



SONGS OF A SECRET COUNTRY

The Stephen and Agatha Luczo Gift



BUGAI WHYOUTLER

Front cover: *Wantili*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 59 ¾ x 59 ¾ in. (152 x 152 cm).

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JULY 20, 2017 - APRIL 8, 2018

exhibition curated by

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catalogue edited by

MACARIO GARCIA
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kluge-ruhe
Aboriginal art collection
of the UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

FROM THE DONORS

Stephen and Agatha Luczo are honored to have served as temporary custodians of artwork that pays respect to Elders, past and present, and that carries with it the deepest sense of story, music, dance and land itself. Their collection of Australian Aboriginal art, which began with the purchase of a few canvases in 2006, grew to nearly 200 paintings and sculptures as a result of their devoted efforts. Driven by a profound appreciation for the ways in which 50,000 years of art-making now manifests itself in lively and energetic contemporary works, Stephen and Agatha have immersed their family in this visual world. These are works that have been lived with and loved by the Luczos, both at their home and at the US corporate headquarters of Seagate Technology, of which Stephen is Chairman and CEO.

The Luczos are gratified to share twenty-three works from their collection with the vibrant community of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. Kluge-Ruhe is the best and most natural home for such a gift, not merely because it is the only museum in America dedicated to the exhibition and study of Australian Aboriginal art. Nor was it selected simply because of the admirable virtues of philanthropy and scholarship embodied by John Kluge and Edward Ruhe. It is the brilliant level of engagement—with students, with the local community and with artists from both America and Australia—that makes Kluge-Ruhe the ideal museum home for this gift.

Every donor wants their gift to have a lasting impact. This universal wish was fulfilled when the Luczos' crates arrived in Charlottesville and university students from the Mellon Indigenous Arts Initiative took up the study, curation and interpretation of their contents. This remarkable program will enrich not only the academic and professional lives of the students, but its good results will also ripple outward to visitors of all ages and demographics. Stephen and Agatha, as parents to four young children, think often of the future. With this gift, they wish to honor the artists and to deepen our collective understanding of the stories carried by and through objects, all for the benefit of the next generation.

[Blair Hartzell, Curator of the Stephen and Agatha Luczo Collection](#)

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

In 2016, the University of Virginia launched the Mellon Indigenous Arts Initiative, a collaboration among the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, the Fralin Museum, the Kluge-Ruhe Collection and the Office of Diversity Programs. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the University, this initiative establishes a center of excellence for the study of the Indigenous arts of Australia and the Americas at UVA.

A centerpiece of this initiative was to open pathways to graduate studies in the curatorial field for students from diverse backgrounds. In June, we welcomed India Ferguson, Caitlyn Keeve, Rosalba Ponce, Jake Martin and Imani Williford as the inaugural participants in this program. Graduate students Macario Garcia and Lee Bloch, from the Department of Anthropology at UVA, were hired to assist with supervising the students' research and editing this catalogue.

In selecting a project for the Summer Curatorial Program, we were fortunate to receive a gift of outstanding works of Aboriginal art from Stephen and Agatha Luczo. Our students curated this collection into the exhibition *Songs of a Secret Country*. We are grateful to the Luczo family for a body of work that not only expands the representation of major artists and art communities in the Kluge-Ruhe Collection, but also has provided our students with an exemplary focus for their learning about Aboriginal Australian art.

On the first day of the Summer Curatorial Program, a North Carolina-based faction of the Ku Klux Klan announced that they would hold a rally in Charlottesville to protest our City Council's decision to remove equestrian statues of Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. UVA President Teresa Sullivan issued a statement condemning the "ideologies of hatred and exclusion that run directly counter to the principles of mutual respect, diversity, and inclusion that we espouse and uphold..." Our community has responded with variety of events emphasizing unity and civil rights. While it is upsetting that our students' forged their first impressions of Charlottesville during this troubling time, we know that the Summer Curatorial Program is preparing them to break through barriers to equality and pursue their dreams.

Margo Smith AM, Director of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection

INTRODUCTION

BY MACARIO GARCIA AND LEE BLOCH

[Australia] is a secret country—with a secret history. Now that may sound strange... Yet there are few countries in which a historical conspiracy of silence has been so complete.

John Pilger, *The Secret Country*, 1985¹

This is an exhibition about country, about innovative spirits and divergent perspectives. In Aboriginal Australian usages, “country” refers not to the nation-state of Australia, but rather ancestral landscapes and homelands. In the creative gestures of painting and sculpting, Aboriginal artists make tactile contact with country. They caress its contours, its memory and return home—that is, if they ever left. The artworks in this exhibition sing melodies of ancestors and land, creation and power, history and memory, community and identity.

Aboriginal ancestors are the stuff of spacetime.² Their movements create landscapes, people, languages and entire universes. Ancestors marked the earth, creating land formations with desires, interactions and intentions.³ You can still see their bodies in these features. They are a river, a rock formation, a mountain.⁴ They find life and form in their descendants, in the gestures of hands that move across and mark canvas and wood. In this sense, these artworks are self-portraits as well as landscapes.⁵

Some researchers have called these ancestral movements the Dreaming or Dreamtime. While these are conventional terms in English, they are inadequate translations derived from a single Aboriginal language out of several hundred, erasing the diversity and complexity of Indigenous peoples in Australia.⁶ Framed through imperial eyes and beliefs of superiority, many assume these cosmologies to be myths told by “primitive” peoples skirting the edges of modernity and civilization.⁷ However, this language robs Aboriginal realities of power, fixing them into colonial categories. We prefer the language of history, opening questions about other ways of existing and other kinds of time.⁸

These are not histories that move in the straight line of progressive and chronological time: a past that is over and done with, cordoned off and kept at a distance from the

present. Puntjina Monica Watson paints honey grevillea flowers, tracing histories in the paths of ancestors across the land, lines of movement that gave form to earth and sustain people to this day. The brushstrokes and carvings you see before you embody pasts that insist on being present, ancestral movements and forms that find ways of becoming contemporary.

