

STRONG WOMEN STRONG PAINTING STRONG CULTURE

Indigenous women's art of the Central and Western Deserts
from the Sims Dickson Collection



The University Gallery 17 April - 4 May 2013



Ruby Tjangawa Williamson *Puli Murpu* 2006, acrylic on linen, 120 x 101.5 cm

STRONG WOMEN, STRONG PAINTING, STRONG CULTURE

This Exhibition was developed to celebrate the Centenary of International Women's Day in 2011 and has since grown to have a life and energy of its own. While acknowledging the work, the passion and the belief of earlier generations of women, and marking the talent and achievements of some of the most marginalized women in the world today, the energy and passion evident in this collection of artworks by women from the Central and Western deserts of Australia celebrates the future as much as the past.

Women's roles as custodians of family life and values, of cultural traditions and practices, and frequently as the anchors of society across time and across the globe, inform the work of traditional craftswomen and contemporary artists alike. Sometimes these values are clearly articulated, sometimes barely mentioned; sometimes unconsciously embedded and at other times consciously excised.

The British artist Tracy Emin for example uses needlework as an integral element in her work which explores the links between creativity and autobiography, and the role of subjectivity and of personal histories in constructing art. While Emin's work seeks to examine the pain and dysfunction of one woman's life in the late 20th century, the women of the remote desert communities, whose work is gathered here, seek to reveal what unifies rather than what divides—hope rather than despair. And yet many know despair, family break-down, the disastrous consequences of substance abuse, violence and crime. Their art is a bold statement, a conscious effort to communicate with their community and with generations to come, to rekindle belief in today and hope for the future, based on knowledge and a valuing of the past - stories that reveal connections to Country, to the Dreaming and that teach about the practicalities of bush-tucker and strengthen ties with family.

Many of these women believe that this is an urgent and critical moment in the history of their people and their country, and that the knowledge they still hold is imperative for the survival of their people. That passion is what drives this art, as much as deeply held spiritual beliefs and deep love of Country. It is a passion easily apprehended by all women and men alike, and is a fitting tribute to the values and goals of International Women's Day.

This exhibition is one of the first that brings together such a collection of works by women artists from this region. It is also unique in being drawn from a single collection, with the exception of the work *Intervention, Ayeye Akerte* 2008 by Margaret Kemarre Turner (from the collection of Dr Denis Saunders). Deborah Sims and Matt Dickson have pursued their love of Australian Aboriginal art with zeal and sensitivity to the narrative—responding to the colour, the energy, the sadness, the truth and the beauty that are inherent in these works.

As a collection they document the development of women's art produced in the Art Centres of the Central and Western deserts over the past twenty years; they also record the journey from epiphany to knowledge on the part of the collectors. With knowledge comes responsibility. This exhibition represents a commitment on the part of these collectors to share their knowledge and the stories of these women with a wider audience. Cessnock Regional Art Gallery is delighted to have had the opportunity to facilitate this exhibition and its tour to other centres.

VIRGINIA MITCHELL,
CESSNOCK REGIONAL ART GALLERY, JANUARY 2011

Virginia Mitchell is currently Head of Public Programs and Education at the Biennale of Sydney. From 2009 to 2011 she was Director of the Cessnock Regional Art Gallery.



Anmanari Brown *The Seven Sisters* 2009, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 101.5 cm

STRONG WOMEN, STRONG PAINTING, STRONG CULTURE

This art has travelled from some of the most remote settlements on earth. The power and strength of the women who created it is undimmed by distance; indeed, it is amplified in being offered so generously to such faraway audiences.

Much of the context within which this contemporary art has been created is completely outside the experience of most Australians. On the one hand, there's the breathtaking natural beauty of the artists' Country, their profound affinity with that Country, and the energising political and cultural struggle to return there. On the other, at the risk of understatement, is the heavy burden of pandemic health problems, lack of jobs, few training and educational opportunities, overrepresentation in the justice system and under-representation in art galleries.

From this world of contradictions, hundreds of desert women have emerged as community leaders, artists and innovators. Forty eight of them are being shown here.

How appropriate then that this exhibition celebrates the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. Perhaps nowhere else on the planet are so many women so active, so resourceful, so connected and so engaged in stating their claim to their past, present and future.

This point is wonderfully illuminated by the success of the Tjanpi Desert Weavers enterprise. It was established in 1995 by the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council in the remotest part of Western Australia, near the borders of South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Basket weaving workshops using tjanpi (grasses) quickly sparked spectacular creativity and momentum. Today the women's tjanpi creations are sold nationwide, and are held in national and international collections.

In the process of making their baskets, sculptures, even a life size Toyota (which won the 2005 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award), women have travelled back out to their Country to work in groups, hunting for bush tucker, gathering the grasses and weaving, telling stories and teaching younger generations. More than 400 women are now linked as participants across the APY and NPY lands of the Great Victoria, Gibson and Great Sandy deserts.

