), 28.
- ⁸ Luke Taylor, "Seeing the 'Inside': Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body," in *Animals Into Art*, ed. Howard Morphy, (London, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 377.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 371.
- ¹⁰ Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," 8–9.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Marc Augé, quoted in Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," 10.
- ¹³ Luke Taylor, "From Rock to Bark: Art from Western Arnhem Land," in *They Are Meditating: Bark Paintings from the MCA's Arnott's Collection*, ed. Linda Michael and Djon Mundine, (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 147; "They were so interesting that, after collecting some from their studios, which meant taking down the slabs on which they were drawn, that formed, incidentally, the walls of their Mia-mias, I commissioned two or three of the best artists to paint me a series of canvases, or rather 'barks,' the price of which was governed by size..." Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, vol. II, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1928), 793–794.
- ¹⁴ This was not an unprecedented move—the earliest collections of bark paintings consisted of panels cut out from unused wet-season bark shelters. These include bark panels acquired by Foelsche in the Port Essington region in 1878 and Carrington in Field Island in 1887; Sally K. May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," in *Archaeologies of Art: Time, Place, and Identity*, ed. Inés Domingo Sanz, Dánae Fiore, and Sally K. May, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 174–175.
- ¹⁵ Taylor, "From Rock to Bark: Art from Western Arnhem Land," 147; Two of these barks were included in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, one collected by Spencer in 1912 (*Spirit Called Auuenau*, Fig. 55, cat. 9) and another collected in 1914 by Cahill for Spencer (*A Spirit Being*, Fig. 56, cat. 10); Peter Sutton, ed. *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: G. Braziller, 1988), 40–41, 216–217.
- ¹⁶ Taylor, "Flesh, Bone, and Spirit: Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting," 29.
- ¹⁷ Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 793–794.
- ¹⁸ Henry F. Skerritt, "Seeing Through Spencer: Gabriel Maralngurra's Paintings of Baldwin Spencer," *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* 14, no. 1–2 (2015): 112.
- ¹⁹ Indeed, there are major differences between the latest phases of rock paintings in the western Arnhem Land escarpments and those works acquired by Spencer—they were not copies of rock art, but a new combination of styles. The x-ray paintings collected by Spencer suggest movement and narrative scenes, whereas x-ray rock paintings generally have a more isolated, static quality; May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," 176–177.
- ²⁰ Taylor, "Flesh, Bone, and Spirit: Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting," 30.
- ²¹ Sutton, *Dreamings*, "Chapter II: Responding to Aboriginal Art"; "Chapter III: The Morphology of Feeling," 64–79.
- ²² Roberta Smith also asserted that paintings on bark could be distinguished from acrylic works on canvas because the former were completed before 1970, ignoring the fact that many were made in the 1980s; Roberta Smith, "From Alien to Familiar," *New York Times* (December 16, 1988): 1–2.

