



# SHANE PICKETT

Djinong Djina Boodja | Look at the Land that I Have Traveled

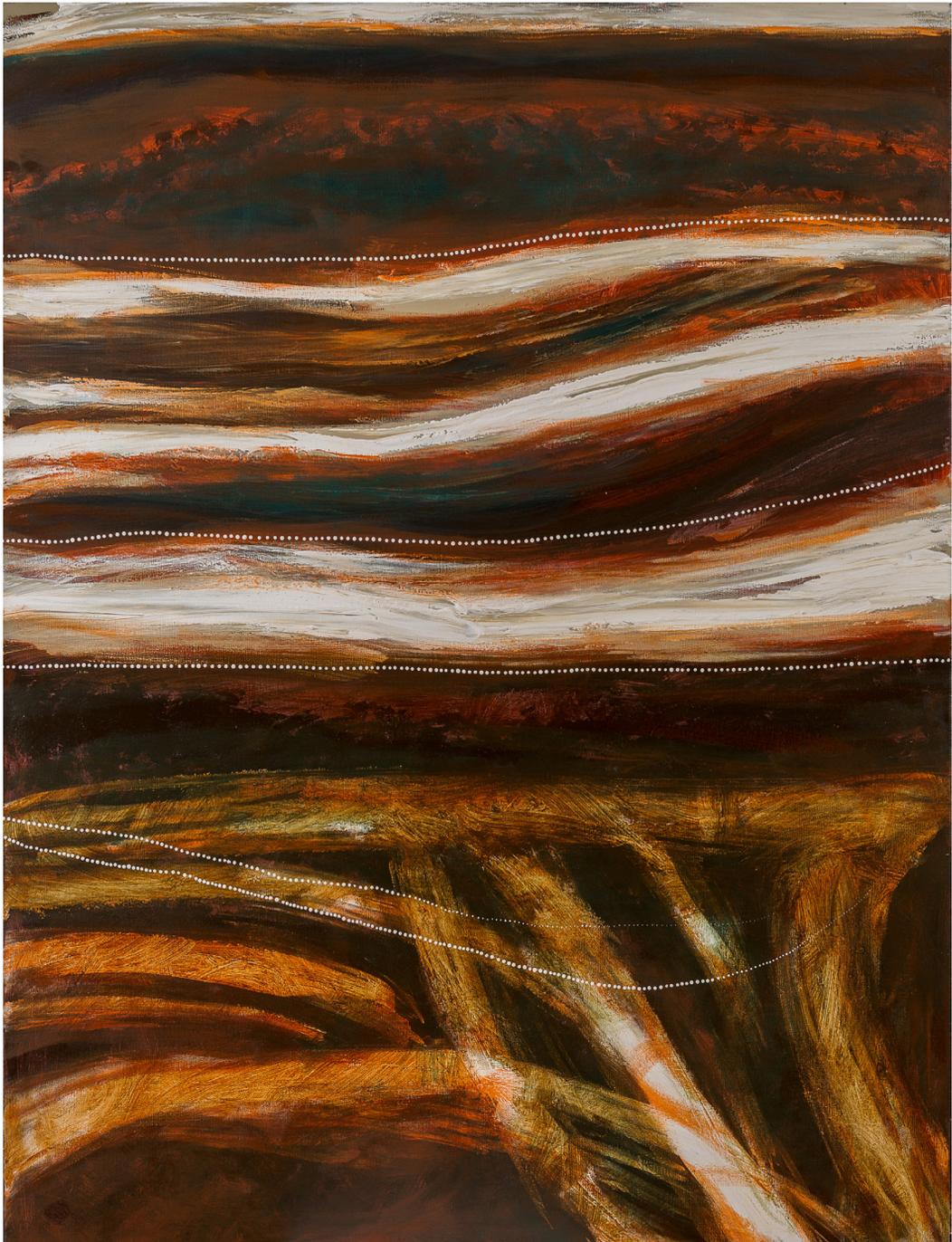
# SHANE PICKETT - HEALING GROUNDS

by Henry F. Skerritt

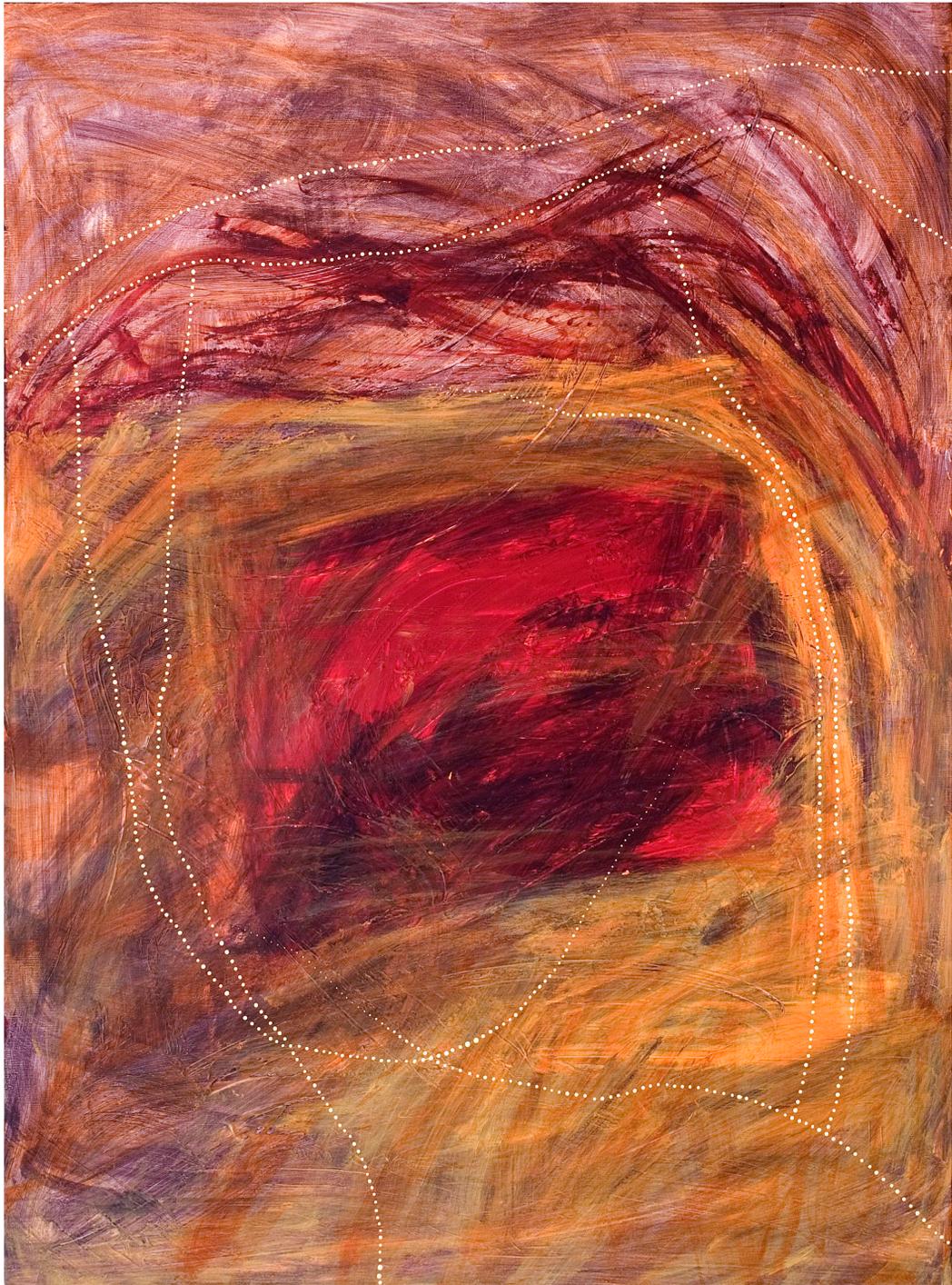
*Art is the becoming and happening of truth.* —Martin Heidegger

When I was growing up in Perth, Shane Pickett was something of a local legend. With his impish smile and affable sense of humor, people warmed instantly to Shane. “He was a millionaire in respect,” says fellow Nyoongar artist Richard Walley.<sup>1</sup> At Pickett’s memorial service in 2011, there were countless testimonies to his deep cultural knowledge and his generosity of spirit. I was the beneficiary of this kindness, and I cannot express how much I learned from Shane’s patient but unflinching serpentine exegeses on Nyoongar culture.