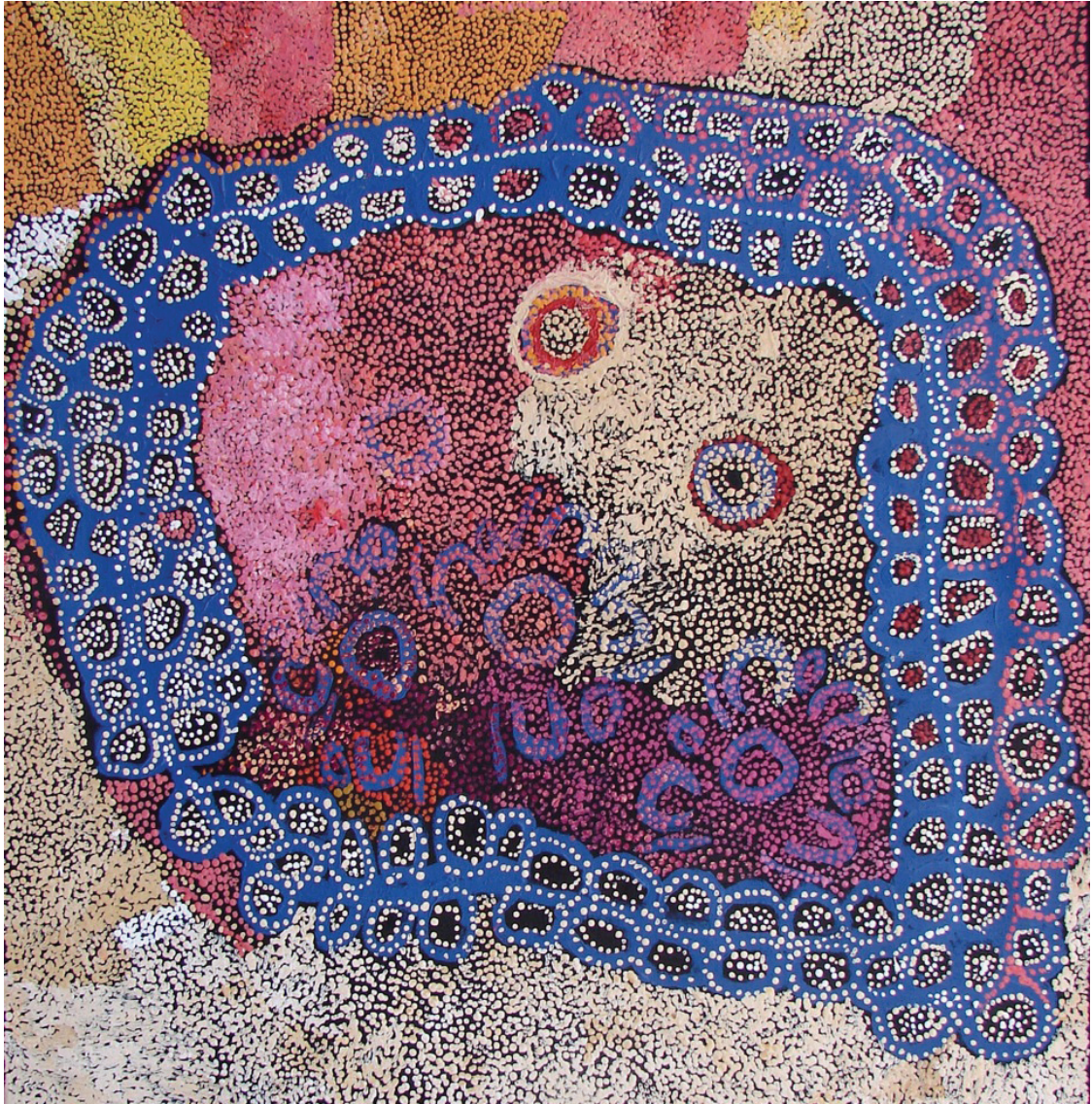
That the Tjanpi women have also created a new inma, a dance and song ceremony, shows that the dynamic of desert culture is as open to change and innovation as any. A glance around the gallery walls will confirm it, the evidence being what Judith Ryan has called "a spiritual and conceptual form of landscape painting", that has changed the way we perceive the continent and its history.¹

The Tjanpi story is mirrored in the recent establishment of new Aboriginal owned and managed art centres, especially in the small, remote communities of South Australia and Western Australia near the tri-state border with the Northern Territory.

In just the past decade dozens of outstanding new artists have emerged here, some in their 80s and 90s, using palettes of saturated colour with shimmering confidence and effect. The explosion has been likened in significance to the original Papunya movement of the 1970s.

So, in looking at the works here you'll see the evidence of a living, breathing art movement of great inherent strength and integrity. Not a fragile hot house flower bred only for the air-conditioned unreality of a white cube. A contemporary art movement that, perhaps uniquely, draws its strength from within its own body, not in ironic relationship to the viewer.

All these works have a palpable immediacy, as everywhere the women work without preliminary sketches or studies. The artists share a common belief in the power of the Tjukurpa



Tjampawa Kawiny *Kapi Tjukula* 2010, acrylic on linen, 101.5 x 101.5 cm

(the Dreaming) in their lives. It is an inexhaustible source of creative inspiration that, in turn, is reinforced and revitalised by the women's artistic practice. These are stories they paint.

In Eileen Stevens' intense depiction of her birthplace, *Makiri* 2007, for example, the canvas can barely contain the energy she derived from her connection to this women's sacred site. In Ruby Williamson's *Puli Murpu* 2006, there is electricity and an almost magnetic attraction to its at-first-glance curious perspective. But like Stevens and many of the desert's senior cultural Law women, Williamson is depicting events and places in multiple dimensions, both the seen and the unseen.

The directness of Alkawari Dawson's mark-making creates a music-like language all of its own. In fact dance and song is everywhere in these works.² Sometimes a rhythmic sway as painted by Tjampawa Kawiny, at other times a many-versed song by Anmanari Brown, or a chorus of vibrating memory by Joyce McLean. Elsewhere, a stately formality underpins a variation on a theme, as in Myra Cook's works that become increasingly loose and more refined as even into old age she relentlessly explores better ways to tell her story. It's a hallmark she shares with many other senior desert women artists.

The impressive scale of Tali Tali Pompey's *Para - Desert Gum Trees* 2010 immerses the viewer in an ethereal vision of the defining flora of her Country. In the sculptures of Jean Burke so much power resides as to bring the animals' spirits alive. In their soft sculpture of animals, Mrs [Constance] Robinja and Dulcie Sharpe have transformed woollen blankets, with all their connotations of colonialism. The etchings of Blanche Ebatarinja, Shirley Namatjira and Telissa Splinter seem to be free of conventional Western society's sense of the present - a step on the ever-forward moving path. Instead they float free in a circle of unbroken and unbreakable time.

The politics of self-determination are never far from the surface. How could they not be when Country is such a central theme? It's powerfully present in *Intervention Ayeye Akerte* 2008 by Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM; its Arrernte text translates as, "Intervention story for us. Government making us go all one way, not listening to us".