- ²³ The exhibition organizers' emphasis on the traditional content of Aboriginal acrylic painting did little to counter this view.
- ²⁴ Sutton, *Dreamings*, 65.
- ²⁵ The most egregious example was the 2013 *Australia* exhibition held at the Royal Academy in London, which, unfortunately, hardened back to the display practice solidified by the exhibition of Spencer's commissions at the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 *Art of Australia 1788-1941*. Organized temporally, both of these institutions staged bark paintings at the beginning of their exhibitions, regardless of the date of their creation. These featured bark paintings were produced in the twentieth century; Henry F. Skerritt, "New Lines of Flight: Bark Painting as Contemporary Encounter," *Art Guide Australia* (January/February 2014), 63.
- ²⁶ Kunwinjku and Kuninjku are both dialects of the Binninj-Kunwok chain of languages and are closely related languages; Luke Taylor, "Fire in the Water: Inspiration from Country," in *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*, ed. Hetti Perkins, 115-130 (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004), 126.
- ²⁷ "Any excursion into Kuninjku art requires an attempt to define some of the attributes that contribute to its greatness. A key consideration is that the work is produced with ochres and pigments on bark. Such works may have some unfortunate connotations in a market that is more conducive to acrylic on canvas or works on paper. For some, it is easy to slip into an identification of bark with mission regulation and promulgation of a traditional and 'primitive' form, in contrast to 'contemporary' works produced with contemporary materials. Yet for Kuninjku, the media of ochre and bark bespeaks their independence, their control over all stages of the production of their work, and their self-reliance on materials derived from their country"; *Ibid.*, 128-129.
- ²⁸ Sprague, 21.
- ²⁹ Adrian Parker, *Images in Ochre: The Art and Craft of the Kunwinjku* (Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 1997), 15.
- ³⁰ Felicity Wright, *Contemporary Paintings from Western Arnhem Land: A Significant Collection of Recent Works on Paper by Kunwinjku: Flinders Art Museum, Flinders University, Adelaide, City Gallery, 5 June - 18 July 1999* (Adelaide: Flinders Art Museum, Flinders University, 1999), 6.
- ³¹ Artists at Injalak come from many different regional clans, and the production of art at the center has served as the catalyst and medium for the construction of new individual and group identities; May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," 171, 188.
- ³² Sally K. May, "Started Down at the Little Shed," in *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, ed. Louise Hamby, (Gunbalanya: Injalak Arts and Crafts, 2005), 191.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 190.
- ³⁴ Gabriel Maralngurra, interview by Lauren Van Nest, Audio Recording, March 26, 2018.
- ³⁵ May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," 181-182.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.
- ³⁷ Gabriel Maralngurra, interview by Lauren Van Nest, March 26, 2018.
- ³⁸ The Aboriginal peoples of western Arnhem Land, for example, were born of *Yingarna* who came to their land from the north, across the sea. *Yingarna* is the mother Rainbow Serpent, who transmutes into the Earth Mother, *Waramurungundj*. Upon arrival to the mainland south of Croker Island, she also gave birth to male and female Rainbow Serpents, *Ngalyod* and *Ngalkunburriyaymi*, respectively. As *Waramurungundj* traversed the country, she created the land, flora, fauna, people, and rivers, before heading south beyond the extent of western Arnhem Land; Parker, *Images in Ochre*, 12.
- ³⁹ George Chaloupka, *Journey in Time: The World's Longest Continuing Art Tradition: The 50,000 Year Story of the Australian Aboriginal Rock Art of Arnhem Land* (Sydney: Reed New Holland/JB Books, 1999), 228-229.
- ⁴⁰ Wright, *Contemporary Paintings from Western Arnhem Land*, 5.
- ⁴¹ The specific paper is *Aquarelle Arches 640 gsm* archival paper, produced in France and made from one hundred percent cotton. This is a common paper for other European and Australian contemporary artists as well; David Cossey, "Introduction to the Commission," in *Kunwinjku Art From Injalak 1991-1992: The John W. Kluge Commission*, ed. Christine Adrian Dyer, 12-17 (North Adelaide: Museum Art International, 1994), 12-13.
- ⁴² Gabriel Maralngurra, interview by Lauren Van Nest, March 26, 2018.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Taylor, "Flesh, Bone, and Spirit: Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting," Note 3, 40.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁴⁷ Henry F. Skerritt, "Is Art History Any Use to Aboriginal Artists? Gabriel Maralngurra's *Contact Paintings*," in *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 231.
- ⁴⁸ Taylor, "Seeing the 'Inside': Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body," 382.
- ⁴⁹ Taylor, "Flesh, Bone, and Spirit: Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting," 50.
- ⁵⁰ These stories accompany images of each commissioned painting, compiled in a catalog for the commission; Cossey, 14-15.
- ⁵¹ "The Collection of Paintings," in *Kunwinjku Art From Injalak 1991-1992: The John W. Kluge Commission*, ed. Christine Adrian Dyer, 31-123 (North Adelaide: Museum Art International, 1994), 122.
- ⁵² Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," 8.
- ⁵³ Taylor, "Flesh, Bone, and Spirit: Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting," 38.
- ⁵⁴ Taylor, "Seeing the 'Inside': Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body," 371.

