

Painting the Song

Works from the Sims Dickson Collection

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Painting the Song explores the inextricable connections between music and contemporary Aboriginal art. It examines the notion of Aboriginal painting as visual music – the literal painting of songs, music and dance. The exhibition also includes works that reference music in different ways - political, personal and cross-cultural.

At heart, what we call Aboriginal ‘art’ comes from a rich cosmology in which all knowledge and creativity is held in song. Song that is held in human memory and made tangible in the transformation of landscape into Country. Song that animates Country, vibrating with life force and sentient power. These songs are strung into songlines stretching across thousands of kilometres. They cover Australia in a network that maps the journeys of ancestral beings who are eternally in the act of creation.

Songs are the carriers and activators of what is known in English as The Dreaming but which has many different names in Aboriginal languages. It is known as the *Tjukurpa* in Pitjantjatjara, the Western Desert language of most of the artists in this exhibition. Tjukurpa is not only the creation period, but is the inextinguishable truth about the meaning of everything. Its songs are a musical mnemonic for an oral encyclopaedia of all knowledge - spiritual, conceptual and practical - needed to survive and thrive in the range of environments found on Earth’s driest inhabited continent.

The works in this exhibition have their genesis in the ephemeral forms of an integrated artistic spiritual and life practice that has endured for millennia. As artist Inawinytji Williamson says: ‘We are artists, singers and dancers of the Tjukurpa’.¹

Art, song, music, dance, all in the service of the Tjukurpa; the everlasting source of creative inspiration.

While Aboriginal languages have no single word for ‘art’ in the largely commodified sense of the Western art world, they do have words for marks, mark-making and designs: *walka*, in Central Australia, and *jilamara*, in the Tiwi Islands, for example.

Before painting and drawing on canvas and paper began, painting was traditionally an ephemeral practice applied to bodies and onto the ground for ceremony.² This long history of painting is the bedrock of the paintings hung here.

Body marks

Prince of Wales, also known as Midpul, was a legendary Larrakia ceremonial leader, a dancer and singer who performed for Queen Elizabeth II and whose father was known as King George. His works are paintings of ceremonial body marks. Or rather, they are body marks - the canvas being both metaphorically and ontologically the body of the male dancer:

*These paintings...I paint them on bodies... young people and old...ceremony for singing...dance...I make the marks.*³

Prince turned to painting on cardboard, and then canvas, as a means of performing ceremony after suffering a stroke. The surfaces of the two paintings shown here (from his first solo exhibition in 1997) dance and shimmer and vibrate in front of our eyes, alive with the sound and movement of ceremony.

Pitjantjatjara artist Nellie Stewart tells us that in her luscious and gestural painting *Irrunytju* (2010), the *Minyma Kutjarra*, Two Women, of the Tjukurpa 'were stopping at every rock-hole and the big sister was teaching that little [sister] dancing and singing'.⁴ The way Nellie Stewart painted was vitally linked to ceremonial song and dance, known as 'inma'. Her brush strokes strongly evoke ceremonial body painting designs on women's dark skin:

*Stewart uses her brush in ways akin to women using their fingers to smear layers of paint onto the darker background, in preparation for women-only ceremonies (inma). The mark making, such an integral part of women's body painting, also plays a decisive role in Nellie Stewart's artwork.*⁵

Tradition and improvisation

It goes without saying that there is huge diversity across the spectrum of Aboriginal art in Australia, in style, subject and media. However, perhaps the largest number of works from 'remote' communities are those that concern The Dreaming. Artists paint their particular Dreaming stories as embodied in their Country, and they paint them over and over again, often singing the song of The Dreaming as they paint.

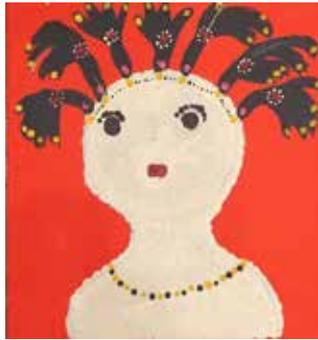
This repetition is not to say they are painting the same painting again and again. The traditions of storytelling, singing and iconography are the inspiration for relentless and evolving improvisation. Each new painting is an exploration held in tension by the tradition.

This creative process can be thought of in terms of improvised music, most quintessentially in the art form of jazz.⁶ Jazz is driven by dialogue between tradition and improvisation. It is music made and remade. Like the paintings of Tjukurpa, jazz is created live, in real time, every time. Similarly, these artists do not make preliminary sketches or studies before they paint. They know their culture and tradition intimately, and each painting is a fresh, supremely confident improvisation upon it.



