

REVIEW

PAPUNYA TULA: GENIUS AND GENESIS

CURATED BY HETTI PERKINS

AT THE ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, SYDNEY,

18 AUGUST - 12 NOVEMBER 2000



Timing is all-important for exhibitions. The placement of *Papunya Tula: Genius and Genesis* as the Art Gallery of New South Wales' main Olympic event bespeaks a desire to exhibit Aboriginal culture to international visitors as among the best of all Australian culture. During the Games few people visited the exhibition. Indigenous cultural heroes were no match for Indigenous sporting heroes like Cathy Freeman. She, the papers suggested, by bringing the nation together as one mob of barrackers, had taken a giant leap towards reconciliation. But David Williamson rightly warned that "much as it made us feel warm and progressive as we cheered Catherine's victory, we recent Australians have no real right to call her 'our Cathy' or celebrate her victory deliriously as if it were our own. Until we do complete the process of reconciliation, she's nobody's Catherine but her own, her family's and her people's."

The same might be said of the Pintupi, Warlpiri, Luritja, Anmatyerre and Arrernte people whose art graces the walls of *Papunya Tula*. Theirs are Cultures

within a culture: focussed, strong, Indigenous cultures persisting within the weaker, dispersed and multi-ethnic farrago that is modern Australia, which now claims them. As is often stated, the paintings on board and canvas of *Papunya Tula* exist only to communicate from Culture to culture: because the outside wanted them, because the old people realized painting could help white Australia understand the Indigenous Culture within.

To its credit the Sydney gallery and its Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins have done far more than assemble a predictable survey aimed at the broad public. Both the show and its splendid catalogue are full of riches, even for initiates of *Papunya* art. The drawcard of the exhibition is the unprecedented chance of seeing a large collection of early 'boards'. These are the paintings on irregularly-proportioned, small sheets of masonite that initiated the movement in 1971-72. The boards began to achieve cult status in the late 1980s, when histories of *Papunya Tula* began suggesting their exceptional nature.

Limited in number (between 600 and 1000), intricate in design, they possessed a startling variety of designs and stories, some of which were said to breach desert protocols for divulging sacred information. This was a factor soon corrected, but one which helped make the early boards irreplaceable. Meagre, hard-won profits saw the boards supplanted by the expansible support of stretched canvases, and Papunya art boomed in scale. In the late 80s the boards were becoming museum-pieces, and state galleries scrambled to buy what they had neglected in the 1970s, purchasing clutches of boards as the symbolic seed-beds for their Western Desert canvases. In the new millenium, with auction-houses like Sothebys organizing sales of "Important Aboriginal Art", the most valuable works are early Papunya boards (Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's *Water Dreamings* in the exhibition made just under half a million dollars in mid-2000).

The Papunya boards function culturally as the new Australian antiquities. Just thirty years old, most of their authors, middle-aged initiates when painting them, have sadly now passed away (Warangkula and Ronnie Tjampitjinpa are exceptions). Aura is in abundance here: these comparatively unedited images have a direct relation to ceremonial designs for body and sand painting of incalculable antiquity. This idea helps invest the boards with ritual and visual authority. Like old Arnhem Land barks, they seem physically less like exchanges with Euro-American modernity

than the later big canvases. It is astonishing to see such an ensemble. Occupying the first two large rooms in the exhibition, the sixty-odd boards (and supports like the schist tjuringa-shapes of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa) strike one, in an art-historical sense, with the freshness, quirkiness and non-systematicity of their designs. Any one of them (for example Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri's 1972 work featured on the cover of this issue) is more interestingly unorthodox than most standard Papunya-school canvases post-1980, even if they lack the visual gravity conferred by scale in the Tingari-cycle site-and-path paintings that define the Pintupi contribution of the movement in the 1980s.

Over half of the ten essays in the outstanding catalogue throw light on this moment of 'genesis', through to the beginnings of the outstation movement. There is an album of moving texts provided by the former art advisors Geoff Bardon, Dick Kimber, John Kean, and Daphne Williams (the latter as recorded in interview with Hetti Perkins). Actually every one of the ten essays in this book is substantial, there are no duds. Vivien Johnson writes at the top of her form, and Fred Myers gives a preview of his new book on the developing market for Papunya art. Commissioning Paul Carter and Marcia Langton to write on Papunya was a great move, and they do not disappoint: Carter breaks new ground by attempting to specify and interpret, via Bardon's un-published writings, just what

occurred in the first months of painting in the squalid polycultural 'death camp' (Bardon's term) that was Papunya in 1971. All of these essays give a mythopoetic and writerly quality to the book. But they hardly, as Nicholas Rothwell opined, produced an air of unreality broken only by the Aboriginal intellectual Marcia Langton: she, no less than the somewhat Aboriginalized art advisors, is in awe of the artists' achievement in transforming country and myth into paintings of unique resonance.² It is always challenging to decipher the curatorial stresses in exhibitions, even ones so magnificent as this. *Papunya Tula* emphasizes not only the start of the movement (as expected), but its recent past and implicitly, its future prospects. I was surprised to see two large rooms (after four devoted to the mid-70s to early 90s work that constitute the mainstream) given over to paintings made in the last two years. This means the exhibition closes on a weaker note, where selection by visual excellence has given way to commercial *realpolitik*. Papunya Tula went through some dark days in the early 1990s, due to a combination of the death of senior painting-men, the move of key artists beyond the co-operative's dealer network, and commercial competition provided by the emerging Yuendumu, Balgo and Utopia art movements. The leading Papunya Tula dealer Gabrielle Pizzi was concerned to see a new generation of Papunya artists emerge.³ This exhibition does not miss the chance to proclaim that they have done so. In these late-90s rooms, resurgent first-