The son of Dorcas and Fred Pickett, Shane Pickett was born in 1957 in the farming town of Quairading, around 100 miles east of Perth, Western Australia. Since the mid-nineteenth century these lands had been stripped and cleared by the invaders. Renamed the Wheatbelt, the region became central to agriculture in the southwest, leaving little trace of the pre-colonial topography that had long sustained Nyoongar people. Despite this, Pickett grew up in a uniquely Nyoongar milieu. Living on the Badjaling Mission, he belonged to an extended community in which Nyoongar phrases still peppered speech, and hunting, fishing and camping remained cherished pastimes. Surrounded by athletic siblings, but suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, Pickett gravitated to art from an early age. In 1988 he reminisced, “I can’t recall a time I didn’t have a pencil or brush in my hand.”<sup>2</sup> After moving to Perth, a chance encounter with the art dealer Tai Ward-Holmes led to his first solo exhibition in 1976. The exhibition was a sell-out and launched Pickett’s career as a popular producer of picturesque landscapes and magic-realist Dreaming tableaux. It was a comfortable living, and Pickett quickly became a stalwart of the small Perth art scene.



*Muguroo Grounds and Songlines After the Sunset*, 2007, acrylic on linen, 60.25 x 48 in. (153 x 122 cm).



*Wanyarang Winds Calling Bunuroo*, 2008, acrylic on linen, 48 x 35.75 in. (122 x 91 cm).

If, in hindsight, Pickett's early works might be viewed as somewhat conservative, it must be remembered that in 1976 the Aboriginal art market was still nascent. Pickett was an "urban" Aboriginal artist more than a decade before the success of east-coast artists like Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt brought cachet to such a label. In forging a career as a full-time, professional Aboriginal artist, Pickett was very much pioneering an uncharted path. If this path brought financial security and local fame, it was only in the final five years of his life that Pickett was able to break from these provincial confines to ascend to the upper echelons of the Australian art world. This coincided with his move away from the studied realism of his youth, towards an expressive form of gestural abstraction. After three decades of painting, the speed of this transition and the sophistication that it brought to Pickett's practice caught many by surprise. And yet Pickett did not see any discontinuity: even at his most abstract, he continued to describe himself as a "landscape" painter. Pickett spoke often of trying to uncover the "truth" or *kaanarn* in his paintings. In 2006 he told me: "My career has been a journey, expanding in scope; as I have grown in maturity, my work has become less like a photograph and has tried to explore the deeper meaning of the landscape."<sup>3</sup>

This exhibition—*Shane Pickett: Djinong Djina Boodja (Look at the Land That I Have Traveled)*—does not survey the entirety of Pickett's three-decade long career. Rather, it provides a snap-shot of arguably the most significant period in this career, when his paintings reached their abstract zenith. We should be careful, however, in characterizing this as a teleological progression from figuration to abstraction.<sup>4</sup>

“Healing is the most important part of any artwork, and the message is loud and clear, and very bright, and narrative in some cases.”

