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SPECIAL ISSUE  
ARTHUR DANTO: IS THERE  
A CRISIS IN AMERICAN ART?

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# MODERN PAINTERS

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## DREAMTIME



GEORGE RISH, DREAMTIME PAINTING, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 1988. REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY

The art of Papunya Tula was a vision born out of adversity. At a time when the wandering tribes were being brought out of the Australian desert and forced to share with each other a static life in the name of assimilation, there was a feeling that the complex mythology and identity which they had carried with them across the plains for countless centuries would be lost to them. Realising this, a white Australian teacher encouraged them to keep their stories alive by painting them, not in the sand but in acrylic and on canvas. The artists quickly adapted the rhythm of their songs and dreamings to the new rectangular format, and found in the new colours a way to expand the ancient palette of ochre and charcoal. Fifteen years on and this small beginning has become a movement of astonishing power and complexity. Some of the best recent work is at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery from June 12th to July 22nd.

If one reason only is needed to go and see these paintings, it is because they are showing us, in the west, a new way of seeing. In the absence of any formal written language, painting for the Aborigines has been for over 30,000 years, a central system of communication – one which appears highly reductive, using only the simplest of marks (dots, curves, circles, arrows), but which is capable of encompassing a bewildering depth and variety of meanings. This is what makes it so gripping, because whilst they appeal to us as richly textured abstract designs, with the rhythm of dots recalling the surfaces of Jackson Pollock, yet

for the Aborigines, they are essentially descriptive. Indeed the dots have been used to obscure the story telling, lest too much sacred lore be imparted to strangers.

What these paintings are describing is the desert; not through western eyes as Drysdale and Nolan saw it, from ground level with an empty horizon, barren and hostile to man, but rather from above, as described by those who have walked over it, a land full of fertile life and hidden promise. To look at the work of Clifford Possum or Japaljarri is to look at an intricate map of the desert; abstracted and yet capable of describing, for example, the exact route to be taken from one waterhole to another. It is also an anthropomorphic vision, where mountains are not just mountains but dreamtime beings, where everything is itself a story.

Luke Elwes