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ABORIGINAL ART

The birth of the Papunya Tula school of Aboriginal painting has been described as one of the most miraculous stories in the world of art. Drawing on traditional Aboriginal imagery and the mythology of the Dreamtime, Papunya Tula painting is recognisable by its development of a distinctive pointillist style, which has become readily marketable in New York, London and Paris, attracting growing international currency. Following the key exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, in 1985/6, Aboriginal art has become the subject of several other major overseas exhibitions, including one this summer at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London, and one in October at the Asia Society, New York.

Elizabeth Thompson here describes the development of Papunya Tula painting, set against the background of a harsh, yet starkly beautiful desert landscape. Judy Newman discusses the key exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, and Paul Carter provides a detailed critique of Aboriginal art in general, with particular reference to the very different, but renowned watercolour landscapes of Albert Namatjira, himself a member of a quite separate community, two hundred miles to the south-east of Papunya, taught by the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission. Carter questions the too-peremptory assumptions of Western critics and argues for a fuller understanding of the enigmatic art of Namatjira and the degree to which he communicated or withheld ancestral knowledge to the outer world.



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An original photograph of an Aboriginal sand painting.

Landscape and legend

In the centre of Australia, thirty-two kilometres from the McDonnell Range and 258 kilometres west of Alice Springs, lies Papunya. Papunya is one of the many government Aboriginal assimilation depots created during the 1960s. Initially conceived as a re-orientation project providing the tools for a more successful Aboriginal integration into white culture, the reserves are inhabited by a people whose sense of purpose has been severely encroached upon. Contact for Aboriginal people has, until recently, involved an ever-increasing alienation from cultural heritage.

Yet, from within these depressing environs has grown what is perhaps one of the most exciting and defiant contemporary gestures of art in existence. This development is in keeping with the spirit of the land, a lawless and undefinable space across which pass beautiful progressions of light. Temperatures change radically from the cool fresh air of the morning, when the sun fills the earth with an amber light, shifting as the day moves on to the hot, dry and relentless heat of the late afternoons. With it comes an oppressiveness beneath which the trees bow with fatigue and the animals kick up dust which hangs interminably in their trail as they move in search of shade.

It is hardly surprising that, on arrival, Papunya gives no hint of this visual wealth. Within a barbed-wire compound the environment loses its vitality and energy. The sense of freedom and power in the uncluttered horizons stretching

into eternal red earth has somehow had its wings clipped. The pre-fabricated housing of the compounds is so alien and unsuitable that the majority sleep on the verandahs and surrounding land. Graffiti decorates the earth and surrounding land, and abandoned cars litter the ground. Between the desert oak and spinifex the scene is scarred with glass and rusting metal. It emits a sense of desolation that is hard to describe.

This environment is somewhat ironically involved in the development of contemporary Australian art, and cannot be seen in isolation from the general societal disintegration to which the Aboriginal people have been exposed. The painters' ability to work amidst this chaos 'makes perfect sense if we see their actions as part of a new strategy for survival — a bid to save the basis of their people's identity from the oblivion to which our arrogance and ignorance had almost condemned the most venerable tradition on earth'.

It is all too easy to view central Australian desert painting as the last vestiges of a dying culture, part of all that is mythically 'primitive'. On the contrary, however, its appearance represents a new art amongst Aboriginals adapting to a new situation and living conditions. Aboriginality is an evolving phenomenon and the central desert artists are major figures in its evolution. Geoff Bardon, a white art-school teacher at Papunya and a man who was to be instrumental in the artistic revival amongst the Aboriginals, talks of the 'crucial settlement problem'

which was how a successful 'integration of large numbers of bush Aboriginals, from varied tribal backgrounds' was going to come about.² The development of a new art amongst a divergent group was a major contributing factor to some kind of social harmony. As the more esoteric features of tribal life disappeared, for example, the sacred beliefs retained by small groups, an increasingly universal religion has been established.

Whatever the external influences and subsequent changes, the traditional concept of 'Dreamtime' remains a foundation stone in Aboriginal culture. The Dreamtime is an all-encompassing term: it is the time of creation, all that is past and all yet to come, the eternal present. Legends, beliefs and ceremonies are explained in the Dreaming stories. When these find expression in painting, symbols and signs become part of a visual language, a complex system of iconographies which relate narratives concerning the land and its people.

There are many levels of perception in the desert. It is a landscape which, to the unfamiliar eye, may appear monotonous, dry and hostile. Gum trees stand silver and twisted in dried out and cracked river beds, the sky appears eternally blue, unmoving. It is easy to believe nothing lives or breathes, that the scene is stationary but for the weather patterns. The painting narratives are a blatant denial of this static perception: in a depiction of the traces there is a suggestion of the extensive presence and activity on the land. These traces are a



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Honey Ant Dreaming. Reggie Tjupurrula (Pintubi/Aranda tribe), 1986. The story depicted in this painting comes from the Honey Ant Dreaming site of Warumpi (Papunya). The Honey Ants are shown as they travel south from Warumpi, and the roundels represent the places where they stayed on their journey. The curved shapes depict the sticks that are used to hunt out the ants, and the small roundels are part of the body paint design associated with the Dreaming.



