THE PRESENCE OF GREATNESS
EARLY WANJINA PAINTINGS & INDIGENOUS ART OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

T IM K LINGENDER FINE ART
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THE ART OF THE WANJINA

Within the rock shelters and caves of the northern and central areas of the Kimberley are preserved a staggering history of cultural change in the form of a complex sequence of rock art that may extend back more than 20,000 years into the Pleistocene era. Within the oldest art forms can be seen beautiful examples of naturally depicted fauna - fish, birds, reptiles and marsupials. It is in the earlier phases of the rock art sequence that the elegant paintings of human beings known as Gwion or Bradshaw Paintings are located. At a later phase, possibly only several thousand years old, the art form associated with Wanjinas, shape-changing anthropomorphic beings, began. The Wanjinas, their associated mythology, religious practices and rock art played a central part in the cosmology of the people of the north-central Kimberley into the 20th century and today are still major identifying and unifying cultural elements for the Wunambal, Worora and Ngarinyin peoples.

The identification with Wanjinas is reflected in their inclusion as major motifs in contemporary art of the north-central Kimberley that has seen shifts from paintings executed on the walls of caves and overhangs, to paintings on sheets of bark and ultimately industrial materials, from chipboard to the finest artist canvases.

Regardless of actual size the proportions of good Wanjina paintings project a sense of cyclopean grandeur – a massive, looming ruggedness from which the large, penetrating eyes quizzically regard the viewer.

Wanjina beings are usually depicted as anthropomorphic figures, sometimes full length but also often as busts – with just head and shoulders portrayed. The head is often surrounded by one or more halo-like headresses or by radiating ‘plumes’. The mouth is not depicted – although at least one artist, Charlie Numbulmoore, began to include mouth and teeth in the Wanjina paintings he made toward the end of his life. There is often an oval or sub-oval mark in the central chest region. Where the full body is depicted Wanjinas are often shown with a hair belt around the midriff and major joints as well as fingers and toes are indicated. Gender is not always obvious although female Wanjinas may be depicted with breasts.

Wanjinas are believed to be responsible for the maintenance of the seasonal cycle - especially the Wet Season that reinvigorates the land after the drought conditions of the dry winter and early summer Wanjinas are intimately associated with the Ungurr Rainbow Serpents. Clan leaders stimulate and encourage the Wanjinas to fulfil their roles as agents of fertility and growth by repainting their images located in the shelters in caves.

KIM AKERMAN
Micky Bungkuni was the senior Wunambal lawman resident at Mowanjum in the 1960s, a position he retained until his death in 1978. Bungkuni and his classificatory 'son' Watty Karruwarra painted intermittently throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and few of their surviving works are held in public and private collections.

Bungkuni, like Karruwara, first appears as an artist late in life. In 1963 he painted Wanjina and other mythical figures including Agula (evil spirits) on sheets of bark for anthropologist Peter Lucich. Between 1964 and 1966 Bungkuni, along with Wattie Karruwara, worked extensively with anthropologist John McCaffrey. McCaffrey's notes provide great detail of the dialogues the two artists held as they painted – topics included the nature of Wanjina Beings and their anatomy. McCaffrey also detailed how the Wanjina paintings were constructed.

The upswept rays that crown the head of this Wanjina, common to Wanjina paintings done by both Bungkuni, are identified by anthropologist John McCaffrey as 'bundles of hair' arranged in a complex hairdo. These in turn grow from a broader band of red ochre 'lightning' that flows from the head to outline the entire body. The black oval of the sternum (biran-biran) rests on the chest and a hairbelt (ngunuru or wanala) separates the lower limbs from the abdomen. The stippled infill represents rain (kulingi) streaming from storm clouds that march across the Kimberley in the early Wet season.

As with many pre-1970s Wanjina paintings from the Kimberley, this painting is on a trimmed sheet of bark unsupported by reinforcing struts of cane. Bark paintings prior to 1975 were usually done in ochres mixed only with water and directly applied to unprepared surfaces. The careful stripping, flattening of bark using heat and preparing of the surfaces by painting by using fixatives, or mixing ochres with natural fixatives as occurred in Arnhem Land, was unknown in the Kimberley. Consequently many bark paintings tend to show a more textured surface often with some flaking of pigment, than is found on more recent paintings – features that, along with their irregular shape, enhance the sense of affinity with their cave art origins.

