

REVIEW

ART/Linda Talbot

The original Aboriginal symbolism

WHAT may seem a featureless expanse to the European, holds totemic power for the Aborigine. The desert becomes a symbolic maze of the mind, as well as urging an affinity with the earth. Waterholes are a magical means of survival, and sandhills a backdrop to human incident.

Songlines is a show of their art presented by the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, in the Concourse Gallery at the Barbican Centre. This is probably the most comprehensive exhibition of Aboriginal art yet mounted in Britain, disclosing the diversity of the world's oldest artistic tradition.

The Aboriginal "Dreaming" concerns the contours, waterholes and rocks that abound with spirit ancestors. These people, now rudely uprooted, lived for millennia at one with the land, nurturing a mythographic landscape through sacred rituals.

Dot and circle paintings in acrylic are based on traditional works once done in sand. Story-telling is their essence. In Mick Gill Tjakamarra's painting, three rainbow snakes are contained by the dictates of design. The harmony and applied pattern of the work belie the fact that the snakes are deadly and may only be approached by "country men".

The bead-like application of dots builds a sophisticated concept and in George Wallaby Tjangala's picture, two snakes recur, killed by a small but powerful spirit wielding sticks.

Susan Manditjarra Napanangti's birds are more literal, with two attempting to steal the son of another. The mother sends a willy-willy (a dust storm) and they are driven off. Since then, if a Willy Wagtail is hurt, a dust storm is sure to follow.

Women are integrated in the imagery of Bridget Mudjidell Napanangka and Nancy Naninurra Napanangka. In the work of the

former, a rich tapestry depicts their footprints among the tones and abstract forms of the earth and the latter paints an abstraction of women collecting yulkaranyi.

Most works link vital aspects of the land; starkly, like ploughed furrows, in Johnny Tjangala's picture of three hills, harbouring water. This element is a repeated source of inspiration. Saltlakes, rockholes and creeks mark the squirming depiction of Ningie Nangala, where people came in the Dreamtime to hold ceremonies. Often the "map" of landmarks is systematically portrayed, as in Dominic Tjupurrula's land where rockholes and soaks are methodically linked by creek beds. And there is a strong sense of symmetry in the sandhill country conveyed by Milliga Napaltjarri; land covered with spinifex and occasional mulga trees.

Creek beds, reminiscent of agate, run intricately between rocky outcrops, seen as blatant brown circles in Tjumbo Tjapanangka's picture, and depressions in the sand made by the bodies of two travellers among sandhills and rockholes inspire the painting of John Tjapangarti.

There is a striking selection of pictures by Jimmy Pike; paintings where vivid circles and tooth-like elements combine in depictions of land around a water hole, wheat shapes move with bright banded waves and the desert flowers more gently, in stylised sections, after rain. His approach is surprisingly diverse.

Robert Campbell Junior takes a figurative, almost naive stance, with commanding contrasts in his *Sunset on Macleay River*. Doris Gingingara also conveys complexity in confident colour, suggesting the swirl of water, and the forms of flowers.

The 20th century infiltrates the paintings of Luke Elwes. The desert is no longer a



● **Budgerigar: Aboriginal symbolism by Billy Stockman, at The Barbican Centre until September 4.**

mentally disciplined map but moves with half-perceived shapes, like spirits stirring and gaining substance. The land is haunted and alive in an unprecedented way, no longer a reassuring surface of water and rock.

By other artists, there are delicate etchings, with symbolic shapes, photographs of insight by European, Nicholas Adler and

Aborigine, Michael Riley, as well as pure wool rugs based on Dreamtime paintings.

The people of the western deserts have always painted. Their works are statements of individual's rights and obligations as custodians of particular Dreamings and the sites associated with them.

This show, open until September 4, confirms the dynamically seductive quality of

Aboriginal art. Western contemporary artists have strived to concoct imagery equally rooted in the spiritual and earthbound. Often they have failed, having lost the essence of their quest in their daily lives. While Aboriginal art is undoubtedly now being exploited and commanding high prices, its availability in Europe is nonetheless a source of inspiration untouched by time.