

# Exhibiting Western Desert Aboriginal painting in Australia's public galleries: an institutional analysis, 1981-2002

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## Introduction

Contemporary Aboriginal art, and the Western Desert painting movement in particular, now occupies a central position in the story of Australian art history. However, despite this recognition, Western Desert painting was slow to receive widespread critical and art-historical attention in the Australian art institutional setting. Eluding standard systems of art-historical classification, Australia's public galleries struggled to situate Aboriginal acrylic painting within the narrative formations of Australian and international art practice. This paper charts the exhibition history of the movement, commencing with Papunya's first appearance at a contemporary art event in 1981 until the movement's institutional commemoration some two decades later. An analysis of catalogues from key exhibitions reveals three common strategies used by curators to interpret this new visual culture. Based on art-historical and anthropological discursive formations, these interpretative frameworks are called the aesthetic, ethnographic and ownership discourses. This investigation concentrates on the activities of Australia's public galleries.<sup>1</sup> As the traditional guardians of artistic standards, these institutions occupy positions of authority in the Australian art world.

## Comparative interpretations: aesthetic, ethnographic and ownership

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain the circumstances that gave rise to the Western Desert acrylic movement and the emergence of contemporary Aboriginal art more generally.<sup>2</sup> This complex cultural phenomenon has been the subject of major studies already.<sup>3</sup> Many experts, among them Fred Myers, have investigated the intricate social matrix that brought together Aboriginal painters, art critics and

<sup>1</sup> The public galleries are: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, The Art Gallery of South Australia, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Queensland Art Gallery, The National Gallery of Australia and The National Gallery of Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> As noted by Howard Morphy, the term 'Western Desert Art' is a misnomer in the sense that the region covered is much greater than the extent of the Western Desert itself. *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon, 1998, 424.

<sup>3</sup> Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

anthropologists, as well as curators, collectors and dealers.<sup>4</sup> Like Myers' work, this paper makes reference to Arthur Danto's 'art world' concept.<sup>5</sup> Art world, in the most obvious sense, refers to the tangible institutions and networks that constitute the artistic field of practice. Art world also refers to the intangible art-historical and theoretical doctrines that differentiate the cultural category of fine art from the universe of commonplace objects, or non-art. As defined by Danto, the art world is 'the historically ordered world of artworks, enfranchised by theories which themselves are historically ordered.'<sup>6</sup> Although a useful concept, in the case of Western Desert painting art status was not determined by disinterested analytical debate or philosophical postulation alone. Even when the fundamental questions of cultural classification were posited in the literature, social, historical and economic realities were usually implicated in these discussions.<sup>7</sup>

The three exegetic frameworks covered here defy clear periodization. For the most part, there was a great deal of overlap and convergence in their use over the two-decade period covered. However, the aesthetic discourse was the most enduring of these. This evaluative perspective was informed by regular art-historical principles and used the vocabulary of art criticism to emphasise style, media and singular creativity. Conversely, the ethnographic discourse borrowed concepts from cultural anthropology and elevated subject matter over style. Despite downplaying the aesthetic preoccupation with media and stylistic elements, the ethnographic discourse was not necessarily antithetic to contemporary art thinking. This perspective found currency in the theoretical climate of postmodernism and was itself an extension of the 'art-in-context' interests that prevailed after formalism.<sup>8</sup> Because both the aesthetic and ethnographic approaches were heavily mediated by the discursive practices of art history and anthropology, the ownership discourse emerged as an alternative point of view. This third perspective, informed by critical issues posed by post-colonial theory, challenged the universalising worldviews of both art history and anthropology. Importantly, the ownership discourse was based on the unmediated authority of the artist's own experiences. Drawing on primary source information, this strategy was designed to bypass the secondary commentaries of non-indigenous moderators. The 1994 retrospective catalogue of Kimberly artist Rover Thomas, which featured first hand transcripts of

<sup>4</sup> Fred R. Myers, 'Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings,' *Cultural Anthropology*, 6:1, 1991, 26-62. See also Ian McLean, ed., *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Art*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 1964, 571-584; Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 38.

<sup>7</sup> For example: J.V.S. Megaw, 'Western Desert Acrylic Painting – Artefact or Art?', *Art History*, 5:2, 1982, 205-218

<sup>8</sup> See: Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.

the artist's stories, was a prime example of this genre (a more detailed discussion to follow).

## Background and context

It is not the intention of this paper to recount the history of the Western Desert art movement. Authoritative accounts of its origins and development have already been written.<sup>9</sup> A brief introduction is nevertheless necessary. Papunya was established in the early 1960s by the Australian government, 250 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The settlement was comprised of displaced people from several Western Desert language groups, including the Pintupi, Arrernte (Aranda), Warlpiri, Anmatyerr and Luritja. Men from this settlement established the Papunya Tula artists' collective in 1972, after local art teacher Geoffrey Bardon introduced art materials (acrylic paint and canvas) to the community. The Papunya men used these exotic media to reproduce some of their native designs and subjects, which had been traditionally depicted as body markings and sand drawings. Pioneering artists of the movement included Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri, Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa and Johnny Warrangula Tjupurrula. The Australian government established the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 to support the market for indigenous art. The Warlukurlangu Artists' Aboriginal Corporation was established at neighbouring Yuendumu in 1985, after Warlpiri men granted women permission to paint with dot motifs. Yuendumu quickly gained a reputation for its brilliant coloured paintings and gestural brushwork. Exhibitions of Western Desert painting were held in New York in 1988 and Paris in 1993, enhancing the movement's international stature.<sup>10</sup> Anatjari Tjakamarra's *Tingari Cycle Dreaming* was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1989, becoming the first Papunya canvas acquired by a major international institution. Confirming the movement's national iconic status, a mosaic based on a painting by Michael Nelson Jagamara, *Possum and Wallaby Dreaming*, was installed in the forecourt of the new Australian Parliament House in Canberra in 1988.