Similarly self-determination is at the heart of *Homelands Country* 2000 by Nulbingka Simms and Kathleen Donegan, from the Spinifex people's first commercial exhibition after their successful Native Title claim.

Their claim incorporated paintings that, like this one, mapped their deep and abiding connection to Country, separated from them in the 1950s by atomic bomb tests.

It's a great privilege to be able to present all these works for public exhibition. In truth they can only scratch the surface of an art movement of phenomenal energy, diversity and output, a movement that includes women past and present who can rightly claim a place among the world's most important contemporary artists.

This is art that can enrich intellectually, emotionally and spiritually all who acknowledge it. It is truly celebratory, a direct expression of the strength these women take from their culture.

DEBORAH SIMS AND MATT DICKSON
HUNTER VALLEY NSW
JANUARY 2011

¹ Judith Ryan, Senior Curator of Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Victoria, catalogue essay, *Desert Mob* exhibition, 2010, p.36.

² Painting is a form of ceremonial ritual, to which protocols apply. Artists often sing the song of the Tjukurpa story they are painting. As artist Inawinytji Williamson says, "Our culture and art is not separate, it is all one. We are artists, dancers and singers of the Tjukurpa..." *Painting the Song*, Diana James, McCulloch & McCulloch, 2009, p.160.



Milatjari Pumani *Ngura Walytja*, *Antara* 2010, acrylic on linen, 182 x 182 cm

NGURA - COUNTRY

Many artists in this exhibition have painted their ngura or Country, meaning both land and home.

Walytja means family. It also includes broader ideas of kinship and relatedness, and of self and shared identity. Ngura walytja is therefore Country to which one is related. It is the Country of one's spirit.

A painting of Country is a painting of the power of the Country. It encompasses landscape and Tjukurpa, as well as events that have happened there; so family history and mythic history both inhabit these works.

Artists often sing the song of their Country while they are painting it. Their art making is a form of ceremony. It is both an act of cultural reiteration and a spiritual meditation.

Artists paint the stories to which they have rights and responsibility, and Country that belongs to them and to which they belong. With permission, they also paint ngura of close family members.

These paintings are not a mere representation of Country but rather a manifestation of it in the form of acrylic on canvas.

A painting of ngura might also be considered a 'self-portrait' of the artist, so closely do these women identify with their Country. It is where they come from and where they return after death. Their Country is sentient, alive with both ancestors and ancestral creator beings.

“Anangu culture is family culture and it is circular, there is no beginning or end.”

(TJAMPAWA KAWINY, SENIOR ARTIST, TJALA ARTS)



TJUKURPA - THE DREAMING

Tjukurpa are creation stories that tell of the connections within the cosmos, between the ancestor creator beings, the land and the people, animals and plants that inhabit it.

Ancestor beings, both human and animal, moved through the world and by their actions created the landscape. These beings then became physical features of the land and stars in the sky. They remain visible today and their everlasting presence makes the land sacred.

Tjukurpa also detail the Law for human behaviour, how society is structured and how to care for the land. For these artists, the Tjukurpa are true stories that exist simultaneously in the past, present and future.

These artists share a common belief in the power of the Tjukurpa in their lives. It is an inexhaustible source of creative inspiration that, in turn, is reinforced and revitalised by the artistic practice of these women.

Many Tjukurpa traverse vast distances of inland Australia – along what we call songlines - and go back thousands of generations. As the living embodiment of ancient knowledge and timeless stories, they are important to us all.

Jean Burke *Kamela Pikati* 2010, raffia, minarri grass and camel hair

Kay BAKER (1955)
Pitjantjatjara people

Fluted Vessel 2011

Highly crafted and vibrant, Fluted Vessel is shapely, quirky and beautiful all at once. It's a wonderful example of the way Tjanpi artists are taking weaving into new areas of expression.

Kay spent her early years at the Ernabella Mission before moving first to Fregon, where she learnt skills in the craft room, and later to Kanpi, on the traditional Country of her late father, renowned senior artist and ngangkari Jimmy Baker. Kay too is a highly skilled painter.

At Kanpi she helped set up the art and craft room, today acknowledged as one of the most important Aboriginal-owned art centres.

Tjapartji BATES (c1933)
Ngaanyatjarra people

Warlawurra 2009

Tjapartji Bates was one of the first women painters of the Ngaanyatjarra lands, painting in the early 1990s with the Warburton Art Project. She was a founding painter at Warakurna Artists in 2005.

Now one of the leading lights of the 'Wanarn School' based at the Wanarn aged-care home, in recent years her work has become more and more free and expressive while remaining as vigorous as ever.

Anmanari BROWN (1930s)
Ngaanyatjarra people

The Seven Sisters 2009

The Seven Sisters is one of the major Tjurkurpa right across the desert country. It tells of the epic journey of the sisters, visible in the night sky as The Pleiades, and their pursuer the man Nyiru, visible as the star Orion. Many women paint episodes of this story as it crosses their Country. Some men also paint the story from a male perspective.

Anmanari is a senior artist of the first wave of senior women and men painters at Irrunytju who emerged in 2001. Their bold use of colour was an instant critical and commercial

success, sparking the establishment of Aboriginal-owned art centres across the APY and NPY Lands.

Jean Inyalangka BURKE (1945 - 2012)
Pitjantjatjara people

Kamela Pikati (Charging Camel) 2010

Kunmanara Burke was a skillful weaver and a brilliant sculptor, as her four animals here clearly show. All are alive with character and movement and attention to detail.

Tjanpi sculptures were first produced in 1998, quirky, animated figures, animals and objects with great presence inspired by everyday community life as well as Tjukurpa stories.

The Tjanpi Desert Weavers enterprise was established in 1995 with a series of traditional basket weaving workshops, inspiring creativity and momentum that now links over 400 women across the NPY and APY Lands. Grasses are gathered on bush trips, where hunting for bush tucker, story telling and teaching occur, underlining the cultural as well as the economic value of the Tjanpi project.