A comparatively small number of symbols form the basic visual language of central Australian artists. Interpretation partly depends on the viewer's level of understanding but, as the same graphic system serves a wide range of subject matter, it is ultimately only the artist who can fully explain the image in terms of the Dreaming mythology or stories over which he has proprietary rights. Some of the more common graphic symbols and their meanings are illustrated here. (After N Peterson, 'Art of the Desert' in Aboriginal Australia, Australian Gallery Directors Council, Sydney, 1981, p46, table 1, figure 1.)

	Campsite Breast Stone	Well Rockhole Cloaca	Fire Hole Fruit	Hill		Person sitting Windbreak
	Spear Digging stick Person lying down		Path Backbone			Rain Ants Eggs
	Snake Smoke String		Tail Lightning Water flowing			Ribs Clouds Boomerangs
						Rain
			Footprints			

Seven Sisters Dreaming. Tim Leura Tjupalljari (Anmatjara tribe), 1980. This painting depicts the artist's birthplace. It is a spot in a creek on Napperby Station. The place is called Kooralia, which means the Seven Sisters constellation. The dunes in the dry creekbed and various other sites in the vicinity are shown in moonlight. It seems likely that stories and dances are associated with the site. Clearly the subject matter is too secret to divulge.



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major part of Aboriginal experience and perspective, traces on the ground, where evidence of life and movement is most obvious. It is the ground across which most things crawl and leave their mark. Consequently visual narrative is based on an aerial viewpoint.

The patterns and dots describe animal tracks and human footprints. Rivers appear as two-dimensional blue lines, lightning as white streaks, tree-tops and clouds amorphous groups of white dots. Visual communication involves a completely different way of conceptualising. There is no recession into depth. All images exist side by side whether snakes crawling across the sand or morning light appearing on the horizon.

Such visual narratives are a central source of Aboriginal communication and so much a part of the culture that only recently has the concept of 'art' or 'artist' entered into the language. Painting was not set up as an independent activity; everyone in the community was able to paint as a form of visual expression, as everyone was given access to the decoding system. Though in this sense it is a shared activity, the meanings of symbols are conveyed differently to various factions of the society. Women, children, men and tribal elders will all have different interpretations of the same symbols. Bardon states that: 'authority over Dreaming myths and ceremonies remains the prerogative of senior men and is passed on in a life-long process of explanation'.⁴ This may well be the case. Appropriation of higher cultural pursuits by males has occurred in most societies, but anthropological accounts have often failed to acknowledge the importance of women's own private stories and ceremonies of which amongst Aboriginals there are many.

The Dreaming stories often refer to the powerful relationship between people and the land. For thousands of years ancestors have been buried in the earth from which the trees have grown, where animals have grazed, and from which food has been collected and cooked. There is a cyclical quality which far transcends Western society's transient notion of a sense of place, and ownership of land rights. It is quite possible that Australian Dreaming stories have survived oral/aesthetic traditions for as many as 30,000 years and are in fact directly related to the ice age, as Bardon suggests. That visual and performance arts and languages have been the major mode of Aboriginal expression is not to be disputed.

On this basis Bardon was keen to develop the visual aspect within a predominantly white and Western school curriculum which took little account of its importance, 'attempting to steer a course through conflicting educational and aesthetic values'.⁴ Bardon noted that '[Aboriginal] children draw stories in the sand from very early childhood and play games this way. They do not do it in the classroom because they are not asked or encouraged'.⁵

In 1973 he suggested that the Aboriginal school children should paint designs on the school walls, a project which could feasibly expand to involve other members of the community. When the children appeared reticent, Bardon and his assistant carried out some of the work themselves. It was these initial murals which sparked an interest among the elders. Finally amidst this completely alien social organisation there was a forum for exchange and creativity, a space to allow Aboriginal culture to continue growing. Men began to visit the

school rooms and started working on various projects, painting with crushed ochres, clay and charcoal on hardboard, linoleum, or any available flat surface. The evolving works used traditional designs in innovative ways. For the first time men of many varied Dreaming backgrounds were working together. Art works had previously been produced on a co-operative basis, sometimes spanning whole hectares, but always the group was inter-tribal. One way of finding a common thread in an alien social situation was to use a universal language — that of signs.

Changes took place in the content of the work. Once the art became more permanent, certain signs and symbols had to be omitted because of their highly sacred nature. If the spirits were to remain benevolent these particular symbols could only be seen by initiated males and tribal elders. The new transportable quality of art meant that what was presented was necessarily moderated. The bars and hatching common in the earlier works were also controversial and so the generally less sacred dot patternation became a more common feature of contemporary work.

A corroboree leader, old Tom Onion Tjapanngati, gave a design known as *The Honey Ant Dreaming* to the school at which Bardon was teaching. It was this narrative which was eventually used as the subject for the mural, often considered to mark the birth in 1973 of what is now known as the Papunya Tula Artists co-operative. This group has taken on the responsibility of providing artists with canvas and retailing their work to the ever-increasing national and international outlets. The co-operative ostensibly controls all sales and in this way attempts to retain the work it considers

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to be of an inferior quality, thus cultivating a respect for the work in its international context. These decisions are most frequently made by the white Australian assistants involved in the project. Interestingly enough much of the work that was retained or sold cheaply was that considered to be too figurative. Afraid that this represented too extensive a Western influence and desirous of a more typically 'primitive' design, as the market perhaps demanded, these works were not promoted.