In a relatively short period of time, Western Desert painting advanced from a marginal position, both geographically and aesthetically, to the central position in Australian art. When Terry Smith updated Bernard Smith's narrative account of Australian painting in 1991, this standard textbook included, for the first time, a separate chapter on contemporary Aboriginal painting. *Transcending Australian art*

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bardon and James Bardon, *Papunya: A Place Made After the Story: The Beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement*, Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2004; Vivien Johnson, *Once Upon a Time in Papunya*, Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2010; Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*, Ringwood VIC: Penguin, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood, Vic.: Viking in association with the Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1988; Françoise Dussart, *La Peinture des Aborigènes d'Australie*, Paris: Musée des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1993.

history, Aboriginal painting was hailed as one of the most significant developments in recent international art history. According to Terry Smith, 'in world terms, the impact of contemporary Aboriginal painting matches Neo-Expressionism in Europe and Postmodernism in the United States'.<sup>11</sup>

### Early debates and issues

The Western Desert art movement was approximately twelve years old in 1983 when the Art Gallery of South Australia organized *Recent Australian Painting*. This was one of the earliest institutional exhibitions that attempted to incorporate the art of Papunya into the mainstream of Australian art practice. At the time, how did art curators and their metropolitan audiences perceive the significance of this art? Ron Radford, the exhibition's curator, deployed the analytical and visual tools he had at his disposal. Upholding the historiography of style and linear progress that was second nature to a generation of curators schooled in modernism, Radford wrote: 'the movements or directions of the early 1970s documented here, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, Lyrical Abstraction and Western Desert paintings, all have been concerned with the abstract'.<sup>12</sup>

It was not only art curators who reverted to the standard codes of modernism. When first confronted with this new visual culture, most art critics did the same.<sup>13</sup> This trend is not surprising. For both visually and materially, Western Desert painting appealed to a modernist sensibility accustomed to large canvases and the intrinsic properties of paint. Most strikingly of all, as already noted by Radford, the paintings themselves were seemingly abstract. It was by virtue of this association with abstraction that Western Desert painting became embroiled in the backlash against modernism, especially in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> This critique had a radical element. Although anti-modernist rhetoric subsided, the misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture in terms specific to Western art history remained a point of contention.

To define certain objects produced in Aboriginal culture as 'art' is to understand them in terms commensurable with our culture – our 'system of objects' and socio-linguistic frameworks of naming – it is not to understand

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Smith and Terry Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Melbourne: OUP, 1991, 495. See Chapter 15 by Terry Smith, 'From the Desert: Aboriginal Painting 1970-1990'.

<sup>12</sup> Ron Radford, *Recent Australian painting*, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1983, 13.

<sup>13</sup> For example Elwyn Lynn's review of an exhibition of Australasian, Oceanic and African tribal art entitled 'Primitive Works Show a Wild Array of Culture', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, January 14-15, 1984, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Marrie, 'Killing Me Softly: Aboriginal Art and Western Critics', *Art network*, 14, summer 1985, 17-21.

them on their own terms; what this involves is the universalising of culturally specific criteria.<sup>15</sup>

Aesthetically, the basic characteristics of Western Desert painting continued to elicit comparisons with international abstraction. And yet, at the same time, Western Desert painting supported the values of postmodern pluralism. Displaying both modern and postmodern possibilities, Aboriginal acrylic paintings can be regarded as a textbook example of 'double-coding'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, of the global art forms of the late modern period, few highlighted the problems affecting the transition from the modern to the postmodern more demonstrably than Western Desert painting. Hal Foster described this critical juncture in contemporary art as the broad shift from the 'medium-specific' to 'discourse-specific'.<sup>17</sup> Foster's observations can be compared with Noël Carroll's philosophical insights on this matter. That 'the advent of what is called postmodernism on the gallery scene marks a shift from the idiom of phenomenology to that of semiotics and post-structuralism, in which the basic constituents of painting are no longer identified as lines or colors, but signs'.<sup>18</sup>

The modernist 'medium-specific' reading ascribed to Western Desert art arose from the material properties of the acrylic painterly medium. Generally, the aesthetic discourse was informed by the modernist legacy; the ethnographic and ownership discourses, alternatively, by postmodern perspectives. Whereas the aesthetic discourse was more inclined to focus on the qualitative attributes of paintings as autonomous artworks, and later individual artists as autonomous creators, ethnographic and ownership interpretations tended to stress the art's communicative and collaborative dimensions: as symbolic representations of traditional narratives, as signs of cultural identity and Aboriginality.

### **Cultural authenticity and the ethnographic discourse**

What qualified as authentic in the cultural field has long been a moot point for anthropologists and art historians.<sup>19</sup> However, anthropologists have generally enjoyed a more flexible concept of authenticity than their counterparts in art history,

<sup>15</sup> Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, 'Ethnocentrism, Art, and the Culture of Domination', *Praxis M*, 20, 1988, 17.

<sup>16</sup> This refers to the concept of 'double-coding' used by Charles Jenks in 'The Post-Modern Agenda'. See: *Post-Modern Reader*, London: Academy Editions, 1992, 10-40. According to Jenks, double-coding was a strategy that aimed to deny the dominance of any single discourse, thereby allowing alternative discourses to be voiced simultaneously. Jenks employed this concept to explain the broader cultural phenomenon of postmodernism: 'post-modernism means the end of a single worldview and, by extension, "a war on totality", a resistance to single explanations, a respect for difference and a celebration of the regional, local and particular' (11).

