

Papunya Tula—the birthplace of contemporary Australian Aboriginal art

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The groundbreaking *Papunya Tula, Genesis and Genius* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales was the first major retrospective by artists from Papunya in Australia's Western Desert. Consisting of 150 works by over 50 artists, the exhibition provided an overview of the origins and stylistic development of contemporary Australian Aboriginal art during the last three decades.

The Papunya Tula art movement—with its ancestral myths or Dreaming stories and unique imagery—was born in the early 1970s in the oppressive, desolate and poverty-stricken conditions of a government settlement 250 miles west of Alice Springs, in central Australia.

The settlement was officially opened in 1960 under the Menzies Liberal government's racist assimilation program. According to the government, Aborigines were not ready to live as "white Australians" and had to be re-educated to hasten their "advancement". In practice, this meant relocation of Aborigines from their traditional lands and suppression of their language, art and culture. This policy also involved the forced removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their parents and their dispersal into government or religious institutions or foster care.

The Papunya settlement brought together Aborigines from the Pintupi-, Walpiri-, Aranda-, Anmatyerre- and Loritja-language groups. It consisted of substandard government housing designed to accommodate 400-500 people but as the population increased the Pintupi people, the largest language group, began living in structures made from native bushes and sticks. The Anmatyerre group accommodated themselves in humpies made from scrap timber and iron. Conditions were so bad that 129 people, or almost one-sixth of the residents, died of treatable diseases such as hepatitis, meningitis and encephalitis between 1962 and 1966.

Despite these appalling losses the population increased at the settlement, boosted by an influx of unemployed Aboriginal stockmen and farm workers. (Local cattle farmers had sacked the workers when the industrial courts ordered them to pay award wages to Aborigines in 1966.) By 1970, the overcrowded desert settlement had grown to over 1,000 Aborigines.

Geoff Bardon, an art teacher at the settlement, describes the horrific conditions in his book *Papunya Tula, Art of the Western Desert*. When he arrived at the settlement in 1971 he found "a community of people in appalling distress, oppressed by a sense of exile from their homelands and committed to remain where they were by direction of the Commonwealth government. Papunya was filled with twilight people, whether they were black or white, and it was a place of emotional loss and waste, with an air of casual cruelty. I quickly became aware of the breakdown of tribal hierarchies and the disintegration of many of the families.

"I had come to a community of several tribal groups apparently dispossessed of their lands and quite systematically humiliated by the European authorities. It was a brutal place, with a feeling of oppressive and dangerous racism in the air. Although the culture of these people is based on journey or tracks, and all their Dreamings refer to movement over great distance, the authorities had denied them their birthright to travel. They were frustrated to the point of hopelessness."

Government workers were housed in separate quarters surrounded by barbed wire. Aboriginal children were told that if they approached government workers' homes they would be shot. Minor misdemeanors were severely punished. For example, if a tap were left dripping the settlement superintendent would cut the water off to that section of the camp. Riots were not uncommon. In fact, in May 1972, 30 police were called in to put down a riot, the third since 1960. Supervisors claimed the superintendent's pistol had been stolen. Twenty-two Aboriginal youth were charged and arrested, with 17 sentenced to lengthy jail terms.

Before Bardon arrived at Papunya, Western Desert art was largely confined to ceremonial activities for initiated Aborigines and some small-scale production of artifacts for the tourist market established by the church missions. Previously the only paintings produced by Aboriginal artists for sale were by the Aranda water colorists trained in a European landscape style at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission. The most famous artist was Albert Namatjira, acclaimed throughout Australia and personally known to many of the artists who later formed the original painting group at Papunya. While Papunya artists did not adopt Namatjira's style, some recognised the possibility of a vocation as professional artists. Namatjira died in 1959, shortly after serving a prison sentence for supplying alcohol to his relatives.

When Bardon arrived he observed the children drawing traditional designs with their fingers in the desert sand. He began to encourage them to represent Aboriginal motifs in his art classes. Initially the children were too shy to express their work but gradually Bardon won the respect and confidence of the tribal elders who gave permission for the children to draw their designs and to explain their meaning. In July 1971, under the supervision of the elders, seven Aboriginal men painted a mural—*Honey Eating Dreaming*—on the school wall. The vibrant picture seemed to challenge the overwhelming atmosphere of repression and despair at the settlement. It inspired many others to begin painting.

Such was the enthusiasm that over 600 paintings and up to 300 smaller art works were produced during the next 18 months. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's painting *Gulgardi* (1971) shared first prize in the Alice Springs Art competition. Encouraged by this response, Bardon helped the Aborigines establish the Papunya School Painters Co-Operative in October 1971, later, in 1972, to be incorporated into Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd.