⁵⁵ “The [*Ubarr*] ceremony was at one time also performed in North-East Arnhem Land, where it was referred to by the name *Ngurlmarrk*—an alternative term also used in Western Arnhem Land today, at least by the handful of old men who retain knowledge of the ceremony. Warner, who did fieldwork in the late 1920s, believed the *Ngurlmarrk* was recently adopted into the ceremonial repertoire of North-East Arnhem Land and at the time was ‘still being learned by the older men’. Warner’s description of the ceremony and rituals makes it clear that this was a variation of the same ceremony performed in Western Arnhem Land. Also working in North-East Arnhem Land, Ian Keen confirmed the late adoption of the *Ngurlmarrk*, ‘which probably originated from the *Wubarr* of Western Arnhem Land’, but by the 1970s it was no longer being performed in the region. Ronald Berndt, writing in 1962, noted that ‘[t]o the best of my knowledge the *urlmag* has not been performed in full [in North-East Arnhem Land] for about 20 years’. The last performance of the *Wubarr* in Western Arnhem Land is thought to have been about 1975 at Wulwunj near Mount Borradaile, 30 km north-west of Gunbalanya”; Murray Garde, “The Forbidden Gaze: The 1948 *Wubarr* Ceremony Performed for the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land,” in *Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, ed. Martin Thomas and Margo Neale (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 2011), 407.

⁵⁶ Luke Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 123, 237.

⁵⁸ Skerritt, “Is Art History Any Use to Aboriginal Artists? Gabriel Maralngurra’s *Contact Paintings*,” 234.

⁵⁹ Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” 8–9.

Batik to Abstraction: The Art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye

CECILIA GUNZBURGER

An Anmatyerr woman from the remote Utopia area in the northern desert, about 250 miles north of Alice Springs, Emily Kame Kngwarreye (ca. 1920–1996) is perhaps the most celebrated Aboriginal Australian artist. Although Emily practiced ceremonial body painting and sand drawing over her whole lifetime, she only became famous in the international art world as an abstract painter in her late seventies. Emily began working in introduced media in 1977 with batik dyeing and began painting in acrylic on canvas in 1989, one year after *Dreamings* and eight years before her death. Her success as an abstract painter helped precipitate an expansion of the parameters of Aboriginal Australian art. Over the next thirty years, Aboriginal artists working in many styles and media beyond those included in *Dreamings* have found success on the art market, and abstraction has become a dominant style in Aboriginal painting.

Emily was the first Aboriginal artist whose painting sold for more than \$10,000 in the early 1990s and the first whose painting broke the \$1,000,000 barrier in 2007. As of 2018, her paintings have fetched more total money on the art market than any other Australian Aboriginal artist.¹ She was among the first female Aboriginal artists exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1997,² and has been the subject of two solo retrospectives at major museums in Australia and abroad since her death.³ Several factors converged to make this rise in the international contemporary art world possible. Emily emerged within an established central Australian desert Aboriginal acrylic painting tradition celebrated in *Dreamings*. Along with several other exhibitions in the 1980s, *Dreamings* brought Aboriginal Australian art to the attention of the art world at a moment when postmodern multicultural consciousness was on the rise, and EuroAmerican modernism was in dire need of reinvigoration.⁴

The apparently irreconcilable gulf between Emily's Aboriginality and the Western aesthetic affinities of her imagery has preoccupied the art world since the moment it became aware of her paintings, inspiring many explanations for this "impossible modernist."⁵ How did an Aboriginal woman who had lived



EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE, *Hungry Emus*, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 70.5 x 47.25 in. (180 x 120 cm).
Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997.

the vast majority of her life in a hunter-gatherer society, who spoke no English, and who had absolutely no knowledge of Western art produce abstract-expressionist paintings that fit seamlessly alongside Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko? Art historian Ian McLean situates Emily's art at the intersection of her Anmatyerr culture and a lifetime of engagement with European modernity, as a particular local articulation of global modernism.⁶ In his view, Indigenous art-making produces transcultural objects that are born of the interactions between the two cultures, inexorably of both and bridging the chasm between them. Emily did not, in fact, begin painting in an abstract style on the instant or in a void. Taking Emily's prior batik-making experience seriously as an art practice can help bridge this space between Aboriginal content and Western aesthetics that has been called the "Emily paradox."⁷

