Review

Papunya Art

Papunya Painting: Out of the Desert exhibition presents a powerful selection of early Papunya canvases dipped in the rawness and beauty of the country of the Pintupi spirit. Presence is palpable in the gallery space. The painted ground of the desert shakes with presence that jumps off the canvas and dances towards the audience. Curator Vivien Johnson has honoured the artists’ intent to communicate their grounded spirituality by situating these works in their cultural and historical contexts. The Pintupi stories of person, place and spirit in country form an intangible web suspending the paintings in meaning as they travel through different times and spaces. Acquired by the Aboriginal Arts Board in the 1970s and 1980s, these paintings have been in the custodianship of the National Museum of Australia since 1990 and now, after more than 30 years in seclusion, this unique collection has emerged into the light (Johnson 2007: 30).

In the early 1970s the Pintupi were a people displaced from their home country. They had walked or ridden from the west on the backs of welfare trucks over hundreds of kilometres into the government settlement of Papunya. Uta Uta Tjangala and his son-in-law Tim Payangka Tjapangarti, two of the first painters, walked into the ration station at Haast Bluff in 1958, later moving to live at Papunya. Uta Uta then assisted Jeremy Long of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch in locating and bringing in other Pintupi from Lake Mackay, Yumarri and the Kintore Range (Long 2006: 33). His intention was to remove his people from the range of rockets blasting from the British atomic test site at Woomera. By the late 1970s the destructive effect of settlement life on Pintupi people, cut off from their spirit country, had become obvious. Uta Uta and other senior Pintupi were instrumental in moving families back to outstations on their traditional lands. During the years of exile the Pintupi artists kept alive their connectedness to the country of their spirit through painting.

Ironically, the clash of the colliding worlds at Papunya ignited the wildfire of the Western Desert art movement. The Pintupi may have been forced to move from their land but their spirits remained rooted in the hidden aquifers of their country. The artists drew on the subterranean desert water to paint the stories of their country that flowed unstoppable onto any boards or canvas they could find. The Pintupi had decided to state their claims to country and share their rich heritage with the new whitefellas by deploying the tools and pigments of the west.

The first paintings in 1971 were personal communications to Geoff Bardon, a young teacher, who asked them to tell him their stories and provided them with
brushes, acrylic paint and canvas. Geoff remembers it as a conversation, a struggle to convey meaning:

Until December 1971 the art had been mesmerisingly, the great first climactic articulation of the painting men’s creativity; I asked constantly that the artists not only use their own story-representations but also develop them so as to make clear the meaning of a ceremony or act, sometimes in a conventional way, subsequently in a less conventional and more innovative way; also, I sought from the artists an intensification of the motifs, the idea of a ‘big mob of men’, a ‘big fella ceremony. (Bardon 2004: 29)

Cross-cultural articulation of meaning is difficult as perception and value are the results of long acculturation in a specific place and time and communication relies on shared metaphors of meaning within a common language. Marcia Langton reminds the art viewer that within Aboriginal Australia there are several iconographic languages that have to be learned in order to appreciate the art of different peoples and places and that merely looking is not enough. Art is a place of contextualised language: ‘viewers of Aboriginal art expect that looking at the work will itself reveal its value and meanings [but] responding to the paintings requires work – the work of scholarship, research and paying attention, just as we cannot understand Renaissance art merely by looking’ (Langton in Myers, 2005: 24). To expect Western Desert art to be immediately and universally understood as a simple hybridity, an adoption of western techniques to convey traditional knowledge is not sufficient to experience the Pintupi life-force in these Papunya paintings.

Papunya painting evolved as a series of dynamic conversations that moved outwards from the close confines of the Papunya painting room in ever widening circles until these conversations included the world.