KA
ARTIST UNKNOWN

Untitled (Wanjina)
Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark
86 by 50 cm irregular

PROVENANCE
Painted at Kalumburu, Western Australia
Aboriginal Traditional Arts, Perth c. 1977
The Estate of William Bowmore
Private collection, Sydney

Painted on a sheet of bark with the rounded top and flagellum reinforcing to the rim that is typical of larger bark paintings from Kalumburu, this work is one of a small handful of larger Wanjina paintings from the latter half of the 20th century that, at this stage cannot be attributed to a specific artist.

This painting was photographed hanging on the wall at Aboriginal Traditional Arts, then managed by Mary Macha, at the first exhibition of Wanjina paintings from Kalumburu in Perth circa 1977.
Attributed to Jack Karedada, this painting is one of several similar, larger Wanjina paintings that have a number of discrete features in common and which differ from paintings that can be confidently ascribed to specific artists. It is only after looking at a suitably large body of work that familiarity with the variation that exists within the portfolio of a single artist becomes apparent. Such variation may reflect the differing thematic mythologies represented, as well as influences from both within and without the artist’s cultural milieu.

Another work by the artist, closely related in style was collected by the sound recordist during the filming of Lalai Dreamtime in 1971, a film by Michael Edols. Though collected at Mowanjum, it is believed that the painting was created at Kalumburu.
CHARLIE NUMBULMOORE

Ngarrinyin people

Untitled (Wanjinas) c. 1965
Natural earth pigments on cardboard
42 by 66 cm

PROVENANCE
Collected by Mr C. D. Dohnt in the Kimberley in the mid 1960s
Private Collection, Adelaide
Private collection, Melbourne

For discussion of Wanjina paintings and related works by the artist see:
Crawford, I. M., The Art Of The Wanjina; Aboriginal Cave Paintings In The Kimberley, 1964, Oxford University Press, Melbourne; McCourt, Tom, Aboriginal Artefacts 1975, pp. 47, 48, 52 & 53 for related paintings of Wanjina by the artist including one on cardboard at the artist camp at Gibb River; Ryan J., Images Of Power; Aboriginal Art Of The Kimberley, 1992, pp. 15-19, for discussion of Wanjina paintings, and pp. 20 & 21 for two other paintings illustrated by the artist; Berndt and Philips (eds) Australian Aboriginal Heritage 1973, p.275; pl. 229 for a related painting entitled ‘The Wanjina Beings At Mamadai-East Of Gibb River Station’. Charlie Numbulmoore, cave-painter and artist, resided for many years at Gibb River Station in the central Kimberley, heartland of the Ngarrinyin people. During the 1960s Charlie worked closely with anthropologist Ian Crawford who recorded him repainting Wanjina images in Mamadai cave. Crawford provides a detailed account of Charlie’s approach to the retouching of these important images, and of the techniques he used. Crawford also collected a number of paintings of Wanjina that Charlie executed on paper for the WA Museum.

Works by Charlie, along with those of other Ngarrinyin, Woonambal and Worora artists were commissioned by Helen Gorge-Wurm on behalf of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1970. These paintings are now part of the National Estate.

In 1971, South Australian grazier and collector the late Tom McCourt, visited the central Kimberley and purchased a number of paintings, on ply-wood and cardboard, depicting Wanjina and Agula (evil spirits) that Charlie had executed. McCourt also commissioned Charlie to paint a Wanjina figure on an archaeological millstone found on an adjacent station. Traditionally paintings of Wanjina on small stones were not common in the Kimberley, but they did occur and one found in 1977 is now in the collections of the Western Australian Museum.

Charlie’s Wanjina figures are generally readily identifiable. Those that are shown head and shoulders only are usually solid white (invariably derived from the mineral huntite) figures with details added in red, black and yellow. In the centre of the chest a solid, usually black but occasionally red, oval form said to depict the sternum/heart or a pearl shell pendant. The almost circular heads are surrounded by a very regular headdress. Solid, black round eyes with delicate lashes are typical of his work. These eyes, along with the narrow, outlined noses suggest the silent crania of clan ancestors that still rest on shelves and in crevices of many Wanjina caves.

