

bin talk
 "You pretty hungry, eh?"
 [The old owner] bin say.
 "Oh, yeah."
 "What you want. What you want,
 tea and sugar?"
 Don't move away
 I'll go and get 'im
 Not far
 I'll be back
 Don't move away
 Want flour and tea, sugar too
 "What about tobacco?"
 "Yeah, we want tobacco, boss!"
 Next minute,
 they bin see him coming back
 Along two Forty-fours.
 Look.
 Well they couldn't run away.
 One bin this side – lower side.
 One bin higher up side –
 the manager and the owner].
 The bin trying to get over the
 bank, you know.
 Crrrrrrraak.
 Another bin trying to get away.
 Crrrrrrraak
 Finish'm up.
 And this fella, now –
 one 'im cut'm that beef,
 leg beef. You know.
 That's the bloke now.
 Bang'm in.
 Right. Pull'm that another two
 fella that way"
 "And cut"
 "Cut 'im throat"
 "This fella now."
 Where that bloke bin cutten that
 beef."



Ruby Plains Killing 2, natural pigments on canvas, 1990: one of a series by Thomas, 'The Killing Times'

They bin just chuck'm on ground
 now.
 That hollow log
 – that head part now.
 That's true word. And that right.
 They bin look around,
 look around
 next morning.
 Couldn't find them.
 When that everything bin dry
 Waak, waak, waak', crow sitting
 longa tree.
 Look down.
 And this mob bin keep watching
 'im. You know.
 "Waak, waak, waak, waak, waak,
 waak"
 They bin keep watching 'im, you
 know.
 Anyhow, they bin come back and
 have a look.
 "Oh, that's the one now."
 They bin do damage la
 – that old man now
 – that young fella
 – cut his throat
 – threw 'em from ground.
 "Oh Goodness."
 Well, next morning.
 They bin tell'm him
 "We not working for you,
 no more.
 We going to another place.
 You too much killer."
 See they bin go away now.
 They bin go to Flora Valley.
 Sturt Creek.
 Go back Wongal, Wongal Station.
 Woman and all bin go.
 Everybody.

Rover Thomas

ROVER THOMAS was one of the first-generation masters of the Aboriginal Art movement. The strength and almost abstract simplicity of his paintings won him an international reputation. In 1990 he was chosen to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.

Although in his art and in his life he became indivisibly associated with the East Kimberley region of north Western Australia, he was born further south – in 1926 – at Gunawaggi, near Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route, on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. At the age of 10, however, he, with his parents, moved up the stock route to the Billiluna Station in the Kimberley region, and he began work, like so many other aboriginals, as a stockman.

During his early teens he was initiated into the traditional law of his tribe, the Wangkajungas. Over the next 30 years he worked at cattle stations throughout the area – at Texas Downs, Lissadell and Mabel Downs. His horsemanship and his taste in wide-brimmed headgear earned him the nickname "Cowboy".

While at Texas Downs he was once thrown from a bucking horse and kicked badly across the head. His scalp al-



Thomas: directness

most came completely off. It was, however, cleaned up and stitched back on by the station cook, Queenie Mackenzie (now another leading light of the East Kimberley Aboriginal Art movement). He was always proud of the scar.

All this time aboriginal stockworkers were not paid, except in shelter, provisions and tobacco. But following the mid-1970s Australian government ruling that all aboriginal pastoral workers had to receive the same wages as their non-aboriginal co-workers, the system broke down. The station owners claimed they could not support such a measure, and almost all aboriginal people were obliged to leave the stations and

their work. Thomas, together with many of the people from Texas Downs, moved to Warmun, an aboriginal community at Turkey Creek.

Here a turning-point in his life occurred. He received several visitations from the spirit of a relative who had recently died following a truck accident. She recounted the story of her death in terms of the mythological landscape of the area and revealed to Thomas a new ceremony cycle – the *Krill Krill*.

Thomas communicated this ceremony to the rest of the Warmun community and it has become one of the key elements of their cultural identity. It was in devising special painted boards for the dance rituals that Rover Thomas began to paint.

Drawing on the traditions of East Kimberley rock art and ceremonial body-painting, Thomas produced work of extraordinary directness and originality. He worked on board with the natural ochres which abound in the Kimberley region, grinding and mixing them himself. And he combined the aerial map-maker's perspective common to much aboriginal desert art with elements of side-on silhouette.

His painting soon extended beyond purely ceremonial boundaries. He recorded the local

landscape, its mythological "Dreamtime" significance, and its recent (often racially troubled) history. His example inspired others in the community to experiment in the same direction.

With the success of the Aboriginal Art movement in the Western Desert there was growing interest in – and a growing market for – new schools of work. Thomas's paintings – and those of his fellow Warmun artists – were soon acclaimed by critics and collectors. The East Kimberley art movement is still amongst the most vital and original in Australia.

Although Rover Thomas continued to work quietly at Warmun, sitting under the old Post Office building, painting alongside Queenie Mackenzie, Jack Brittain and others, his fame spread rapidly. He exhibited not only throughout Australia but also in the United States, Canada, Japan, France, Italy, Germany and Britain. In 1994 he became one of the first aboriginal artists to be given a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia.

Rebecca Hossack

Rover Thomas, artist: born Gunawaggi, Western Australia 1926; twice married; died Gunawaggi 11 April 1998.

From "Ruby Plains Killings", Rover Thomas's account of a massacre of a group of aboriginal cattle-killers by the owner and manager of a stock camp (from *Roads Cross*, National Gallery of Australia, 1994)