<sup>17</sup> Foster, *Return of the Real*, 199.

<sup>18</sup> Noël Carroll, 'Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51:3, 1993, 316.

<sup>19</sup> Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

where the rubric of 'material culture' was more encompassing than the art-historically contingent category of fine art. Aesthetic notions of authenticity have therefore imposed particular strictures on art curators. Art-historically speaking, authenticity had a twofold meaning. Firstly, it was bound to attribution assigned to singular (unique) works of art. Secondly, it was applied to an object that fitted a body of objects, defined collectively by conventions governing style, function and media. To quote Larry Shiner: 'authentic usually means only those things that have been made in an inherited style to serve a traditional purpose, whereas things made to be sold to outsiders are scorned as fakes, tourist art, or craft kitsch'.<sup>20</sup>

The first major survey exhibition of Western Desert painting, organized by an Australian public gallery, occurred in 1985. *The Face of the Centre: Papunya Tula Paintings, 1971-1984*, was mounted by the National Gallery of Victoria. The relative lateness of this exhibition is even more surprising when considering that the first travelling exhibition of Papunya art was organized as early as 1973. This early exhibition was not the work of a public gallery, however; the Commonwealth Department of Interior, the Australian government bureaucracy responsible for administering the Aboriginal settlements in the Northern Territory, had arranged this formative event.<sup>21</sup> *The Face of the Centre* exhibition catalogue was a document of its time. It revealed, among other things, the epistemic limitations of museum art history. Without a language or conceptual framework capable of comprehending the unique cultural and social milieu that gave rise to the art of Papunya, even the most committed art curators struggled to explain the significance of this atypical art. Anne Marie Brody, the exhibition's curator, made use of art-historical analogy and precedent. Landscape painting, the dominant tradition of Australian art history, provided the most obvious frame of reference. According to Brody, 'the Papunya Tula movement in the early 1970s possessed a fascinating synchronicity in relation to the mainstream tradition of Australian landscape art, particularly in the work of Fred Williams.'<sup>22</sup> *The Face of the Centre* was an important forerunner of the exhibitions to come. Between 1985 and 2000, each of Australia's major public galleries would organize a dedicated exhibition of Western Desert painting or at least include important examples in their broader surveys of Aboriginal art.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 271.

<sup>21</sup> *Art of Aboriginal Australia* travelled to Canada in 1974 under the auspices of the Peter Stuyvesant Trust. It is the first time examples of Western Desert dot painting were shown internationally.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Marie Brody, *The Face of the Centre: Papunya Tula Paintings, 1971-84*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1985, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Between 1985 and 2000, Western Desert art appeared in the following exhibitions: *The Art of the Western Desert: Aboriginal Art from Central Australia*, Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1987; *Art of the Great Sandy Desert*, Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1987; *The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia*, Darwin: Brisbane, Museums and Galleries of the Northern Territory in association with Queensland Art Gallery, 1988; *Windows on the Dreaming: Aboriginal Paintings in the Australian National Gallery*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1989; *Mythscapes: Aboriginal Art of the Desert from the National Gallery of Victoria*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1989; *Tjukurrpa – Desert Paintings: Aboriginal Art from Central Australia*, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1993; *Painted Dreams: Western Desert Paintings from the Johnson Collection*, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1995;

Enthusiasm for contemporary Aboriginal painting, which gained momentum from the late 1980s, redressed almost two decades of relative neglect. Despite limited exposure in contemporary art festivals and general survey exhibitions before 1985, Western Desert painting had failed to attract significant curatorial attention until events compelled the public art galleries to remedy the situation. The main catalyst was the bicentenary in 1988, a year commemorating two centuries of European colonization of the Australian continent. As part of the official cultural program of that year, the South Australian Museum assembled the landmark exhibition, *Dreamings: Art of Aboriginal Australia*. Organized in association with the Asia Society Galleries of New York, and financed in part by the US Government's National Endowment for the Humanities, *Dreamings* toured venues in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Curated by Peter Sutton, a linguist and anthropologist from the South Australian Museum, *Dreamings* included a sizable collection of acrylic paintings, in addition to bark paintings, sculpture and traditional tools.

*Dreamings: Art of Aboriginal Australia* was a great critical success. But most important of all, the response of the New York art world was highly complimentary, especially towards the Western Desert acrylic paintings. Fred Myers summarized the reaction: 'The *Dreamings* exhibition met with an extraordinary critical reception. Reviews in the major publications and periodicals – from the *New York Times* and *Time* to *Art in America* – signalled the apotheosis of acrylic painting as a fine art.'<sup>24</sup>

It is ironic that anthropologists and natural history museums took most of the credit for establishing the international art status of Western Desert painting. The *Dreamings* exhibition had three important legacies. To start with, the American reception provided international recognition. At home, this prompted a re-evaluation of the movement's place in the realm of contemporary art. *Dreamings* also confirmed the orthodoxy of the ethnographic discourse and the exegesis of Western Desert art based on insider knowledge of Aboriginal law and kinship. The exhibition catalogue contained a chapter on Western Desert paintings called 'Dreamings in Acrylic', written by anthropologists Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart. The authors of this piece made the point that acrylic painting was firmly embedded in the social and spiritual context of Aboriginal culture. Furthermore, this new mode of painting was governed by the same protocols that sanctioned the use of patterns and subjects found in 'traditional' art forms. Finally, and most importantly, *Dreamings* rejected the narrowly defined notion of cultural authenticity that negated the legitimacy of materials and techniques derived from supposed non-traditional sources. To summarize the anthropological position:

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*Dreamings of the Desert: Aboriginal Dot Paintings of the Western Desert*, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1995, *Utopia: Ancient Cultures, New Forms*, Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1999; *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Myers, *Painting Culture*, 277.