Ngintaka 2008

A family of father, mother and baby ngintaka (goannas) by Jean Burke was included in the landmark Menagerie exhibition of contemporary Indigenous sculpture, curated by Object Gallery and the Australian Museum.

Ngintaka 2008

Emu 2010

Myra Yurtiwa COOK (c1932)
Ngaanyatjarra people

Kartjinguku Creek 2005

Myra Cook was born in the Ngaanyatjarra lands at Kartjinguku Creek, the subject of this, one of her earliest paintings. She started painting in mid 2005, which was the first year of Warakurna Artists art centre, and rapidly became one of its leading painters.

Lirrun 2010

With seemingly endless invention and nuance, authority and beauty, Mrs Cook retells a story from her mother's Country, Lirrun.

'A serpent snake man came from the south of Pukarra. The snake had been trying to steal a girl to become his wife. She called all the feather-foot men and they chased him away to Pukarra. The blue marks in this painting show the feather-foot men chasing the serpent man through Country.'

Lirrun 2009

Painted in succeeding years, Myra Cook's two paintings of Lirrun here show a continuing determination to explore better ways to tell her story even as she approached her 80s. Like Tjapartji Bates who is also in this exhibition, she paints as one of a group of remarkable senior artists at the Wanarn aged-care home 60 km from Warakurna.

Margaret Yurpiya DAGG (1949) Pitjantjatjara people

Ernabella Walka c.1970s

The school room and the craft room at Ernabella Mission might be said to be the places where contemporary desert arts and craft began. School children were given materials to draw and paint their own designs, inspired by traditional women and children's sand drawing, which developed quickly into the distinctive Ernabella walka design seen here. As the school girls grew up and started work in the craft room, established in 1948, and incorporated as an Aboriginal-owned art centre in 1974, they took their walka designs with them. Walka became incorporated in the rugs and weavings, drawings and paintings they made for sale.

This rare example, from the 1970s, is a classic walka, echoes of which can be seen in contemporary Ernabella works in this exhibition; Niningka Lewis's carved bowl and Renita Stanley's batik.

Alkawari DAWSON (c1930 – 2010) Ngaanyatjarra people

Tjawl Tjawl 2002

'This rockhole's called Tjawl Tjawl. Sandhill right around. Really good water here. This place snake country.'

The senior women of Irrunytju (Wingellina) initiated the extraordinary painting revolution that has spread throughout the NPY and APY Lands during the last decade, powerful, vibrant results of which you see around you.

Determined to establish their own painting centre, after unsuccessfully seeking government assistance the women started a second-hand shop that raised enough money to open an art centre in 2001.

Anne DIXON (1965) Pitjantjatjara people

Basketpa 2008

Anne was inspired to learn the Tjanpi coiled basketry technique after watching her mother and auntie work. She has a strong sculptural sense and is known for her large baskets and experiments with form.

Her work was included in the landmark ReCoil exhibition that toured widely throughout Australia. She is represented in the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and in the British Museum, where her work featured in the major exhibition Baskets and Belonging, in its Australian Season in 2011.

Blanche EBATARINJA (1965) Western Arrernte people

This Country is Me 2009

Little Ghost 2009

Blanche makes prints and soft sculpture. Her two multi-plate etchings in this exhibition are poetic statements of claim on Country, identity and birthright.

She has been working at Yarrenyty Arltere, the Larapinta Valley Town Camp art centre in Alice Springs, since 2004, when she took a Certificate II in Art and Craft, run through Batchelor College.

Yangi Yangi FOX (c1956) Pitjantjatjara people

Tjukula (Waterhole) Basket 2011

This highly original basket is typical of Yangi Yangi Fox's formidable skill and innovative style.

Her career goes back to the late 1970s when she first worked in batik. She became active both in the Land Rights movement and in teaching weaving and carving. She

continues to produce outstanding weaving like this basket, which reminds us of the crucial importance of water to desert communities. As well as an artist Yangi Yangi is a celebrated dancer, a health worker and former teacher.

In 2002 she and Ivy Hopkins went to Manchester during the Commonwealth Games where their major commission was a three metre long goanna, made and installed at the airport.

Like many other desert women artists Yangi Yangi moves easily across mediums. She undertook a workshop at Urban Arts Foundry in Brisbane to make work ready to be cast in bronze or aluminium. She is also a painter and wood carver.

Basketpa 2007

Naomi KANTJURINI (1944) Pitjantjatjara people

Kapi Tjukula 2005

Naomi Kantjurini is a ngangkari, a traditional healer, who commenced her ngangkari training as a child. Ngangkari are highly honoured and respected in the community. There is no condition – physical, mental, emotional or spiritual – that cannot be referred to them. Today their contribution to health and wellbeing is acknowledged in their working closely with medical and other social services throughout the homeland and town communities.

Naomi started painting in 2001 and is also an excellent wood carver and Tjanpi weaver.

Tjampawa Katie KAWINY (c1921) Pitjantjatjara people

Kapi Tjukula 2010

'Anangu culture is family culture and it is circular, there is no beginning or end.'

Tjampawa's painting seems to sing of the artist's deep connection to her Country, an echo of the ceremonial song she sang while she painted it. It depicts the life-giving rockholes but its subtle, shimmering surface implies and carries so much more information, fully understood only by senior initiated women.

Painting at the peak of her powers and in her 90s, Tjampawa is a remarkable example of the strength,

innovation and trajectory of the women's painting movement in the APY Lands.

Colleen Morton KINGWARREY (c1948) Alywarr people

Bush Medicine Country 2009

Colleen started her career as a batik artist at the remote community of Utopia during the 1980s. She has painted at the community art centre at Ampilatwatja since it began in 1999.

The women of Ampilatwatja have a unique style of landscape painting that is richly detailed and full of knowledge. Their work often reflects the changing seasons, and colours at different times of day. Here Colleen paints bush medicine plants, as finely as in a miniature.

