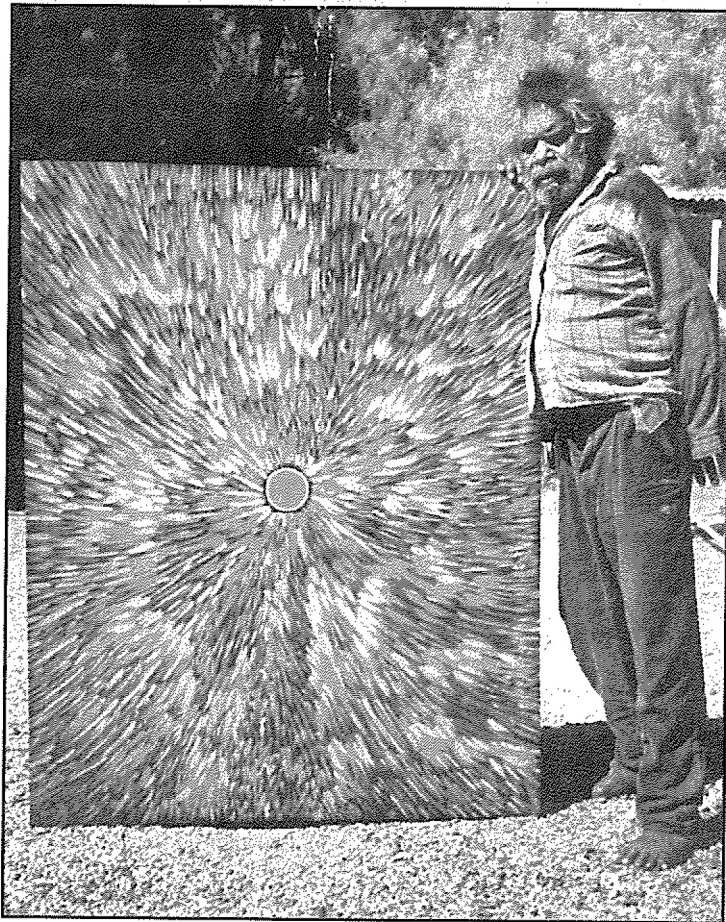


Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula



Tjupurrula with his picture *Fire Drawing*, 1989

JOHNNY WARRANGKULA Tjupurrula was one of the founding fathers of the modern aboriginal painting movement. His art, long admired by connoisseurs and collectors, leapt to wider prominence in 1997 when one of his early paintings, *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* (1972), sold at auction for a record price A\$206,000 (some £75,000). Three years later the same painting again set a new record when it was resold by Sotheby's for A\$486,500. For the first time an aboriginal artist was achieving prices comparable with – indeed higher than – the established figures of modern Australian painting.

Tjupurrula was born in about 1925 in the central desert lands of the Loritja tribe. Despite his traditional upbringing in the bush, he was chosen, in 1954, as one of two aboriginal people to meet the Queen on her Australian tour. Along with many other desert-dwelling aboriginals he was moved in the 1960s on to a government-instituted settlement at Papunya, west of Alice Springs.

The settlement was a depressing place, with deracinated aboriginals from many different tribal groups living together in considerable tension, poverty and degradation. Nevertheless it provided the seedbed for an artistic revolution. In 1971 an idealistic young art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, arrived at the settlement to

work at the special school there. He encouraged the aboriginals to paint some of their traditional designs – first as murals on the walls of the schoolhouse, and subsequently on boards and bits of cardboard.

The work was taken up with enthusiasm by some of the older men of the community. The pictures recorded in schematic form the many tribal creation myths and stories. The artists adapted their iconography of dots and circles to the new medium of acrylic paint on board. There was great variety of approach. From the start Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula displayed an innovative daring and fluidity of execution that marked him out. Where other artists used their paints unmediated, he painstakingly mixed his own colours. He developed a distinctive style that combined strong forms, intricate calligraphic lines and a shimmering overlay of tiny dots.

Despite a slight stammer and a tremor, Tjupurrula was a confident and influential figure at Papunya. He enjoyed his position as a leading member of what he termed the “painting mob”, and often wore his paintbrushes tucked into the band of his hat. Bardon described him, in the Seventies, as a happy and expressive man, who worked with great concentration, and also a keen appreciation of the (then quite limited) commercial possibilities of his art.

“He would paint on anything,” Bardon recalled, “of any shape, length or size – even a matchbox.” And, when the time came to load the pictures into Bardon's van for them to be taken into the Alice Springs art shop to sell, he was always on hand to help, and to make sure that plenty of his own work was included. He soon established a reputation. He exhibited in all the state capitals of Australia, as well as in Europe and America.

By the early Nineties, deteriorating eyesight and other pressures had led to an almost complete break in his artistic production. But, perhaps galvanised by the enormous price achieved by *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* (which he had sold for A\$150), he resumed work at the end of the decade and enjoyed an impressive late flowering. His last paintings are bolder in design and more open in their brushwork but still retain the powerful originality and assurance of his earliest pieces.

Ill-health, however, curtailed this revival. He retreated to Papunya, where he was nursed by his daughter Ngali. He died on Monday.

REBECCA HOSSACK

Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula, artist; born c 1925; married Gladys Napanangka (10 children); died Papunya, Northern Territory 12 February 2001.