

# Songlines

Mick Gillis  
representative of  
three snakes of  
the Dreamtime ...  
widening an  
international audience

An important exhibition  
of Aboriginal art is now

showing in London for the first time outside Australia.

*"Aboriginals could not believe the country existed until they could see it and sing it — just as in the Dreamtime the country had not existed until the Ancestors sang it. An unsung land is a dead land: since, if the songs are forgotten, the land itself will die."*

Bruce Chatwin, 'Songlines'

JANE CORNWELL

explores the meaning

behind the works of the

people of Balgo Hills

**S**ONGLINES are pathways connecting up all over Australia, ancient tracks made of songs which tell of the creation of the land. Invisible to the modern eye, these songlines are ritually travelled by the Aboriginals who sing their Ancestors songs and so constantly renew the world.

Songlines is also the title of an exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in Windmill St, W1, until April 7. Above the gallery door, the black, red and yellow of the Aboriginal flag flutters in the London breeze, raised in celebration of a movement which has proved itself to be much more than an ethnographic curiosity.

'Paintings from Balgo Hills' follows on from Rebecca Hossack's 1988 'Songlines' series featuring works from Papunya Tula, Yendumu and Mt Allen artists, the original painters of the movement. In early January, ex-Melbournian Hossack made the arduous journey from Alice Springs 700km north-west to Balgo Hills to collect paintings from the elder men of the community. In her eponymous gallery they now appear for the first time ever outside Australia, praised in many art circles as being some of the finest examples of indigenous painting yet seen. Many similar works grace the walls of the National Gallery in Canberra.

Writer Bruce Chatwin was a close friend of Hossack's during the last years of his life, and

it is in tribute to him as well as to Australia's original inhabitants that the exhibition is so named. The gallery policy is to have three exhibitions of Aboriginal art a year. To prevent British patrons from perceiving the movement as merely cultural voyeurism, a one-man show by Bill Stockman is featured in June and July. To mark the event, this elder brother of the famous artist Clifford Possum is leaving his homeland for the first time at the age of 84 to come to London.

The paintings featured in 'Songlines: Paintings From Balgo Hills' are presented in a way which, on first impression, seems incongruous in a pristine gallery environment. Large, geometrical abstracts feature the deep, rich

are vividly collected by modern Australian entrepreneurs such as Robert Holmes a Court. Julie Christie bought a painting from the first exhibition and it is envisaged that this one will also be a sell-out.

Hossack accepts a limitation in British taste in Aboriginal art. "When in the past I've shown something bright orange and wonderful it hasn't sold. The pictures that do sell are more muted: the soft orange colours, the blues and the pinks, the soft, smoky British colours." The sale of the artists' work and their output is regulated to ensure there is always a demand and the profits go back to the Aboriginals themselves.

'Paintings from Balgo Hill' is intended specifically for a European market. The present fashionable status of Aboriginal art is as important to the art world as aesthetic demands and it would be interesting to know if wealthy purchasers are also aware of their cultural significance. For over 50,000 years, Aboriginal people have been depicting their tribal dreaming in the sands of the Outback. Only recently, traumatised by confinement in government reserves and inspired by 'Western' examples, have they put these 'conceptual desert landscapes' onto canvas using acrylics.

The Balgo artists live in three communities, Balgo, Mulan and Billiluna, lying between 20-300km south of Halls Creek. This is an area where vast expanses of the Western Desert meet the rugged, sub tropical Kimberley region. The different influences are represented in Balgo art and probably its greatest strength is its diversity. The Warlayiri Artists is a cooperative of over 120 artists from differing cultural groups, with more female than male artists. Over a third of these are over 50 years of age and so were born and grew up in the