To say that country is secret draws our attention to the workings of power. “Secreting” speaks to practices across Aboriginal Australia of obscuring information. Some paintings in this exhibition manifest histories and landscapes we know little about: details familiar to the artist but inappropriate for a wider audience.

In John Pilger’s documentary, *The Secret Country*, *secreting* refers to the whitewashing of colonial violence and silencing of Aboriginal histories. Over the last century, the nation-state of Australia has displaced Indigenous Australians from their homelands, targeted their children with educational programming meant to permanently disrupt Aboriginal knowledge and language, and violently removed thousands in what came to be known as “the Stolen Generations.”⁹ These kinds of secrets—things “out of sight and out of mind”—structure narratives of (white) progress and “high” culture. They continue to grip consciousness in the United States and Australia through institutionalized racism, the proliferation of white supremacist ideologies and conflicts over the public representation of history.¹⁰

These paintings speak to displacement as both a removal and a re-routing of movement. Artists such as Bugai Whyoulter remember absent homelands and return to birthplaces. Paintings of places along the Canning Stock Route evoke the settling of formerly mobile Aboriginal peoples into undesirable tracts of land. Even so, ancestral landscapes and histories refuse to be eradicated. Molly Nampitjin Miller re-creates and reinterprets Aboriginal histories with each painted mark. Others, like Nyilyari Tjapangati and John John Bennett Tjapangati, portray land as ancestral presence and contemporary identity through elaborate dotting and compositional devices.

But what happens when you approach a sculpture created by an unknown artist? The Tiwi figures in this exhibition come to us without the names of their creators. They were collected at a time when such objects were meant to represent cultural types rather than creative expressions. As they migrated across the land into different museum



and collection spaces, they also moved across museological categories, from objects of ethnography to objects of art.¹¹ They carry these histories with them, speaking to institutional collecting practices and categorical frameworks. Yet they also are marked with clan-specific designs, locating them within concrete webs of Aboriginal relationships, histories and landscapes. On display at Kluge-Ruhe, these sculptures call their audience to look into the voids created by colonial record-keeping and see what looks back.

Gender and other forms of social differentiation shape ancestral memories. Many artworks in this exhibition represent a move to gestural painting characteristic of the contemporary Aboriginal women's art movement. Creations from Jennifer Mintaya Connelly and Harry Tjutjuna both depict the Seven Sisters narrative but from differing perspectives. While Connelly's work grapples with female creation and male sexual violence, Tjutjuna literally centers a man within the narrative.

Histories of ancestral land and colonial invasion are alive in these paintings and sculptures. We ask you to take up the difficulties of perspective and the complexities of power. This path opens new channels of understanding for those willing to decolonize

PANTJITI LIONEL

Malara, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 57 ½ in. (101.5 x 146 cm).

land and mind, to question assumptions about what counts as normal, natural and inevitable.¹² What does one make of Billy Benn Perrurle's story, who was exiled by the government after he killed another person and returned decades later to paint his homeland? His story reverberates within a longer history of displacement, unsettling moral certainties about criminality in worlds shaped by domination.

The movements and relationships in this exhibition proudly display kinship and spiritual linkage and confront settler violence. As you become audience to these paintings and sculptures, does the country of Australia begin to converse with the earth under your feet? What does it mean to look upon them in this place, once a plantation where Thomas Jefferson forced enslaved black people to labor? When you look at these Australian landscapes, do you also see Monacan people returning to sacred places and ancestral burial mounds along the Rivanna River? And where do you stand in this picture?

These artworks are contemporary creations of ancestral futures, reverberations of deep histories visualized through the gestures of artists' paintbrushes and tools. The works in *Songs of a Secret Country* are expressions of ancestral lands that refuse to exhaust themselves, contemporary histories that trouble the certainties of colonial governance.

¹ John Pilger's 1985 documentary *The Secret Country: The First Australians Fight Back* describes the British invasion of Aboriginal lands and the subsequent displacement practices. See also John Pilger, *A Secret Country: The Hidden Australia* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1991).

² Coined by Albert Einstein in the context of theoretical physics, spacetime refers to a model in which the dimensions of time are inseparable from those of space.

³ Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998); Henry Skerritt, "Marking the Infinite." In *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Henry F. Skerritt, (New York and Reno: Prestel and Nevada Museum of Art, 2016), 9-17.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Transgender Creeks and the Three Figures of Power in Late Liberalism," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 2 (2015): 168-187.

⁵ Rosalba Ponce made this observation in our workshop and we are indebted to her for the insight.

⁶ Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 67-68.

⁷ See Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1989), R.M. and C.H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1964), and Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters* (New York: Grove Press, 1994); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012 [1999]).

⁸ Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁹ Dale Wayne Kerwin, "When We Became People with a History," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15, no. 2 (2011): 249-269. For more information see: Peter Read, *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1183 to 1969* (Surry Hills: NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2006, 1981).

¹⁰ Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, "Art as Ethnocide: The Case of Australia," *Third Text* 2, no. 5 (2008): 3-20.

