





# Waking up to Dreamtime

In one of the most memorable passages from Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, an Aboriginal artist is visited by his dealer whose offer of \$300 is rejected: "Six thousand dollars! You have to be joking!" "Well, why are you asking seven fuckin' thousand dollars for one of my paintings in your fuckin' exhibition in Adelaide?" Aboriginal art is big business and much has changed since 1971, when an art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, provided the Papunya community with canvas and acrylic paints, enabling them to render permanent versions of their ancient sacred sand paintings. These "Dreamtime" paintings have become increasingly familiar to Western eyes following the exhibition *Dreamings* which toured the USA in 1988. New York galleries were soon selling fine Aboriginal works for four and five figure sums and with the boom came claims of exploitation and profiteering and a general confusion as to pricing levels. Responses to the exhibition can be seen in four shows in Britain, two current and two forthcoming.

**Rebecca Hossack** is showing mainstream dot and circle paintings at her central London gallery. Having specialized in western desert painting for 10 years, she is scathing about the mercenary businessmen, or "cowboys", who, in the wake of the *Dreamings* exhibition, were quick to realise Aboriginal art's commercial potential and bought in bulk for a pittance from the then gullible artists. She herself has tried to nurture a select group of artists, paying them a reasonable cut.

The largest of the British shows, which opened at **Glasgow's Third Eye**

**Centre** on Saturday, also offers a refreshing change from the cashing-in syndrome. **Tagari Lia** has been put together by Sydney dealer Anthony Burke, who emphasises that his intention was to show the diversity of Aboriginal art. The exhibition falls into three categories: traditional dot painting of the Western Desert; bark painting of the Northern Territories; and "Urban" Aboriginal painting. This last art form, spawned in the squalid, alcoholism-ridden townships around Alice, has a political base far removed from the Dreamings and is seen by many to

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offer a more authentic picture of the contemporary Aborigine lifestyle. The message of the exhibition is that the Dreaming is only one side of Aboriginal art, and cannot be seen as ethnographically valid, although it has been instrumental in attracting the attention of a Western audience already accustomed to abstract art and preoccupied with the natural environment.

Although these shows will be for many their first exposure to Aboriginal art, it already has its old guard, and newcomers to the field can face criticism. Young dealer Patrick Corbally-Stourton has been in the business only two years, but has organised two shows in London this month. His unconventional approach is clearly evident at the

**National Theatre** where he shows traditional images in non-traditional colours and at **Addison Ross** in Belgravia where the work of recognised masters hangs alongside that of lesser-known artists. These shows follow in the wake of his more grandiose exhibition at the Mall Galleries in June, billed as "the largest ever". Critics were swift to point out that largest does not necessarily imply best and that, as in all art, it is easy to hang a minor painter alongside a respected artist, imparting a measure of reflected glory to the latter. Nevertheless, among the 600 or so painters of the second wave of dot and circle painting there must be a few who really are worthwhile, and it is these that Corbally-Stourton believes he has found. In a field whose few experts refuse to be drawn into value-judgements on specific artists, his hunch remains to be disproved.

Despite the conclusions of one Australian government report last year — that it no longer exists — there is little hard evidence for or against the exploitation of Aboriginal artists. Many of the artistic communities have formed organizations, found lawyers and, like Chatwin's painter, developed a market awareness, but one still cannot be certain who is getting his fingers burned, artist or "cowboy". What is certain is that far from betraying sacred secrets to the white man, Aboriginal art has prompted a new interest in Australia's first custodians, and has preserved their culture in the only way possible in a white-dominated society. To really understand the issues one would have to live in Alice. It is somewhat simpler to start by visiting these exhibitions.

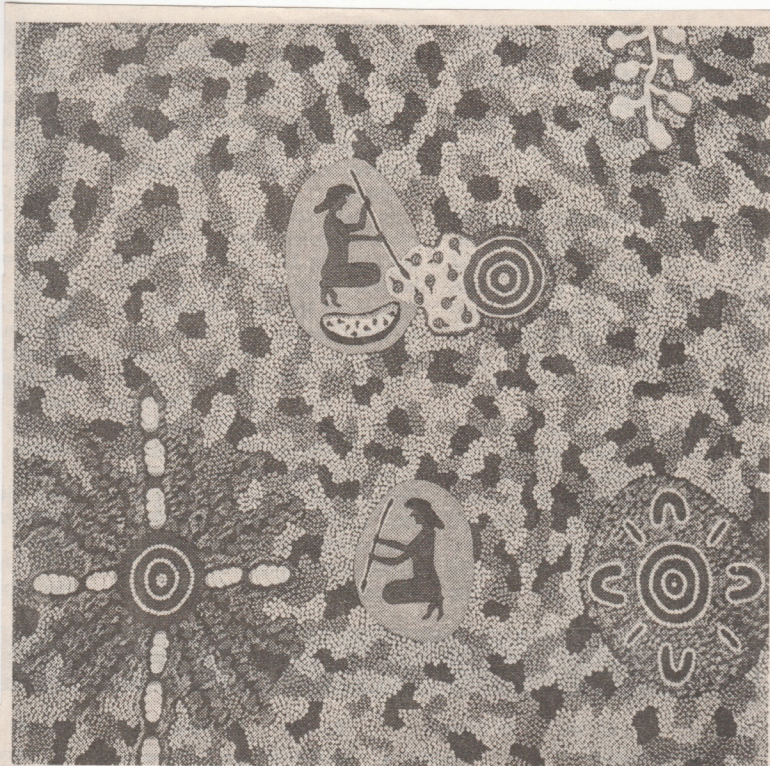
**REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY**  
Western desert paintings of the Dreamtime from central Australia. High quality work at un-inflated prices. Artists include Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri and Joseph Jutta Tjapaltjarri. 35 Windmill St, W1 (071-409 3599)