The transferral of images from sand to board was to bring about changes in the position that art held in society. Initially designs had been used for rituals and ceremonies. As such their existence was only necessary for the duration of the occasion: 'erasure of designs serves to de-sacralize, to mark the boundary between the sacred and profane'.⁶ The transitory quality of the designs had been an important aspect of their meaning. Now, on the contrary, art was becoming transportable and could be moved from its immediate environment.

As the position of art changes within society so too does that of the artist. Both have become recognised figures. Amongst many whites this is considered to be a sorry state of affairs. The persistent romanticism leads to a notion that it is wrong that Aboriginal art is getting caught up in materialism and a consumer society. Some believe that there is an irony between 'the stark material circumstances of the artists' lives and the superficially glamorous environments to which their work is destined'.⁷ What is often not taken into account is that recognition for Aboriginal artists in the eyes of the rest of the world is as important as it remains for the majority of Western artists. There is a fine line between justifiable sympathy for certain chains of events which have occurred and a patronisation which stems from a culture's own nostalgia for the unknown, the myth of the 'primitive'.

Aboriginal life is bound up in an environment which urban dwellers see as stark and uninhabitable. Thousands of years of experience has developed an understanding and observation of the land which would be alien to most Westerners. The more time spent in this apparent nothingness the richer it becomes, the more of itself it seems to expose, the more one's senses are heightened to appreciate its beauty and



An Aboriginal installation in a New South Wales Gallery. The work is based on a traditional sand painting. Photograph © Elizabeth Thompson.

power. Refracted bands of light emerge from the horizon into a turquoise sky as the sun finally dies leaving darkness and a calm and tranquillity that the heat of the day denies. The weight is lifted, the dust settles, the sweat dries and the night sky, far from pollution and city lights, is littered with stars. Every change of light, colour, temperature becomes a source of fascination. The clear, fluid light of morning drenches the white powdery ghost gums. Flocks of rainbow lorikeet sit on their branches, waiting calmly for the cockatoos to abandon the water holes. The galahs sway drunkenly and pink-breasted. Slowly the desert displays its 'life'.

All these elements appear in the paintings: the immediacy of birds in flight, the memory of ancient ceremony, the evolution of new experiences. Comparisons have been drawn between Papunya art and the work of other Australian artists such as Fred Williams. There is thought to be a synchronicity within the mainstream tradition of Australian painting. Papunya art, however, in the face of any comparisons, remains an island. It is a unique visual expression from the central Australian desert and, as James

Mollison, the Director of the Australian National Gallery, suggests, is 'possibly the most ... important event in the history of Australian art'.⁸

ELIZABETH S THOMPSON

Acknowledgement

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Footnotes

1. Vivien Johnson, 'Papunya Tula Art and the Fallacy of Primitivism', in *Papunya Tula: Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert*, Macquarie University, Sydney, October-November 1980, p26.
2. Geoff Bardon, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1979, p13.
3. Bardon, *op cit*, p12.
4. Annemarie Brody, *The Face Of The Centre: Papunya Tula Paintings 1971-84*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1985, p6.
5. Bardon, *op cit*, p21.
6. Brody, *op cit*, p11.
7. Brody, *op cit*, p6.
8. James Mollison, *Dot and Circle — A Retrospective Survey of the Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings of Central Australia*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, 1986, p11.

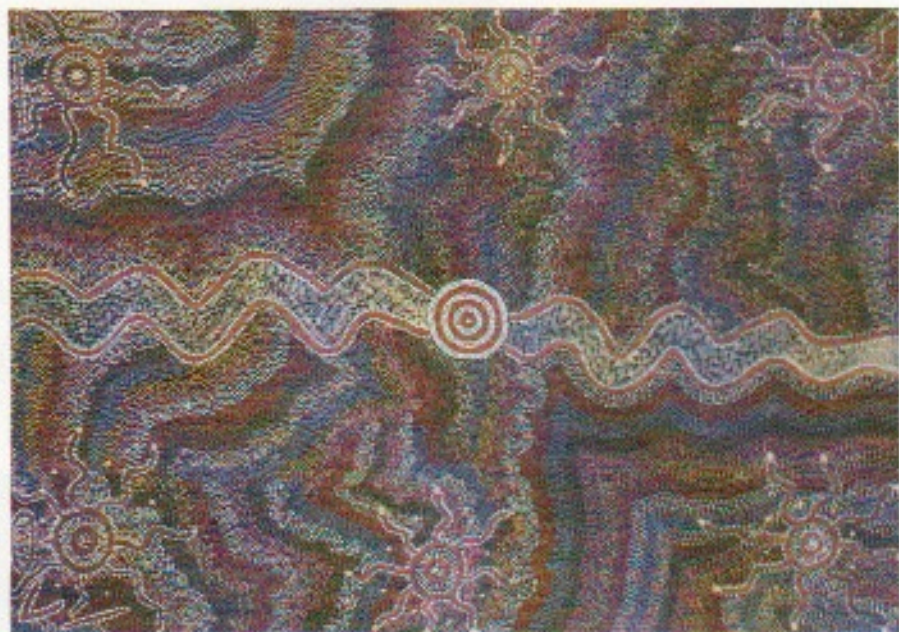
Stories of the Dreamtime

Born out of Australia's western desert, the dead heart which covers almost a third of the Australian continent, Papunya Tula painting is becoming one of the most important schools of contemporary art in Australia today. It began only sixteen years ago in the Papunya settlement north-west of Alice Springs, but it has its roots in a tradition of sand paintings stretching back more than 35,000 years.

