



LATROBE
REGIONAL
GALLERY
...

FRIENDLY COUNTRY FRIENDLY PEOPLE

Artworks from Papunya Tula

25 July - 18 October 2020

Latrobe Regional Gallery is located on the traditional land of the Braiakaulung people of the Gunaikurnai nation. We pay respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

FRIENDLY COUNTRY FRIENDLY PEOPLE

Artwork from Papunya Tula

Latrobe Regional Gallery is so proud to remount this exhibition which was first presented at Araluen Arts Centre in 1990.

In a feat of remarkable foresight, the entire exhibition was purchased to become part of the CBus Collection of Australian Art, a valuable collection of contemporary art that LRG is the custodian of.

This idea of custodianship is so central to the culture and creative practice of Aboriginal artists, elders and communities. It is with this intention that we invited Jessica Clark, Palawa woman and independent curator to offer a perspective on this remarkable exhibition.

What Jessica offers us is an insight into the ongoing resonance and impact of self-determination, and how this is communicated through visual culture as an act of leadership and great generosity.

As one proud Palawa woman to another, it is my pleasure to present Jessica's powerful writing, just as it is our pleasure to present this exhibition for you to enjoy.

Bec Cole
DIRECTOR

With Thanks
CBUS Collection of Australian Art as advised by Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE
Araluen Arts Centre

Latrobe Regional Gallery is owned and operated by Latrobe City Council
with support from Creative Victoria.



Cover Image: Alison Nampitjinpa, Honey Ant Dreaming, 1990, Acrylic on Canvas, 123 x 93 cm, CBus Collection of Australian Art





Image: Pansy Napangati, Ilpilli, 1990, Acrylic on Canvas, 92 x 122 cm, CBus Collection of Australian Art

Jessica Clark is a proud Palawa woman with English, Irish, Turkish, and French ancestry, currently living and working in Naarm Melbourne.

She is an independent curator with a background in art history and education, and current PhD Candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

old way new way, new way old way

Jessica Clark

And that which is aeons old is living and will live forever, for the Dreaming is eternal. It is at Papunya and beyond.¹

In 1971 a group of strong cultural men – Anmatyerr, Arrente, Luritja, Pintupi, and Warlpiri, language groups – came together on Honey Ant Country to offer a powerful image of unity, in their own language and on their own terms.

As a counter to the complicated internal dynamics within communities that the Assimilation Policy had brought with it; that group of men now living together in the government settlement of Papunya, instigated an unparalleled outpour of creativity that would fundamentally change the trajectory of Australian visual culture.² They would come to be known as the Papunya Tula artists, and their living legacy now is more relevant than ever.

With the leadership of principal artist Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa and the support of the school's art teacher Geoffrey Bardon, the Papunya Tula artists began transforming and transferring their ephemeral iconographies into the physical realm. In doing so they collectively brought a new paradigm of Aboriginal art into being.

The founding artists of the Papunya Tula art movement initially came together to plan and paint the now nationally-renowned Honey Ant Mural on one of the external walls of the local school.

The collaboration that unfolded between Kaapa, other senior Pintupi men, and Bardon through the creation of the mural meant that its final design was a result of the groups collective negotiation and knowledge exchange – enacting a revolutionary compromise that would form the central idea that the Papunya Tula Artists Cooperative was founded on in the year to come.

¹ Papunya and Beyond, Edited by Richard G. Kimber (Alice Springs: Araluen Arts Centre, 1984), Exhibition catalogue.

² John Kean, "Digging for Honey Ants – The Papunya Mural Project." Lecture, Defining Moments: Australian Exhibition Histories 1968–1999 from Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 29 April 2019.

The Men's Painting Room at Papunya was set-up not long after, following the artists' request for materials and a place to keep painting together. The artists' culturally significant markings distinct to their own Country – encoded with complex and enduring stories that traditionally were used for ceremony, either drawn in the desert sand or painted with ochre on the body – were transformed as they began to work with acrylic paint, canvas and board. Still staying true to their own unique iconographies, the men adapted their ancient designs, taking control of what they culturally could and couldn't share within the community and in the context of wider Australia.

The Honey Ant Mural was the first of its kind in exhibiting this more 'secular' and 'summarised' visual account of the men's complex stories.³ This new way of painting permitted the sharing of culture while also concealing the 'secret-sacred' knowledges embedded within the land.

For the artists painting was an immediate way to document culture and advocate for a return to Country, and a significant act of self-determination. A radical new art movement was born in that painting room, one that is at once ancient and contemporary. It just took the art world a decade to take notice.