¹¹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

¹² See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1986); Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20-34.

AN UNVEILED TRUTH

BY INDIA FERGUSON

In 2011, renowned Aboriginal artist and community activist Molly Nampitjin Miller created *Mamungari*, a painting of the sacred site where during the *Tjukurpa* (Dreaming) a group of ancestral women were murdered. Using the vibrant colors of the landscape, Miller's painting tells the story of a woman named Alkuwari crying out for protection from her evil grandson. With the help of her *minyma tjuta* (women) spirit relatives, Alkuwari finds her grandson using an improvised ladder made of a long branch to climb into a tall tree at a site called Mamungari. As the spirits reached into the tree, the grandson kicked down his ladder, pushing the women into the depths of the land. After describing the story behind Mamungari, Miller simply concludes, "*mulapa*" (true), indicating that this is a true story. This claim challenges any assumption that her paintings represent mythological subjects. Against colonial tendencies to label Aboriginal artworks and narratives as myths, Miller asserts that this creation story provides the factual history of her birthplace.

Since the late nineteenth century, Aboriginal creations have been sold into the art market controlled by colonial powers, where they have been interpreted as mythical, and thus fictional sagas on canvas. Art dealers framed these works as "primitive art," a term embedded in colonial hierarchies. This language places African, Native American and Aboriginal peoples at the bottom of an imagined evolutionary ladder, imagining them as static, ancient and undeveloped. This misinformed view continues to limit our understanding of Indigenous cultures and philosophies while shaping systems that cause tangible harm to Aboriginal peoples. Our curatorial ambition is to dismantle these colonial assumptions about Aboriginal art and peoples by acknowledging these creations as both Aboriginal histories and flourishing innovations in contemporary art.

Each artist in *Songs of a Secret Country* expresses perspectives vital to understanding the history of Australia. In their depictions of displacement, ceremonies and internal reflections, we observe eighteen Aboriginal artists expressing ties to homelands that were appropriated and renamed by English colonizers. Yet one cannot have an



MOLLY NAMPITJIN MILLER

Top: *Mamungari*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 43 x 72 in. (122 x 183 cm).

Bottom: Molly Nampitjin Miller in her country. Photograph by Paul Exline.

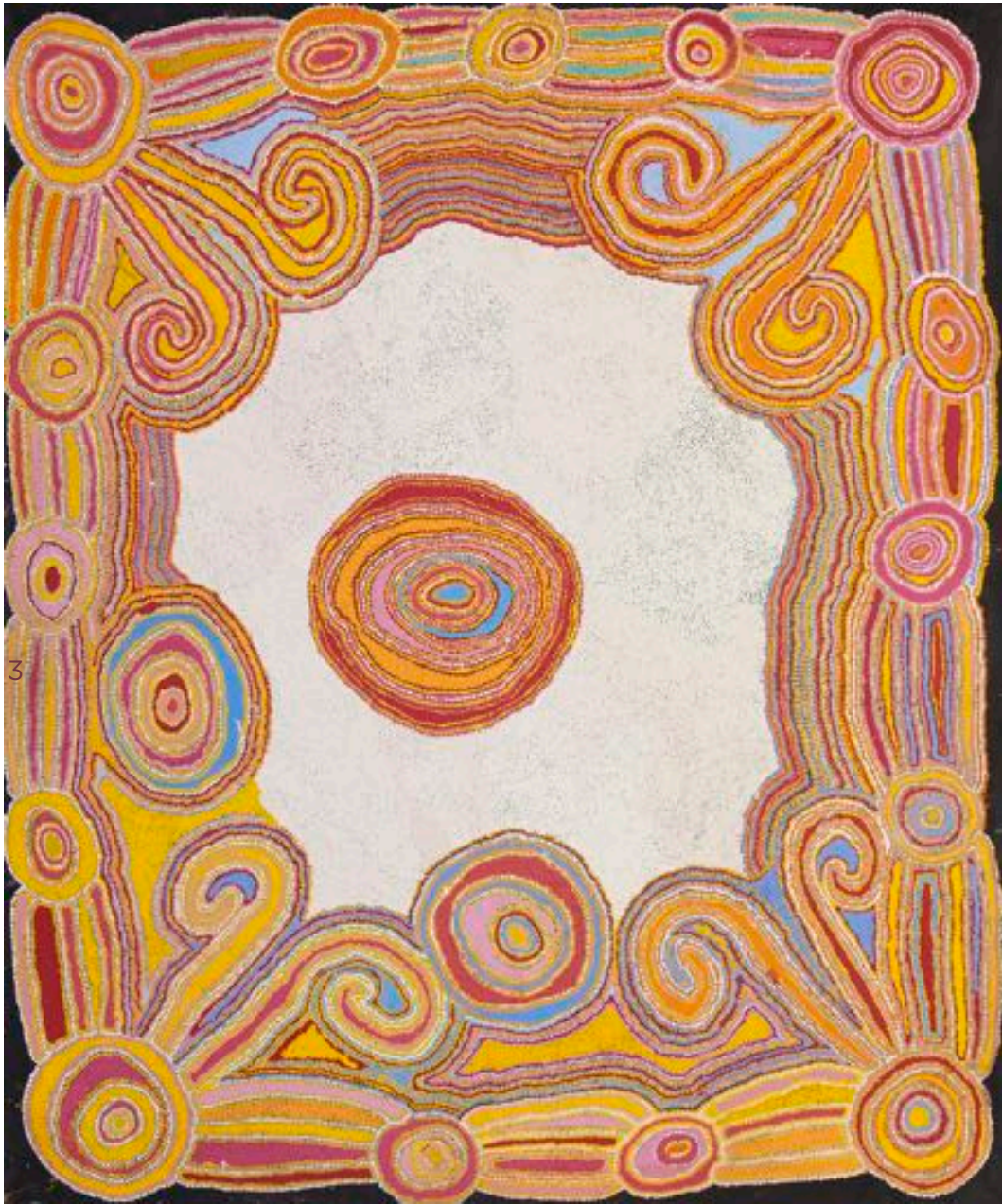


understanding of Australia and the influence of Aboriginal art without discussing both ancestral relationships and the effects of this violence.