In jazz, some tunes become enduring 'standards'. Musicians make these their own through improvisation on a shared tradition. When they succeed to the fullest, they make music that transcends its prosaic component elements. A similar shared creative process between artists and the songs of their Tjukurpa takes place in these paintings of their Dreamings. This regenerative improvisation keeps the tradition strong and powerful and new.

There are few better examples of this than in the work of Pitjantjatjara artist Tiger Palpatja. In his paintings *Wanampi Tjukurpa* (2009) and *Piltati* (2011), he is telling and retelling the story of his Country. Same song, different paintings. Certain elements are always visible: two wanampi - water snake brothers - and a rock hole at Piltati. The accompanying video shows Tiger painting one of his Piltati masterpieces.⁷ As his voice tells the story, fellow artists and senior custodians Keith Stevens and Ginger Wikilyiri sing the song of the painting in the background, thus enacting the very theme of this exhibition.



Similarly when you look at other paintings of Tjukurpa in *Painting the Song*, you'll see artists riffing on the song of their Country as they create a new opus within the world's oldest continuous tradition. Take Yaritji Young's paintings of the *Tjala* or Honey Art Dreaming: each is a joyous improvised symphony of free-flowing colour and bold, lyrical line. And, as in the best music, the spaces left empty are what let her paintings breathe.

A record of performance

For these artists, many of them senior men and women who have lived lives of lifelong cultural learning, the act of painting is equivalent to performing the inma of the Tjukurpa (a kind of performance art). What remains on the canvas is a record of performance as painting. Each painting is sent out into the world vibrating with the singular, real and tangible energy of its performance.

Performance and dreams

There are two suites of small paintings here that speak directly to the performance of inma. One of these has its origins in song and dance revealed to the artist in dreams. As do the six *balmoorah*, large structures of wood and coloured wool for the performance of the Bali Bali Balga, a ceremony born of the dreams of a senior Kimberley songman and Law man who has recently died.

The first series of paintings brings forth the *mamu* woman as performed and painted by Matjangka Nyukana Norris from the APY Lands of South Australia⁸. The *mamu* is a scary spirit who is burnt by fire. Mrs Norris is famous across the Lands and beyond for her performance of the *mamu* inma, in which she becomes one with the *mamu*.

Three levels of meaning inhabit these paintings. They are simultaneously the *mamu* herself, and Mrs Norris performing the *mamu* inma. They are also self-portraits as the *mamu* woman. Far from creating benign artworks on canvas, the act of painting the inma holds potential dangers for Mrs Norris – she no longer paints them for fear of perhaps permanently becoming a *mamu* herself.

The other figurative depiction of inma is by Iwana Ken, one of the most senior cultural women in the APY lands. Ken was renowned as a teacher of Law, and as a *ngangkari*, a traditional healer. Her high standing was indicated by her creation of new inma that came to her in dreams. In these paintings we see women, and men, painted up and performing inma. They dance forwards towards a chorus of singers that are only seen in two works as the iconographic form of u-shapes – the shapes their seated bodies leave behind in the ceremonial ground.

The rare *balmoorah* on display were made by Mr Griffiths, without doubt one of the great culture bosses and artists of the East Kimberley. *Balmoorah* are used in the performance of a

corroboree¹⁰ (a song and dance cycle) called the Bali Bali Balga. The corroboree was revealed to Mr Griffiths in a dream:

Each time it is performed, what [Mr Griffiths] is doing is attempting to reproduce what came to him [in a dream], the way it 'stands up in my head'. He is forthright in saying that the process is artistic and creative, 'same as how you think for painting'.¹¹

The balmoorah manifest rather than merely represent significant persona (ancestors, spirits, humans), places and constellations in the corroboree: they are powerful, magical objects that are carried by male dancers¹². (You can see the traces of white ochre from their hands on some of the timber frames). Mr Griffiths would sing the narrative of the Bali Bali Balga during its performance. These balmoorah testify to his life-long invention and promotion of ceremony. He walked for decades with his balmoorah on his back – organising, teaching and performing corroborees on Country (often the Kimberley cattle stations where he and his people lived and worked).

Rhythm and dots

Rhythm is everywhere in this exhibition. Coded within each painting you will find the musical rhythm of song. Mary Kanngi's paintings, for example, pulsate with colour and sway with the rhythmical gestures of her brushstrokes, quickening our experience of her verdant Daly River Country.

Not all Aboriginal paintings have dots. Not even those from the desert. But for those that do, the marking of dots can be a rhythmical accompaniment to the practice of painting the song. The repeated act of tapping a paint-laden *punu* or stick to make a mark, and the percussive sound thus made, echoes the beating of a stick on the ground as accompaniment to *milpatjunanyi*, a rich form of storytelling characterised by drawing with fingers and hands in the red earth. Nowadays, such hand movements are as likely to be described on the concrete floor of the art centre painting room,

or waved over a canvas during the painting process. They bring to mind, too, the percussive rhythm stamped or clapped during ceremony. In other words there is a physicality in the process of dotting that is integral to the music of the painting.