In the early 1980s the art world embraced the acrylic canvases of Papunya Tula – not because Aboriginal art had finally achieved fine art status – bark paintings had won this fight twenty years earlier – but because something completely different and unexpected had happened.⁴ A major threshold was crossed in 1981 when three large Papunya Tula paintings were exhibited in *Australian Perspectives*. Although the 3rd Biennale of Sydney in 1979 had included Aboriginal art in the form of bark paintings, they hadn't managed to escape their art world designation as separate, 'primitive' or 'ethnographic'. The point of difference with the inclusion of Papunya works in the *Australian Perspectives* was their placement. The works of Anmatyerre-Arrente artists Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, and Pintupi artist Charlie Tjapangati were for the first time exhibited in direct dialogue with a series of abstract works by non-Aboriginal artists.⁵

³ John Mundine, "Aboriginal art in Australia today," *Third Text* Vol. 3, Issue: 6 (1989): 33

⁴ I. McLean, "How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art," in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Art 1980 – 2006*, ed. Ian McLean (Sydney: Power Publications, 2011), 333.

⁵ McLean, 336.





Image: Anatjari Tjampitjinpa, Tingari Men Gathered at Tjurnga, 1990, Acrylic on Linen, 123 x 152 cm, CBus Collection of Australian Art

The innate contemporaneity of the Papunya Tula paintings was then cemented, challenging the art world's anthropological predispositions and in doing so, fundamentally realigning how art was conceptualised in this country. Aboriginal art is not bound by tradition, it is enlivened by it.

The art world's embrace of Papunya Tula throughout the 1980s did not occur in a vacuum, and its story, like the story of Aboriginal art, can't be told any one way – geographical, political, historical, or art critical. For Papunya Tula it was all about timing and the continuing advance and dissemination of ideas and practices that had been ongoing since first contact⁶ and beyond. Through both medium and process the Papunya Tula artists broke the mold of the contemporary art industry – challenging Western historicist and divisional ways of seeing through the revelation that Aboriginal art was and is contemporary, alive in the now just as it has been since the beginning of time. As part of a visual and cultural lineage specific to Country, the Papunya Tula paintings signified a way back home for the artists, and a new way forward for Aboriginal artists across the country, a way to survive and keep culture alive.

When Papunya cracked the contemporary art market a plethora of Aboriginal art exhibitions proceeded to sweep the country and then the world, and a new wave of Aboriginal art was set in motion. What was initially a localised phenomenon spear-headed by the men working out of the painting room at Papunya, had evolved into a unique, vibrant, and expansive art movement that has since been declared as the “greatest single cultural achievement”⁷ of Australia's history post-invasion. Together the men painted with a common intent while developing their own distinct styles and practices, paving way for the development and expansion of Aboriginal art – remote, regional, and urban.

The model of the Papunya Tula Artists Cooperative (1972) inspired other communities to start producing art as a means to generate an income and a creative outlet to express culture – there are now over seventy art centres operating within communities throughout Australia and entire art festivals devoted to Aboriginal art from all parts of the country. While the first Papunya Tula artists were Anmatyerr and Ngaliya-Warpiri men, Pintupi men also became significant contributors, and the 1990s saw the emergence of women painters from the Western and Central Desert who are now equally important to the story.

⁶ McLean, “Aboriginal art and the artworld,” 30.

⁷ Russell Skelton, “Flawed visionary led others to their dream,” Sydney Morning Herald, published December 31, 2011

The mid-1980s to 1990s also saw Aboriginal curators take up identified positions within art institutions, and a new generation of urban-based Aboriginal artists, photographers, and film-makers started to carve out their own space in the art world through dedicated exhibitions, the formation of collectives (Boomal Aboriginal Artists Cooperative, 1987 in Sydney, and later proppaNOW Collective, 2003 in Brisbane) and the establishment of training programs.

Aboriginal art is more dynamic than ever, still grounded in place and operating within a larger and much older story that continues to evolve in a contemporary context.⁸ The cross-pollination of ideas between locations and experiences, and the immense creative production by Aboriginal artists and collectives today, is a testament to the profound impact and success of the Papunya Tula art movement.

The re-staging of FRIENDLY COUNTRY - FRIENDLY PEOPLE is more relevant than ever – first presented in 1990 at the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs to celebrate the twentieth year of the Papunya Tula Artists Cooperative. The exhibition's presentation at Latrobe Regional Gallery is timely, not only because of the cooperative's fiftieth anniversary, but also because of its message of coming together – the artists manifesto of 1985 still rings true "the style has changed but the message has not".⁹

This exhibition celebrates the power and weight of Aboriginal art, the achievements of the original Papunya artists and their descendants, and the enduring resonance of their living legacy. The works, together again, offer us a reprieve from the unprecedented uncertainty that abounds the now and acts as a collective reminder of our connection to Country – what connects and grounds and us all, our way to come together.

*The influence of those old men from Papunya continues today, as does the influence of the eternal Dreaming.*¹⁰

8 Michael A. O'Ferrall, *On the Edge: Five Contemporary Aboriginal Artists: Bede Tungutalum, Rover Thomas, Mandjuwi, Trevor Nicholls* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1989), 8.

9 "Papunya Tula Artists Manifesto, 1985," in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Art 1980 – 2006*, ed. Ian McLean (Sydney: Power Publications, 2011), 338.

10 FRIENDLY COUNTRY - FRIENDLY PEOPLE, Edited by Richard G. Kimber (Alice Springs: Araluen Arts Centre, 1990), Exhibition catalogue.





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