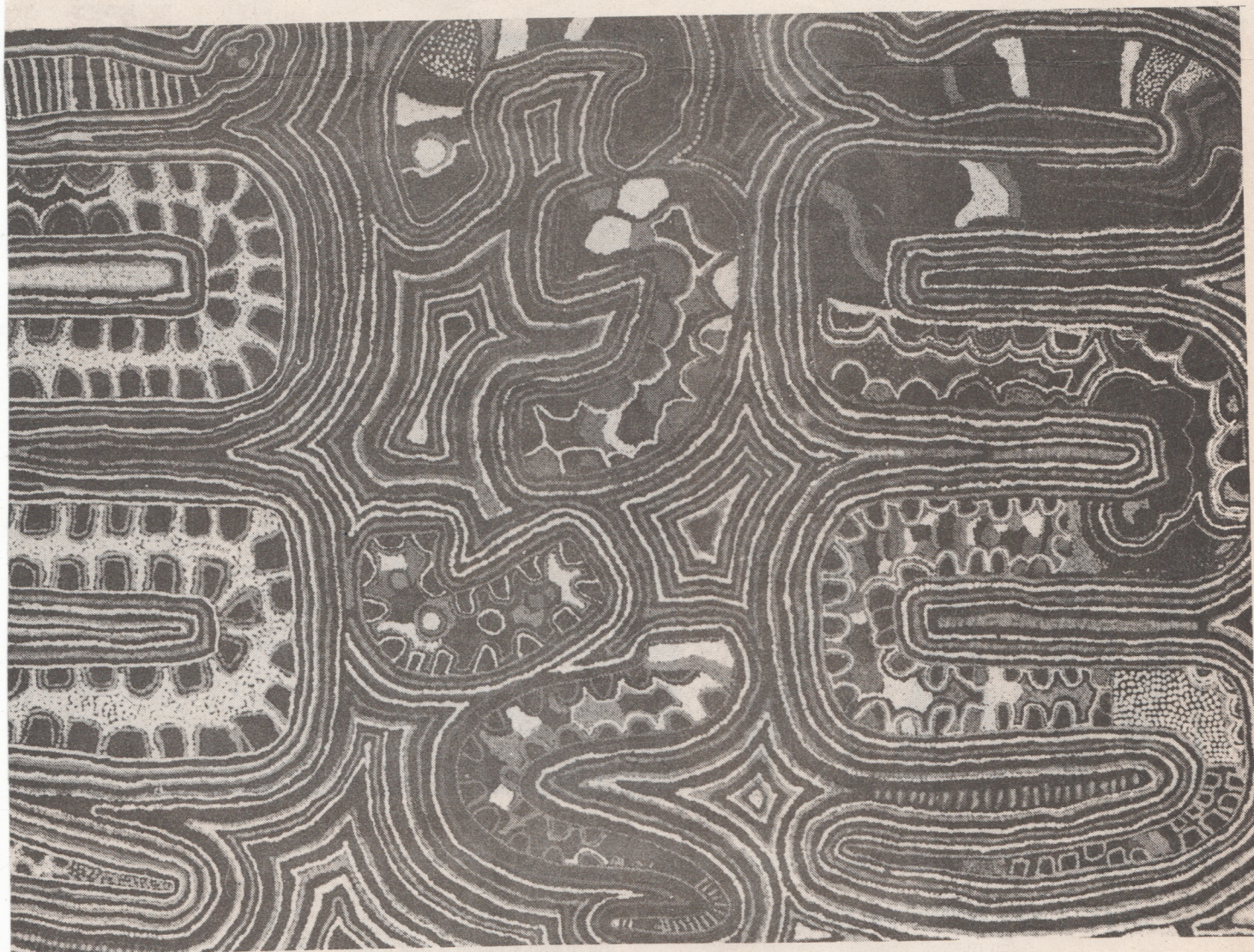


Photographer Nicholas Adler ... Portraits from an Uninhabited Land

colours of the Australian Outback, invoking the spirit of the ancient songlines. Displayed on stark white walls, the investment potential and aesthetic appeal for the boardroom is evident and it is for these reasons that the works







bush before the first contact with white society.

The original Balgo community was established in the 1920s as a centre for desert Aborigines. The current art activity began in the late 1970s with older men using whatever paints, sheets of canvas and boards that were available. The designs used were similar to those traditionally employed in the sand and on their bodies during ceremonies and to decorate their sacred boards. All secret and sacred elements were removed.

Financial assistance led to an explosion of painting activity, and the Warlayiri artists have developed steadily. The presence of the Roman Catholic church over the past 50 years is reflected in the art in, for example, the greater use of decorative and figurative elements, especially by younger artists. Each Balgo painting is about a particular place which 'belongs' to the artist and which has been and will always be in his or her family. This amounts to a rock solid, eternal link that stems from the Dreamtime, giving to the people the strength to meet their difficulties and to their art the power and harmony that white Australia is at last beginning to acknowledge and admire.

Many of the works on display in 'Songlines' are dominated by dotting (with rounded sticks rather than brushes) in the four traditional colours of black, white, red ochre and yellow ochre. Others incorporate greens and blues, and brighter reds and yellows. In keeping with the title of the exhibition, all the paintings can be seen from a bird's eye view — typical of those who follow the songlines, those who have walked over the land.

Each painting is itself a story: 55-year-old Bridget Mudjidell's depiction of her country, Tulkku, near Yagga Yagga, describes an area where the artist grew up. Women are seen to be collecting all the different types of foods found here and the two snakes which went travelling in the Dreamtime are also shown. George Wallaby, 50, paints the Lake Gregory area, incorporating the 'Kuntakitjua', a small but powerful spirit seen killing two snakes with sticks to stop them travelling to other places.

To the uninitiated, the rich mosaic like designs do not serve the same essentially descriptive purpose they do for Aborigines. The dots have actually been used to obscure the story telling, to that much of the sacred lore remains precisely that. 'Songlines'

shows a tableau of the aesthetic and symbolic, all the more effective in its presentation as a collective effort.

Downstairs at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery is a fitting compliment to the canvasses on show above. 'Portraits from an Uninhabited Land' is an exhibition of the Balgo people themselves by English photographer Nicholas Adler. From a series of makeshift bush studios, Adler has produced a series of black and white images which capture the curious blend of naivety and sophistication that the Balgo Hills people also portray in their art.

Hopefully the voracious art market will not get too greedy and devour the meaning behind the Aboriginal art movement. In the wake of Bicentennial fervour, 'Songlines: Paintings from Balgo Hills' may assist in creating an awareness of Australia's original inhabitants and their natural right to cultural expression. Bearing this in mind, the exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery should be viewed with respect and humility.

**SONGLINES: PAINTINGS FROM BALGO HILLS**  
Until Apr 7, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill St, W1, 11am-7pm, admission free