We can now see much more clearly the likelihood that from the perspective of the Aboriginal men who sought to paint it was an opportunistic chance to speak, the intuitive colonising of a coloniser who had the sympathy, the heart to listen, to ask, and most of all to see! (Issacs 2004: 206)

The inner circle of meaning was held firstly by the Pintupi male artists, and then their neighbouring kinsmen who negotiated appropriate graphic representations of the meaning of their shared Dreamings. Secondary circles of meaning were discussed by the men with the young male art advisors Geoff Bardon, Peter Fanin, John Kean and Andrew Crocker. The outer circles of meaning are usually all that is available to art buyers and the art gallery visitors who rely on the brief annotations art advisors attach to the paintings.

The museum context provides an opportunity to amplify the levels of meaning and appreciation of these early Papunya artworks for the general public. The exhibition visitor is taken on a journey tracing the story of Papunya paintings becoming recognised as fine art. From 1974 to 1981, the period covered by the exhibition, Aboriginal art was valued primarily as ethnography. Papunya acrylic paintings were not considered ‘authentic traditional’ art nor were they seen as modern art free of the ethnographic tag. Being unclassifiable they were rejected by both museums and art galleries. It was only through the foresight of Bob Edwards, the director of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) a federal government body formed in 1973, that a collection of these early Papunya
paintings was acquired and in 1990 was transferred to the custodianship of the National Museum of Australia.

The exhibition presents the paintings in the artists’ temporal framework referring to the ‘times’ of each manager of Papunya Tula. After Geoff Bardon left Papunya in 1972, Peter Fanin took on management of the newly incorporated Papunya Tula Artists. During ‘Peter Fanin time’, 1972–75, the paintings were marketed as ‘authentic ethnographic art’. A label was designed to assure the public that Papunya painting was both ethnographically coherent within the Western Desert tradition and was high art. During this time the Aboriginal Arts Board supported and promoted Papunya art by commissioning large canvases for its national and international exhibitions.

‘Dick Kimber time’, 1975–77, was a time when the fledgling art movement needed to establish strong financial and cultural guidelines. Controversy over the value and meaning of Papunya art needed to be resolved. In 1972 Dick Kimber warned the Aboriginal Arts Board and Peter Fanin that potentially serious problems could arise because of the inclusion of secret sacred symbols in some early paintings. Kimber had spoken with the Papunya men who expressed their concerns about painting Tjukurpa or Dreaming that spilled into others’ country: ‘This Tjukurpa, you can’t cut it, you can’t make a fence across it, you can’t make a road, this Dreaming track it goes there, those Walpiri men are painting there, that one belongs to me too’ (Kimber pers. comm., June 2007). Kimber assisted the senior men to resolve these issues with their Western Desert neighbours through ceremonies of reparation.

The process of transformation from a secret sacred art to a public art was continuing and being refined during the 1970s. Geoff Bardon had witnessed the beginnings of this in the painting of Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula:

The cave and the Water Man became more directly comprehensible. I felt that as we talked and he painted Johnny was clarifying and giving new life to an archetypal form. Moreover, he was showing, with supreme brilliance, that archetypes were being modified and changed, sometimes even omitted from a representation; and he was making his own rules stylistically and iconographically. His work and that of Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri followed from what is least understood about the Western Desert art from 1971 to 1973: that seemingly it was being secularised, so that a multitude of stories could be generally seen; that the adaptability of the hieroglyphics and the way an individual artist could change the forms and still make them understandable was becoming a cultural acceptance. (Bardon 2004: 32)

When John Kean took over as manager of Papunya Tula in 1977 the transformation continued; the artists were consciously painting for the national and international western audience. Kean, fresh out of a Melbourne art school, presented the painters with the larger canvases popular with the art worlds of New York, Sydney and Melbourne. The artists responded with expanded vision, conveying their knowledge of Tjukurpa without revealing secret sacred Law; their paintings were like ‘deeds of title’ (Johnson 2007: 89).
‘Andrew Crocker time’, 1980–81, heralded the complete shift from ethnographic art to ‘art for art’s sake’. Crocker’s definitive statement at Papunya Tula exhibitions assumed a sophisticated art audience able to appreciate the Western Desert aesthetic:

Much could be said about the genesis of the Western Desert school and also of its role in the artists’ society. I think that for the purposes of this exhibition the paintings should be allowed to exercise their own aesthetic appeal and that explanations of content and symbolism be best kept to a minimum. (Johnson 2007: 95)

It appears, however, that the public appreciation of the Western Desert aesthetic is not as sophisticated as Crocker assumed. Art critic Robert Nelson suggests that white Australians are still struggling to ‘grasp the secret knowledge at the heart of Aboriginal art’ (Nelson, 2006:17). This is instructive as it reveals that 35 years after the first acrylic canvases emerged from Papunya and took the modern art world by storm, western art critics continue to debate how to understand modern Western Desert art. It is no longer separated from mainstream art as an ethnographic curiosity but neither can it be simply categorised as ‘abstract art’ in the western tradition. Western Desert art remains enigmatic to a western eye because it is not just ‘art for art’s sake’. Its artistic symbolism and iconography arise from a far more ancient tradition in which art has always been an integral expression of a holistic religious ontology.

Exhibiting the Papunya paintings in their full glory as magnificent works of art in a museum space allows texts, films and photographs to weave a communicative context around the works encourages informed appreciation. The artists sang the flesh and spirit of their creation ancestors quivering with life into the painted marks on their canvases with the intent to make their power and presence real to the audience. This performative interaction between the Papunya paintings and the viewers is made possible by the intentional space of the exhibition. The desire of both curator and artists is to communicate the vividness of Pintupi relatedness to country. To communicate the feeling of being in desert country the museum gallery has been transformed through low lighting and warm earthy coloured surrounds into a sacred performance ground designed to focus attention on the painted marks of power in the Pintupi artworks.

On entering the exhibition space a visitor moves from light to dark, from the bright daylit glass and metal towering entrance hall of the National Museum of Australia through an unassuming door into a softly low-lit cavern. The body and mind are called to attention by a Pintupi voice alerting them that they are crossing into another country. In this Western Desert world English is a foreign tongue and the visitor’s ears and eyes need to be attuned to another aural and visual language.

The exhibition hangs in a high-ceilinged hall and, like the Big Painting Room tin shed at Papunya it resembles a cave. The soft dark surrounds focus the eye on the brilliantly coloured paintings glimmering in beams of low light. The sounds of Pintupi men talking and singing comes softly from a film booth, while in the centre of the vast space a group of children and parents sit around a large light box on which Western Desert symbols are depicted and interpreted to be traced by children’s hands. The scene is reminiscent of a campfire around which children sit with elders learning to trace their
graphic language in the sand. The exhibition space feels alive with the presence of the painters, just as Geoff Bardon described them in the painting shed:

The incredible vitality of the Western Desert art became a veritable flood of brilliant paintings; the men in groups about the darkened, cave-like interior of the galvanised iron circle of a shed, singing and roaring out to their creations and attaining a confraternity of four tribes; forms radiating into new forms, and conceptions of place and subject matters being set down definitely, technical problems with many of the Pintubi being overcome.’ (Bardon 2004: 29)

The paintings have a quality that transcends cultures and languages: audiences around the world are awestruck by the power and sacred presence in these great works of art. The paintings tap into the common human desire to connect with something greater than ourselves, the immensity and beauty of land and home country. The collective unconscious responds to symbolic language at a deeper level than words, allowing viewers to feel the breath of the Dreaming ancestors that shimmers over the Western Desert. The painted ground of the Papunya canvases is a thin porous membrane between the tangible and intangible worlds of the animated flesh of country.

The Museum ‘cave’ provides a sacred space in the secular western world that encourages quiet reflective attentiveness to the creativity of the human spirit. The Papunya exhibition space, like an ancient painted cave, is a place to retreat from the daily business of hunting and gathering sustenance for our bodies to focus on the sustenance of our souls, the precious gift of the Pintupi to the nation and the world of their vibrant living art signifying human meaning in landscape, human presence and connectivity to place.

References


Langton, Marcia in Myers (details needed)


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