While the artists reinterpret and share the histories of Australia, each work can be seen as an extension of ceremonial actions through which people care for and conserve the land. In her paintings, Puntjina Monica Watson uses intricate jewel-like borders to frame her spiritual connection to the sacred food and water sources of her birthplace, Pukara. Watson depicts a lake a few hundred meters outside of Pukara named Wirrku Wirrku that for centuries has been associated with the sweet-tasting honey grevillea plant. The prominent hook shapes allude to both the flowers of the plant and their origins in Pukara's history when they were vomited by the ancestral water snake. Watson's joyous depiction celebrates her connection to her ancestors as well as the ceremonies performed by women to increase the amount of nectar in the honey grevillea flowers.

Molly Nampitjin Miller's painting *Mamungari* (2011) also alludes to Aboriginal connection to land in its large gestural brushwork and her spirited use of color that reflects the

THE HONEY GREVILLEA FLOWER



PUNTJINA MONICA WATSON

Pukara, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 in. (183 x 153 cm).

“Beyond stunning visual qualities of form and color, these artists share their homeland’s histories through a complex collage of uniquely Aboriginal expressions and landscapes.”

the multiplicity of Aboriginal histories and ways of life by displaying a wide variety of sacred stories, ceremonies and landscapes. They extend sacred relationships with honey plants and water snakes or inspire conservation efforts, all of which are inseparable from cultural revitalization and preservation. Beyond stunning visual qualities of form and color, these artists share their homeland’s histories through a complex collage of uniquely Aboriginal expressions and landscapes. While subtle and often overlooked by non-Indigenous consumers, Molly Miller said “*mulapa*” to assert the truth behind Aboriginal creations. As curators, we ask you to respectfully analyze the layers of depth and reflection expressed in every displayed work. With each creation, carry that word “*mulapa*” with you. Understand that you are witnessing history in a new, unabashed light.

landscape: red earth, soft green foliage, as well as lavender, yellow and fuchsia desert flowers. In 2012, fifty-one Aboriginal women elders gathered in Mamungari to discuss the growing need to create programs to teach community women how to care for the land. They discussed the importance of vocalizing their concerns regarding land management and educating younger generations about the many women’s sacred sites at Mamungari. Molly Miller’s painting was a catalyst to Aboriginal cultural education and historic preservation relating to women’s connections to identity, land and history.

The works in this exhibition assert



PUNTJINA MONICA WATSON

Punkara, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 43 ¾ x 34 ¾ in. (88 x 101 cm).

THE NATURE OF PROMISE

BY CAITLYN KEEVE

Aboriginal Australian artists often represent the actions of ancestral beings that shape the landscape. At the same time, aspects of a person's identity, like gender, ethnicity, age and family connections influence their art. These two perspectives—identity and ancestral presence—are inseparable from one another. What may appear to be repeating circles on canvas are really symbols reflecting an artist's commitment to creation and engagement with the differences and power relations in both their communities and the wider world. Far from static and fixed traditions stuck in the past, artists immortalize Aboriginal identities on canvas and share them with the world: a promise to maintain a living and dynamic cosmology.

Histories cannot exist in a vacuum, but are active practices that emerge from and transform their social context. Physical and social landscapes are shaped by gendered cosmologies, power relations and violence. Aboriginal women artists emerged into prominence in the contemporary art scene in tandem with the ongoing land rights struggle, and as a response to the silencing of their voices by global and political forces.¹ While the Australian Aboriginal art movement historically privileged male artists, women artists drew inspiration from their own ceremonies, including song, dance and body painting. One of these, which can be seen in several paintings in this exhibition, is the Seven Sisters narrative. This story, more accurately translated as “Many Sisters,” is highly significant to women artists and is tied to a specific set of women's ceremonies.

Jennifer Mintaya Connelly's expressions of ancestral narratives reflect on these women's ceremonies. As a skilled artist and mother of seven, she embraces creation in most areas of her life. In *Kungkarraikalpa* (2011), she paints the Seven Sisters narrative. In this Pitjantjatjara version of story, the sisters travel to sacred sites in the Western Desert. While on top of a hill, a lustful man named Wati Nyiru spots them and begins to chase them. The sisters take shelter in a nearby cave and wait until he falls asleep before escaping. Wati Nyiru wakes, only to find them gone. He pursues them, eventually catching the youngest sister, whom he rapes and marries.

Harry Tjutjuna, a senior man, traditional healer and creative visionary, reimagines patterns of authority with his art. In *Wati Nyiru Munu Wati Wanka* (2011), he also paints the story of the Seven Sisters. Where many women artists would forgo painting the male ancestor, Tjutjuna literally centers the man, Wati Nyiru, at the middle of the piece to emphasize his influence on the sisters' journey. Tjutjuna's choice to have the male protagonist as the center of the painting foregrounds Wati Nyiru as a symbol of a man's pilgrimage rather than to minimize the narrative of the sisterhood. Additionally, Tjutjuna's identity as a traditional healer links him to the spider, several of which border the painting. The Seven Sisters narrative and the recurring spider motif have no inherent relationship but in combination point to the individual perspective and authority that Tjutjuna brings to ancestral histories.