KA
During a visit to the Kimberley in 1971 South Australian pastoralist Tom McCourt had the opportunity to observe Charlie Numbulmoore paint on a variety of surfaces including stone, plywood and fibreboard. McCourt made possibly the largest and most certainly the last major collection of Charlie’s work. It is at this period that Charlie began painting mouths, sometimes filled with teeth, into the faces of his Wanjina images. McCourt also commissioned two very large Wanjinas, over 1.6 metres high, that Charlie executed on plywood. Unlike most of Charlie’s other paintings, each of the major Wanjina images was supported by a background in which a variety of animals, plants, along with spirit figures or smaller Wanjinas.

By the end of his life Charlie had probably produced a greater body of work than any previous Wanjina artist - most of which is now housed in public institutions. It was not until the mid-1970s that Wanjina art began to be produced by other artists in comparable numbers or of such high quality.

An anomaly, which Charlie introduced in the final years of his life was the inclusion of a mouth and sometimes teeth. At this period Charlie also began adding nostrils to the noses of his Wanjina paintings - transforming the organ into a somewhat serpent-like form.

Numbulmoore’s full-length figures are rarely as comfortably executed, with heads out of proportion with the often doll-like bodies and quite unlike the massive grandeur of full-length figures found in shelters and caves.

In many cases the background to Charlie’s Wanjina paintings may contain figures of spirit beings or animals including fish, tortoises, brolgas or with invertebrates - moths or butterflies - all of which have connections with water and the Wet Season - the very element controlled by the Wanjinas and the season at which the potency of the Wanjinas is most obvious.

Charlie Numbulmoore died in the later months of 1971.

PROVENANCE
Collected by Tom McCourt at Gibb River Station in the West Kimberley in 1970.
Thence by descent
Private collection, South Australia
Deutscher and Hackett, Aboriginal + Oceanic Art, Melbourne, 14/10/2009, Lot No. 9
Private Collection

LITERATURE
McCourt, T., Aboriginal Artefacts, Rigby Press Australia, Adelaide, 1975, p. 48 (illus.)

The painting illustrated in Tom McCourt’s publication, “Aboriginal Artefacts”
The Wanjina paintings created by Wunambal artist Alec Mingelmanganu are acknowledged as among the finest renditions of these quintessential icons of the north and central Kimberley.

Mingelmanganu’s work first hit the public eye in 1975. A Wanjina figure on bark was entered in the West Kimberley town of Derby’s Boab Festival art competition, on Alec’s behalf under the title Austral Gothic, partly in relation to the window effect produced by the cane-bound frame of the bark. The painting however, was deemed to have been an original ethnographic work from an earlier period and disqualified. After the judges were informed of the recent age and provenance of the piece, Mingelmanganu was belatedly awarded a prize commensurate to that offered as first prize in the competition.

Recognised by Perth art dealer, Mary Macha as an artist of outstanding calibre, Mingelmanganu began in 1975, with the help of the late Father Seraphim Sanz of Kalumburu, marketing all his work through the agency Aboriginal Traditional Arts. A year or so later, Mingelmanganu, Marita Kulitji, Waijaq Gapangara, Geoffrey Mangelomara (composer of the Cyclone Tracy palga) and the Karadadas, Jack and Lily and Louis and Rose and Louis were shown, in their own Wanjina-focused exhibition in Perth, by Macha and Aboriginal Traditional Arts.

In 1979 Mingelmanganu and the other Kalumburu artists were introduced to painting on canvas and Alec, inspired by the size achievable on canvas went on to produce a small but celebrated series of paintings of colossal Wanjina figures. This suite of paintings are regarded as among the most important bodies of work to emerge from the Kimberley at this period.

Although painting on a grand scale at the end of his life, Mingelmanganu continued to paint smaller Wanjina and other motifs on plaques of soft wood, or engrave them on overpainted slabs of wood or soft stone. It is interesting to note that the engraved Wanjina vary stylistically from the artist’s painted Wanjina.

KA
Painted in 1979 this painting must certainly be considered one of the finest of Mingelmanganu’s works on bark. The close-set eyes that abut the long narrow nose are typical of his Wanjina images as are the high angled shoulders that run around the halo that almost encloses the entire head. The halo consists of a broad, arced band from which very short, stubbled lines radiate. Comparison with Mingelmanganu’s earlier bark shows considerable variation in the manner in which the halo is depicted and highlights the need to be aware of the flexibility exercised by many Wanjina artists in terms of the stylistic variation of individual elements within the corpus of work.