For much of this century, the “primitive art” market has given highest monetary value to objects that are aesthetically pleasing to connoisseurs, relatively uncommon, documented, and “authentic.” Authentic objects are often regarded as those that enjoy the “sincerity” of a precommercial, pre-Christian tribal origin. This particular criterion for quality is now, more than ever, under a cloud. Sincerity in art is, happily, a metaphor, just as the definition of primitivism in Western art as “a retreat from false sentiment” is a metaphor.<sup>25</sup>

### Aboriginal art as museum art

Aboriginal artefacts (stone tools, weapons and ceremonial curios) had long been collected and exhibited by Australia’s scientific and natural history museums. Many of these objects, originating from central Australia, were amassed between 1875 and 1912 by the pioneering ethnologists Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen.<sup>26</sup> Despite having a major influence on the early development of anthropology and sociology, the impact of Aboriginal culture on the disciplinary study of art history was almost non-existent in comparison.<sup>27</sup> If international art publishing was an indicator of art-historical consciousness, Aboriginal art was first admitted to the ‘World of Art’ as recently as 1993. In the words of Wally Caruana, author of *Aboriginal Art*, from the Thames and Hudson series of that title, ‘the art of Aboriginal Australia was the last great tradition of art to be appreciated by the world at large.’<sup>28</sup>

The construction of Aboriginal artefacts as artworks is therefore a relatively recent phenomenon. Modernism, in particular the cult of primitivism, provided both impetus and rationale for the aesthetic enfranchisement of Aboriginal art.<sup>29</sup> However, in Australia, this development had to wait until the 1960s, when modernism itself first gained an institutional foothold in the country’s notoriously

<sup>25</sup> Peter Sutton, Philip Jones and Steven Hemming, ‘Survival, Regeneration and Impact’, in *Dreamings: the Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1988, 202.

<sup>26</sup> The various elements of the Spencer and Gillen collection were deposited in a number of Australian and international institutions. The Spencer and Gillen Collection Project, comprising the Australian National University, Museum Victoria and the South Australian Museum, is currently identifying, cataloguing and digitising the material gathered by W.B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen. See: *Reconstructing the Spencer and Gillen Collection: Museums, Indigenous Perspectives and the Production of Cultural Knowledge*, 2009, <http://spencerandgillen.org/> Accessed 26 July 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Spencer and Gillen’s ethnography had a profound impact on Emile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912); their work on Aboriginal religious beliefs inspired Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and deeply influenced the development of James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1906-15).

<sup>28</sup> Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, 7.

<sup>29</sup> The literature on primitivism in modern art is vast. For example: Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986; William Rubin, ‘Modernist Primitivism’, in *Primitivism: Twentieth Century Art, A Documentary History*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003; Arthur C. Danto, ‘Defective Affinities: “Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art’, in *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.



conservative public galleries. The watershed event frequently cited in the literature was the exhibition mounted by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1964.<sup>30</sup> Tony Tuckson, curator and abstract expressionist painter, organised this milestone exhibition, which featured Arnhem Land art collected from Yirrkala and Melville Island.

Bark paintings from the Yolngu communities in Arnhem Land were the first examples of Aboriginal material culture to make the transition from handicraft to fine art.<sup>31</sup> By the 1980s, state gallery exhibitions and collections had enshrined the Arnhem Land Yolngu-style as the exemplary form of Aboriginal art. So much so, the local features of Arnhem Land art, cross-hatched patterns, natural ochre colours and bark panels, came to exemplify the stylistic and material features of Aboriginal art in general.<sup>32</sup> The resulting conflation of style, media and ritual function would therefore adversely affect both the critical reception and institutional acceptance of Western Desert acrylics, especially during the formative stages of the movement's development. In material terms, polymer pigments on canvas and plywood surfaces contradicted the traditional idiom as typified by bark painting.

While some elements of the art world questioned the legitimacy of Western Desert acrylic painting on grounds of cultural authenticity, others challenged this purist sentiment. In 1981, Western Desert painting was first exhibited alongside other forms of Australian contemporary art. The occasion was *Australian Perspecta*, an exhibition hosted by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Three large paintings were selected for the event. Bernice Murphy, contemporary art curator, summarized the key issues affecting art world perceptions of Papunya painting at the time.

Aboriginal ground paintings in acrylic on canvas have long been excluded from the art museum context in Australia as a result of quite artificial strictures placed around the question of their "cultural authenticity". They have often been regarded as hybrid, because of their expression in non-traditional materials. Thus the powerful symbolic abstraction and spiritual potency of these works at their best has been, relatively speaking, obscured from broader cultural view.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1998, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-cultural Categories*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Collections of Arnhem Land art included: *Kunwinjku bim: Western Arnhem Land Paintings from the Collection of the Aboriginal Art Board*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1984; *Ancestors and Spirits: Aboriginal Painting from Arnhem Land in the 1950s and 1960s*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1987; *Spirit in Land: Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land in the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1990; *Keepers of the Secrets: Aboriginal art from Arnhemland in the Collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia*, Perth, WA: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> Bernice Murphy, *Australian Perspecta 1981*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981, 15.