In painting memories, Pantjiti Lionel transforms the past into an unfading reality. In *Malara* (2012), Lionel creates a scene based on her memories of a secret site where seven sons transformed into seven snakes. Country is transformed through her artistry. As the most senior woman at the Ernabella Art Center, she creatively reinterprets the land from a position of wisdom. Like other Aboriginal women artists, Lionel forgoes discourses of indigeneity often romanticized by Eurocentric art in favor of her intimate knowledge and firsthand experience.² Using the creativity that comes with her seniority, she combines traditional abstract iconographies, such as concentric circles and dotting, with more figurative elements like mountains, rivers and trees.

Through their art, Connelly, Tjutjuna and Lionel project different visions, crafting divergent identities in a shared conversation about cultural expression and preservation.³ These paintings are experiential expressions that bring differentiated Aboriginal perspectives and histories into the spotlight. Unflinching and thought-provoking, these artists create

“Like an unspoken promise, these respected artists are committed to sharing a part of their identity with the world.”



JENNIFER MINTAYA CONNELLY

Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters Story), 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 71 ¼ in. (153 x 183 cm).



HARRY TJUTJUNA

Wati Nyiru Munu Wati Wanka, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in. (183 x 183 cm).



positive representations of sacred ceremonies, ensuring that they will remain relevant. The union of contemporary themes of gender, politics and identity guarantees that the transformative nature of tradition transcends both generation and geography. Like an unspoken promise, these respected artists are committed to sharing a part of their identity with the world.

¹ As Tim Acker and John Carty argue: "The NPYWC [Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council] evolved as a response to the land rights struggle of the 1970s when desert women were concerned that they had no voice no visibility." Tim Acker and John Carty, *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2012), 151.

² Anna Haebich and Julie Parsons, "Indigenous Women and the Arts," *The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2014, accessed July 5, 2017, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0383b.htm>.

³ See Katelyn Barney, "Gendering Aboriginalism: A Performative Gaze on Indigenous Australian Women," *Cultural Studies Review* 16, no. 1 (2010): 212-239.

THE ROAD TO PIPALYATJARA

Photograph by Sandra Meihubers.



MIYAPU MARY MERIBIDA

Ilyara, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 38 ½ x 37 ½ in. (98 x 95 cm).

HISTORIES OF DISPLACEMENT

BY ROSALBA PONCE

Invasion and colonialism had a devastating impact on Aboriginal Australian peoples' ways of life and identities, disrupting their connections to land and sacred sites. In the eyes of the state, Aboriginal landscapes were seen not as reservoirs of sacred power but as commodities to gain economic profit. In addition to fatal confrontations, genocidal violence, mass disappearances and coerced assimilation, many Aboriginal peoples were displaced by natural and human-caused drought and ecological degradation. Colonialism limited movement across the land and, in desert contexts, access to places with water. People who had lived in the desert scattered westwards, where they established co-residency with other Aboriginal groups. In post-displacement contexts, environmental refugees gathered to uphold ancestral knowledge and oral history through new forms of desert painting. Painting became an Aboriginal *way of land*, something inclusive of all there is in life.

The story of the Canning Stock Route provides a potent illustration of the histories of colonial violence and Aboriginal peoples' responses.¹ The 1,150 mile route was intended to provide a beef market for non-Aboriginal farmers in the far north. Their cattle were infested with ticks, and so transporting them by sea was prohibited.² The Government of Western Australia proposed a overland route from Perth to the Kalgoorlie goldfields for the pastoralists.

In 1906, the Government of Western Australia appointed Alfred Canning to select a route. He was to survey the region, although an earlier 1896 expedition had concluded that a stock route through the desert was impossible. Canning held Aboriginal peoples captive, tying them up with ropes, neck chains and handcuffs. He forced the captives to guide the expedition to water sources that could supply the route by depriving them of water and feeding them salted beef. The chained and dehydrated prisoners could only survive by leading the expedition to water: springs that, for Indigenous Australians, were both sacred and secret, imperative for spiritual, social and biological survival.



WEAVER JACK

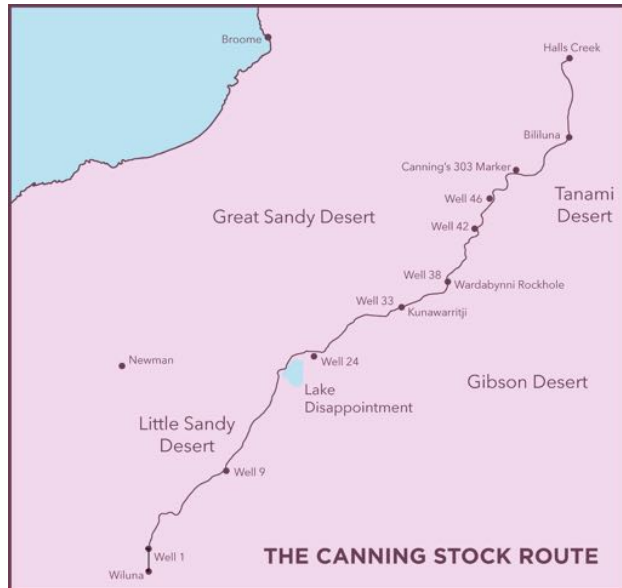
Lungarung, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 48 ¼ x 30 (122 x 76 cm).