The Papunya Co-Operative was bitterly opposed by the welfare division of the Northern Territory's Department of Interior, which sought to have exclusive control over the activities of the artists. In 1956, the Northern Territory Legislative Council made it an offence for anyone to buy paintings from Aboriginal artists without the permission of the Native Affairs Branch, a government body. The penalty was a £100 fine and/or 6 months in jail. The Papunya settlement superintendent claimed the paintings were produced by "government Aborigines" and therefore belonged to the government, and circulated malicious gossip against Bardon. He was accused of "trafficking in paintings" by local authorities

and in January 1972 forbidden to leave Papunya on weekdays without permission from the Alice Springs welfare office. Bardon, however, regarded these rulings as racist threats and resolved to take the paintings out of the settlement for sale in Alice Springs.

By mid-1972, Bardon became seriously ill and was forced to leave the settlement. While relations between the Papunya artists and the government authorities would later change, Bardon played a key role in encouraging and promoting the artwork produced at the settlement.

The art and artists

Paintings on display at *Papunya Tula, Genesis and Genius* were arranged chronologically. The exhibition included early paintings on scraps of board and linoleum tiles, the well-known “dot” paintings of the 1980s, and the more recent large-scale abstract and minimalist works produced during the 1990s by individual painters and teams of men and women artists. While it is not possible to review all the artists included, the work of some of those who influenced the direction of Western Desert art is particularly noteworthy.

Work from the 1971-72 period is fresh and evocative with the unrestrained use of bright colours. The early Papunya Tula artists, mainly older men, worked quickly using whatever materials were at hand—tin sheeting, fruit boxes and masonite (particle board). Their paintings are animated by concerns that their culture was being destroyed by the settlement and that the traditional myths would be lost to the next generation. Many of the experimental designs and motifs in these paintings have not been repeated since.

Untitled (1971) attributed to Tutama Tjapangati (1909-87), one of the tribal elders involved in the original *Honey Art Dreaming* mural, is typical. Painted on both sides of a coarse composition board, the non-representational work, which is roughly cut into an oval shape and resembles a small shield, seems to reflect the transition between traditional ceremonial body painting methods, ground drawings and more modern materials and techniques. One side of the painting is covered with energetic dabs of white and black over soft blue oblongs on a yellow ochre background. This acts as a gentle but surprising visual contrast to the more accentuated and strictly defined black concentric circles and lines on the opposite side of the painting.

Tutama uses the same simplicity of technique and composition in his *Stars Twinkling at Night* (1972). Black circles of varying size, highlighted with white dots scattered across a red ochre background suggest the shimmering beauty of the desert’s night sky. Like much of the other early works, this painting has an unselfconscious, almost child-like quality to it.

Nosepeg Tjupurrula’s *Three Corroboree Poles* (1971) is another important painting from this period. Three corroboree (ceremonial) sticks stand against an iridescent pink wash background. The sticks, which are illuminated with white dots, are placed in a vertical position in the picture. An orange glow is reflected from the base of the ritualistic sticks giving an almost magical quality.

Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri’s (1927-) *Yala (Wild Potato) Dreaming* (1971) (see photo attachment) with its stark yellow background and red ochre motifs is an audacious early experimental work. The appearance of this bold painting must have been an extraordinary visual contrast to the harsh and oppressive imagery dominating the Papunya settlement.

Before becoming a cook in the Papunya canteen, Billy Stockman worked, as his name implies, as a stockman at Napperby cattle station. Born in 1927, he is one of the few survivors of the infamous Coniston massacre in which police and landowners slaughtered over 100 members of the Walpiri people near Coniston cattle station in August 1928. Stockman’s mother was killed in the mass murder. A government inquiry justified the genocidal attack, with police claiming that Aborigines had killed a local dingo hunter.

Paintings by Papunya Tula artists began to change by the end of 1972.

In the beginning they painted solely for themselves but as the paintings began to be sold beyond Papunya some Aborigines outside the settlement began to raise concerns about the disclosure of secret traditional rituals and sacred sites and that ceremonial knowledge and images were being represented in new artistic forms. This came to a head in 1974 when a group of Aborigines stoned an exhibition of Papunya Tula art in Alice Springs in protest.

In response, and in order to conceal secret knowledge, the Papunya Tula artists began adopting a more painterly style, overlaying their paintings with a flood of dots to disguise parts of their work that included religious rituals. One of the early masters of this technique was Johnny Warungula Tjupurrula (1920-2001). His technique of “over-dotting” was gradually taken up and developed by many Papunya artists. By 1975, this technique became one of the central characteristics of Western Desert art.