- SHANE PICKETT

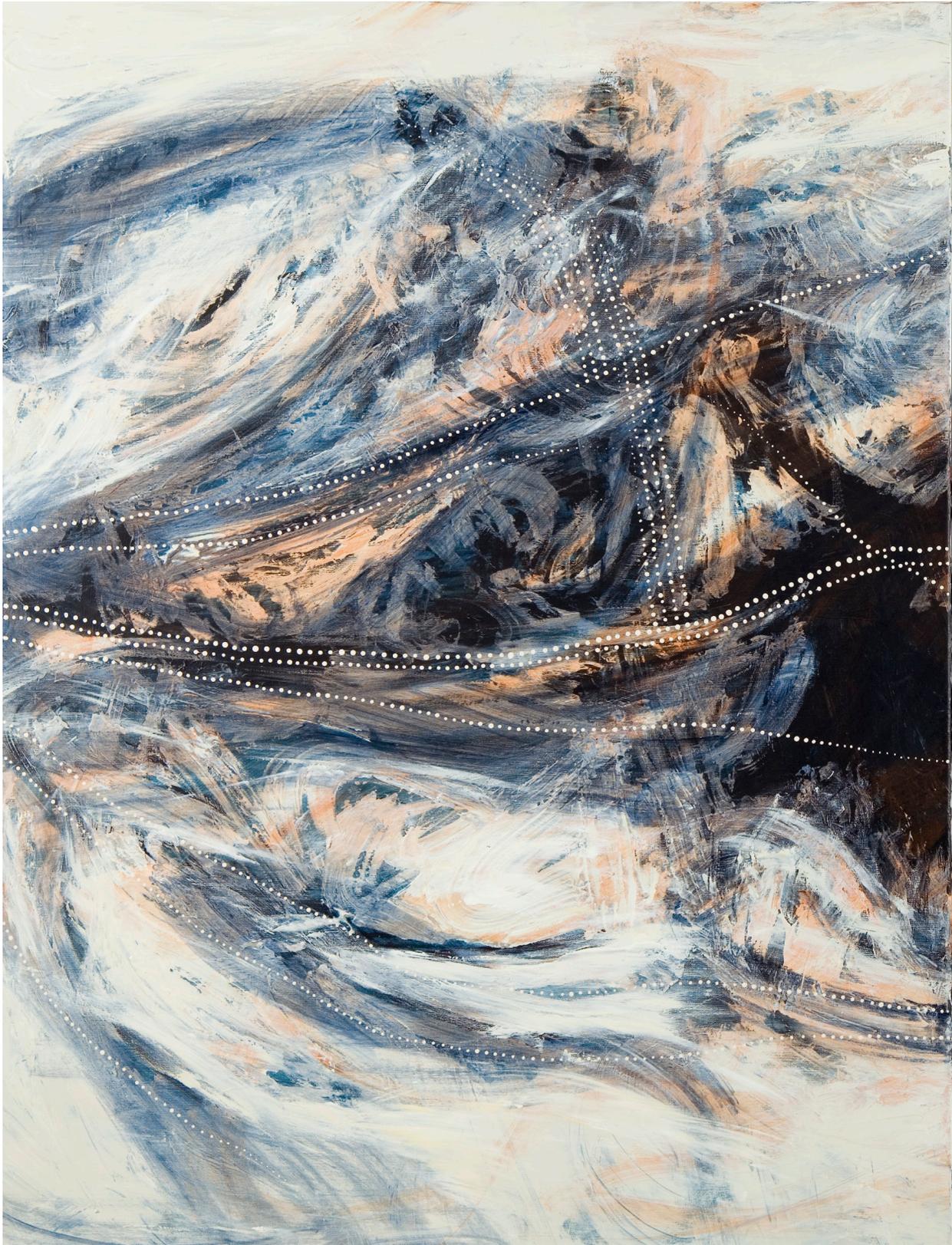
As I have noted elsewhere, Pickett consistently cycled back and forth between figuration and abstraction. Indeed, originally, *Djinong Djina Boodja* was the title that Pickett had chosen for a 2011 exhibition intended to signal a late return to figurative landscapes. In one sense, then, the title of this exhibition is somewhat incongruous. What land is there to be “seen” in these paintings? What is the “truth” that we are being called to view?

For Martin Heidegger, truth in art was about capturing the tension (or “essential strife”) between “earth” (the concealed phenomenal realm that both informs and resists conceptualization) and “world” (the intelligible realm of meanings). *Earth* makes *world* possible, but at the same time, resists the *world* by always receding back into itself. Through unconcealing that which conceals itself—namely this irresolvable tension between *earth* and *world*—artworks have the ability to reconfigure our understanding of *being*.<sup>5</sup> Pickett’s abstraction was clearly phenomenological in many respects: he spoke often of the central role of observing the natural world to his practice. But Pickett’s *earth* was always filtered through the *a priori* of Dreaming.<sup>6</sup>

Pickett used the term “Dreaming” in its most expansive sense: it could mean the creation time—*Koorndaam*—when ancestral beings such as the Waagle (Rainbow Serpent) journeyed across the earth giving it its present form; it could mean the ancestral presence that remains in the earth, animating it and giving it spiritual essence; or it could mean the connection between individuals and the places from which their spirits are born. Like most Indigenous Australians, when Pickett used the term “Dreaming,” he used it to refer to all of these meanings simultaneously. In his art, this manifested itself as an attempt to capture the essence of the land: a swirling energy force that runs through all things, connecting every point in space and time. For Pickett, Dreaming was the bedrock of this existence. He described it this way: “Every river, every tree, every rock is important, as the Dreaming runs through them connecting all things, including mankind. These are the energy paths of the Dreaming and they are never meant to be broken, never meant to fail.”<sup>7</sup>



*Twisting Paths Hunting Ground*, 2008, acrylic on linen, 24 x 21.5 in. (61 x 55 cm).



*The Healing Waterhole Below Rock Wall (Diptych)*, 2008, acrylic on linen, 48 x 71.5 in. (122 x 182 cm).