Iwana KEN (1937) Pitjantjatjara people

Walytjitjara 2008

'A lot of what you paint is in your heart and mind rather than what you see.'

Iwana is one of the most senior cultural women in the APY lands, renowned for many years as a teacher of Law, and a ngangkari, a traditional healer. Her high standing is indicated by her creation of new inma, song and dance ceremonies that come to her in dreams.

She was born at Walytjitjara rockhole, shown here along with surrounding country, creeks and campsites. Her dreaming is the Minyma Kututja Tjukurpa, which begins at Walytjitjara and is intimately connected to the healing spirit held in the rocks at nearby Ukata.

Iwana has been a mainstay of Kaltjiti Arts at Fregon for many decades but painted this magisterial work while living with her daughter at Kanpi.

Dora Wanatjura LANE (1933 - 2011) Ngaanyatjarra people

Kungarrangkalpa (The Seven Sisters) 2009

The artist and her husband lived at Warburton, but spent much of the year visiting family at Jameson and at tiny

Patjarr, the desert's most remote community, home to just 60 people. It was here that the couple would paint.

Although her last years were spent in the aged care home at Wanarn, she continued to paint, with great care and determination, producing a handful of works rich with her experiences as a traditional desert woman.

The Seven Sisters is one of great Dreaming narratives.

Elaine Wanatjura LANE (c1941) **Ngaanyatjarra people**

Wirtipwarra 2008

It was the women of Blackstone who instigated the establishment of the art centre in their community in 2004. Elaine featured in their first commercial exhibition in 2005. Her paintings reflect the seasons, her palette changing with the different colours of the flora.

Like so many other painters here Elaine is also a leading fibre artist. She was one of the team of women from Blackstone who made the full-size woven Toyota that won the NATSIAA prize in 2005. She has worked with Tjanpi Desert Weavers since its inception in 1995.

Niningka LEWIS (1945) **Pitjantjatjara people**

Ara Irititja Ernabella-la—Old Days in Ernabella 2010

Niningka is one of the most accomplished artists of the desert regions - a painter, weaver, ceramicist, printmaker, carver, batik maker, singer and dancer.

In this painting, which was Highly Commended at the NATSIAA 2010 awards, Niningka links the past and present, showing when anangu (people) lived in a wiltja (shelter) in family groups on the Mission, and senior Pitjantjatjara Law man (and now also leading artist) Dickie Minyintiri tended the Mission's flock of sheep. In Niningka's own words:

'Before, we were always nikidi (naked) and when the whitefella came we started to wear clothes and the community shared a truck we all went bush in... we started going to church and singing gospel songs. Later more people got Toyotas and we could go hunting and travel to other places to visit family. It was a good time.'

Punu bowl 2011

As with Thelma McLean's piti nearby, Niningka Lewis created this punu entirely from scratch. She dug the river red gum root out of the ground, hollowed it out, carved it and decorated it with burnt and painted designs.

The design echoes the typical Ernabella walka, abstract designs derived from sand drawings.

Pantjiti Ungkari McKENZIE (1942) **Pitjanjatjara people**

Basketpa Tjukulangati (Deep Rockhole Basket) 2010

Deep Rockhole Basket links contemporary artistic expression to ages-old knowledge of the source of 'living water' in the desert, the rockholes and soaks essential for survival. This basket echoes the rockholes depicted in many of the paintings elsewhere in the exhibition.

Born in the bush and one of the strongest cultural women in her home community of Ernabella, Pantjiti McKenzie is a ngangkari (traditional healer) specialising in women's health, and a teacher of traditional song and dance and the Pitjantjatjara language, for both Anangu and piranpa (white) people. She danced at the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony, and is a filmmaker and an actor in films and the stage play Ngapartji Ngapartji. She is a Director of the NPY Women's Council.

'My particular areas of interest are in prevention of domestic violence on young girls... I am also passionate about our culture, about keeping our law and culture strong, and passing on strong law and culture to women of all ages, and children.'

Joyce McLEAN (c1936) **Ngaanyatjarra people**

Parrtjartanya 2008

Until her recent move to Warnarn, Joyce was a real 'bush painter,' painting works such as this one alone on her Country through an outreach program run by Papulankutja Artists from Blackstone. The freedom of her work reflects this independence of spirit.

Since 2012 Joyce has painted at the Warnarn aged care facility.

This is a painting of the Western Quoll or Native Cat Tjukurpa of her late husband Reggie Jackson, one of the most senior Ngaanyatjarra painters. Joyce was his second wife. When he and his first wife, artist Panjiti Mary McLean, were alive, the three would paint together in the bush.

Thelma McLEAN (c1945)
Ngaanyatjarra people

Piti 2008

Thelma made this piti - a women's traditional carrying vessel - from river red gum, decorated with both carved and painted designs.

A renowned wood carver, she spent many years on the board of Maruku Arts, the Uluru-based art centre specialising in punu, carving.

Thelma is a respected community leader at Jameson, moving there before it was built and living a largely traditional life. In 2008 she was one of the instigators of the Papulankutja Artists outreach program to help develop and market the work of Jameson artists. She has also been a Tjanpi weaver since 1995.

Paniny MICK (c1939)
Pitjantjatjara people

Kapi Tjukula 2009

The women of Amata started the Tjala Arts art centre in 1997. It was originally called Minymaku, 'belonging to the women', but was renamed in 2006 after men started painting there as well.

Paniny Mick is a senior cultural woman of Amata. She has painted one of the most important features of desert life - the rockholes where water collects after rain. Revered knowledge of rockholes is passed from generation to generation.

Betty Kutungu MUNTI (1942 - 2011)
Pitjantjatjara people

Basketpa 2008

Betty Munti created strong and idiosyncratic baskets that are highly sculptural in form. Some of her more finely woven and elegant work evokes the metaphysical realm, with titles

such as *Tree full of stories* and *Tree from a long time ago* (her two works in GOMA in Brisbane).