Unlike many later works, executed on canvas and with the use of commercial fixatives to stabilise the earth pigments, the irregular surface of this bark, with areas where pigment has flaked from the textured surface imbue in this work all the qualities of Wanjina paintings that grace the rock walls and ceilings of many caves and overhangs in the north and central Kimberley.

This work, bearing all the hallmarks of a master Wanjina artist, a person who was intimately connected to Wanjinas through both his country and his ancestry, reflects the continuity by which the living are perceived to be bound to the far-distant creative period of the Lalai - the Dreaming.
Painted on canvas the subtleties exhibited in this painting that is almost monochromatic in execution again evokes an ancient painting located on some distant rock wall. Only the intensity of the piercing gaze and the rectangular symbol that may represent at times the sternum, the heart or a pearl shell ornament relieve the more subdued earth colours that make up the painting generally. The intensity of the eyes seem to lead the viewer into their depths and then on, through them into a deeper, more distant dimension - another cosmos situated on the other side of the canvas, the universe.

Again, comparison with various individual elements found within this and other paintings by Mingelmanganu, variation and flexibility in his approach to depicting Wanjina figures becomes very apparent.
This large plaque of softwood—probably from the Helicopter Tree (Gyrocarpus americanus)—depicts six Wanjina of various sizes in a manner quite different in style to those painted by Mingilmanganu. The large eyes are separated only by the vertical line depicting the nose giving the heads an impression of a Cyclops, or suggest that a ‘space-helmet’ is being worn.

Small as they may be Mingilmanganu’s figures engraved on both wood and stone project the same degree of power and strength found in his larger and more complex Wanjina painted figures.

The birds may represent the White-quilled Rock Pigeon (Petrophassa albipennis) whose rattling flight, panicked the Rainbow Serpent in the Dreamtime, causing the eyes of the, then imperfectly formed, human population to open.

The name ‘Idolphonsus’ inscribed on the back of this plaque suggests that Mingilmanganu had presented it to a kinsman ‘Idolphonsus’ Chiemmos also of Kalumburu who had then the right to mark it as his own when it came to benefiting from selling it on. Such a practice is not uncommon among indigenous artists and their kin and does not imply that the name inscribed on a work of art is necessarily that of the artist.

KA
Tumbi, the Barking Owl (*Ninox connivens*), plays a major role in the opening stages of a great Wanjina saga, that, like the *Iliad* of ancient Greece deals with hubris and nemesis, human frailties, conflicts with the Gods and the subsequent dispersal – in this case of the Wanjina folk - across the northern Kimberley.

A palga dance cycle composed by Worrorra elder, Wattie Ngerdu, at Mowanjum in the 1960s, the opening events of this saga focused on the actions subsequent to the persecution of Tumbi by human children, and the retaliation by the Wanjinas under the leadership of Wanalirri - a senior Wanjina for the country east of Gibb River, who had been much offended by the shame suffered by the owl. This palga was shown extensively within the Kimberley and further afield and no doubt influenced Rover. In this instance however Rover localized the owl’s home country as lying in the Osmond Valley on Texas Downs Station. Rover’s ability to engage with the cosmology of many different countries falling across many language groups within the Kimberley gave him a unique perspective on the landscape as a whole which is apparent in the saga of the Kurirr-kurirr, itself a saga, in this case an odyssey.

There are at least ten other significant paintings depicting owls by Rover Thomas, of which this is one of the most exceptional examples. Noted Kurirr-kurirr artist Paddy Jaminji, and later other painters from Warmun have also produced paintings depicting Tumbi.
ROVER THOMAS (JULAMA)

**Untitled (The Serpents – Juntarkal and Wungurr)** 1987
Natural earth pigments and bush gum on canvas
Bear’s Mary Macha catalogue number RT 1787 on the upper edge of the canvas stretcher
90 by 180 cm

**PROVENANCE**
Commissioned by Mary Macha, Perth
Private Collection, Canberra
Niagara Galleries, Melbourne
Private Collection, Perth

Cf. For two related paintings, by Rover Thomas, connected to the Kurirr-kurirr ceremony see Wungurr is the name for that Snake, 1983, and Ngamarrin (The Snake near Turkey Creek), 1984, in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, in R. Thomas with K. Akerman, M. Macha, W. Christensen and W. Caruana, Roads Cross: The paintings of Rover Thomas, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1994, pp. 28 and 38 respectively (Illus.).