Not only had *Australian Perspecta* exposed the biases that impeded the recognition of Western Desert acrylic painting, it also provided a justification for including these canvases in the contemporary art arena. Despite efforts to establish the art credentials of Western Desert painting, the criterion of cultural authenticity continued to overshadow these early endeavours. The term 'ground painting', used to describe the dot-paintings of Papunya, was meant to provoke comparisons with the traditional (ceremonial) ground art of the Western Desert region. Thus, although the paintings were not themselves made from traditional materials, they at least purportedly followed an established style and were derived from a traditional (ritual) art form. For the time being, the case for cultural compatibility would allow art curators to sidestep the issue of cultural authenticity. This followed the logic that the new was at one with the traditional:

The adoption of exotic media by artists at Papunya in the early 1970s provided a new context and expressive possibilities for traditional forms and practice. Despite the oppressive cultural circumstances which prevailed at the time, ceremonial art still existed and continues to exist. Whilst some writers have found in the new direction a problematical break with ceremonial art and values, this does not seem to be the view of the artists for whom the Dreaming subject or story celebrated in both provides an overriding, indissoluble connection. It is preferable to view both kinds of art as authentic alternative expressions rather than separate practices in purist competition with each other.<sup>34</sup>

The ethnographic discourse had the advantage in this debate because it accepted acrylic painting on its own terms and in its own contemporary contexts, without having to constantly defer to the ideals of traditional style and media. Another Bicentenary exhibition was *The Inspired Dream*, organized by the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory in association with the Queensland Art Gallery. Compiled by academic anthropologists, *The Inspired Dream* catalogue was significant because it presented a methodology for writing about Western Desert art. Most importantly, the catalogue essays that dealt with acrylic painting made the argument that authenticity was based on representations of the Dreamtime ('Tjukurrpa'); that is, creation stories sourced from Aboriginal cosmology and law.<sup>35</sup> The representation of a Dreaming story was enough to confirm a painting's cultural authenticity, irrespective of materials or media. For anthropologists, therefore, the presence of one of these culturally sanctioned subjects satisfied the question of cultural authenticity. This allowed non-indigenous commentators to interpret the significance of the signature dot-motif and the symbolic ideogram as contemporary representations of traditional cultural values.

<sup>34</sup> Brody, *The Face of the Centre*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> The Pitjantjatjara word 'Tjukurrpa' is often used in professional discourse in preference to Dreaming or Dreamtime.

According to this theory, a painting's cultural authenticity was guaranteed if it fulfilled two specific criteria. Firstly, the subject matter represented a legitimate Dreaming (Tjukurrpa). Secondly, the artist(s) who painted the canvas had the cultural authorization to paint the Dreaming subject depicted. As well as satisfying the conditions of authenticity, this theory also attempted to satisfy an aesthetic criterion. This pertains to an artwork possessing artistic intention or purpose. Ian Green, writing in *The Inspired Dream* catalogue, explained how these conditions worked with reference to the art-making practices at Papunya:

But the point is that the purpose and validity of a painting lies in its Dreaming. To the Papunya artists, and the society in which they live and work, a painting not informed by a Dreaming (if such a thing were seriously possible) would be nothing more than frivolous decoration; simply not art. These *tjukurrpa* (Dreamings stories) provide interpretations of the land that verify and reaffirm traditional Aboriginal law. It is through these stories that the law is visible and accessible. Thus when a Papunya Tula artist paints a contemporary work, he sees himself as part of the unbroken cultural tradition of the artist; as an instrument through which the old established law is retransmitted and renewed, whether it be in sand painting, body painting, canvas or whatever.<sup>36</sup>

But what did this approach mean for art curators? In practical terms, art audiences had to be taught to see the paintings in representational – rather than purely formal – ways. That is, as 'story art' not abstract art. To encourage and facilitate this perception, catalogues started to feature explanatory diagrams and tables that resembled cartographic legends. These devices enabled pictographs and surface designs to be deciphered in accordance with narrative intentions, where, for example, a seemingly abstract U-shape symbolised a sitting person and arrows represented emu tracks. As explained by anthropologist Françoise Dussart, this iconographic reading even applied to the paintings at Yuendumu, the community noted for its brightly coloured canvases.

In the most general terms, the shapes found in acrylic paintings, like their predecessors, often represent that mysterious and often intangible world of Dreamings. They are not abstract symbols randomly dispatched across the

<sup>36</sup> Ian Green, 'Make 'im flash, poor bugger: talking about men's painting at Papunya', in *The inspired dream: life as art in Aboriginal Australia*, Brisbane: The Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory in Association with the Queensland Art Gallery, 1988, 42.

canvas. To the knowledgeable elders, the dots and dashes offer as much narrative possibility as Morse code.<sup>37</sup>

### The aesthetic discourse and language of modernism

If legitimate Dreaming subjects fulfilled the criterion of authenticity, as was claimed by some anthropologists, then there was little to distinguish the masterpieces of the Western Desert movement from regular tourist art sold at Sydney international airport. Since, as experts have pointed out, 'paintings of the tourist type may very well continue to reveal sacred knowledge, as the painters insist they do, and in this sense they are not "inauthentic"'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, if a Dreamtime subject endowed a painting with cultural authenticity, then the ethnographic discourse could not explain why some paintings were classified as fine art while other paintings were consigned to the inferior category of tourist art.