She was originally a batik artist, starting in the 1970s at Ernabella. Her batik work is in the National Museum of Australia's Hilliard Collection, and PowerHouse Museum Sydney.

Doreen Reid NAKAMARRA (c1955 - 2009)
Pintupi people

Tjukula 2003

This is an early painting by Mrs Reid of sandhills surrounding a rockhole where many ancestral women camped before travelling north to Kintore.

Mrs Reid was one of the greatest of the younger generation of women artists. She produced a series of dazzling canvases that are often displayed on the floor to accentuate their almost 3D depiction of sandhill country.

At her untimely death, she had just returned from exhibiting in New York. In 2012 her work was included in DOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel, Germany, and previously was in the Sydney, Moscow and Adelaide Biennials and in *Culture Warriors*, the first Indigenous Triennial which toured Australia and Washington DC.

Shirley NAMATJIRA (1969)
Western Arrernte people

Kadaitcha Man Walking Through Country 2009

Shirley has been involved with Yarrenyty Arltere art centre where this etching was made since 2004, when she took art classes there through Batchelor College. She has been an avid member of the art committee and helped to transform the art classes into an art enterprise in 2008.

Her four-plate etching brings forth a dual expression of the terrifying Kadaitcha Man as he ominously looms over the land seeking revenge.

Millie Skeen NAMPITJIN (c1932-1997)
Kukatja people

Kameradda, in the Great Sandy Desert 1995

Lightning appears in the sky as two women sit by a rockhole, sheltered by a windbreak. In addition to a boomerang and digging stick, a women's sacred stick, used in ceremonial dancing, appears at the bottom of the painting.

Millie Skeen began painting in 1986 for Warlayirti Artists at Balgo, where the widespread use of bright, bold colours changed the dynamic of desert painting by departing from the more restrained Papunya Tula palette.

Narputta Jugadai NANGALA (c1933 - 2010)
Pintupi people

Kaarkurutinytja 2006

The massive salt lake Kaarkurutinytja (Lake MacDonald), on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, is Narputta Nangala's birthplace.

She was related to several of the original Papunya painting men and learned to paint in the 1970s by assisting her husband.

She was one of the original founding artists at Ikuntji Women's Centre, Haast's Bluff, when painting began there in 1992, a momentous event celebrated the following year with three days and four nights of Ceremony.

Widely exhibited in Europe, Asia and the USA, she won a NT Women's Fellowship in 1993 and the country's top Aboriginal art award, the NATSIAA Open Painting prize, in 1997.

Lucy Kennedy NAPALJARRI (1926-2008)
Warlpiri people

Eagle and Bush Onion Dreaming 1987

Many women are represented in this painting – all those semi-circles – each with her digging stick and coolamon.

Yuendumu was the first place where women as a group painted in their own right. Lucy Kennedy was one of eight women, all from Yuendumu, whose work was included in the highly influential Dreamings exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art in New York in 1988.

Tjunkiya NAPALTJARRI (c1927 – 2009)
Pintupi people

Women Gathered for Ceremonies at Umari Rockhole 2002

One of the founders of the Papunya Tula women's painting movement, during her career Tjunkiya produced a great cycle of paintings of the sacred women's site of Umari. In her later

years she lived and painted at the 'widow's camp' at Kintore, with her sister Wintjiya. Her classic palette was buttery yellows and oranges or caramels, with black and cream, applied with great gusto by two sticks held in one hand.

Almost blind when she started painting in 1994, Tjunkiya's cataracts were removed and her sight restored that same year, one of several artists (including Wintjiya) who underwent the operation.

*"They flew on the airforce cargo plane known as 'the army plane' and returned like celebrities, flash in 1970s retro clothing and wraparound sunglasses, smiles all around.... The community was excited and happy for them and perceived their restored vision as a miracle. They had been given a new lease on life and a future as painters". **

(*Marina Strocchi, Ikuntji Art Centre founding manager, in Across the Desert, Judith Ryan, ed., p131).

Eunice NAPANANGKA (c1940)
Pintupi people

Rockholes at Kuruuldu 2000

Eunice came to Haasts Bluff on her mother's back as a young child, when her family walked in from Kuruuldu, her birthplace near Tjukurla, several hundred kilometres away in WA.

She was instrumental in the founding of the art centre at Haasts Bluff in 1992, and took part in the groundbreaking joint Haasts Bluff / Kintore women's painting projects in 1994 and 1995, along with Narputta Nangala, Makinti Napanangka and Tjunkiya Napaltjarri, whose works are also in this exhibition.

Eunice regularly participates in women's law and culture meetings where up to 500 women gather twice yearly in remote desert areas to dance and sing in Ceremony.

Makinti NAPANANGKA AM (c1922 - 2011)
Pintupi people

Kungka Kutjarra 2000

Makinti Napanangka was a tiny woman but a giant of Western Desert art. She won the prestigious NATSIAA prize in 2008.

She first painted at Haast's Bluff in 1994 and, like Tjunkiya Napaltjarri, was one of the senior ceremonial women who launched the Papunya Tula Artists women's painting movement at Kintore in 1996.

She was almost blind until her cataract operation in 1999. This gem-like painting is from the first year of her restored vision.

The epic song and dance cycle Kunga Kutjarra (Two Women) tells of the journey of two sisters. In her book Irrunytju Arts, Mary Knights says of this Tjukurpa:

'Nuanced, multi-layered, and especially important for the women, some aspects of the story are only told in whispers. Women's business associated with menstruation, courtship, pregnancy, childbirth, as well as inma [ceremony] and rites associated with them are woven into the narrative.'

Maggie Watson NAPANGARDI (1921-2004)
Warlpiri people

Bush Potato Dreaming 1990

Women started the painting movement at Yuendumu in the early 1980s. Men followed, when they saw the 4WD truck the women bought with funds from their early success selling painted artifacts. Painting on canvas by women began in 1984.

Maggie Watson was one of the first great desert women colourists. She was mentor to her younger sister, Judy, who also became an acclaimed artist.