The desert acrylic painting movement was originated by Aboriginal men in Papunya in the early 1970s and was taken up at Yuendumu, Lajamanu, and Balgo, among other communities. The early movement's imagery and style derived from men's ceremonial painting and ornamentation of their bodies, the ground, and objects, and was characterized by boldly delineated and colored circles, lines, and above all, dots.⁸ The dots create a shimmering surface effect embodying the sacred ancestors.⁹ In Michael Nelson Jagamara's *Five Stories* (1984), the lines and circles represent paths and sites of the Dreamings' interaction with the land, all outlined with carefully placed dots and surrounded by fields of dots (see page 24). Most elements are in a single plane, although some of the surrounding dots overlap.

Women in these towns first assisted their male relatives in acrylic painting, and continued in the style established by the men when they began painting on their own. Indeed, Balgo women successfully petitioned the men for permission to use the dots proper to men's ceremonial painting, but by then entrenched as a defining element of Aboriginal desert painting.¹⁰ *Dreamings* was the first exhibition outside of Australia to include named Aboriginal women artists. It included five works by eight women, all acrylic painters from the community of Yuendumu. Although most of their paintings dealt with sites related to women's ceremonies and Dreamings, the style of the works generally conformed to the established line, circle, and dot acrylic style.

In contrast, Emily and the other female painters in Utopia did not derive the visual conventions of their paintings from the established male-dominated tradition. From the start, their paintings looked strikingly different from those included in *Dreamings*, and were eagerly embraced by the art market as both contemporary abstraction and Aboriginal art. Donald and Janet Holt, Utopia pastoralists for whose family Emily worked in the past, explicitly acknowledge batik as an influence on this new painting style on the certificate of authenticity used in the early years of their Delmore Gallery, touting Utopia painting as a "batik-inspired new expression in Australian contemporary art."¹¹ Many art critics have acknowledged Emily's batik practice as a "prelude" or "precursor" to her acrylic painting, with Margo Smith and Judith Ryan valuing her batik equally as an artistic practice, before quickly moving on to a discussion of the acrylic painting.¹² In contrast, Roger Benjamin, after cursorily "setting aside the pre-history of [Emily's] ... batik art," goes on to identify several ways Emily's painted imagery was a formal match for Western abstract expressionism: lines and dots that do not resolve into iconographic shapes; layers of imagery;



EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE, *Kam*, 1988. Batik on silk, 75 3/8 x 46 in. (191.3 x 116.9 cm). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the H. J. Heinz II Charitable and Family Trust, Governor, 1994.

imprecise, irregularly placed elements; and an all-over, decentered, infinite plane of imagery. And yet, close examination of Utopia batik practice suggests that it was this prior experience of making art in an introduced medium that originated the very qualities valued by the Western art world in Utopia painting.

Straddling the traditional lands of the Anmatyerr and Alywarr people in the remote eastern desert, Utopia, was not colonized by European Australians until 1927. After a series of failed pastoral experiments, legal jurisdiction was returned to the Aboriginal people in 1979. Beginning in the 1950s the Australian government funded a number of art centers and adult education programs in Aboriginal communities to assist Aboriginal people to generate income. Utopia never had an art center, but two government adult educators, Jenny Green and Julia Murray, introduced batik in 1977, inviting a government art educator and an Aboriginal batik artist from the art center in the neighboring community of

Ernabella to teach the women of Utopia.¹³ Green's intention was "to provide the women with some measure of economic independence" as they attempted to "create a way of life that both retains the essence of their culture and incorporates the useful elements of the dominant society."¹⁴ Batik making allowed Utopia women to explore the possibilities of new materials, techniques, and visual conventions within their longstanding body and ground painting practice, while responding to outside market demands for Aboriginal crafts.