LYDIA BALBAL

Winpa, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 47 ¼ x 47 ¼ in. (122 x 122 cm).

On their return route, an Aboriginal man attacked Canning's expedition. The military retaliated and killed many Aboriginal people. After the conflict, cattle ranchers were afraid to use the route, which remained unused for the next twenty years. The wells that Canning constructed disturbed the underground water system. In the ensuing drought, families were forced to move away or die, faced with a landscape unable to sustain life. According to Emily Rohr of Short Street Gallery, many Aboriginal peoples believed someone had breached the earth's laws and they never spoke about these laws or painted in traditional ways again.³



Artist Lydia Balbal was among those displaced by the Route. With layers of overlapping colors, Balbal focuses on personal experience and ancestral narratives connected to the land. She re-creates the landscape by depicting what is underneath the land, such as roots or watercourses. The vibrant reds and soft hues serve as a way of “digging” through the land and her memories, reaching towards the roots of the countryside. Balbal's paintings often depict hunting memories of underground snakes, creatures whose ancestral counterparts are associated with rock holes and sacred sites. *Wirnpa*, the title of Balbal's 2007 painting in this exhibition, refers to a rainmaker who lived and hunted throughout the country before turning into a snake himself and going underground.

Bugai Whyoulter displays a vast ecological knowledge on canvas but her painterly dynamic is rooted in ritual painting. Her loose, general brushstrokes evoke rhythm and dance, bringing ceremonial essences into presence. *Wantili* (2014) depicts Well 25 on the Canning Stock Route near her birthplace. Her painting incorporates memories of

locations where she drove cattle along the Route, proudly presenting creative practices while affirming memories of her youth.

Ilyara (2010) by Miyapu Mary Meribida is less concerned with the visible features of country than with its underlying spiritual dimensions. An overlay of white paint alludes to and protects deeper knowledge, making it difficult to define the landscape. She develops an abstract visual language, recognizable by the encrusted dots symbolizing waterholes. The area remains concealed to Western and uninitiated eyes. The rawness of her artwork pushes the boundaries of contemporary art.

In expressing connections through painting, Aboriginal identity is never lost regardless of distance from ancestral homelands. The pain and suffering brought by the Route had the unexpected consequence of also putting formerly distant Aboriginal peoples into contact, catalyzing the sharing of oral histories and emergence of new artistic styles. These paintings maintain connections with ancestors and absent homelands while gaining global attention in the art world.

¹ Big Black Dog Communications PTY Ltd. and Kathryn Wells, "The Canning Stock Route," Australian Government, May 2011, accessed July 06, 2017, <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/canning-stock-route>; John Carty, Carly Davenport, and Monique LaFontaine, *Yiwarra Kuju: the Canning Stock Route*. (Sydney: Read How You Want, 2010).

² Ticks on cattle can have serious health consequences and can lead to skin irritation, hair loss, disease, and bovine anemia. Cows infested with ticks may be in poor physical condition and are prone to develop other infections.

³ Emily Rohr, personal communication, June 21, 2017.



BUGAI WHYOUTLER WORKING AT MARTUMILI ARTISTS

Photograph by Bo Wang.



NAWURAPU WUNUNGURRA

Moky, 2009. Natural pigments on softwood, left: 93 x 6 x 5 ¼ in. (236 x 15 x 13.5 cm), center: 85 ¼ x 4 ½ x 4 ¼ in. (216.5 x 11.5 x 11 cm), right: 73 x 4 x 4 ¼ in. (185 x 10 x 11 cm).

FINDING THE FORM

BY JAKE MARTIN

Both Aboriginal sculptures and paintings invoke ancestral narratives, spirits and places. Despite this, developments within the contemporary art world have led to a perceived distinction between the mediums of painting and sculpture. Western Desert paintings—with their bright colors and abstract designs—were more easily assimilated into Eurocentric notions of art. In contrast, Aboriginal sculptures have often been pigeonholed as ethnographic objects representing cultural types rather than works of high art. As such, sculptural works have tended to exude an aura of tradition in exhibitions arranged through and for imperial eyes. However, this stark distinction between cultural conventions and innovative expressions is misleading, especially in the context of the sculptures in this exhibition.

The Tiwi people of Ratuati Irara (Bathurst and Melville Islands) and the Yolngu people of northeastern Arnhem Land have rich sculptural traditions. The three-dimensional works within this exhibition display different styles of woodwork and geometric designs representative of the artists' clans and ancestral connections with homelands. They also feature a robust range of materials reflecting diversity within Aboriginal sculptural practices, including a myriad of natural earth pigments, feathers and even human hair. While these sculptures elaborate on ancestral forms, they were also created with the intention of selling them to outsiders within the context of an Aboriginal art market.

Sculptural forms are often used in ceremonies that mark the rites of passage, from childhood initiation through to final mortuary proceedings. They can be physical vessels or channels to the spiritual realm and ancestral beings. Tangible extensions of the peoples and geographies from which they come, these sculptures represent different identities while also ensuring that forthcoming generations continue to intertwine ancestral pasts with current and future realities.

The flexibility within Aboriginal cosmologies allows artists to express common narratives while evoking ancestral spirits in individualized, interpretive ways. Ancestral spirits

created the features of the landscape and the different clans. Simultaneously they established laws for living together and set the terms for ongoing creative expressions by their descendants. Tradition and innovation do not exist as an oppositional binary in Tiwi and Yolngu art, but rather as mutually constitutive aspects of creation.