Even in the face of environmental devastation and loss, Pickett argued that Dreaming energy persisted. Moreover, it was discernible to those attentive to its power: those who have learned to read the songlines by careful observation of the natural world. The visual activity of the lands (the shimmer of a dried waterhole, the shifting color of a sunset or blooms in spring) are all tangible expressions of ancestral presencing. They are the bridge between *earth* and *world*: the ways in which Dreaming is made visible. In his late works, translucency became increasingly important to Pickett. Where earlier works tended to use solid blocks of color, in works like *Twisting Paths Hunting Ground* (2008) contrasting layers of opaque and translucent paint force a heightened perspicacity, as the viewer strains to look below the outer veil, to uncover the tantalizing flickers of azure or orange.

But there is something else at play here, because if the Dreaming is observed through acute sensitivity to changes of the landscape, there is also a sense in which Pickett's paintings are themselves manifestations of Dreaming: embodiments of the creative powers of the ancestors. Pickett describes the process of starting a painting: "I get into a rhythm that's within the spirit and then even get up and walk around—and get an energy happening inside that allows me to follow a rhythm or a pattern."<sup>8</sup> Painting then, is not just a representation of specific sites of their related narratives, but rather a performance of the "spirit" in the act of uncovering the enduring presence of Dreaming. "A lot of my artwork," says Pickett, "is never-ending in ways of finding subjects, and at the same time it's done in a way where artistically it can't be repeated in markings or dot works or whatever brush strokes are put on canvas."<sup>9</sup> Painting becomes a regenerative or "healing" act (both literally and spiritually), keeping the songlines strong via their repeated embodiment: "For thousands of years, Aboriginal people have lived with and understood the connections between ecology, meteorology and songlines that bring, as well as disperse, the rains. In practicing this form of culture, we find that we have a part to perform in maintaining the balance of life."<sup>10</sup>

For Heidegger, art was both the *becoming* and *happening* of truth. As Pickett moved into abstraction after 2004, the horizon line of the landscape became the key structure around which his compositions were built. A great example of this device can be seen in Pickett's best-known work, *On the Horizon of the Dreaming Boodja* (2005, National Gallery of Australia); but vestiges of the horizon are still clearly evident in works such as *Muguroo Grounds and Songlines After the Sunset* (2007). After 2007, Pickett's work was increasingly animated by his struggle against the horizon line. In works like *Healing Grounds and the Soft Breeze* (2008), it feels like the artist is in a tussle with the horizon, thrusting it in every direction in a desperate attempt to cleave the landscape open. At their very best—such as the monumental *The Healing Waterhole Below Rock Wall* (2008)—this fracas creates whirling vortices of turbulent energy.



Shane Pickett in his studio at Mossenson Galleries, Subiaco.

“Pickett’s paintings move from the capturing of an ‘instant’—as in the photographic record of a place—to existing in a state of *everywhen*.”

For the philosopher Edmund Husserl, the horizon presented a limit, but not a boundary. It was, he argued, “a determinable, but never fully determinable indeterminateness.”<sup>11</sup> The horizon is always expressed as a beyond: something we can sense, but which is always receding, always beyond reach. Pickett’s move, in puncturing the horizon, is to go from a state of anticipation, to one of *presencing*. To use Heidegger’s formula, this is not a *becoming*, but a *happening* of truth. Pickett’s paintings move from the capturing of an “instant”—as in the photographic record of a place—to existing in a state of *everywhen*. Nick Tapper has noted the pivotal role that dots play in Pickett’s late paintings. Unlike many Western Desert artists, Pickett’s dots operate as independent lines rather than border or infill. Pickett referred to these alternately as travel lines or as the path of stars through the night sky. Tapper notes, “Given the centrality of astronomy to a Nyoongar sense of place, the two

need not be separated. Rather they are braided in the metaphorical resonance of being art once in place and in between places, or in a place between the present and the ‘everywhen.’”<sup>12</sup>

While Heidegger favored the metaphor of “breaking ground,” Pickett’s unconcealing was not so much transgressive, as harking back to much older philosophies. As his work engaged in

an increasingly violent struggle with the materiality of paint, it might seem paradoxical that “healing” became an increasingly prominent feature of his titles. In the period these paintings were produced, Pickett was in considerable physical pain. The rheumatoid arthritis that had burdened him since childhood, and which would eventually take his life, aged him considerably in his final years. Partly from the difficulty of holding a brush, and partly, I think, from an urgency to complete his ontological and artistic project, Pickett began increasingly to use his hands to paint. He described it as “a very, very ancient, old technique,” the “healing manner” used to spread ochre on the body during ceremony.<sup>13</sup> In paintings like *Muguroo Grounds and Songlines After the Sunset*, the lines that had once signified the horizon became transformed into the striations of body painting, like those seen in the defiant 1909 portrait photograph of Nyoongar elder Monnop.