Batik is a wax-resist surface design technique for patterning cloth. The technique was introduced to Australia from the long-established tradition in Java, Indonesia.¹⁵ Australian hippies, surfers, and cultural tourists had discovered Indonesia in the 1960s and 70s and returned with batik sarongs, creating a market in Australia that art coordinators such as Green and Murray sought to supply. In the most prestigious Javanese batik, the melted wax is applied by hand with a pen-like tool (*canting* in Javanese). When the waxed cloth is immersed in a dyebath, the painted wax resists the dye, creating an undyed area within the dyed cloth. Unlike painting with pigments, the painted line is the negative space rather than the positive space, lighter than the surrounding area after dyeing, instead of darker. Multiple colors on a single cloth must be built up successively from light to dark in layers, with a waxing process necessary at each iteration. Unless wax is very evenly applied, saturates the cloth completely, and is softened by low heat just prior to immersion in the dyebath, it will crack, producing fine veining of color within the white or reserved areas.

While very precise and fine patterning is possible and even common in the batik technique, as in the workshop facilities of Java and Ernabella, the practice of batik in Utopia did not lend itself to precision work. Women carried their batik work with them to their camps and on travels through the bush.¹⁶ Working in family groups, with children and dogs running around and sometimes even over the cloth, they held the cloth on boards on their laps or laid it on the uneven ground to apply the wax. They melted the wax in old metal cans and hubcaps over open fires, and it was often of uneven temperature and viscosity, as well as clogged with red dust from the bush. Javanese *cantings*, which dispense even, well-defined lines of wax, were not readily available in Utopia, so the women mostly used brushes that applied wax unevenly.¹⁷ The very nature of the technique as practiced in Utopia encouraged a freer interpretation and less regular placement of any motif the women painted.

From the start, Emily and the other Utopia batik makers worked on lengths of cotton cloth for sarongs and on garments, such as t-shirts and pants, for commercial markets.¹⁸ Imagery ranged from representational to stylized, drawing on the makers' *Altyerr* (Dreamings) and *awelye* (ceremonial designs), as well as florals and fauna in the style of the industrially-printed clothing purchased in stores and worn by Aboriginal women.¹⁹ Commercial printed apparel cloth is commonly patterned with all-over repeating designs that visually extend beyond the edges of the fabric in an infinite plane. In producing garments and sarongs for the commercial market, Utopia batik makers treated the surface of the cloth as an endless whole, rather than as a contained picture plane.²⁰ Later art coordinators and anthropologists disparaged this style of Utopia batik as "pretty flower" and encouraged the women to produce more

“traditional” motifs and layouts on lengths of silk cloth as art objects.²¹ The Utopia batik makers became adept at producing different styles of imagery in response to market demand and the requests of white intermediaries.

When she began making batik, Emily was already in her sixties, an elderly woman, senior ceremonial leader, and custodian of several Dreamings, with a lifetime of ceremonial painting and drawing behind her. By all accounts she was a strong personality and energetic, but also was arthritic and her eyesight was failing.²² She preferred large gestures and less time-consuming imagery. Emily’s batik ranged in style, but she was known for her “rough bold approach” both among the Utopia women and the white intermediaries who had trouble marketing her batik.²³ She was even less precise than other Utopia women about her waxing, and was known for using a limited number of colors, thus requiring fewer repetitions of the wax-and-dye cycle, larger motifs, and ill-defined, quickly applied lines and dots.²⁴ Her allover, large, and less representational motifs were more difficult to connect to a Dreaming story, which was expected of Aboriginal art at the time, but not neat enough to compete with Western industrially-printed cloth. Her batik was not traditional enough to be Aboriginal art, and not Western enough to be commodity craft.

Emily’s batik on silk, *Kam*, 1988 (National Gallery of Victoria), illustrates the culmination of her batik practice just before her switch to acrylic painting (see page 101). She takes the *kam* (yam) flower and seed as her motifs, abstracting them into a cluster of radiating lines covered in dots. Emily was the custodian of the Yam Dreaming, from which she derived her Anmatyerr name.²⁵ She repeats this motif across the entire surface and off the edges in an allover picture plane. Holding small sections of the cloth at a time in her lap to paint the wax encouraged her random orientation, placement, and size of her motifs. Her lines and dots are uneven in thickness, length, and wax saturation, increasing the abstracted quality of her imagery. Emily built the imagery in two layers, first waxing the white lines and dots and dyeing the cloth yellow, then waxing the yellow areas over the white waxed lines, along with new lines and dots, and dyeing in black. While the black appears to be the background or under-layer, it is added last in the batik process, while the white foreground lines are applied first.