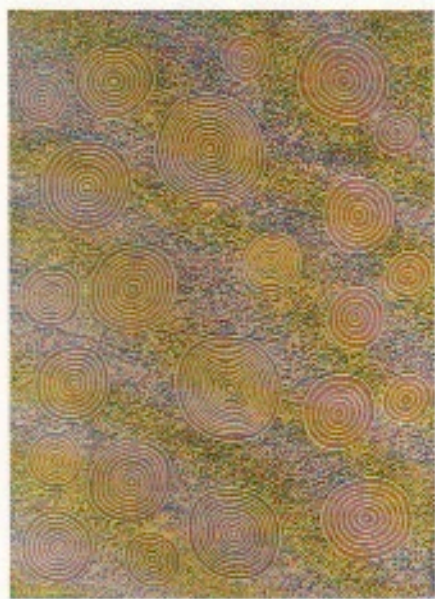
The Aborigines of central Australia have always recorded in the sand the stories of the Dreaming, the time when, according to Aboriginal folklore, the world and all it contains came into being. These intricate patterns, which the Aborigines used to explain the mysteries of the creation of the landscape and the life it contains, were ephemeral art forms which disappeared with the wind and the rain. But they survived in the minds of the custodians of the Dreamtime stories, and it has always been the tradition for these custodians to pass the stories down to the next generation. So the survival of the Dreaming stories has always depended on an unbroken chain from one generation to the next.

With the fragmentation of the Aboriginal tribal life, this chain was in danger of being broken and the stories lost forever until Geoff Bardon, an art and craft teacher appointed to the Papunya school, took a step that was to provide the catalyst which brought the new art form into being. Bardon noticed that the children of the area drew stories in the sand from early childhood but would never reproduce these patterns in the classroom. In an attempt to come to grips with conflicting educational aesthetic values, he encouraged the children to paint Aboriginal designs on the school walls. His attempts failed, probably because of the children's reluctance to break with tribal tradition which does not permit tribal designs to become common property.

In the end Bardon and his assistant painted an 'Aboriginal' mural, and its creation caused so much interest among the senior members of the Aboriginal community that several of them expressed an interest in trying the medium. This led to the first attempt to translate the sand paintings into something more durable, using acrylic paints. The first artists to attempt the new medium used pieces of old linoleum, or anything else which came to hand, as a basis for their



Untitled. Pansy Napangardi, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 124 x 177 cm. Courtesy Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London.



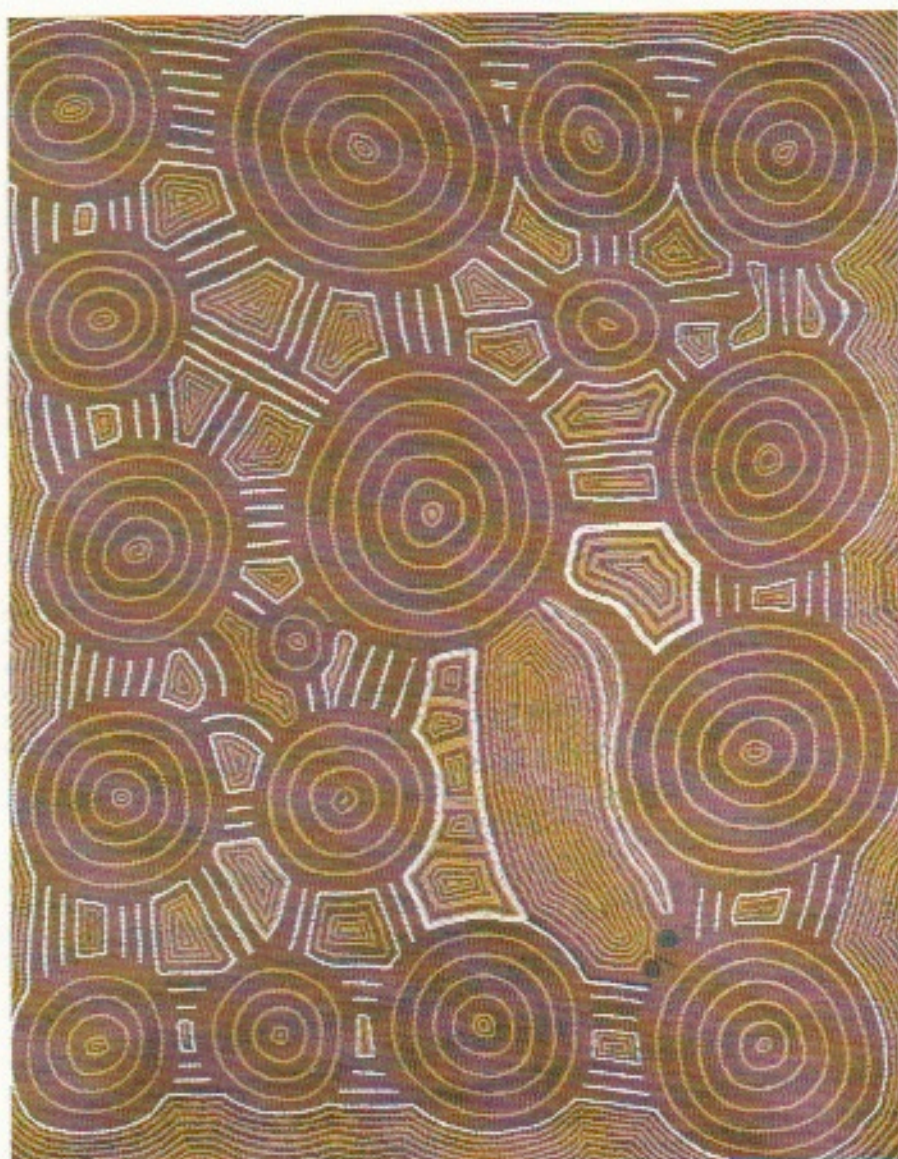
Secret Tingari ceremonies. Anatjari Tjakamarra (Pintubi tribe). Acrylic on canvas, 173 x 127 cm. Courtesy Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London.