Painted during the most fertile period of the artist’s career in 1987, this work is one of those in which Rover Thomas revisits the imagery used in the original Kurirr-kurirr ceremonies and the Dreaming figures referred to in that saga. Here we see the images of the two Rainbow Serpents, Juntarkal from the eastern Kimberley, and Wungurr, the Rainbow Serpent of the northern and central Kimberley who, in the guise of Cyclone Tracy, destroyed Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974.

Cyclone Tracy had a profound effect on many indigenous groups within the Kimberley region. By the early 1970s the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley had experienced the disruption of their links to their traditional lands and culture appeared to be on the wane. As people across the Kimberley regard Darwin as the centre of European culture in northern Australia, its destruction by a cyclone was interpreted as a warning delivered by the Rainbow Serpent to Aboriginal people to maintain their culture and practices. At Kalumburu Geoffrey Mangalamara celebrated the event by composing the now familiar Cyclone Tracy Palga, Worrorra poet and author, Daisy Utemorrah wrote a poignant poem (telling the tale of the awful night as if she were there and Rover Thomas links the Serpent that was believed to cause the death of his classificatory ‘mother’ and evokes the same potency as the dead woman’s spirit watches the destruction of Darwin by the Serpent-Cyclone, Tracy in his epic dance cycle the Kurirr-kurirr.

The Kurirr-kurirr ritual and its accompanying imagery, choreography and songs were revealed to Thomas in the aftermath of the cyclone by the spirit of the dead woman. After being seriously injured in a vehicle accident on a flooded road, near the community of Warmun (Turkey Creek), the woman died as she was being taken by the Royal Flying Doctor Service to hospital in Perth. Her death is said to have occurred while the airplane was flying over a whirlpool, off the coast of Derby, the whirlpool is regarded as the physical manifestation of the Rainbow Serpent Alungun. The Kurirr-kurirr chronicles the journey of the woman’s spirit across the Kimberley, visiting sites of ancestral and historical significance – sometimes alone sometimes with other ghosts and spirits. On the return to her home in the east she looks to the northeast and witnesses the destruction of Darwin. The artist’s inclusion of the silhouette of a boab tree in the lower right corner of the painting firmly locates the place – the Kimberley.

In this painting the conjunction of the two Rainbow Serpents, Juntarkal and Wungurr, reflects Rover Thomas’ ability to bring together various distinct cosmological entities from very different parts of the country as evidenced in the Kurirr-kurirr.
This is a story about the Wet Season. The picture is a rainbow (Tjadarung).

Like so many of Rover Thomas’s most powerful early works this painting is characterised by rich encrusted surfaces created by infusing ochres with natural resins, boiled to a tarry consistency and then mixed with water. The rainbow, one of the few natural phenomena that is regular in form and colour in many areas of indigenous Australia, is a manifestation of the primeval Serpent creators – bringers of the Wet Season with its life-giving freshwater, whose abodes are the permanent springs and waterholes found across the country. Not all of the great mythic snakes however are Rainbow Serpents and care must be made in defining their status.

Cyclones, willy-willys, waterspouts and tornadoes are all perceived to be destructive manifestations of Rainbow Serpents in the Kimberley. Such destructive forces are believed to appear wherever or wherever the Serpents have been offended by the inappropriate behavior of human beings. There are countless stories told and retold across the region of the punishments inflicted on humans who have ignored or taken for granted the presence of Rainbow Serpents.