Emily first painted in acrylic on canvas in 1989 as part of a Utopia-wide project initiated by Rodney Gooch, director of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association Shop.²⁶ In acrylic painting, Emily’s quickness and forcefulness became an asset. Her early canvasses, such as *Hungry Emus*, 1990, display a debt to the visual conventions of batik, with their light lines on a darker colored ground and unevenly shaped and sized dots (see page 94). Just like the iterative wax-and-dye process of batik, Emily built her imagery in layers from the primed colored ground, through the uneven white lines, and then finished with irregularly placed overlapping dots. The lines and dots are lighter than the ground, reminiscent of the lighter waxed lines against the darker dyed ground of batik. Her large arcs and unevenly spaced dots fill the canvas and disappear off its edges, suggesting an infinitely extending pattern. The meandering lines are reminiscent of batiked lines, applied quickly to cloth held unevenly in the lap and painted in sections.



Beyond Dreamings installation image at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection showing works by **PADDY JAPALJARRI STEWART, CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI, TOMMY LOWRY TJAPALTJARRI, MICHAEL NESLON JAGAMARA** and Unidentified artists.

While Green, Murray, and Gooch had attempted to promote Utopia batik as art for several years with limited success, the response of the art world to the abstraction in Utopia acrylic painting was immediate and much more lucrative.²⁷ James Mollison, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, saw several of Emily's first paintings in an exhibition in Melbourne in 1989 and travelled to Alice Springs to purchase all the CAAMA Shop's works by Emily.²⁸ Mollison's standing as an expert on contemporary art provided the initial imprimatur to Emily as an abstract artist, prompting many other curators, collectors, and dealers into a frenzy of interest in Emily's paintings. A "money river" flowed into Utopia through Emily for the remainder of her life.²⁹

Some established desert acrylic painters were already moving towards more abstracted renditions of their Dreamings motifs in the 1980s. Shorty Lungkarta Tjungarrayi's *Pattern in Sand* (1980), for example, isolates a single circle joining two overlapping radiating concentric circles, all composed of lines and dots (see page 30). These dots and lines are still precise and controlled, mostly in a single plane, and clearly state their ceremonial origins. Emily's acrylic dots owe more to batik wax splotches than to brush-placed pigments; her abstraction was more physical—more gestural in the language of modernism—and fit Western ideas of the expressionist tendencies of abstraction better than the Aboriginal men's and even other Utopia women's paintings.³⁰

Emily and other Utopia women switched from painting in wax on thin, wearable cloth to painting in acrylic on stiff, hang-on-the-wall cloth not because the new medium offered different aesthetic possibilities, but because it offered greater respect and economic returns from the global art world.³¹ They continued to draw upon their Dreamings, country, and ceremonial practice in their imagery, and continued to paint in an introduced medium to engage with the outside world. Batik had suffered from its categorization in the Western hierarchy of making as craft, utilitarian, commercial, and feminine, while acrylic painting was considered fine art, conceived as intellectual, aesthetic, male, and paradoxically unsullied by commercial concerns.

After her first painting on canvas Emily declared she was never going back to the much more labor-intensive batik process, and she never did.³² As Emily explored the possibilities of the new acrylic and canvas materials, she moved away from some batik-inspired visual conventions into all-over layered fields of dots, single layers of imagery, and brush-stroke lines. These styles were often quicker and easier on her body, as well as ever more satisfying to her dealers' requests for increasing abstraction and new styles. Moreover, painting in acrylics is a much more direct and efficient process than painting with wax resist and dyeing, and much closer to the direct painting of pigments on bodies and objects that constituted Emily's formative painting experiences. She moved towards reproducing the actual lines she painted on her breasts during ceremonies, instead of representing painted breasts themselves as she did in her earliest paintings. In addition to providing greater engagement with the Western world, acrylic painting offered Emily a return to the direct physicality of mark making, the gestural and expressive quality at which she excelled and which was so valued by the contemporary art market.