**THIRD EYE CENTRE**  
First official Aboriginal exhibition in this country, organised by the Australian Aboriginal Art Board. Includes works by Lin Onus and Venice Biennale exhibitor Rover Thomas; also music, dance and lectures. 346-354 Sauchihall St, Glasgow (041-332 7521) 4 Aug-2 Sept.

**NATIONAL THEATRE**  
Songlines and Dreamings. Show of Western Desert paintings organised by controversial promoter Patrick Corbally-Stourton. Includes works by Wenton Rubuntja, Lynette Corby Nungurrayi and the great Billy Stockman. Foyer, South Bank SE1 (071-633 0880) To 15 Sept.

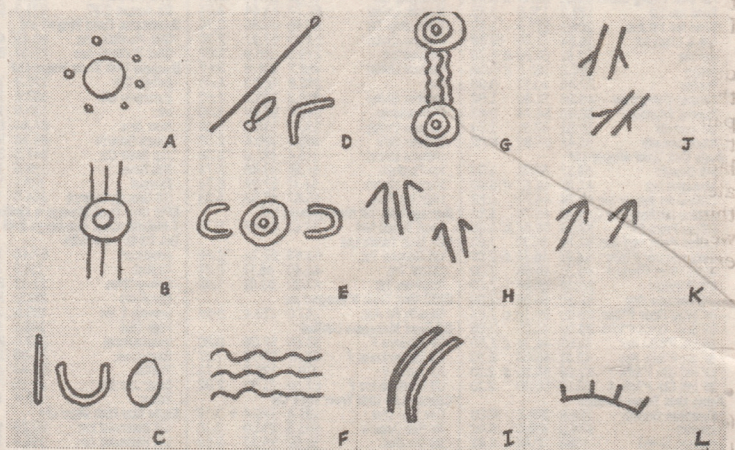
**ADDISON ROSS**  
Another Patrick Corbally-Stourton show with pictures by Michael Nelson Tjakkamara and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri alongside such relative unknowns as Mavis Wayne Mangala and Barney Daniels Tjungurrayi. 40 Eaton Terrace SW1 (071-602 5838) 14 Aug-7 Sept.





Pictures, clockwise from bottom left: *Jyulpa* by Jarinyanu David Downs, a representation of the powerful "doctor" Jyulpa who travelled south from Kaningarra with his brother in the Dreamtime and had many adventures. He is shown carrying sacred objects and wearing body paint. The arc around his head represents his power. *Third Eye Centre, Glasgow*; *Rainbow Serpent Dreaming* by Clifford Possum Tjapaljarri, one of the most respected Dreamtime painters, tells how, in the days before man, the Rainbow Serpents crossed the land and formed the mountains and the lakes. Whenever two of them met they had a conflict and a landscape was created. One is shown here in the sky above Mt. Wedge Soakage Area. *Rebecca Hossack*; Clifford Possum Tjapaljarri and Stanley Scrutton Tjapaljarri working on a large Dreamtime canvas at Mt. Napperby; *Witchetty Grub Dreaming* by newcomer Lynette Corby Nungurrayi. The picture shows women digging for Witchetty Grubs and Honey Ants at Mt. Liebig with a background of desert vegetation. *National Theatre*.

## DOT AND CIRCLE PAINTINGS / A guide to the reading and understanding of Aboriginal symbols



The beautiful and intricate Dot and Circle paintings are depictions of totemic sites sacred to the individual and it is an insult to the Aborigine to regard them simply as decorative objects without attempting to understand as much of their meaning as we are permitted. The paintings have no "right way up" but represent an aerial view of the painter's "country". Their titles refer not to the creature dreaming, but to what the dream is about. The white man can only glean their sometimes incredibly complex stories in outline: some "secret-sacred" knowledge is always retained by the artist.

The key shown here, referring to the picture above, provides a begin-

ners guide to the most commonly-used symbols.

- A. Campsite, waterhole, initiation site or hill.
- B. Sacred site with water, rain or clouds.
- C. Woman sitting with coolamara (wooden bowl) and digging stick.
- D. Spear, boomerang and spear thrower.
- E. Two men sitting by a campsite.
- F. Rain, wind or river.
- G. Sacred path (songline) leading between two sites.
- H. Kangaroo tracks.
- I. Wind break.
- J. Budgerigar tracks.
- K. Emu tracks.
- L. Possum tracks.