By 2007, Pickett was clearly aware of his own mortality: he was returning to the ancestral realm. As arthritis crippled his body, he became increasingly physically involved in his canvases: using his hand to push and smear paint across his works. The paintings became indexes of Pickett’s movement, in much the way that the landscape is indexical of ancestral travel during *Koorndaam*. But Pickett’s struggle with paint was not at the service of revealing its autonomous material essence—as in Clement Greenberg’s model of material specificity—but rather to point to the inherent connectivity of *all* materials. It was a struggle to unite the pictorial and physical worlds. Like ceremonial body painting, which manifests ancestral energy, uniting the wearer with the ancestors and the country they created and inhabit, the “performance” of Pickett’s late canvases represents his becoming one with the ancestral realm. Revealing the truth in the landscape was not about seeing beyond the horizon, it was about healing the rift between the earth and our understanding of it. As he matured, I do not think that Shane saw a division between his art, his country, and his self: these things were conjoined. These late works record his attempts to connect himself to the *earth* of Dreaming. His identity came from the Dreaming, something that

flowed through him, just as it connected him to every other being on the planet. “*For the Dreams do flow strongly through the views of my life.*”<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Walley quoted in “When He Told Stories, I Can See the Country,” in *Shane Pickett: Meeyakba*, ed. Nick Tapper (Coolbinia, Western Australia: Mossenson Art Foundation, 2017), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Shane Pickett, quoted in Alex Harris, “This Artist Brushes Up on Science,” *The West Australian*, June 18, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Shane Pickett, interview with the author, February 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See Henry Skerritt, “Just Weather: The Art and Philosophy of Shane Pickett,” in *Shane Pickett: Meeyakba*, ed. Nick Tapper, 85-99.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art (1935-36),” in *Martin Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-56. I am indebted to Ian McLean for his suggestion of this reference.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that many Indigenous Australians object to the term “Dreaming,” I use it here in deference to Pickett’s own usage.

<sup>7</sup> Shane Pickett, artist statement, in *Culture Warriors*, ed. Brenda L. Croft (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2007), 149. Pickett dictated this statement to me in Collingwood in 2006. As a sign of Pickett’s ever-present humor, after delivering this poignant passage, he immediately broke off into song. To my surprise, it was not a traditional Nyoongar song, but Australian pop-singer Alex Lloyd’s 2005 single “Never Meant to Fail.”

<sup>8</sup> Shane Pickett, interview with Miriam Zolin and Wilbur Wilde, 774 ABC Melbourne, October 23, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Shane Pickett, interview with Nick Tapper, February 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Shane Pickett, quoted in Nick Tapper, “There is a Season,” in *Shane Pickett: Meeyakba*, ed. Nick Tapper, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten, (The Hague, Boston and Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, 1983), 52.

<sup>12</sup> Tapper, “There is a Season,” 18.

<sup>13</sup> Shane Pickett, “I’m on a Path That’s a Healing Path,” in *Shane Pickett: Meeyakba*, ed. Nick Tapper, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Shane Pickett, artist statement, in *Culture Warriors*, ed. Brenda L. Croft, 149.



## ABOUT Shane Pickett

Shane Pickett (1957-2010) grew up on a small Aboriginal mission in the Wheatbelt agricultural region east of Perth. From an early age Pickett suffered from ill health, but showed an immediate aptitude for drawing and painting. He held his first exhibition in Perth in 1976 at the age of nineteen. Over the next three decades he would hold over thirty solo exhibitions and his works would be acquired by major public collections include the National Gallery of Australia. In 2017, Pickett was the subject of a major monograph, *Shane Pickett: Meeyakba*. Over his career, Pickett's work transformed from detailed landscape paintings to expressive gestural abstractions. Highly influential to a younger generation of Indigenous artists, he developed a unique visual language to represent the cornerstones of his Nyoongar culture.

Photo by Matthew Galligan.



## ABOUT Henry F. Skerritt

Henry F. Skerritt is the Curator of the Indigenous Arts of Australia at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, the only museum dedicated to Indigenous Australian art in the United States. He first met Shane Pickett in 2004 when he became manager of Mossenson Galleries in Melbourne. Over the next six years he worked closely with Pickett and has written extensively on his work. Skerritt is the editor of the books *No Boundaries: Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Abstract Painting* (2015) and *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia* (2016). He holds a PhD in art history from the University of Pittsburgh.

Photo by Tom Cogill.

# SHANE PICKETT

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