KA
ANATJARI TJAKAMARRA
C.1938-1992
Pintupi people
Kuningka (Western Quoll/Native Cat)
Synthetic polymer powder paint on composition board
Bears artist’s name, title, catalogue number A731065 and date on Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd label on the reverse together with a description of the story depicted and an annotated diagram
74.5 x 54 cm
PROVENANCE
Likely to have been painted at Yai Yai, the Pintupi outstation near Papunya in 1973
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs
The Anvil Gallery, Albury, New South Wales, 1974
Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, Melbourne
Private collection, United States of America
Sotheby’s, Important Aboriginal Art, Melbourne, 29 June, 1998, lot 101
Private collection
EXHIBITED
The Anvil Gallery, Albury, New South Wales 1974
A Myriad of Dreamings: 20th Century Aboriginal Art, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art at Westpac Gallery, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne, October 5 - October 22, 1989, cat. no.56
LITERATURE

Anatjari Tjakamarra was one of the last Pintupi people from the Gibson Desert to move to Papunya in the 1960s where he became one of the original members of the painting group in 1971. From 1973 to 1975, a number of initiation ceremonies were conducted at the Pintupi camp at Yai Yai to the west of Papunya. Myers (2002, p.86) suggests that this period of intense ritual activity may have been the stimulus for Anatjari to create a significant body of paintings that refer to the Tingari. The paintings feature two sets of iconographs, the concentric rectangle and the concentric circle, which appear in paintings either separately or in combination. The forms relate to the designs engraved into the surfaces of sacred objects and painted onto the bodies of initiates. Indeed, Anatjari recalled the painting of the rectilinear iconographs on his own body at his initiation: ‘Ngaandi ngulpum-pumpum (This one bit me when I was a young roo)’ was his way of expressing this fact to Myers (2002, p.179). In later years Anatjari adopted camels as his painting support with a consequent increase in scale. He developed matrix-like compositions based on graphic elements such as the concentric circle, joined by journey lines that became the convention for depicting Tingari subjects in the public domain. Anatjari’s exploration of form is indeed, as described by Myers, ‘virtuoze’ (2002, p.106).

In Bardon and Barond, 2004, p.45, Geoffrey Bardon states that this painting was one of several made when the artists at Papunya had been encouraged to talk about their traditional lands that lay far away from the government settlement. Settlements like Papunya had been established to accommodate groups throughout the western desert but had the effect of distancing people from their homelands. Consequently, the ability for an artist to paint his or her country reconnected them to those places and fulfilled the traditional obligation of ‘caring for country’. The subject of this painting is Kuningka the ancestral native cat or quoll although Bardon originally recorded the creature as a kangaroo rat or hopping mouse. The repeated concentric circle motif is often associated with the Tingari, major ancestors of western desert people. In his discussion of a similar painting featuring the squares and the quoll’s tracks, Alyanga, 1974, Professor Fred Myers, who conducted extensive field work with Anatjari Tjakamarra in the early 1970s, asserts that the repetition of a motif in Anatjari’s paintings of the period indicate a number of sites associated with the ancestors; this interpretation is reinforced by the lines of cats’ tracks that signify their journeys between sites. In addition, the repetition of an iconograph emphasizes the importance of these ancestral events (Fred B. Myers, Painting/Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002, pp.98-9). Furthermore, the formal nature of the composition reflects the highly sacred nature of the subject. According to Bardon, in this painting the squares represent the Ancestral animal’s lair and the central round a freshwater rockhole.

WC
Painted at Papunya in the later months of 1972, shortly after Geoff Bardon’s departure, this early painting depicts the artist’s site of Yumari, nearby to the place of his conception, on the edge of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia. Yumari (Mother-in-law) is the subject of much of Tjangala’s most important work, both in his early works on board and the monumental canvases he produced later in his career. An illicit liaison between an ancestral Old Man and his ancestral Mother-In-Law took place at Yumari.

In the early 1980s he produced two epic canvases relating to this site, the first of which Yumari, 1981 was exhibited in the Australian representation at the XVII Biennale de São Paulo (São Paulo 1983), and then together with the later Yumari 1983 in Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia (New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago 1988–89).

The attribution of both artist and site depicted have been made by Professor Fred Myers, and R.G. (Dick) Kimber. Kimber notes that the overall design is a variation of many of the artist’s depictions of ‘Yumari’ prior to his later depictions of the site as ‘a stylised human figure’ (personal correspondence).

