



Ngarparla, painting by Cyril Brown

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RETURN TO THE LAND

The story of the Spinifex People.

ABORIGINAL ART IS almost always about the land. About how the land came into being, about how it lies, about its mystic power and its practical resources. This was never more the case than with the paintings of the Spinifex People of Western Australia.

The Spinifex People live in one of the least accessible areas of the world — deep in the arid wastes of the Victoria Desert on the northern fringe of the Nullarbor Plain. It is an area so remote that in the 1950s, when the British Government wanted to try out their atomic weapons, they chose it as the ideal test site.

Back then, the very existence of the Spinifex People was known only to a handful of anthropologists. The first reference to them was not made until 1934. Even today, they remain largely unknown. The vast red sand-dunes — dotted with the clumps of the sharp spinifex grass from which the local aboriginal people take their name — have been seen by very few white people.

Because of the inaccessibility of their traditional lands and the harshness of their environment, the Spinifex People were left largely untroubled by the European settlement of Australia, and continued hunting, gathering, drinking from water-holes hidden in the desert, and performing their sacred ceremonies. It was a way of life that had endured unaltered for millennia.

Just how many millennia is uncertain. But one of the Spinifex People's stories describing the formation of the land during the Dreamtime recounts how much of the desert was once under water, and how the relentless advance of the waves was stemmed only by a great army of spirit birds, who built a massive rampart with their spears. This barricade endures as the Nullarbor cliffs and the Hampton Escarpment rising out of the desert. Geologists are agreed that this great range marks the limit reached by the ocean during the last ice age, fifteen thousand years ago.

The centuries-long isolation of the Spinifex People began to change only at the beginning of the 1950s, as graded roads were run across their country, prior to the establishment in 1956 of the Giles Weapons Research Station in the heart of the desert.

When, that same year, the first aerial nuclear bomb was to be tested over the desert at Maralinga (some 150 miles east of the Spinifex heartlands), the scattered Spinifex People were alerted to the coming danger by a single patrol officer charged with spreading the word across the whole three million square kilometres of the Western Desert. Those he found were told to evacuate the area immediately. Many were directed towards the newly established mission station at Cundeelee.

During the long trek away from 'the big wind' — as they termed the explosion — many aboriginals died.

Some expired of thirst: terrified by the thought of the coming cataclysm, they were too frightened to venture off the designated track to search out the water-holes they knew of in the desert. Some simply refused to leave.

In the decade immediately after the atomic tests, patrol officers discovered 250 Spinifex People still living on their homelands in the desert. Almost all of them were persuaded to move to mission stations. This process was reversed only twenty years ago. In the 1980s the closure of the Cundeelee mission station acted as a catalyst for many of the Spinifex People to return to their own country. Compensation money paid by the British Government for the damage caused by the atomic testing programme was used by the Spinifex People to grade a new road into the heart of their traditional lands.

The tiny community settlement at Tjuntjuntjara was established, and a group — that grew steadily to around 130 — began to live there in and around the handful of sheds (and the large electricity generator). There are now at least twenty elders in the community, preserving the ancient ceremonial life of the place — retelling the creation stories, preserving the sacred sites, maintaining the water-holes — and passing on their knowledge to the next generation.

With the advent of the Aboriginal Land Rights movement in early 1992, the Spinifex People sought to claim Native Title for their traditional lands



Untitled, painting by Karli and Lorraine Davis

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— some 55,000 square kilometres of desert. These were for the most part still designated as Vacant Crown Land, a legacy from the original colonial assumption that Australia was an empty continent, with its aboriginal inhabitants having no legal rights at all to the land. The process was a long one, taking almost six years, but it was ultimately successful. It was pursued in a remarkable spirit of cooperation and reconciliation, the Spinifex People always concerned to explain their vital engagement with their traditional lands, but also to recognise the rights and aspirations of others who might wish to use it.

THE SPINIFEX ART PROJECT, estab-

lished in 1996, arose out of the campaign to achieve Native Title. The initial pictures produced were vast ceremonial 'maps' of the territory, recording the land's origins in the Dreamtime, its delicately balanced food and water systems, its ceremonial importance. They were part of the Spinifex People's proof of ownership. Schematic images — made up of dots, lines, circles, track-marks — that had been sketched fleetingly in the sand for millennia and shown only to the initiated were now set down in the new medium of acrylic paint on canvas and displayed to the public. It was an act of extraordinary cultural generosity, of a desire to communicate and share. It had its effect. Native

Title was granted in 2001.

Although that goal was achieved, the generosity of the Spinifex People still endures. Their desire to communicate is as strong as ever. The art of the Spinifex People continues to record the stories of the land, to convey a vivid sense of its spiritual power and its unexpected beauty. ●

An exhibition of the work of the Spinifex People will be held at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery and at the London International Art Fair in Islington from 18th to 22nd January 2006. For further information: Tel: + 44 (0) 207 255 2828, <rebecca@r-h-g.co.uk>, <www.r-h-g.co.uk>.