It is impossible to review the beginnings of Papunya Tula without referring to Anatjari Tjakamarra (1930-92), a Pintupi man who had little contact with Europeans before joining the settlement in 1966. His early work—*Rat Kangaroo Dreaming* (1972), *Rat Kangaroo Dreaming* (1974), *Ngaminya* (1974) and *Wangukartjanya* (1974)—are examples of the geometrical iconography common to many Aboriginal paintings.

Rat Kangaroo Dreaming (1974) is painted on an uneven and roughly rectangular composition board, approximately 57.5 x 63.3 cm. The composition consists of a simple geometrical design with nine black rectangles of varying size randomly positioned across the painting. The central focus of the picture is a rectangle divided into four triangles crossed with white lines leading to a central point. The complex image, with its apparently uneven and disjointed patterns, creates a sense of visual tension as well as a feeling of balance and natural harmony.

The central rectangle in the image, according to Anatjari, is the rat kangaroo’s camp and the surrounding rectangles are caves. Anatjari’s painting is obviously not a naturalistic representation of the rat kangaroo’s camp but an idea or a series of visual ideas representing one of the stories of the Aboriginal spiritual world. Timmy Payungka Tjapangati’s (1940-2000) *Untitled* (1998) is another example of this non-representational style and imagery (see photo).

Also of considerable note is Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri (1929-84), who is also well known for his distinctive woodcarvings of snakes and goannas. His painting *Wild Plum Dreaming* (1971) is a good example of the harmonious and often symmetrical designs created by the Anmatyerre artists, the language group to which he belonged. He uses repetitive yellow and white concentric circles floating above a geometrically divided background of tiny red and white dots over black to create a strangely futuristic image.

Tim Leura collaborated with his brother Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1932-) on *Warlugulong* (1976). Both had previously worked as stockmen, which gave them the opportunity to gain a detailed knowledge of their traditional Aboriginal lands and beyond. Before arriving at Papunya, Clifford Possum regarded himself as an artist and produced woodcarvings for the tourist market. He met Namatjira several times in the 50s but rejected the older artist’s offer to teach him to paint in the European water colorist style.

Warlugulong is a large story map on canvas recounting an Aboriginal myth about an old blue-tongued lizard man who accidentally kills his two sons in a bush fire. This work marked a shift to larger works by Papunya Tula artists and is regarded as one of the movement’s great masterpieces because of its narrative complexity and visual intricacy. The painting was first exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW’s *Australian Perspecta* in 1981 alongside other contemporary Australian art and then bought by the gallery. It was one of the first contemporary Aboriginal paintings acquired by a state-owned Australian art museum.

Another prominent artist represented in *Papunya Tula, Genesis and Genius* is Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri (1926-98), who had 15 paintings in

the exhibition. These works, which cover the period from 1972 to 1998, show the raw and unconstrained paintings of his early days, his dot paintings, and the minimalist and abstract work of the late 1990s. Early symbols and icons developed by Mick Namarari are refined and repeated in later work.

His *Untitled* (1977) is a good example of the prominence of dotting techniques in the mid-70s. Fine dots of colour are superimposed on each other to form layers of soft pink and brown tonal clusters. In later work, such as *Tjunginpa* (1990), he applied elongated strokes of yellow with minute pale dots to create a delicate, gentle undulating image of the sand hill country from which he originated.

In *Untitled* (1997) Mick Namarari tells the story of a mother dingo that leaves her pups to go hunting. When she returns, they have been taken away. The artist reduces all detail to an absolute minimum in the painting. Symbolic stripes of vibrating red, yellow and brown stretch across the canvas evoking the sound waves of the wailing mother dingo mourning her loss. Painted a year before his death in 1998, this striking work is one of the most compelling images in the Art Gallery of NSW exhibition.

Papunya Tula, Genesis and Genius provided a valuable overview of some of the most important work by Aboriginal artists from Australia's Western Desert. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue, however, made no attempt to explore the complex aesthetic and political questions posed by the emergence of Papunya Tula and the rapid growth of contemporary Aboriginal art, which had sales last year totalling \$200 million. Where government officials once frowned upon Aboriginal art, today they use it to promote Australia internationally and hail it as a glowing example of self-determination, self-reliance and business entrepreneurship by Aborigines. How these political and market demands have impacted on the artists and the desert communities will be the subject of further WSWs reviews and analysis.

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