

## *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa*

by David Brooks and Darren Jorgensen

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*Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa* does indeed take us into the world of older Ngaanyatjarra painters – born into a time and place that is fast disappearing – who are spending their last days in the Kungkarrangkalpa Aged Care Facility at Wanarn in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in the Western Desert. Beautifully written and illustrated with colour plates of the paintings, this book weaves together social history, anthropology and art history. Through painting, the authors David Brooks, an anthropologist, and Darren Jorgensen, an art historian, take us into the historical circumstances that have formed the Ngaanyatjarra identity. The book describes the establishment of the Wanarn Painters program from Warakurna Arts by Eunice Porter, who was one of the directors of Warakurna Art, and others. The Wanarn painters are in their final stage of life, much of their strength and short-term memory has gone, and while this comes through in the way they paint, their long-term memory and links to Tjukurrpa (the Western Desert term for the Dreaming) remain strong because of their regular links to family, ceremony, song and dance.

Brooks and Jorgensen not only talk about the paintings themselves but they link the painters to the lives of the Ngaanyatjarra population as a whole by acquainting us with other painters, families, country and the life lived by these elderly artists. We learn of the life of John Richards, for instance, a strong culture man, and of his life's work looking after country, when others who were also strong in culture opted to learn the white man's ways and become vocal in government issues. The book also introduces Wanarn artist Tjapartji Bates, who is well known for painting the Kungkarrangkalpa Seven Sisters Dreaming, by describing how she only took

to painting later in her life through the Warburton Arts Project. This draws our attention to the significance of Wanarn as the location of the aged care facility, located as it is in the Tjukurrpa of the area, primarily the Kungkarrangkalpa (Seven Sisters), Kakalyalya (Pink Cockatoo) and Kaarnka (Crow) Dreamings. This location enables these elderly painters to be thoroughly immersed in the time and place of the Tjukurrpa. The Wanarn painters never attended the white man's school. Art centre managers have described the Wanarn paintings as the 'wobblys' with much cute laughter and serious respect for the Wanarn painters, referring to the unsteady hands that guide the tentative, almost childlike brushstrokes.

The book gives an excellent, detailed history of the setting up of Wanarn Painters as well the mission days at Warburton Ranges Mission and Ernabella Mission and Papunya settlement. In the mission and settlement days, the Aboriginal families kept in contact with their country and each other. Regarding watercolour painting at Warburton, the ones who were 'turkeys' (initiates) in seclusion used to do watercolour painting in secret at Herbert and Lorraine Howell's house. There were other changes too: movement out of the desert to the Eastern Goldfields during gold rush time, followed by sheep station work, with many not to return – although others returned with new families. At this time, people were still nomadic, sourcing dingo scalps, looking after country and conducting ceremonies and rituals.

By taking a Western Desert-wide perspective, the authors allow us to discern the distinctions between the Ngaanyatjarra and their desert neighbours the Pitjantjatjara and the Pintupi. Brooks and Jorgensen state that the art of this region does not reflect the political necessity of painting from Papunya, where desperate circumstances produced powerful, iconographic intercultural communication (p. 72). Nor does it reveal the all-over, lateral compositions of their eastern neighbours, the Pitjantjatjara, whose history entailed a longer and more intense exposure to settler society through dogging, pastoralism and the missions. It is the relative isolation of the Ngaanyatjarra that has helped to form what the authors describe as a gentle friendliness to Ngaanyatjarra compositions that entail somewhat loose and eccentric forms and a sparseness in landscapes. So while they are similar to other paintings like Papunya Tula insofar as they are Tjukurrpa stories, the aesthetics are different: Papunya painting is neat and symmetrical.

Dot painting, as it is done now in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, came to this region from Papunya via Docker River. Ellis recalls how many of her family from Tjukurla first lived at Docker River and then later they continued to paint and passed on these skills to other families west of them in places like Warakurna. Through a focus on arts production, this book illuminates other major stories in the lives of these elderly painters and their country. This necessarily entails introducing the reader to the concept of the Tjukurrpa. These painters always paint their own Tjukurrpa, family's Tjukurrpa and moiety and language group's Tjukurrpa. One Tjukurrpa story told in this book is about the Quoll and the Numbat. This story is in fact about painting.

These two animals lived in the desert before the white man came with their cats and foxes that wiped them out. These ancestral beings take it in turn to paint patterns on each other. The Quoll paints a neat straight line on Numbat's back, but Numbat in return did a poor painting job on Quoll's back with messy dots.

Brooks and Jorgensen suggest that painting in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands is not seen as an activity that constitutes anything that could be called a career, or even part of a career, and that ambition as normally understood would not have driven anyone of this time and place to be a painter. Moreover, they suggest that, in Ngaanyatjarra social life, painting has remained separate from the core activities of Ngaanyatjarra existence both now and in the past, and that the senior painters who are the subject of this book do not rate the production of these paintings as highly as an outsider might imagine (p. 38). Yet the body of work these artists have left behind, ephemeral as it is, shows us that through these paintings we can learn to respect the Tjukurrpa, the land and the people who have maintained its power through time, as Edwina Circuit, a past manager of Warakurna Artists, describes in the book's Preface. All in all, this book provides a window into a vanishing world and invites a cross-cultural insight into old age as well as paying homage to a unique aesthetic oeuvre.

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