Anthropologist Fred Myers worked closely with Uta Uta Tjangala over many years and writes about the significance of this site as the central example in his essay “Ways of Place Making”, in an effort to explain the layers of a person’s connection to their country. He writes, ‘Almost invariably Pintupi discussions of country are punctuated by descriptions of what happened in the Dreaming. Every single feature is said to result from Dreamtime events. Yumarnya, for example, means wife’s mother’s place. The Yumari site in this case is the mother-in-law of the mythological Old Man who travelled west from Henty Hills, and who copulated with her at this place. Rock outcroppings, a rockhole, and various markings within a few hundred yards are interpreted as a result of illicit actions of mythological beings’ (Fred R. Myers, "Ways of Place Making" in Flint, K. and Morphy, H (eds) Culture, Landscape and Environment: The Linacre Lectures 1997, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p.81).
This painting was created in the days immediately following the Tjumpo Tjapanangka’s return from an epic journey back to the extremely remote country around Lake Mackay, where he grew up and went through his initiations in pre-European times, and where he had not returned for decades. Commissioned by NHK Japan and SBS Australia, an award-winning documentary Painting Country, followed this journey back to the traditional country of some of Balgo’s most celebrated artists – including Tjumpo Tjapanangka, Lucy Yakeribari, Helicopter Tjungurrayi and Sam Tjampitjin. At Lake Mackay Tjumpo Tjapanangka, recounted: “I still remember it. I am from this place, I went through the law here. This is still my place. I grew up and became a man here… we were all naked. We belonged to this country. No white man here. No one else – just us. This was our place.”

Accompanying art centre documentation reveals that the painting depicts the landscape of Marlboroee, “including a rainbow in the upper half. At the centre of these two halves are tjuma; or soakwaters, the top one is Wirrimbah, the lower one is Kukugugoo. It was at Marlboroee during the Tjukurrpa (Dreamtime) that two ancestral men (Tjangala skin group), Marakudu and Kulada came upon the soakwaters. They could see Wanayarra, the ancestral snake, and reached in and grabbed him. They fought, but the men eventually won, taking Wanayarra with them on their backs, far away to new country.”

One of the art coordinators, Tim Acker, who accompanied Tjapanangka on this important trip recalled the significance of this work when it was painted on the return to Wirrimanu (Balgo Hills), and in the film he reflects that “The best of the work out here is as contemporary as anywhere you’ll find on the planet. The fact that it’s painted by people whose background, whose perception, whose storytelling, whose priorities, whose whole life is so different gives it a quality that other paintings don’t have.”

TK
DOREEN REID NAKAMARRA
 c.1950 - 2009

Untitled 2006
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
122 by 153.0 cm

PROVENANCE
Painted at Kintore in 2006
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs
Private Collection, Sydney

EXHIBITED

LITERATURE
Brenda L. Croft, Culture warriors, Australian Indigenous Art Triennial, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2007, p.135 (illus.)

Marrapinti is the rock hole site west of the Pollock Hills in Western Australia. Ancestral women of the Nangala and Napangati subsections camped at Marrapinti during their travels east. There, the women made nose bones, also known as marrapinti. During ceremonies relating to Marrapinti, the older women pierced the nasal septums of the younger women who were participating in the ceremony. Now, nose bones are only used by the older generation for ceremonies.

Upon completion of the ceremonies at Marrapinti, the women continued their travels east, passing through Wala Wala, Ngaminya and Wirrulnga, before heading north east to Wilkinkarra [Lake Mackay]. The lines in the painting represent the surrounding tali (sand hills) in the area around Wirrulnga. A group of ancestral women once gathered at this site to perform the dance and sing the songs associated with the area. Wirrulnga is known as a traditional birthing site for the women of the area, and while the women were at Wirrulnga the women also gathered the edible berries known as kamupurpa or desert raisin from the small shrub Solanum centrale. These berries can be eaten straight from the bush but are sometimes ground into a paste and cooked in the coals to form a type of damper.

The paintings of Doreen Reid Nakamarra late career are a revelation, and were immediately acclaimed as her mature style emerged in the mid 2000s, taking her from an artist of relative obscurity to one featured in commercial exhibitions in London and New York, and included in both the Sydney Biennale, the inaugural Australian Indigenous Art Triennial and the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2009. She was awarded the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award general painting prize in 2008 for another untitled work, also depicting Marrapinti. Her life was tragically cut short in the winter of 2009, after an extreme case of pneumonia, at the age of 50. Posthumously she was honored further when her paintings were exhibited to critical acclaim at last year’s dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany.

TK