Differences in geography, gender, political situations and clan-specific customs create a vast universe in which Aboriginal peoples construct different identities while remaining true to shared cultural roots. Nawurapa Wunungmurra's striking group of *Mokuy* sculptures (2009) represent spirits in transition between the physical world and the afterlife. In addition to their cultural underpinnings, they display imaginative, expressive designs created for the art market.

Tony Bindin Yuwati's *Mokuy Figure* (c. 1960) and Luluna's *Ceremonial Figure (Mokuy)* (c. 1963) bear clan designs that mark their sculpted bodies with specific personal, familial and ancestral meanings. These designs are associated with the activities of ancestral beings during the *Wangarr* (Dreaming) and are still present in country today. Painting these patterns manifests ancestral power, uniting the identities of a person, their clan, ancestral beings and country. It is difficult to overstate the importance of these markings in Aboriginal cultures. In funeral ceremonies, the deceased person's body and coffin are adorned with clan designs. By painting sculptural figures with them, Yolngu people commemorate the deceased. Clan designs are so integral to a Yolngu person's identity that figures such as these can even act as decoys for malicious wandering spirits.

Death and creation are closely linked in Tiwi narratives. Purukapali, the first man, was responsible for creating many living things, as well as performing the first funeral following the death of his infant son, Jinani. This ceremony marked the end of the creation period and the dawn of mortality. Known as the Pukumani ceremony, it is as much about regeneration and renewal as it is about death. Purukapali instructed Tiwi people to celebrate their creative power when making art objects and body paint designs for the funeral. These sculptures show how artists adhere to ceremonial patterns while finding space for individual expression.

Contemporary Aboriginal sculpture is part of the ongoing artistic creativity within the artists' communities. These artists have found a way to revere ancestral forms and



TONY BINDIN YUWATI

Mokuy Figure, c. 1960. Natural pigments, feathers, and human hair on softwood, 13 x 2 x 2 in. (33 x 5 x 5 cm).



LULUNA

Ceremonial Figure (Mokuy), c. 1963. Natural pigments, string, and feathers on softwood, 30 x 6 ¼ x 3 ¼ in. (76 x 16 x 8.25 cm).



modes of creativity while sharing them with the world and strategically creating access to economic benefits. Sculpture continues to be important in the daily lives of Aboriginal peoples. It preserves and transmits Aboriginal ways of life and death, interweaving descendants' bodies with the ancestral pasts. At the same time, contemporary Aboriginal sculptors have managed to embrace the tangible social and economic benefits associated with the growth of the Aboriginal art market.

YIRRKALA, ARNHEM LAND, NORTHERN TERRITORY

Photograph by Henry Skerritt.



UNIDENTIFIED ARTISTS

Tiwi Figures, c. 1970. Natural pigments, resin, and feathers on ironwood, left: 20 ¼ x 9 5/8 x 5 ½ in. (51.5 x 24.5 x 14 cm), right: 20 3/8 x 6 ½ x 5 ½ in. (52 x 17.5 x 13.5 cm).

THE ART OF PRESENCE

by IMANI WILLIFORD

Through painting, Aboriginal artists grapple with displacement from homelands by remembering and asserting the ongoing presence of places left behind. This art is not a record of times gone by, but a living expression that allows Aboriginal peoples to participate in the past, present and future. Exemplifying this, Aboriginal art expresses continuity through intricate and lively affirmations of homeland, ceremony and memories. If displacement was meant to terminate Indigenous peoples and their ways of life, painting cements and extends the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and their homelands.

In the 1950s, many different nomadic peoples in Australia were forced to relocate to overcrowded and undesirable tracts of land. One such settlement was Papunya, located in the Western Desert. In 1971, in response to oppressive conditions, schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon encouraged Aboriginal men to paint a mural on a blank school wall.¹ The mural catalyzed community interest around an already emerging painting movement, leading to the formation of the Papunya Tula Artists cooperative. The success of Papunya Tula invigorated the unbreakable connection between male painters and their homelands.

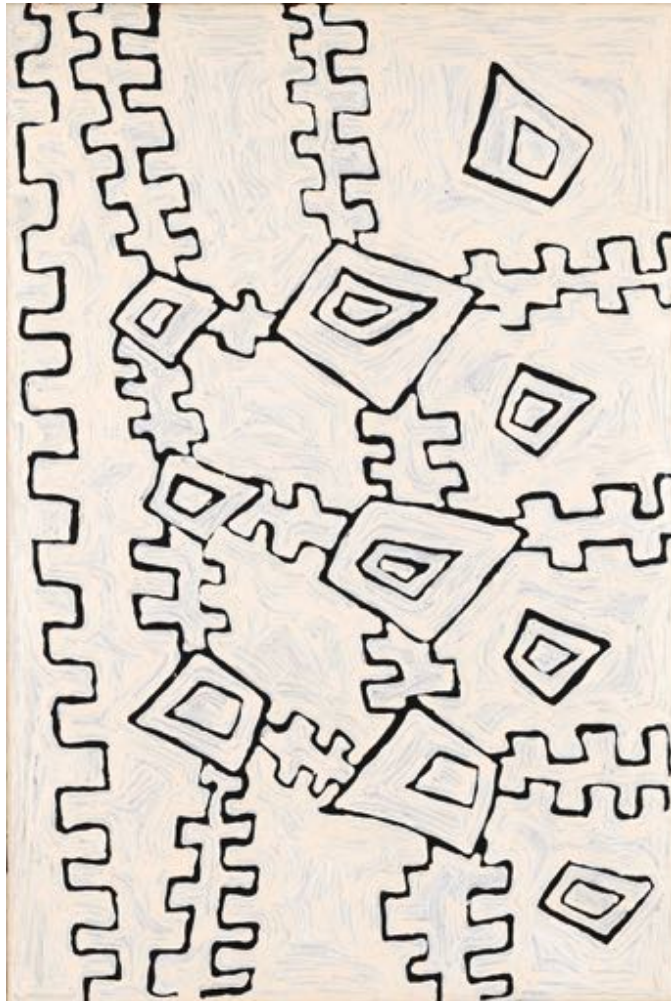
A signature expression of this connection is the Tingari Cycle, an important ceremony based on a collection of secret and sacred traditions. Tingari are a group of ancestral men who traveled across the country from waterhole to waterhole accompanied by women and children. Today, men continue these ancestors' movements, returning to these places and performing ceremonies at specific sites.²

