

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1932-2002)

Pioneer of contemporary Aboriginal art dies

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4 July 2002

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, one of the acknowledged pioneers of the contemporary Australian Aboriginal art movement which emerged at Papunya settlement in central Australia in the early 1970s, died in Alice Springs on June 21. A co-founder of the audacious Papunya Tula style and the first Aboriginal painter to be critically acclaimed by art patrons in Europe and North America, Clifford Possum's life bore all the scars of poverty and racist oppression confronting Aborigines in central Australia in the 20th century.

No accurate records were ever kept but Possum was born sometime in 1932, in an isolated dry creek bed about 200 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. His mother, Long Rose Nangala and father, Tjatjiti Tjungurrayi, were members of the Anmatyerre tribal group living on ancestral lands near Napperby cattle station. While white settlers and government officials had driven tens of thousands of Aborigines from Australia's richest farming land during the 19th century, the dispossession of central Australian Aborigines did not occur until the early 1900s and continued during the early years of Possum's life.

Hundreds of Aborigines were forced from tribal lands. Possum's family, like countless others, existed on government and mission rations with occasional low-paid work on nearby cattle farms. Clifford Possum accurately described this period as the "killing times".

Four years prior to his birth, a harsh drought had compelled several groups of Aborigines into the Coniston area, producing tensions with local farmers who wanted the scarce water resources for their cattle. In 1928 police shot and killed nearly 100 Aborigines at the infamous Coniston massacre. Police claimed that the Aborigines had killed a local dingo hunter. Possum's father was taken prisoner during the assault. Billy Stockman, another founding member of the Papunya Tula art movement, survived the massacre and was raised by Clifford Possum's mother.

Possum's first contact with Europeans was through his father, who sold dingo scalps in exchange for tea and flour at the Jay Creek government ration depot. Pastor F.W. Albrecht from Hermannsburg Lutheran mission noticed that the young Clifford was suffering from severe malnutrition during one of these visits and arranged for him to be nursed back to health at

the mission and then returned to his mother. Conditions were so bad during these years that Possum's father perished from lack of water.

Contact with Albrecht had an ongoing impact on Possum and his family. While Possum never forgot the Christian teachings at Hermannsburg, he never fully embraced the religion, unlike his older brother who studied at Hermannsburg and was ordained as a Lutheran pastor.

Possum received no formal education but knew six Aboriginal languages and a little English. His working life began at an early age on the Hamilton Downs cattle station—the very industry that had driven his family from the land. After learning how to muster and brand cattle, he became a stockman at Hamilton Downs and then head stockman at Narwietooma station. He learnt ancestral stories from elders like One Pound Jim Tjungurrayi, who took on the role of his father, and was famous for his extensive knowledge of the country. This information and Possum's work herding cattle and horses across the desert provided the source and content of his later paintings.

In the early 1950s, Possum met Albert Namatjira at Glen Helen Gorge, a newly developing tourist spot established by the nearby cattle station owner. Namatjira was the leading Aboriginal artist at the time, finding growing success for his realistic watercolour landscapes that captured the stark and unique beauty of central Australia. In between working as a stockman, Possum had begun carving wood. Namatjira, recognising his obvious talent, inquired whether he wanted to learn to paint in his style. While Possum declined the offer, he began to recognise the possibility of a vocation as a professional artist.

In the late 1950s he was employed, along with his older brother Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and other Aborigines, to assist in the construction of Papunya settlement. This was the last Aboriginal settlement built under the Menzies Liberal government's racist assimilation policy. According to the government, Aborigines were not ready to live as "white Australians" and had to be re-educated. This meant removing them from tribal lands and herding them into settlements.

In 1971, Geoffrey Bardon, a young teacher, arrived at Papunya. Bardon, who later described the settlement as "an

unsewered, undrained, garbage-strewn death camp in all but name,” won the respect of the older men and encouraged them to paint their ancestral stories. In contrast to Namatjira’s realistic watercolours, Bardon supplied them acrylic paint and discouraged references to Western images. This approach help give birth to the unique Papunya Tula style, which is an abstract representation of tribal myths and legends that is derived from traditional ceremonial designs.

Encouraged by his brother Tim, Clifford Possum, who had already begun teaching woodcarving at the settlement, joined Bardon’s painting group, which later became the Papunya Tula Artists Company. By the mid-1970s he was chairman of the company and had emerged as one of its most inventive artists.

An innovative artist

In 1976, with the assistance of Tim Leura, he painted *Warlugulong 1976*, which he later described as his “number one painting”. This large canvas (168.5 x 170.5cm) exceeded anything produced by the Papunya Tula artists, both in size and narrative complexity. For the first time many different legends were told or mapped on one canvas, each story layered one upon the other. Coinciding with the superimposed stories was a new paint-layering technique and visual imagery. *Warlugulong 1976* and several paintings by Aboriginal artists was exhibited at the inaugural *Australian Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1981, the first time Aborigines had been included in a general survey of Australian contemporary work.

After completing five works of similar scale and style during the 1970s, Possum began experimenting with colour and subtle modifications of traditional symbols. While mastering the dot painting techniques used by other Papunya Tula artists, he began drawing on other sources for inspiration. For a time he experimented with complex striping, linked dotting or overlapping the background with a patching pattern. Often these techniques would be carefully interwoven into an integrated composition, overlaid with more dots to producing an illusion of changing spatial depth.

In 1983 Possum’s *Mulga Seed Dreaming* won the 14th Alice Prize, an important breakthrough. But a year later his brother Tim died, deeply affecting Possum and ending many years of a close artistic collaboration.

After accepting a commission in 1985 to paint a mural for the Araluen Art Centre, Possum moved his family to Alice Springs, the first Papunya Tula artist to do so. The move coincided with a growing interest in Western Desert art by private and public galleries, with financial support and commissions from the federal government, which was anxious to include paintings by Aborigines in the 1988 bicentennial celebrations and the new parliament house.

While Possum had two small exhibitions in Brisbane and Melbourne in 1987, his first major retrospective was at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art in 1988. It was given extensive media coverage and had record attendances. Later that year he travelled to the US to attend the *Dreamings*

exhibition at New York’s Asia Society Galleries. The focal point of that show was *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* (1980), a large collaborative painting by Possum and Leura. This was followed two years later by another London exhibition, which was favourably reviewed in the prestigious *Artline* magazine.

Despite this success and his prolific output, Possum’s fame did not bring great personal wealth or security. The artist, who provided ongoing financial assistance to his extended family and close relatives, rarely saw the increasingly large sums of money that art dealers and gallery owners made from his work.

In 1999, Possum became embroiled in a public scandal after he initiated a police investigation into a Sydney exhibition of his work and identified most of the paintings on show as fake. The incident led to the first conviction of an Australian art dealer for fraud and saw some malicious and undeserved criticism directed against the artist by a number of influential collectors. The unwanted publicity and other pressures had a debilitating impact on Possum and he largely withdrew from the art scene.

This writer had the opportunity to meet Clifford Possum at an exhibition of his paintings and sculpture held at a small inner city Sydney gallery in August 2001, a few months before he became seriously ill. A gentle and quiet-spoken man with a light-hearted sense of humour, Possum was proud of his life as a stockman and passionate about his artistic work. His determination to express and pass on his ancestral stories to the next generation became the means for forging his distinct artistic vision. Through his remarkable paintings, Clifford Possum’s unique images and stories will endure.

In June he received the Order of Australia for his pioneering work in the development of the Western Desert Art movement, and was to be officially invested with the award on the day he died. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri is survived by his two daughters, Gabrielle and Michelle, and son Lionel.



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