Maxine Mick NELSON (1962)
Pitjantjatjara people

Echidna 2011

Tjanpi animals like this loveable echidna are sculptures with great appeal to all ages. But more than this, they are reminders that people, animals and the land are all linked. The grasses are collected by women on group trips 'out bush' that re-state and re-invigorate the artists' ongoing connection to Country.

Jacinta NUMINA-WAUGH (1965)
Anmatyerre people

Nagara Awelye – Body Lines 2 2007

Jacinta was born at Mount Stirling, in Utopia country north-east of Alice Springs. She moved to Darwin where she studied art and design and became a print-maker.

Jacinta's etching refers to the traditional designs women paint on their chest and breasts in preparation for ceremony. This ritual is integral to the ceremonial calendar, and indeed retains powerful contemporary importance. Lena Pwerle, an older artist also from Utopia, describes how women's ceremony proved their continuing connection to Country as part of their Native Title claim:

'We moved back to our proper country that the judge gave back to us. We got it through the land claim. ... With our women's ceremonies we held on to the country and got it back. Who would think we had it in us, we women astounded them with our dancing, dancing from side to side.'

Tali Tali POMPEY (1945 - 2011)
Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people

Para – Desert Gum Trees 2010

The artist described this large expressive painting in a single phrase:

'Para – gum trees, white ones.'

Para depicts Ghost Gums found in southern NT including her birthplace at Finke, and Desert Gums native to SA and WA. Their smooth white-to-cream trunks seem to hover in front of the dotting that evokes their shed bark.

The effect is intense yet soft focused, like much of Tali Tali Pompey's work that depicts elements of landscape rather than Tjukurpa stories. Her paintings nurture the spirit of the Country.

After suffering a mild stroke in late 2007 that affected her left hand, she taught herself to paint again with her right hand.

Milatjari PUMANI (1928)
Yankunytjatjara people

Ngura Walytja, Antara 2010

*'This painting is about my home, family and culture.
The land is Antara, a place not far from Mimili.'*

Milatjari Pumani is the senior artist at Mimili Maku art centre, where she started painting in 2008 at the age of 80. Ngura Walytja, Antara shows her deep knowledge of the Maku (witchetty grub) Tjukurpa, the significant songline of her Country, in layers of information expressed in a dynamic palette of subtle variation. Both quintessentially a woman's painting and a strong statement of the eternal interconnectedness of Country (Ngura), Family (Walytja) and identity, this monumental work is an eloquent and powerful amplification of the themes that run throughout this exhibition.

Mrs [Constance] ROBINJA (1968 - 2012)
Western Arrernte people

Pussycat 2009

This pussycat formed part of Mrs Robinja's entry in the Togart Contemporary Art Award in Darwin 2009 that explored memories of her childhood at Ntaria (Hermannsburg).

'I remember cat, cat, cat. My father used to shoot it with a rifle. It's good medicine, good if you have a fever. Eat it all.'

Mrs Robinja remembered the feral cats as being really big and *'...marre kere, good meat.'*

Dulcie SHARPE (1957)
Luritja/Arrernte people

Sausage Dog 2009

The soft sculptures by artists at the Larapinta Valley Town Camp in Alice Springs are made from recycled woollen blankets. Undeniably cute, they're also evocative reminders of the colonial connotations that blankets hold for Aboriginal Australians for whom a blanket, flour and tea were often the only recompense for the loss of their land.

Mrs Sharpe's sculptures of animals are made from old woollen blankets that she dyes using leaves and rusty old metal.

**Nulbingka SIMMS (1945) and
Kathleen DONEGAN (1944)**
Pitjantjatjara people

Homelands Country 1999

Mrs Simms and Kathleen Donegan are senior Spinifex women who are auntie and niece. Traditional owners from Spinifex Country exhibited this painting along with 31 others in their first commercial exhibition, in 2001.

Collaborative work has been a feature of Spinifex painting, which began with two large canvases - one by women, the other by men - that mapped their Country and their ongoing connection to it as part of their successful Native Title claim. An area of 55,000 sq kms was returned to the Spinifex people in 1999.

Telissa SPLINTER (1985)
Arrernte people

Remembering My Father's Country 2009

Telissa is the youngest woman in this exhibition. Born in Alice Springs, she has always lived in the Larapinta Valley Town Camp.

Telissa created this etching during a printmaking workshop that was her first experience of art making. In it, her father and his Country are one, welded together in a blaze of searing light that glows white hot.

Renita Nyalapantja STANLEY (1962)
Pitjantjatjara people

Raiki Wara 2005

Renita's highly complex yet free-flowing batik is her own interpretation of walka (design) elements distinctive to Ernabella women's art.

In 1971 Ernabella became the first place where desert women produced batik. Unlike Indonesian batik, all Ernabella batiks are hand-drawn, using a combination of traditional tjantjing, sticks and brushes to apply hot wax.

Renita was born at Ernabella Mission, home of the first desert art centre, established as a women's craft room in 1948. She is a past Chair of Ernabella Arts.

Eileen Yaritja STEVENS (c1915 – 2008)
Pitjantjatjara people

Makiri 2007

'This is the place I was born, Makiri. This Country is between Fregon and Watarru and is Minyma Tjala Tjukurpa [Honey Ant Women's creation story site.]'

In this intense depiction of her birthplace, the canvas can barely contain the energy 93 year old Eileen Stevens derived from this women's sacred place, the visible and the invisible both powerfully present.

She was close friends with the other great senior woman artist, Wingu Tingima, and the two painted together at Tjunga Palya art centre at Nyapari.

Nellie STEWART (c1935 - 2012)
Pitjantjatjara people

Minyma Kutjara 2010

'Minyma Kutjaraku Tjukurpa pulka, Tjukurpa mulapa. This story from the creation time about the Two Sisters is an important dreaming track and it is real!'