work. As the movement developed, canvas was made available. Now there are more than one hundred artists associated with the school, and the movement has expanded over a wide area as artists from Papunya have moved on to form settlements elsewhere in the desert, bringing with them their new skill to be passed on to other Aborigines in these areas.

Today there are a large number of centres where Aboriginal artists are painting in acrylics, and the work they have produced is gaining acclaim all over the world. Already there have been several major overseas exhibitions of these new works. Australia's national galleries, too, have recognised the importance of this new school of painting. The National Gallery of Victoria mounted a major exhibition of works by the Papunya Tula school in 1986. The then director, Patrick McCaughey, claims that the birth of this new movement is one of the most miraculous stories in the world of art anywhere and that a great tradition, which looked as if it would die out, has now been rendered permanent and given a renaissance by being put onto the walls on canvas for the rest of the world to share.

To many these pointillist-style paintings appear as pleasing, sophisticated abstract works, but they are in fact a form of hieroglyphics in which the artist tells the stories of the Dreaming using symbols. The stories are always related to the landscape. For the Aborigine, the physical facts of reality are also spiritual. The boundary between the physical and the spiritual simply does not exist. Thus Turkey Tolsen Tjupurrula's painting, *Tilpakan*, which was borrowed from the Robert Holmes à Court collection for the National Gallery of Victoria's exhibition, tells of the great mythical snake of the Dreamtime, one of the figures which shapes the world. The painting shows how the sandhills of Tilpakan have come to be formed around the body of the great snake.

Two or more Dreaming stories are often combined in the same painting. Limpi Puntungka Tjapangati's contribution to the exhibition is based on a sand painting used for ceremonies to celebrate two Dreaming stories. The spider-like motif represents the root of the wild onion which grows at Pampali, a waterhole and creek close to Hermannsburg, and also near Haast's Bluff, where the



Mythical Characters of Tingari Dreaming. Anatjari Tjampijimpa (Pintubi tribe). Acrylic on canvas, 153 x 122 cm. Courtesy Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London.

work was painted. The story of the painting follows a path between the two places. White hands represent witchetty grubs. The Dreaming story parallels the social transition of young men from boyhood to manhood with the metamorphosis of the witchetty grub from the pupal stage to the moth. The painting is based on a sand design used in a ceremony in which hundreds of witchetty grubs are collected and worn about the body by two male dancers who later 'fly away'.

Often the stories in the paintings are from journeys. Many represent an extraordinary aerial view of the landscape. The Aboriginal artist of today is able to picture thousands upon thousands of square kilometres of landscape in the form of an aerial map, not because of a first-hand knowledge of how it looks from the air, but because he has inherited from his ancestors an understanding of his land that is profound and internal.

Aboriginal women are now beginning



The Aboriginal reserve in Papunya.
Photograph © Elizabeth Thompson.

to participate in this new art form. Daisy Laura Nakamarra's painting in the National Gallery of Victoria's exhibition is of a women's Dreaming site at Ibilli. Circles and U-shapes show women seated around the campfire.

Attempts to unravel the basic visual language of the Australian Aborigine in the western desert suggest that the range of symbols is limited and that the same symbols are used for a number of different purposes. Thus a U-shaped symbol can mean a person sitting or a windbreak; an inverted S-shape can mean a snake, smoke, lightning or water flowing; two parallel curves can mean ribs, clouds or boomerangs; rain can be represented either with small circles or consecutive lines; and there are at least four symbols to represent footprints of various kinds. Reading these paintings is, therefore, not an easy matter.

Annemarie Brody, who curated the exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, talks in the catalogue of how the Aborigines use their sense of touch to read the paintings, tracing the patterns of the paintings with the fingers in much the same way that the sand maps were read. Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Charlie Egalie Tjapaltjarri, the two Aboriginal artists who came to Melbourne for the opening week of the exhibition, gave a demonstration of this use of the fingers when they attempted to explain it to members of the press. Their fingers moved slowly over the surfaces of the paintings, tracing out the stories as something familiar, something known. Annemarie Brody says that in the early days of the art movement the paintings were taken one by one and put on the ground, where they were touched by the men who also 'sang' the paintings to bring them to life.

New York is to see this new form of Australian Aboriginal art in a major survey exhibition called *Totemic Landscapes from Aboriginal Australia* which opens at The Asia Society headquarters, 725 Park Avenue in October 1988. The exhibition will travel to Chicago and Los Angeles and later returns to Australia to be shown in Melbourne and Adelaide. Half of the paintings in the exhibition will be on canvas, the other half will be the more traditional bark paintings which come from areas of Australia where wood is more plentiful. It will be the most significant exhibition of Aboriginal art ever to be shown in America.

