

# Aboriginal abstracts capture the imagination of Western buyers

PERIODICALLY the contemporary art world is hit by a craze which has little to do with the main lines of development in modern art. After the New York Graffiti Painters of the early 1980s come Australian Aboriginal artists.

Their paintings (in acrylic on canvas) are coded versions of Aboriginal stories and legends — for example, one painting may tell how seven sisters came down to Earth to eat witchetty grubs. To the uninitiated eye they look like a new and rather jolly variety of modernists' abstraction, instantly recognisable because of an obsession with dots.

The paintings are very definitely addressed to a Western market, and the proceeds are used to buy consumer goods. Asked what was her inspiration for a painting, one artist said she "did it to buy a Toyota".

Aboriginal painting has been big in Australia since 1984, when the National Gallery of Victoria bought a big canvas for \$200,000. It has caught on in New York, with a show at Asia House and a commercial exhibition at the prestigious John Weber Gallery, where the highest price was \$23,000. Aboriginal art has now come to London, with a show called "Songlines" at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in Windmill Street.

Ms Hossack is Australian, and she has the right sources. Her

## CONTEMPORARY ART MARKET

by Edward Lucie-Smith

paintings include work by established masters from Papunya, the government-run settlement 175 miles north of Alice Springs, where the whole thing began. Her prices are more accessible than those in New York. A medium-sized work by Clifford Possum, one of the star names, costs £4,500. Lesser-known artists are cheaper. Some of the more famous are Aboriginal women, traditionally downtrodden, but now

getting vocal support from white Australian feminists. Ms Hossack has a painting by Bessie Liddle for £2,500 and one by Janie Peter Nakamarra for £900. Small painted boards with the same designs start at £150.

There is more exotica at the Thumb Gallery in Lexington Street — work by Japanese sculptor and printmaker Tsugumi Ota, who studied in London and who has recently been working at Pietrasanta in Tuscany — a mecca for marble-carvers.

Ms Ota is inspired by the Japanese-American sculptor Tsamu Noguchi, and by Noguchi's master, Brancusi. Her carvings (there is a beautiful one of a fish)

cost between £3,500 and £7,000. Her huge, rather Art Deco woodcuts, made by carving the image into sheets of plywood, cost between £225 and £1,200, in very small editions. Confusingly, they are often inspired by Greek and Latin classics which the artist read as a child in Japan.

At the Curwen Gallery, also in Windmill Street, there are landscape paintings by Thirza Kotzen, born in South Africa but now British. They record her travels in colourful expressionist style. The largest, an African panorama called *Letaba I*, is priced at £2,000. Smaller canvases cost £900 and works on paper are between £375 and £700.



A work by Bessie Liddle featured in the 'Songlines' exhibition



*Dreamtime Painting*, an acrylic on canvas by Aborigine George Bush



*Water Dreaming*, by the leading Aborigine artist Clifford Possum