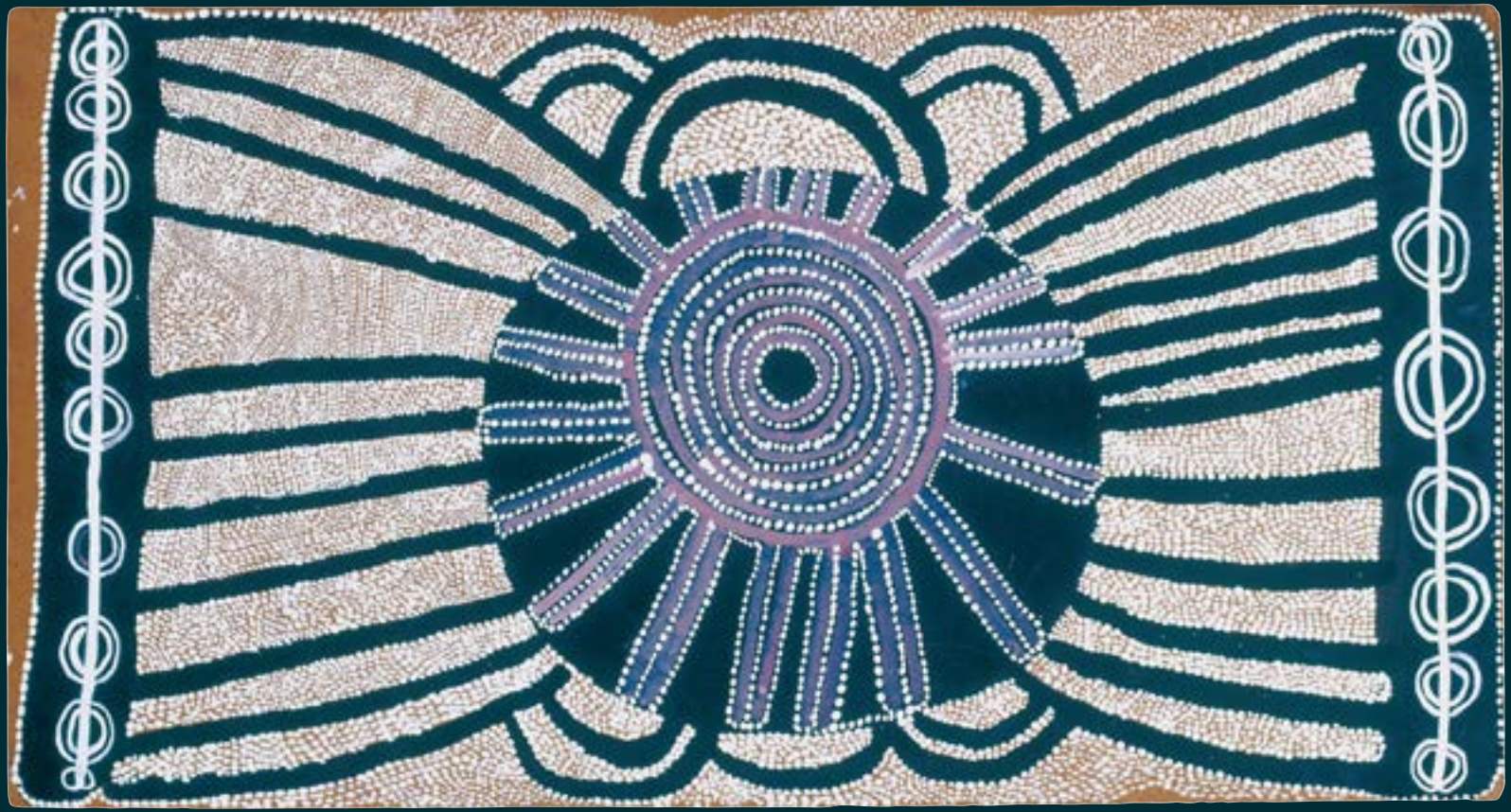
SIX PAINTINGS FROM PAPUNYA



A CONVERSATION

Fred R. Myers
and Terry Smith

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WITH A REFLECTION
BY STEPHEN GILCHRIST

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To Joseph Jurra Tjapaltjarri (circa 1952–2022)
and to Samantha Myers (1989–2022)

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Preface and Acknowledgments

OUR CONVERSATION OCCURRED in response to an opportunity, an offering, and a challenge.