Nellie Stewart was born in the bush at Pipalyatjara and educated at Ernabella Mission. She was a strong cultural woman who later in life taught Pitjantjatjara language to mainly non-Indigenous students in Alice Springs before returning to the Pitjantjatjara Lands, where she began painting in 2007 when in her 70s.

Her paintings recount the Minyma Kutjara Tjukurpa, narratives of the heroic Creator Women who formed the landscape and all that lives within it. As Christine Nicholls notes*, in their travels they performed fertility and love-magic ceremonies and decreed complex ritual behaviour relating to initiation, childbirth, food gathering and social harmony.

In creation narratives women originally possessed greater creative powers than men, derived from their authority in these vital areas of reproduction, before ancestor men became jealous and stripped them of their powers.

(*catalogue essay, Nellie Stewart 2011 solo exhibition at Vivien Anderson Gallery).

Wingu TINGIMA (c1920s – 2010)
Pitjantjatjara people

Minyma Tjuta 2008

Born in the north of Spinifex country at Nyumun rockhole, Wingu Tingima was a senior traditional owner of this area, one of the most important sites on the Seven Sisters songline.

She divided her time between family in Nyapari in SA and Irrunytju and Tjuntjuntjara in WA, separated by what many would consider vast distances of desert country. She painted this tiny, distilled version of the Seven Sisters story while visiting her family in Spinifex country in WA. It's a reminder that inter-generational sharing of knowledge is a crucial function of artmaking for these women.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest artists to emerge from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, Wingu's work is held in almost all major Australian collections.

Margaret Kemarre TURNER OAM (1938)
Eastern Arrernte people

Intervention ayeeye akerte 2008

Margaret Kemarre Turner, or MK as she is affectionately known, has painted her response to the Intervention in the Northern Territory. The text, in Arrernte, states:

Intervention story for us. Government is making us go all one way, not listening to us

In the other panel of this diptych, MK uses iconography to express the impact of the Intervention. This is how she describes it:

The stripes are the rules. The river shapes show all the different people being put in the same channel, the people sitting around the circles show all the rules being made into one inside the other. The smoke shapes represent everyone being confused, everyone talking and no one listening

Appointed a medal of the Order of Australia in 1997 for services to the community, particularly in the area of Indigenous language, Margaret Kemarre Turner published her memoir *What it means to be an Aboriginal* in 2010.

Nyanu WATSON (1951)
Pitjantjatjara people

Waru (Black-footed Rock Wallaby) 2011

Nyanu Watson is known for her beautifully observed depictions of the animals and birds that live in her Country. Here she has captured a waru, or Black-footed Rock Wallaby, in that moment of stillness as it exchanges gazes with the viewer.

Waru numbers have dramatically declined since European Australian incursion into their habitat. Foxes, feral cats, sheep, goats, cattle and changed fire regimes have exacted a heavy toll. In 2007 there were estimated to be just 50 waru left in South Australia, mostly around Nyanu's birthplace of Pukatja (Ernabella).

More than a charming portrait, this painting is an assertion of the artist's knowledge of her birth Country, and her ongoing responsibility for it, a living presence in her life.

Ruby Tjangawa WILLIAMSON (c1940)
Pitjantjatjara people

Puli Murpu - Mountain Range 2010

Puli Murpu translates as mountain range, in this case the Musgrave Ranges, near Amata in South Australia, about 120 kms south of Uluru. Ruby was born here, making her the only woman with the right to paint this sacred men's Country.

In this depiction of her Country she has painted the landscape and the Tjukurpa it holds, showing the mountains from both the side and above, as well as rockhole, creek and *puti puluwa*, desert flowers shown in orange, yellow and pink.

Ruby Williamson's use of non-Western perspective and representation in depicting landscape recurs throughout this exhibition, where Country is painted from an aerial viewpoint, with no horizon line.

Bush Cats 2008

Women traditionally hunted rabbits and feral cats introduced into the bush by Europeans. Ruby's paintings of cats have great charm and humour, and she stresses that there is no longer a need to hunt cats for food.

Puli Murpu - Mountain Range 2006

In this bold and dramatic painting Ruby has painted the

mountains of her birth country near Amata, from above and the side. Blue areas represent rockhole and creek.

The orange and pink dotting depicts desert flowers, and reminds us that, perhaps contrary to common belief, the so-called desert areas of central Australia are often intensely colourful, with deep reds and bright orange of the soil and the profusion of flowers after rain. Ruby's painting is electric with the life force of her Country.

Tjaruwa WOODS (c1954)
Pitjantjatjara people

Nguraku 2008

Most of the Spinifex People were forced to leave their Country in the 1950s and '60s by British atomic bomb tests, rocket testing and severe drought.

Tjaruwa and her family, however, stayed in their homelands, continuing to live a traditional Western Desert life. It was not until 1986 that Tjaruwa met white people.

There is nothing arbitrary in her painting; Tjaruwa can name all the rockholes depicted in this eloquent rebuttal of the view that the desert is, or ever has been, an empty place.

Not only an artist, Tjaruwa remains one of the region's most highly skilled bushwomen.

Notes and abbreviations

APY is Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara, meaning people who speak Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. Their Lands are in the north of SA, towards WA, extending into the NT.

NPY is Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara. Their Lands are in the eastern portion of WA near the SA and NT borders. Ngaanyatjarra is the main language spoken.

For consistency, Pitjantjatjara words and spelling, such as Tjukurpa, are used throughout this exhibition. Other Indigenous languages of the Central and Western Deserts may use variations in spelling or different words.

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Our culture and art is not separate, it is all one. We are artists, dancers and singers of the Tjukurpa.

Inawinytji Williamson, artist and co-founder of Ananguku Arts



Dulcie Sharpe *Sausage Dog* 2009, natural dyed woollen blanket, wool, plastic buttons and seeds
Mrs [Constance] Robinja *Pussycat* 2009, natural dyed woollen blanket, wool, plastic buttons and emu feathers

COVER IMAGE Tali Tali Pompey *Para – Desert Gum Trees* 2010, acrylic on linen, 183 x 200 cm



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