The massive commodification of Aboriginal visual culture further complicated the concept of authenticity; according to one Australia Council survey, purchases of indigenous art, artefacts and souvenirs by international visitors increased from \$46 million in 1993 to \$67 million in 1996.<sup>39</sup> Compounding these developments were political reverberations from the Australian Bicentenary in 1988. This event had precipitated a wave of cultural nationalism and calls for Aboriginal self-determination, which in the early 1990s coalesced in debates about Australian national identity. In 1994, the Australian government conflated Aboriginal culture with Australian identity in its cultural policy statement. As announced in *Creative Nation*:

As never before we now recognise the magnificent heritage of the oldest civilisation on earth – the civilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In literature, art, music, theatre and dance, the indigenous culture of Australia informs and enriches the contemporary one. The culture and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has become an essential element of *Australian* identity, a vital expression of who we *all* are.<sup>40</sup>

At this time, when government agencies and corporate enterprises were readily expropriating images of Aboriginality for their own political and commercial purposes, Aboriginal visual culture became most vulnerable to popular overexposure. As distinctive signifiers of the new Australian self-perception,

<sup>37</sup> Françoise Dussart, 'Women's Acrylic Paintings From Yuendumu', in *The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia*, Brisbane: The Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory in Association with the Queensland Art Gallery, 1988, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Myers, *Painting Culture*, 2002, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Terri Janke, *Our Culture: Our Future – A Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights*, Sydney: Michael Frankel and Company for AIATSIS and ATSIC, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Department of Communications and the Arts, *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy*, Canberra: Department of Communications and the Arts, 1994, 6. Emphasis original.

Aboriginal art was especially attractive for tourism and cultural diplomacy ventures. When the National Gallery of Victoria mounted the Ginger Riley Munduwalawala retrospective in 1997, the sponsor's foreword in the exhibition catalogue typified the hyperbole surrounding Aboriginal culture; Ginger Riley was a contemporary acrylic painter from south-eastern Arnhem Land.

Qantas is proud to participate in this outstanding exhibition of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's work as part of its ongoing program to support and promote Aboriginal art – one of the most dynamic streams in contemporary Australian art. An unusual feature of this program showing the work of Aboriginal artists are the two Qantas 747 Jumbo aircraft painted in eye-catching Aboriginal designs. On their flights around the Qantas international network, these aircraft – *Nalanji Dreaming* and *Wunala Dreaming* – have created enormous awareness of and interest in the unique work of Australia's indigenous artists.<sup>41</sup>

The aesthetic discourse was less a response to the commodification of Aboriginal visual culture than a need to establish modes of qualitative distinction that would separate art from non-art. To this end, it resurrected the modernist idea that avant-garde art eschewed facile and popular cultural forms. Reprising *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Clement Greenberg's famous manifesto, art world aficionados rejected the clichéd ornamentation of the so-called Dreamtime Strip by emphasising uniqueness and experimentation as the essential attributes guiding this new contemporary art movement. Exhibitions advocating Western Desert painting in avant-garde terms appealed to the tastes of a more discriminating art audience. *Mythscape: Aboriginal Art of the Desert*, organized by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1989, foreshadowed the revival of the aesthetic discourse in the public gallery scene. While retaining many of the features of the ethnographic discourse, including emphasis on subject-centred content and cultural context, the *Mythscape* exhibition was also imbued with parlance and concepts distinctly art-historical. Judith Ryan's catalogue was important in this development because it gave the ethnographic position on cultural authenticity a unique art-historical spin. From an art world perspective, the 'living culture' ideology was translated to mean a living and evolving contemporary art movement. The result had progressive implications for art historiography. By explaining Western Desert painting as a vital sign of 'living culture', art curators could describe originality and innovation in the language they knew best.

Aboriginal art and culture are alive – and dynamically changing. Contrary to common belief, their future does not lie in the past. So often maltreated, ignored and downtrodden, the dispossessed first Australians from the arid

<sup>41</sup> 'Sponsor's Message', *Ginger Riley*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1997, 6.

Central and Western Desert regions are speaking eloquently in art of their own making. They have now evolved a unique contemporary form of artistic expression, using European materials but based on their own inviolate, mythologically sanctioned signs. The seemingly 'abstract' designs, together constituting an eternal hemisphere of meaning, spoke directly to a white audience accustomed to the world of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Op Art. The constellar configurations of circles, arcs and meanders, also found on ancient Aboriginal petroglyphs, seemed to issue from within the continent itself. Yet these paintings were undeniably modern. Here was sophisticated art, not artefact.<sup>42</sup>

The 'living culture' rationale allowed aesthetic documents to invoke avant-garde terms and movements without compromising the imperatives of cultural authenticity. By the mid-1990s, Western Desert painting was firmly established in the public gallery setting. These exhibitions were adapting the terms of the ethnographic discourse to suit the interests of the contemporary art environment. The appearance in the mid-1980s of the highly expressive and brightly coloured canvases from the Yuendumu settlement greatly enhanced the avant-garde credentials of Aboriginal acrylic painting. Unlike the men painters from Papunya, with their quasi-traditional ochre colours, 'hard-edge' designs and ideograms, the women from Yuendumu fully embraced the painterly vibrancy of acrylic pigments. Yuendumu presented a new, dynamic and seemingly unorthodox direction. For critics and curators alike, these results were particularly exciting. Although never transgressing the discursive boundaries of Aboriginality, the Yuendumu style was celebrated for its unique expressiveness. This style was highly conducive to vintage art-historical formal analysis. As Judith Ryan explains:

This legitimized the Yuendumu style, which was characterized by vibrant colour, large brush-strokes and an almost messy, gestural freedom. In Wölfflin's classic terminology, it was the painterly rather than the linear. Colour and design were free-ranging and mattered more than symmetry of line. There was a frankness about the properties of the acrylic medium which seemed the antithesis of the meticulous, almost minimalist Papunya Tula art of the mid-1980s. The artists dared to use bright pinks, purples, blues – the synthetic edge of the spectrum.<sup>43</sup>