The Director of the Asia Society Galleries, Mr Andrew Pekarik, says that, in arranging the exhibition, he has been well aware that in order to communicate the key aspects of an unknown culture to American audiences it is necessary to exhibit paintings of high aesthetic quality. 'We realise that if people are impressed visually by these art objects, they will take what we say about them more seriously', he said.

The gallery is borrowing extensively from the Art Gallery of South Australia which began collecting the works on canvas soon after the movement began. It holds some of the original paintings collected by Geoff Bardon and these will also be included in the exhibition. Most of the bark paintings will come from the South Australian Museum which has an outstanding collection. The Museum of New South Wales in Sydney, and private collectors in Australia are also lending works. The curator is Mr Peter Sutton, head of the department of anthropology at the South Australian Museum. To back up the exhibition a team of anthropologists from the museum will research Aboriginal art in the desert, and their findings will be included in a book to be published in New York to coincide with the opening. This 300-page book will be the most complete study of Aboriginal art yet made. It will outline the role of the visual arts in Aboriginal culture, and the relationship between symbols, places and people. It will document the role of the artist in the production of the art work and look at the remarkable resilience of Australian Aboriginal art in an interrupted social order. ●

JUDY NEWMAN

An exhibition of Papunya Tula art *Paintings of the Dreaming: Artists from the Central Australian Desert* can be seen at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill Street, London W1 1HH, from 22nd June to 30th July, 1988.

The exhibition *Totemic Landscapes from Aboriginal Australia* will open at the Asia Society headquarters, 725 Park Avenue, New York, on 6th October, 1988 and will continue until 1st January, 1989. The exhibition will also travel to Chicago (David and Alfred Smart Gallery, University of Chicago — 27th January, 1989 to 30th April, 1989) and Los Angeles (the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History — 13th May to 5th August, 1989) before returning to Australia for exhibition at the Museum of Victoria in September/October 1989 and the Museum of South Australia, Adelaide, in November 1989.

The art of concealment

In 1835 John Batman inaugurated the pastoral invasion of Victoria by signing a 'treaty' with the Port Phillip Aborigines allowing him to occupy the territory 'called Dutigalla'. But what did this land consist of? Batman's followers found the Aborigines did not know what 'Dutigalla' meant. Perhaps, an early settler speculated, the word was a corruption of 'Nuthergalla' from 'nuther' meaning 'no'. But by then, as a recent historian has observed, 'Nuthergalla may have been an Aboriginal corruption of Dutigalla'. Whether an invention or a misunderstanding, Dutigalla served its purpose. It provided a rhetorical pretext for taking possession. What's more, it achieved this by making the Aborigines collude in their own dispossession. Not knowing the word, they could only repeat it back to the questioners. Condemned to imitation, they found even their 'no' interpreted as a 'yes', their failure to imitate *perfectly* evidence of backwardness.

This anecdote is typical of many European Aboriginal encounters in this as well as the last century, and it is a reminder that, even when white Australians imagine the Aborigines are speaking to them, they may only be hearing the echo of their own voices. This certainly seems to be true in the realm of the visual arts. Take the watercolours of Albert Namatjira or the 'dot and circle' designs of the Papunya school. Both have been assumed to be 'art', amenable to art-historical and critical categories of description. But is this assumption justified? Perhaps this Aboriginal work only *imitates* Western aesthetic conventions. More disturbingly still, perhaps it does this so well that it conceals its real meaning, its seeming 'yes' to the Western eye concealing a profounder 'no'. Perhaps our acceptance of it represents a fundamental misinterpretation of it. If so, unlike Batman, it is we, not they, who are the losers.

Vasari-like myths cling to Namatjira and the Papunya Tula school. Take the near miraculous beginnings of their art. A chance visit by white Australian artist, Rex Batherbee, to the Hermannsburg Mission west of Alice Springs in 1934 introduced Namatjira to the medium of watercolour. Two years later, as a result of his persistent interest, Namatjira found himself assisting Batherbee on a painting trip to Palm Valley in the Kri-chauff Ranges. Within two weeks 'Al-

bert was producing work that astonished his tutor'. He could reproduce a scene before him with great fidelity. The birth of the Papunya Tula school, 'phoenix-like out of the malaise', was also the result of a chance encounter with a new medium — in this case, acrylic paints. In 1971, Geoff Bardon, art and craft teacher at the Papunya settlement (situated some 200 miles north-west of Hermannsburg) encouraged a number of tribal men to paint large outdoor murals 'first on cardboard and small boards and then stretched canvas'. From then on, Bardon recalls, 'Demand for painting materials rose rapidly'. Before long a fully fledged painting movement had emerged.

Of course, white commentators have acknowledged the art's social and political context. They have been at pains to elucidate the artists' lives. Namatjira had been, we understand, 'searching for a medium of expression since his youth in Hermannsburg where he was adept at carpentry and later at carving and decorating wood in the form of weapons and plaques'. Nor did this sudden efflorescence of native talent flourish in a vacuum. Strehlow, who made the Aranda (Namatjira's people) his life's study, noted that 'By learning its [watercolour's] techniques a full-blooded Aboriginal could win respect and social standing in the new but inescapable world of European ways and ideas'. Similarly, the artistic and commercial success of the Papunya school has exerted political pressure on those whose job it is to formulate Aboriginal policy. No less significantly, it has furnished the art market with new artists — a development celebrated in the recent retrospective devoted to the work of Papunya painter, Charlie Tjaruru Tjungurrayi.