Ray Ken's painting of his Country, *Tali (Sand Dune Country)* (2016) is a fine example of this. It stretches out lines of shifting sandhills in single dots and merged dots as well as brushstrokes in pinks, creams, lilac and blue. It echoes the rhythm of the ceremonial song the artist sung during its creation; it is sound and action embodied in paint.

Protest song

All Aboriginal art is political. It is an irrefutable statement of presence in a historically hostile body politic.

Mumu Mike Williams's work *Postbag Painting* (2016) subverts the Commonwealth government's claim of ownership of his Country. It is a dramatic escalation of rhetoric that starkly challenges Commonwealth law with Anangu Law. A land rights campaigner in the 1970s, his mailbag triptych reiterates lyrics from one of the most famous Pitjantjatjara land rights songs: 'Kulilaya manta milmilpatjara Tjukurpa alatjitu kunpu' (Listen up! Our land is sacred and our Law and Culture is strong). He sings part of this song in an accompanying video.

Art about music in the cross-cultural world

The charming sculptural work, *The Choir* (2016), by Nora Campbell from Titjikala, celebrates the joy of the women who sing sacred songs in their living languages of Pitjantjatjara and Western Arrernte. They are custodians of a continuous cross-cultural choral tradition dating back almost 120 years to when German missionaries first brought hymns to Ntaria, which the Lutherans called Hermannsburg.

A recent documentary feature film, *The Song Keepers* (2017), follows the choir on a tour of Germany, where they returned now archaic

Lutheran hymns back to their homeland. In Campbell's painting, the singers are dressed in the same hand-drawn Aboriginal batik robes. Looking closely at the hymn books held in their hands reveals some of the words.

Rock, hip hop, reggae and country music pulses and throbs out of Aboriginal communities across remote, regional and urban Australia.

Tiger Yaltangki's work melds the worlds of rock music, pop culture and science fiction TV with the scary and cheeky mamu spirits he sees as his *malpa wiru* (good friends). In his painting *Rock'n'Roll Story* (2016), Tiger has painted electric guitars along with his own arm and hand. It is a self-portrait of his love of rock music.



Similarly, Kaylene Whiskey is inspired by popular culture, which she seamlessly enfolded within her own Anangu culture. Pop stars are all over Kaylene's fantastical works: Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Dolly Parton and Cher join Wonder Woman, Superman and Kaylene's alter-ego *Super Kungka* (Super Girl), as well as native plants, animals and snakes.

Listen up with your eyes and heart

It is possible to look at the works on display and understand that many of them are improvisations on the living tradition of the Tjukurpa. They are paintings of the cosmology and Law held in songs and songlines, inscribed in memory and embodied in Country.

The act of painting can be thought of as the vivifying ceremonial performance of song and dance; it reverberates as a record of the artist's performance, which is based on the songs of the Dreaming.

Contemporary art made by Aboriginal artists is as diverse as any contemporary art, but for works such as those brought together in *Painting the Song*, looking for the echo of music can allow us to see and feel them in new ways.

Deborah Sims and Matt Dickson July 2018

Notes

¹ Quoted in *Alpiri Wangkanyi*, published by Ananguku Arts, Adelaide, Autumn 2010.

² Painted, drawn and carved designs were also made on weapons, utensils, pearl shells, bark shelters, trees, sand, sacred objects and on rock walls, the latter surviving up to 40,000 years until today. The earliest scientifically dated Aboriginal use of ochre, a ceremonial and art material, is 65,000 years ago, in a rock shelter called Madjedbebe near Kakadu National Park, NT.

³ Prince of Wales, quoted in Kathleen Brown, *Notes on Prince of Wales and the Gwalwa Daraniki Land Movement*, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne, 1997.

⁴ Nellie Stewart, artist statement for Irrrunytju 2010, Tjungu Palya art centre.

⁵ Dr Christine Nicholls, *Nellie Stewart, Minymaku Tjukurpa Kunpu; Women's Power Women's Law*, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, 23 March - 7 May 2011, catalogue p3.

⁶ This is not to say that any of these artists are in any way aware of, inspired by or influenced by jazz.

⁷ *Piltati* 2011, National Gallery of Victoria collection.