Nyilyari Tjapangati and John John Bennett Tjapangati, both Papunya Tula artists, use the Tingari Cycle to demonstrate ancestral presence as a moving and continuous force within the landscape. Bennett joined the painting movement in the 1980s, employing a traditional style of intricate dotting. This style creates a shimmering effect, evoking the presence of ancestors within the land, while distributions of shapes across the



JOHN JOHN BENNETT TJAPANGATI

Travels of the Tingari Men from Tjukurla to Mitukatjirri, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 53 ½ in. (122 x 136 cm).



NYILYARI TJAPANGATI

Wilkinkarra, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 35 ½ x 23 ½ in. (91 x 61 cm).



canvas depict the motion of the ancestors traveling across the desert. Bennett painted the Tingari Cycle in a strenuous and contemplative manner, extending the arduous experience of the journey into his workspace to absorb the movements of his ancestors.³ Nyilyari Tjapangati joined the Papunya Tula movement in the 1990s. His innovative expression of the Tingari Cycle employs concentric squares and jagged lines. Defined brush strokes and repetitions of geometric forms radiate like tall grass or sand blown by the wind.⁴ At times, Tjapangati carves into layers of paint, highlighting the concealed but moving presence of ancestors.⁵

Makinti Napanangka started painting in 1994 as part of the Kintore-Haasts Bluff women's painting project organized by Marina Strocchi. This experience ultimately led her to join the male-dominated Papunya Tula art movement in 1996, when field officer Wayne Eager started giving out canvases to Pintupi women.⁶ As an early woman member of Papunya Tula Artists, Napanangka departed from dots and geometric forms and embraced animated lines that directly reference Pintupi ceremonial life. Her art evokes

WILKINKARRA (LAKE MACKAY), WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Photo by Paul Exline.



MAKINTI NAPANANGKA

left: *Lupulnga*, 2006, center: *Lupulnga*, 2005, right: *Lupulnga*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 24 in. (122 x 61 cm).

the pervasive experience of ceremony by illustrating its connection with land and ancestors. In her series of works titled *Lupulnga* (2005-6), Napanangka depicts the movements of ceremonial skirts made from human hair worn by women. During the *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming), two ancestral women stopped at a water source called Lupulnga and made hair-string skirts. Women continue this tradition today to commemorate these ancestors. Using wavy lines in an energizing palette of yellow, oranges and pinks, Napanangka creates a tactile encounter with the twisting movement of the skirts and the rolling desert terrain.

While not part of the Papunya Tula art movement, Billy Benn Perrurle channels his memories, dreams and yearnings for homeland through his paintings despite being far from home. Born in a remote eastern part of the desert, Benn lived in exile in the town of Alice Springs after he was arrested for murder in 1967 and released on a mental insanity acquittal. Painting provided Billy Benn with the means to connect with and return to his homeland after exile. After visiting his birthplace forty years later in 2007, Benn's painting became less realist and more focused on capturing the intense, embodied experience of being in his homeland.⁸ In *Arteyerre* (2007), Benn paints with flamboyant flowing brushstrokes and rich colors that successfully capture the discrete topography and natural light of his country, radiating its essence into the gallery. This painting evokes the sensations of memories that move through bodies and time.

Displaced artists continue to re-create their country with every brushstroke. They anchor their memories and relationships in the land as they actively declare that they never left their homelands in their hearts and minds.

¹ "HISTORY | Papunya Tula Artists PTY. LTD.," Papunya Tula Artists PTY. LTD., 2014, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://papunyatula.com.au/history/>.

² Vivien Johnson, *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2008), 9.

³ Johnson, *The Lives of Papunya Artists*, 245.

⁴ Tina Baum, "Nyilyari Tjapangati," in *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011*, ed. Glenn Iseger-Pilkington (Perth: Art Gallery of WA, 2011), 42.

⁵ Henry F. Skerritt, *Nyilyari Tjapangati: Living the Dream/Vivre le Rêve* (Paris: Arts d'Australie, 2015)

⁶ "Makinti Napanangka," National Gallery of Victoria, accessed July 6, 2017, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngvschools/TraditionAndTransformation/artists/Makinti-Napanangka/>.

⁷ "Makinti Napanangka," Art Gallery of New South Wales, accessed July 6, 2017, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/napanangka-makinti/>.

⁸ Billy Benn Perrurle and Catherine Peattie, eds. *Billy Benn* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2011).



BILLY BENN PERRURLE

Artetyerre, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in. (91 x 91 cm).

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