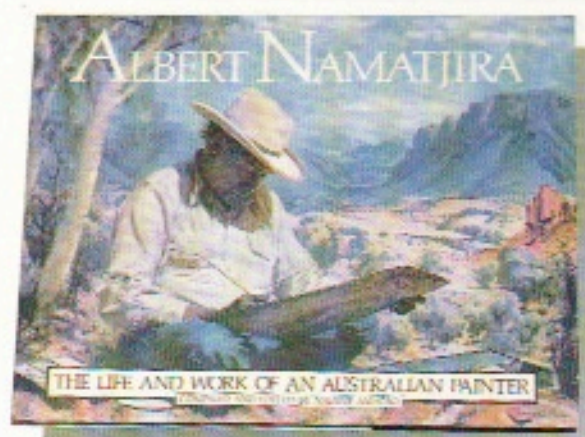
Inside Aboriginal society, too, there have been significant benefits: Namatjira's art was a way of establishing his authority among his own people — his sharing of his art with his children and relatives was a means of giving substance and meaning to traditional kinship ties. Similarly, at Papunya, as Bardon has explained, painting brought together 'several groups of men from different tribes'. It became a means whereby they could paint their 'Dreaming stories' and in this way discover a common cultural identity and purpose.

However, when all the social and political circumstances have been ex-



Albert Namatjira painting at Heavitree Gap, 1956. Reproduced courtesy of John Brackenreg.

plained, there remains an indisputable core of work — work open to stylistic interpretation. The paintings of the Papunya school, it is true, depict Aboriginal myths and require the artist's explanation, but even these can be subjected to analysis. Crocker, for instance, sees important differences in 'content, scale and facility' between early and contemporary Papunya paintings. Formally, if not thematically, they can be compared with the dotted landscapes of Fred Williams. The landscapes of Namatjira present far fewer difficulties:



what could be more natural than to take his 'glorious' colours at face value — and to draw his art into the great debate between Realism and Abstraction? What could be more predictable (and more reassuring) than the discovery that Namatjira was intensely interested in the art of Hans Heyesen? That his art can be divided into three 'periods'?

Maybe the eagerness of critics and purchasers to describe this work and its provenance in reassuringly familiar terms has blinded them to its true emptiness and evasiveness? Viewed purely as landscapes, the watercolours of Namatjira and his followers are notably unpopulated. The treatment of individual elements is laconic, flat: 'distant' ranges are ostentatiously mauve, the 'foreground' sand luminously ochre. The white boles of gums do not merely frame the 'view' or occupy it: they dominate the scene, as if they looked over the shoulder of the viewer. There is a consistent resistance to novelty (little of Colman's interest in formal relations,

say): the treatment is sure, matter-of-fact, devoid of effects, whether compositional or atmospheric.

Namatjira painted country he knew: one is tempted to say the strangeness of his landscapes reflects his own familiarity with them. There is so much which seems to be left unsaid, so much which is perhaps invisibly present. At the climactic moment of his little monograph on Namatjira, the anthropologist, Charles Mountford, describes how he came upon the artist painting in Palm Valley, a few miles from his own 'dreaming-place'. At Mountford's request, Namatjira puts aside his watercolour and begins to explain, with the help of a drawing, 'the legend and geography of the surrounding country'.

'Then happened something which I never expected to see, even in my most fantastic visions. It was surely an experience without parallel to watch a man depicting, in the most primitive of all arts, beliefs that stretched back to the dawn of his creation, while lying beside him, the product of the same hand, were beautiful watercolours in the art of today. It scarcely seemed possible that any man could have bridged that immense gap in artistic expression.'

But had Namatjira 'bridged that immense gap'? Could it not be that the watercolour concealed the meaning of the place — but concealed it in such a way that, to white eyes, it looked like the clearest representation of it?

However, before pursuing this speculation, we should pause over Mountford's amazement. In his classic, and now withdrawn, *Nomads of the Australian Desert*, Mountford showed how, on initiation, the art of Aboriginal youths underwent an astonishing and almost instantaneous change.² In one case, a youth who was capable of drawing a stockyard realistically, produced only eleven days later, and three days after his sub-incision ceremony, a drawing which 'dealt only with tribal matters and was illustrated entirely with Aboriginal motifs'.

From the earliest contact times Europeans have commented on the Aborigines' imitative facility. Early explorers and missionaries noted how readily the Aborigines adopted European names, mimicked European manners, copied European techniques, exploited new materials. More recently, educationalists have commented — sometimes almost

despairingly — on the superior eidetic faculties of the Aboriginal child — the keenness of his visual memory. All this goes hand in hand with the Australian Aborigines' profound and increasingly articulate resistance to white ways of life, and an even profounder sense of identity as something connected with retaining possession of his country.

In this context we realise the force of Charlie Tjaruru Tjungurrayi's remark that, 'If I don't paint this story some white fella might come and steal my country'. Papunya art is, at least at one level, a form of re-possession, a way of re-asserting cultural and political identity. It belongs to a tradition of adaptability, one in which the flexible incorporation of foreign elements was a basic strategy of survival. The aesthetic appeal of his dot and circle designs is, as it were, imitative of European tastes and fashions, but, from the artist's point of view, it functions as a convenient cover — a means of enabling him to say what, in other (political) contexts, would be prohibited: so, concealing his message as an aesthetic object, he speaks plainly (and not necessarily to whites).