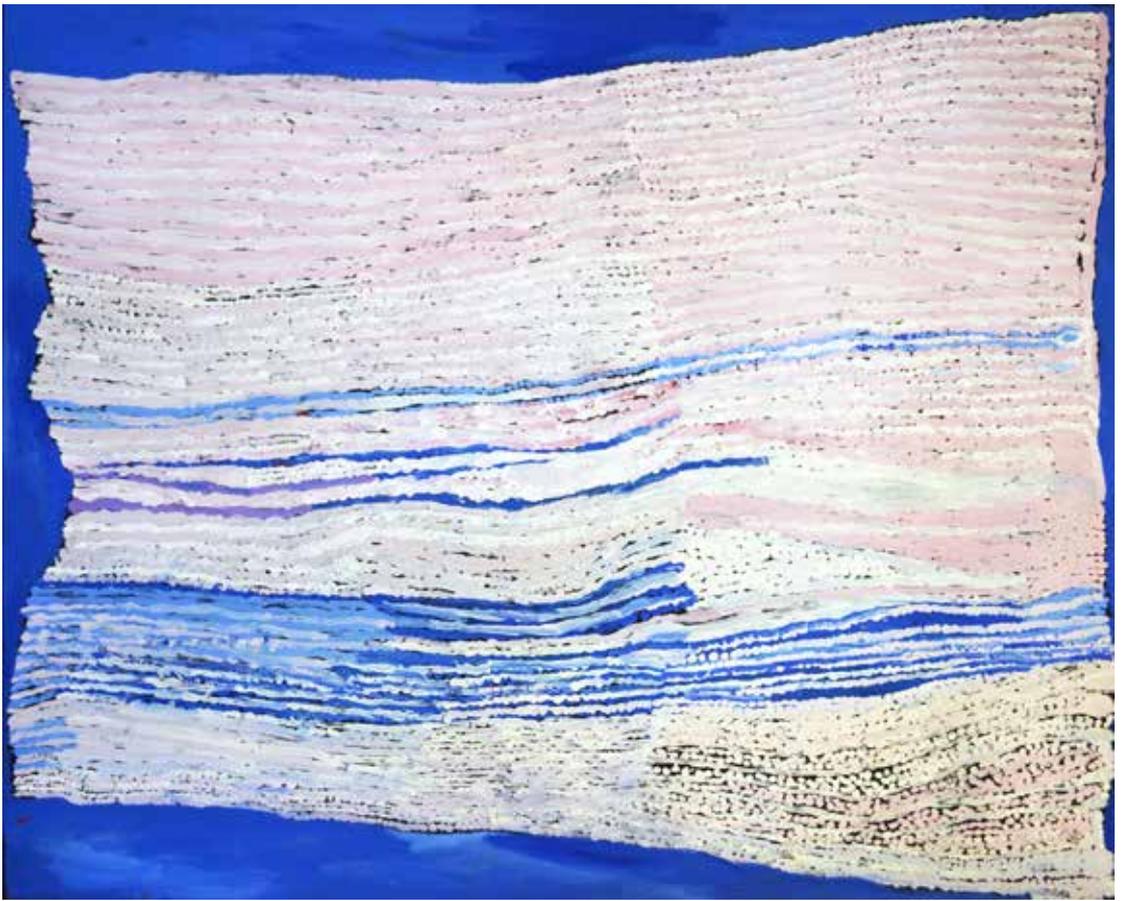
⁸ Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands of northern South Australia and the southern Northern Territory.

⁹ Mrs Norris also paints large, magisterial Tjukurpa paintings of infinite beauty, winning the painting prize at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 2017.

¹⁰ Corroboree is Mr Griffiths' preferred term, *joonba* being its alternative in language.

¹¹ *Brought To Light II*, Queensland Art Gallery Publishing, Brisbane, 2007, p409.

¹² These large balmoorah are carried on the backs and shoulders of men. Women dancers carry small, hand-held balmoorah.



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11 July - 26 August 2018

The University Gallery, The University of Newcastle

Curated by Deborah Sims and Matt Dickson

FRONT: Tommy Mitchell (1943 - 2013) *Walu* 2009 (detail), acrylic on linen, 152 x 152 cm. Courtesy Warakurna Artists. **FOLD LEFT:** Prince of Wales (Midpul) (1935 - 2003) *Untitled #7 (Body Marks)* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 126 x 93 cm. **MIDDLE:** Matjangka Nyukana Norris (b.c1956) *Minyma Mamu Inma* 2015, acrylic on linen, 30 x 30 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kaltjiti Arts. **FOLD RIGHT:** Kaylene Whiskey (b.1976) *Cher and the Water Snake* 2016, acrylic on linen, 76 x 102 cm. Courtesy the artist and Iwantja Arts. **ABOVE:** Ray Ken (b.1940) *Tali (Sand Dune Country)* 2016, acrylic on linen, 122 x 152 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tjala Arts. All works Sims Dickson Collection. Copyright remains with the artists.



PAINTING THE SONG is
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