While acrylic painting allowed a return to the physicality of direct application, Emily and the Utopia women carried some of their batik practice back into this direct painting. The intermediate batik practice in Utopia, with its reversal of positive and negative space, iterative process, and all-over stylistic conventions, introduced an imprecision of form, freer placement of motifs, treatment of surface as an infinite plane, and layered approach into their painted imagery. In other desert painting traditions, the artists had moved directly from direct application of pigment on bodies or ground to canvas or board, without the transformational batik experience in between.

In the *Dreamings* catalog, Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart describe the acrylic painting movement as "one of the most exciting developments in Australian contemporary art."³³ They did not include or even mention batik or other craft in the exhibition, yet it was the Utopia women's batik tradition that was fostering the even more radical developments in acrylic painting that occurred immediately following the exhibition. Within a few years of *Dreamings*, Emily had eclipsed the established stars of desert acrylic painting featured in the exhibition, including Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Michael Nelson Jagamara. Indeed, *Dreamings* curator Peter Sutton was dismayed to find that after emphasizing the intellectual content of Aboriginal art and culture to Western exhibition visitors, it was the more abstract imagery of Utopia painting that the art world was attracted to in the exhibition's aftermath.³⁴

Emily's batik-influenced abstraction put her at the vanguard of an explosion of international interest in Aboriginal Australian art. Art has emerged as one of the most effective sites of intercultural interaction between the Indigenous and Western worlds. Indigenous Australian artists consistently speak of the art they produce in introduced media as a means of interacting with the outside world, of asserting their presence, communicating their culture, and engaging with the monetary economy.³⁵ Painting on canvas is so highly valued in Western hierarchies of making that it has become a primary means for Indigenous people to negotiate ways of being Aboriginal within a global modern world, even as this outside world continues to devalue both the craft and the Indigenous traditions of making that inflect Aboriginal art with its uniqueness. Artmaking allows Indigenous people to live on their lands, in their communities, and within their cultures, while generating income to selectively acquire the parts of Western culture they desire, acquiring legal control of their lands, and projecting their voices into the global contemporary world.

NOTES

- ¹ Cooe Art, "Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Market Analysis" <http://www.cooeeart.com.au/marketplace/artists/profile/KngwarreyeEmily/#analysis> Accessed March 10, 2018.
- ² *Fluent: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie, Judy Watson*. Curated by Hetti Perkins, Brenda L Croft, with Victoria Lynn. Biennale di Venezia, 1997 Australian Pavilion 15 June–9 November 1997.
- ³ Queensland Art Gallery, 1996; and National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan, 2008.
- ⁴ Henry Skerritt, *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting* (Reno and Munich: Nevada Museum of Art and Prestel, 2015), 14.
- ⁵ Akira Tatehata, "The Impossible Modernist," in *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, ed. Margo Neale (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2000), 31.
- ⁶ Ian McLean, "The Possible Modernist: An Insider View," paper presented at the Emily Symposium, National Museum of Australia, 22 August 2008.
- ⁷ Sally Butler, "Emily Kngwarreye and the Enigmatic Object of Discourse" (Ph.D thesis, University of Queensland, 2002).
- ⁸ Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, "Dreamings in Acrylic: Western Desert Art," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller with The Asia Society, 1988), 107.
- ⁹ Christine Watson, "Touching the Land: Towards an Aesthetic of Balgo Contemporary Painting," in *Art from the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art*, ed. Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), 180.
- ¹⁰ Margo W. Smith, "'The Enchantment of Being What We Are': Diversity and Change in Aboriginal Art" in *Dreaming Their Way: Australian Aboriginal Women Painters* (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2006), 26.
- ¹¹ Certificate of authenticity for Emily Kngwarreye's *Hungry Emus*, Delmore Gallery, Alice Springs, signed by Janet Holt, January 1990.
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Beyond Dreamings curators (left to right): Clara Ma, Eliza Hodgson, Audrey Li, Cecilia Gunzburger, Lucia Colombari, Lauren Van Nest, Kelvin L. Parnell Jr., Meaghan Walsh, and Eleanore Neumann. Photograph by Tom Cogill.

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