Not unlike fashionable Neo-expressionism in Europe and the United States, which in the 1980s had challenged the postmodernist predilection for dry conceptualism and irony, Western Desert canvases offered Australian collectors and curators the authorial mark of the original. Although cultural context was retained as a symbolic guarantee, critical terms of evaluation gradually inclined towards the

<sup>42</sup> Judith Ryan, *Mythscape: Aboriginal Art of the Desert*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1989, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ryan, *Mythscape*, 69.

aesthetic and the purely formal. Again, art curators looked to the Yuendumu palette for inspiration. To quote Michael O'Ferrall, from the Art Gallery of Western Australia:

The use of vibrant blues, oranges, greens and reds in an apparent compositional randomness appeared almost anarchic in its vibrancy and panache when Yuendumu paintings first appeared in commercial exhibitions in 1985/86. The notions of anthropological orthodoxy and of an art based on fixed formulations of tradition, ceremonial correctness and traditional colours were seriously challenged by Yuendumu paintings.<sup>44</sup>

### The ownership discourse

The ownership discourse was a reaction to the excesses of aestheticism. While presenting an alternative way of explaining contemporary Aboriginal art, where it was utilized in retrospective surveys in particular, the ownership discourse was never as prominent as ethnographic or art-historical analyses. This exegesis was based on the experiences of the Aboriginal artists themselves. The approach had its roots reflexive anthropology and sought to resist the objectification of Aboriginal culture by non-indigenous academic and professional mediators. Ideologically, it arose from a blend of post-colonial theory and postmodern critique of modernist institutional tenets, especially those doctrines pertaining to aesthetic autonomy and the totality of a universal art history.<sup>45</sup> The ownership discourse was, therefore, pluralistic in ideology with a strong anti-modernist subtext. Radical proposals, such as that voiced by Aboriginal rights activist Henrietta Fourmile, went as far as advocating the creation of separate Aboriginal art museums:

In the process of presenting Aboriginal art in the context of a Western art museum our arts become institutionalised within that context to the extent that a whole set of values, roles and criteria are being applied which are quite alien to our own arts practices. This Western institutionalisation of our arts severely threatens the integrity of the role that our objects fulfil in our own communities.<sup>46</sup>

The George Milpurrurru retrospective exhibition, mounted by the National Gallery of Australia in 1993, provided an opportunity to expound the objectives of

<sup>44</sup> Michael O'Ferrall, *Tjukurrpa: Desert Dreamings – Aboriginal Art from Central Australia (1971-1993)*, Perth, WA: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1994, 8.

<sup>45</sup> As promulgated by Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985 and Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>46</sup> Henrietta Fourmile, 'The Case for Independent but Complementary Aboriginal Cultural Institutions', in *Extending Parameters: A Selection of Papers Delivered at the Extending Parameters Forum Sponsored by the Australia Council and the Queensland Art Gallery*, Redfern, NSW: Australia Council for the Arts, 1990, 37.

the ownership discourse; Milpurrurru was a painter of bark paintings from Arnhem Land. As Wally Caruana, curator of Aboriginal art in Canberra, explained in the catalogue's foreword:

Most importantly, this catalogue aims to reflect Milpurrurru's own view of his work and his life. The catalogue is presented as a commentary told by Milpurrurru and other members of his family. It is not intended to be interpretative or analytical in anthropological or artistic frameworks, but aims to present Milpurrurru's own story as it relates to his art. Therefore, the catalogue is compiled as much as possible in Milpurrurru's own words which were recorded in interviews and discussions.<sup>47</sup>

The Milpurrurru catalogue was a paragon of the ownership discourse. Instead of explanatory essays written by art curators and anthropologists, the catalogue contained a transcript that carefully recounted, word for word, the artist's experiences. The National Gallery of Australia repeated this format in 1994 for the occasion of the retrospective exhibition of Kimberley painter Rover Thomas. The catalogue recorded the stories and songs that inspired Thomas's paintings, including those for the Krill Krill (Gurirr Gurirr) ceremony and the stories behind the Killing Times canvases.<sup>48</sup> As with Milpurrurru, the statements in the Thomas catalogue were faithfully transcribed to preserve an authentic impression of the artist's speaking voice. Although catalogues of this genre were intended to function as primary source documents, this form of exhibition documentation did not mean that secondary source art-historical and ethnographic insights were henceforth redundant. Exhibition catalogues of Aboriginal art were not disposed to any one approach. Indeed, printed transcripts would also appear alongside conventional commentaries.

### **Conclusion: art-historical canonization**

Australia's public galleries were not at the forefront of the so-called 'Dreamtime boom time', the era that culminated in the exuberant Aboriginal art market of the early 1990s.<sup>49</sup> However, following this wave of enthusiasm for contemporary Aboriginal painting, the public galleries did play a key role in consolidating and legitimating this phenomenon. This paper concludes with a brief discussion of three prominent institutional exhibitions that helped install Aboriginal art at the apex position of Australian art history.

<sup>47</sup> Wally Caruana, 'Foreword: The Art of George Milpurrurru', *The Art of George Milpurrurru*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1993, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Rover Thomas, *Roads Cross: The Paintings of Rover Thomas*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1994.

<sup>49</sup> Helen Pitt, 'Dreamtime Boom Time', *Australian Financial Review*, 8 October 1993, 11.



*Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* was the first major group retrospective of the first Western Desert art community. Organised in 2000 by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, to coincide with the Sydney Olympic games of that year, the exhibition proclaimed Papunya's admission to the canon of international art history. In the words of one art historian reviewing the show:

I never dreamed that Papunya Tula could be convincingly claimed as Australia's greatest contemporary art movement, of comparable importance to any in the world. It seemed ludicrous to compare paintings made only since 1971 by a small group of men (and later a few women) in one of the poorest and most remote settlements in Australia with European cubism or American abstract expressionism. This exhibition and book convinced me that such comparisons are completely justified, indeed unavoidable.<sup>50</sup>

Affirming the correctness of the ownership discourse in matters of authority, the opening chapter of the monumental catalogue comprised the transcript of an interview with Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula. Edited by Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink, the catalogue was a 'who's who' of Papunya scholarship, with contributions from Geoffrey Bardon, Vivien Johnson, John Kean, R.G. Kimber, Marcia Langton, Fred Myers and Daphne Williams. Although careful to stress the relationship between acrylic painting and the cultural traditions of the Western Desert communities, the catalogue's eleven chapters are methodologically diverse and not bound by any particular interpretative framework. The catalogue is a compilation of the various approaches used by art galleries over the previous two decades.

Two years later, the National Gallery of Victoria's *Fieldwork* exhibition was firmly committed to an art-historical appreciation of the Western Desert movement. The *Fieldwork* survey exhibition of Australian art, which commemorated the opening of the Ian Potter Centre of Australian art in Melbourne in 2002, made deliberate reference to *The Field* exhibition of 1968; *The Field*, which had sought to align Australian art practice with modern international trends, especially New York colour field and hard-edged abstraction, was the inaugural exhibition of the new National Gallery of Victoria. Given its namesake, it was probably necessary for *Fieldwork* to echo its antecedent and overstate the art-historical significance of the modernist legacy. But the catalogue does more than suggest a tenuous link between the historiography of cosmopolitan art movements and the origins of Western Desert painting. Papunya was extolled as the heir apparent of the modernist heritage. As if summoning the spirit of Alfred H. Barr Jr., curator Charles Green proclaimed 'the global lineage of abstract painting was at this moment about to shift, unseen, from New York to Central Australia'.<sup>51</sup> If the original Papunya artists comprised the trailblazers of contemporary Aboriginal art, Emily Kame

<sup>50</sup> Joan Kerr, 'Papunya Tula: A Great Contemporary Art Movement', *Art Asia Pacific*, 31, 2001, 33.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Green, 'The Discursive Field: Home is where the Heart is', in *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1966-2002*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2002, 12.

Kngwarreye, the enigmatic octogenarian from Alhalkere, located 230 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs, represented the 'modern master' of the movement.

It is therefore fitting to finish with the example of Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Her posthumous reputation, tantamount to artistic deification, rates among the most rapturous affirmations of artistic charisma ever enunciated in Australian art history. Her brief, stellar, career was memorialized in 1998 by a retrospective exhibition organized by the Queensland Art Gallery.<sup>52</sup> Unlike most contemporary Aboriginal painters to date, who were collectively identified with their art-making communities, 'Emily' had the persona of the archetypical Western artist. However, balancing her collective Aboriginality with Western notions of creative autonomy required some rhetorical negotiation. In the words of Anne Marie Brody, 'Emily Kame Kngwarreye was arguably the most flamboyant individualist on the contemporary art scene – the art world, at least, perceived her to be so – but she was, by virtue of her origins, age and experience, also one of its most traditional.'<sup>53</sup> Emily's genius was so profound that according to some of her champions her death in 1996 amounted to the end of Australian art history, or at least the *telos* of the predominant landscape tradition.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye was arguably Australia's greatest painter of the 'landscape'. No artist has painted the country the way she has, inflecting it with her personal vision and innovative style. An ability to penetrate the soul of her 'country' and capture the hearts, minds and imagination of wider Australian audiences is beyond art. It is also beyond the linguistic impasse that prevents us from articulating the full power of her work. Hers is not a view of the land, but rather an experience of it. She re-scales the landscape to a cosmic dimension – more akin to the holistic landscape of the Aboriginal mind. Is this the final word on the Australian landscape?<sup>54</sup>

When deconstructing the main elements of the Kngwarreye myth, Roger Benjamin examined the artist's critical reception from the point of view of the art world establishment. His catalogue essay, 'A New Modernist Hero', points out that the tendency towards abstraction, which won Kngwarreye widespread institutional support in Australia, 'confirms a set of cultural prejudices best described as modernist, very much present today in the mainstream art-world, and fundamentally over-riding many of the theoretical considerations of post-

<sup>52</sup> According to Doug Hall, director of the Queensland Art Gallery, Emily Kame Kngwarreye painted an estimated three thousand canvases in the course of her eight-year career (an average of one painting per day). Doug Hall, 'Preface', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere, Paintings From Utopia*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, Macmillan, 1998, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Marie Brody, 'Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Portrait from the Outside', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere, Paintings From Utopia*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery/Macmillan, 1998, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Brody, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, 31.

modernism.<sup>55</sup> Notwithstanding culturally specific categorizations and ethnographic interpretations, Western Desert painting was congruent with universal conceptions of contemporary art and the historical legacy of modernism. Institutionally, Aboriginal acrylic painting gained widespread aesthetic recognition despite being a problematic art at odds with conventional art-historical classifications.

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<sup>55</sup> Roger Benjamin, 'A New modernist Hero', *Emily Kame Ngwarreye: Alhalkere, Paintings From Utopia*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery/Macmillan, 1998, 51.