



Mythological landscapes: Riley's 'The Four Archers and Garimala', 1989

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala

Aboriginal artist with a highly individual style

GINGER RILEY MUNDUWALAWALA was one of the strongest and most individual voices in Australian contemporary art. His boldly composed, brightly coloured paintings of his native landscape, and the mythological beings that brought that landscape into existence, sounded a new and arresting note. His art helped to break down the distinctions between "Aboriginal" and "contemporary" art. In 1997 he had the distinction of being given a one-man retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne.

He was born *circa* 1937 on the Limmen Bight River in the south-eastern corner of Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. Although he spent his early life in the bush living a traditional aboriginal existence, he also had contact with the nearby Roper River Mission (now the Ngukurr Aboriginal community), and even attended school there intermittently.

In his mid-teens he set off to live the wandering life of a cattle drover and stockman on the vast cattle stations of the Northern Territory. And it was while driving cattle for Lord Vestey that he visited Alice Springs and met the celebrated Aboriginal watercolourist Albert Namatjira

(1902-1959). Namatjira's beautifully coloured depictions of the desert landscape made a great impression on Riley. He was excited at the possibility of one-day depicting his own country after his own fashion.

Although he returned to Ngukurr in the early Seventies, it was some years before he began to fulfil this vision. In 1986 the Northern Territory Education Department ran a print-making course at the community. While others set about printing T-shirt designs, Riley asked for acrylic paints and embarked on a series of large mythological landscapes. Taking off from the bark-painting traditions of the area, he evolved his own highly individual style.

His work was quick to gain recognition and win prizes. His relish for bright hues and strong juxtapositions led to the white Australian artist David Larwill dubbing Riley the "Boss of Colour". In 1993 Riley came over to London when one of his pictures was exhibited in the Hayward Gallery's "Aratjara" exhibition of Aboriginal art. His career was fostered by the energy and direction of Beverley Knight, his Melbourne dealer and friend. He exhibited in Europe and America, and was commissioned to paint four

large canvases for the Australian Embassy in Beijing. Combining the mythologies of white and black Australia, he also painted a hugely popular series of pictures to celebrate the centenary of Australian Rules Football.

Something of a dandy, with a fine sense of mischievous humour, Riley was a true and engaging spirit. Despite his success, he returned to live on his ancestral lands on the Limmen Bight River, spending his time in fishing and hunting, and making only occasional painting trips down to Melbourne. In 2000 the Federal Court recognised the native title of his homeland. And it was there that he died - amongst his relatives - after a battle with lung cancer.

Interviewed for the catalogue of his exhibiton at the National Gallery of Victoria, he said, "I didn't ever have a sad time, just happy as can be all my life. Sad is if you don't think right ways in your mind: if you're happy in your heart and mind, you're good." Ginger Riley Munduwalawala was "good".

REBECCA HOSSACK

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, artist: born c1937; died Borroloola, Northern Territory 1 September 2002.