generation painters Mick Namarari and Ronnie Tjampitjinpa (and the late Yala Yala Gibbs and Timmy Payungka Tjapangati) are strongly present. Their work makes a new departure: the replacement of grids of interlocking roundels (that comprise the classical design for Tingari stories) with a new design. One might call it a rectangular maze-pattern. It covers the painted field with cells of parallel lines which deviate and merge in places. Perkins and Hannah Fink relate it to the 'interlocking grid pattern' of certain early boards and artefacts of the western-most Pintupi.⁴ In the hands of the young artist Ray James Tjangala this motif achieves a crisp resonance, still in keeping with the recognized Papunya aesthetic of technical exactitude. But generally the exhibited works of the last two years seem a mixed bag, in need of rigorous editing. At the risk of political incorrectness, I suggest the substantial wall-space given to the main new group, Pintupi women, needs to be justified curatorially. The avenue of the catalogue was available to detail their differing aesthetic and the interesting history of their involvement, but apart from two pages on the women by Vivien Johnson, the opportunity was not taken up.

When too much space is given to the end what suffers is the middle: the great experimental canvases that so electrified the art world in the 1980s. It seems incredible that the famous Warlpiri artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra is given only one work (admittedly a masterpiece, the

iconic *Five Dreamings* of 1984), whereas the darling of the Sydney curators, the Pintupi painter Mick Namarari, is given fifteen. Pansy Napangati, who was the most productive innovator at Papunya at the end of the 1980s, is present in just one work and her few female peers of the day are not shown. While Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and his brother Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri are well represented (especially through the legendary *Warlugulong* collaboration of 1976), there is another great lacuna in the exhibition: the 'truck-size' painting from the National Gallery of Victoria, the astounding *Napperby Death-Spirit Dreaming* of 1980. Even at seven metres it could have fitted in the central room* that is graced by a temporary ground-painting in sand and ochres. The exhibition privileges the 'classical', severe Pintupi tradition of Papunya Tula art.

Absences are always felt when an exhibition takes on the burden of dealing in icons. But there are many things made famous through reproduction to gladden the viewer's eye. The room with Uta Uta Tjangala's magisterial *Yumari* and *Old Man Dreaming* is a highpoint of the show. *Yumari* in paint and canvas is enormous, in burning reds and blacks, and contains an indelible lesson in the giant figure of the old man and his member, distended in punishment for a wrong-way sexual affair. Curiously, three leading non-Indigenous interpreters of Papunya art witnessed the collective making of *Yumari* under Uta Uta's supervision in 1981. The anthro-

pologists Vincent Megaw and Fred Myers both photographed it,⁵ while the artist and collector Tim Johnson's documentary painting of the men at work recently resurfaced in a Christie's sale, its price skyrocketing due to the prestigious nature of its subject.⁶

A final word goes to the catalogue: its first half is a beautifully understated album of top quality color plates of exhibited works. Fine visuals continue in the essay section with photographic portraits, many unfamiliar, of key Papunya artists by lensmen like Jon Rhodes. More domestic shots record the series of art advisors. Portraits of so many artists no longer living abet the elegaic quality of the texts. Artists' biographies, list of works, bibliography and a substantial chronology of the movement are nicely understated. The last color plates in the album, of four big communal canvases made at the two painting outstations, Kintore and Kiwirrkura (each in collaborative men's and women's versions) best capture the movement's continuing promise. These works will be auctioned for the purchase of kidney dialysis machines, an intelligent diversion of some of the big money that so fetishizes Aboriginal art into the realities of harsh life in the Western Desert communities. ~

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*"Aboriginal Art: Exploitation or
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 1990) and *"A New Modernist Hero"* in
 EMILY KAME KNGWARREYE
 (Brisbane 1998).

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NOTES

1. David Williamson, "Patriot Games", *The Australian Magazine*, 7-8 October 2000, p. 15.
2. Nicholas Rothwell, "Artists lost in Mindmaps", in "Review", *The Weekend Australian*, 14-15 October 2000, p. 13.
3. See my "'The Work is the Statement': An Interview with Gabrielle Pizzi", *Aboriginal Art in the Public Eye: Art Monthly Australia* supplement, 1992-93, pp. 25-36.
4. Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink, "Genesis and Genius. The Art of Papunya Tula Artists", in Perkins and Fink, *PAPUNYA TULA*, p. 181.
5. See Fred Myers, "Aesthetics and practice: a local history of Pintupi painting", *Art from the Land. Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art*, ed. Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles, Charlottesville, University of Virginia, 1999, pp. 245-56.
6. *Contemporary Art*, Christies Australia, Sydney, 13 August 2000, lot 16.