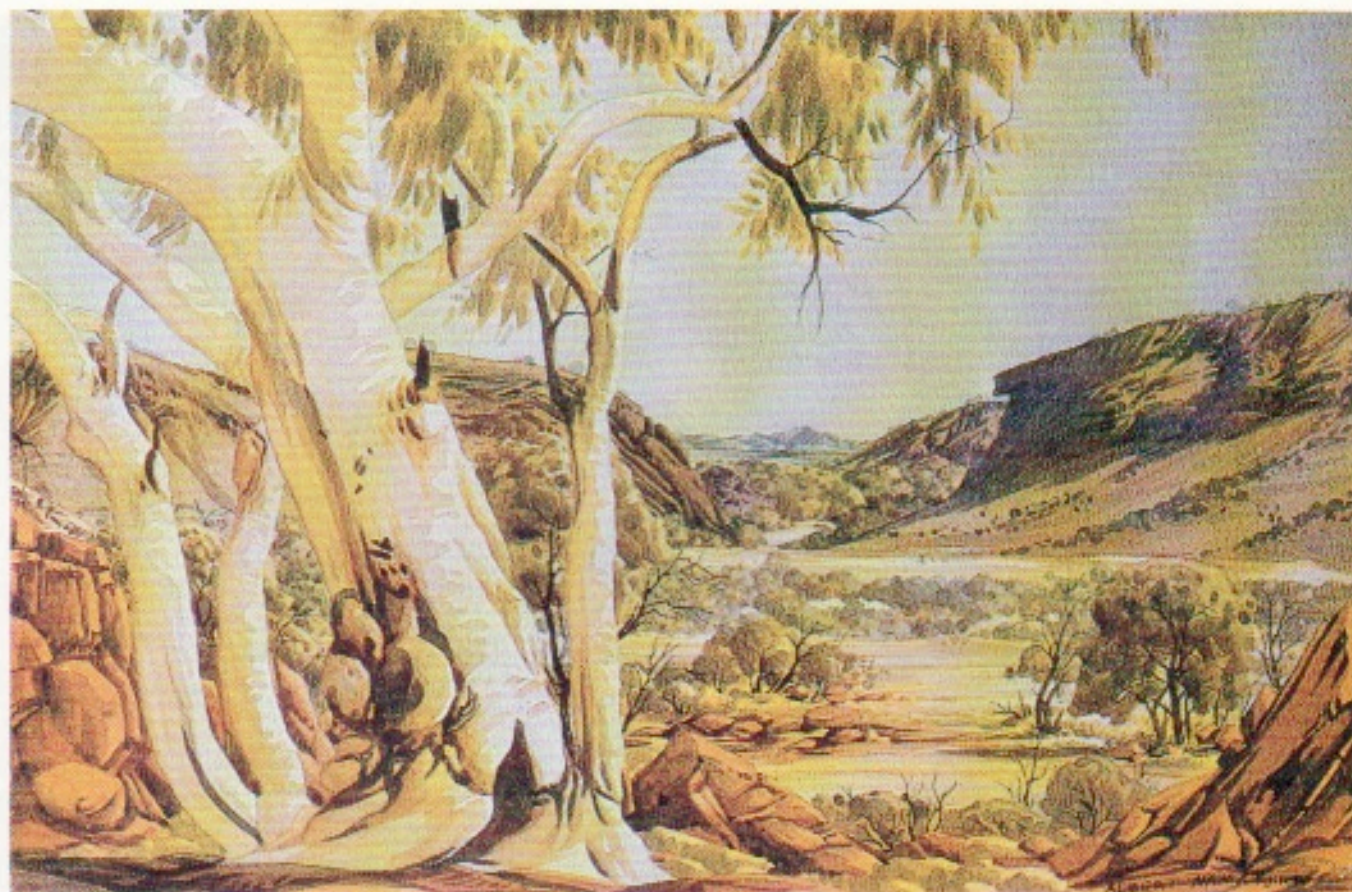
The abstraction of Papunya Tula art, the necessity to have its symbolism explained, makes it, paradoxically, less enigmatic than the art of Namatjira. Papunya Tula paintings, at least, declare their concealment openly — and, indeed, their current fashionableness is not unconnected with the idea that, by their purchase, one acquires access to secret knowledge. Namatjira, on the other hand, seems to have no ulterior motive: he is content, as it were, to imitate the European gaze, to flatter European taste. Yet it is exactly this motive which his paintings conceal. The fact is that the motive of these open landscapes is imitation itself — imitation of a technique, imitation of a place. It is in this way that the European viewer is confronted with the reflection of his own culture and not by any means granted entrance to Aranda country. ●

PAUL CARTER

Footnotes

1. Nadine Amadio, *Albert Namatjira: The Life and Work of an Australian Painter*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986, p3, \$29.95 (available only in Australia).

2. C P Mountford, *Nomads of the Australian Desert*, Rigby Limited, Melbourne, 1976.



South Through the Ranges, Heavitree Gap. *Albert Namatjira, 1952. Watercolour.*



In the High Hills, Ormiston Gorge. *Albert Namatjira, circa 1950. Watercolour.*



*Owl Woman. Moses Masaya. Green serpentine stone, 76 x 23 x 21 cm.
Courtesy Matombo Gallery, Harare.*