

Remembering the Future: Warlpiri Life Through the Prism of Drawing

by Melinda Hinkson

178 pp., Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2014,
ISBN 9781922059673 (pbk), \$49.95.

Review by Petronella Vaarzon-Morel
University of Sydney

This fascinating and beautifully crafted book is a companion to the much lauded exhibition of Warlpiri drawings that was curated by Melinda Hinkson for initial display at the National Museum of Australia. The focus of the book is the collection of crayon and paper drawings commissioned by the anthropologist Mervyn Meggitt in 1953 and 1954 at Hooker Creek (Lajamanu), and subsequently deposited by him in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. Although the majority of artists were male, women also contributed to the collection.

During the 1980s, inquiries by anthropologist Stephen Wild at Hooker Creek resulted in Warlpiri men restricting some 50 drawings from public view, with the remaining 119 identified as 'open'. It was while working at the Institute that Hinkson became intrigued by these drawings. She eventually pursued a research project to reintroduce them to descendants of the long-deceased artists and collaboratively explore their meaning. This was important not only as an act of archival repatriation but also because Meggitt's information on the drawings was sparse (he destroyed his field notes) and his observations were necessarily limited by his framework of interpretation. Furthermore, as Lydon (2005) has demonstrated, the meaning of visual images can change over time. What would contemporary Warlpiri make of the drawings given the radical changes that had occurred in their world since they were made?

Hinkson's discussion of the drawings with Warlpiri at Lajamanu and Yuendumu reveals differing and, at times, ambiguous or conflicting interpretations. Keeping her own reflections separate from those of Warlpiri, she draws upon recollections

from Mrs Joan Meggitt (who was with her husband at Lajamanu) and ethnographic and historical sources to speculate upon what the drawings might tell us about the lives and perceptions of the artists who created the images. Hinkson punctuates the main chapters of the book with four 'interludes' in which we hear the voices of Olive Pink, Jeannie Nungarrayi Herbert and Elizabeth Nungarrayi Ross. Additionally, images of works collected by Meggitt are complemented by other Warlpiri drawings including those collected by Olive Pink in the 1930s, by a teacher at Yuendumu in the late 1960s and drawings produced for Hinkson in 2011. Moving back and forth between Warlpiri readings of the images and discussions of the socio-political context in which they were made, Hinkson highlights the importance of attending to different ways of seeing and 'the role of images and the practice of looking and being looked at in structuring distinctive relationships between people' (p. 3). In particular, she is interested in how stories work 'to structure relationships between people, across time and space' (p. 3).

The resulting book thus not only explores the significance of the drawings as a form of art but also how they figure in Warlpiri responses to ongoing processes of colonisation and relations with others. As such it is a wonderful illustration of how sensitive exploration of the archive may enrich our collective understandings of the past and present. This is necessarily an unfinished project as new interpretations and linkages between different Warlpiri modes of representation will continue to be revealed. For example, Hinkson (pp. 55–56) briefly discusses a drawing that Liddy Napanangka Walker made for her in 2011. It depicts Liddy's father being shot at the time of the Coniston Massacre, as Liddy crouches behind adult witnesses nearby. The year before Liddy made this picture she recounted her recollections of the terrible event to me in an interview that I recorded with Tess Napaljarri Ross for the recently released book *Every Hill Got a Story* (Central Land Council 2015: 88). While individually Liddy's drawing and story about the event are powerful, together they amplify a shocking narrative. They also raise intriguing questions about differing emphases given to the narrative in the two art forms and how they might augment or speak to each other.

Remembering the Future makes compelling reading and, as Professor Lydon is quoted on the back cover of the book, it 'breaks new ground in exploring visual culture'. In addition to Warlpiri and those interested in Indigenous art and issues of representation, the book will be of interest to historians, anthropologists and archaeologists.

References

Lydon, Jane 2005, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Central Land Council 2015, *Every Hill Got a Story*, Hardie Grant Books/SBS, Melbourne.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 39, 2015*,
edited by Liz Conor, published 2015 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.