The opportunity was afforded by an exhibition in New York of several paintings made during the 1970s by Indigenous artists at Papunya, a remote settlement in Central Australia. Curated by Carolyn Fletcher and shown at the residence of the Australian Consulate-General, *50 Years of Australian Aboriginal Art* vividly demonstrated the early development and the continuing vitality of this art. At the lagging end of COVID-19 pandemic isolation, this extraordinary set of paintings rested quietly on the walls of the residency, open to extended and uninterrupted engagement with them on a beautiful New York afternoon in July 2022. The Papunya paintings, all from the collection of John and Barbara Wilkerson, were accompanied by contemporary works by desert-based artists selected from the collection of Steve Martin and Anne Stringfield. We thank Carolyn Fletcher and John Wilkerson for their warm encouragement of this project.

The artists gathered at Papunya in the early 1970s, when the artist cooperative named Papunya Tula Artists was founded, and offered their paintings to other peoples at Papunya and to the wider world beyond as embodiments of their Dreaming. In proffering this most important gift, they sought responses of a similar kind. We are deeply indebted to the patient contributions of Wartuma Tjungurrayi, Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi, Uta Uta Tjangala, Freddy West Tjakamarra, Yanyatjarri Tjakamarra, and Bobby West Tjupurrula. Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd. has been an inspiration, a support, and literally a home during many phases of research from 1973 through the present. It remains a major ongoing support of Indigenous aspiration and ac-

complishment. While the artists involved are no longer alive, their paintings continue to invite response.

The challenge is to respond in ways adequate to this invitation, to offer in return something of equivalent value, and to do so to the best of one's particular abilities. In our case—Myers's as an anthropologist and Smith's as an art historian, art critic, and critical theorist, with both of us having decades-long engagement with, in turn, these artists and this art—our responsibility is to open ourselves to these objects, to see as best we can what they have to say, and to say what it is that we are seeing.

We do so while listening to the voices of many others who have previously responded to the same invitation. We also owe much to the work and the collegiality of T. G. H. Strehlow, Nancy Munn, Geoffrey Bardon, R. G. (Dick) Kimber, Eric Michaels, Judith Ryan, Annemarie Brody, J. V. S. Megaw, Peter Sutton, Christopher Anderson, Françoise Dussart, Paul Carter, Hetti Perkins, Vivien Johnson, John Kean, Luke Scholes, Paul Sweeney, Cara Pinchbeck, Marina Strocchi, Philip Jones, Roger Benjamin, Ian McLean, Jennifer Biddle, and Henry Skerritt. For their valuable comments on our work in progress for this project and their responses to questions related to it, we thank Ian McLean, Henry Skerritt, John Kean, Paul Sweeney, Howard Morphy, Françoise Dussart, and Jennifer Biddle.

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INTRODUCTION

We started it, like a bushfire, this painting business, and it went every way: north, east, south, west, with Papunya in the middle.
—Long Jack Phillipus, 2010

Acrylic paintings by Indigenous peoples from Australia's Western Desert have captivated audiences for more than fifty years. Their arrival has often prompted expressions of surprise that those who were once considered to have the simplest material culture among living humanity could create works that spark such aesthetic resonance. The origin of these works in what seemed to be unfathomable cultural worlds, their evident yet impenetrable sacredness, aroused widespread fascination among secular, disenchanted moderns—not least among modernist artists, critics, curators, and collectors. Such discourses of surprise and discovery have ebbed in recent years as the world becomes more and more aware of the multiplicity of its contemporaneous differences. Yet taste for this art has not subsided, and markets for it continue to grow. In such contexts, how are these paintings to be understood as contemporary artworks?

We propose that this question may be productively answered by close and careful looking at specific paintings, at a selection from among the earliest produced at Papunya in 1971 and 1972, the place and time widely regarded as the origin of the contemporary Aboriginal art moment.

During the decades since then, Aboriginal cultural objects have risen within the hierarchical schema of the Western art-culture system, from being seen as examples of cultural artifacts to achieving the status of singular, "high art" objects, repositories of concentrated aesthetic value and of significant cultural meaning.[1] This transit from the ethnographic museum to the fine art gallery or museum has been much desired by many supporters of Indigenous Australians, fellow artists, and collectors. It has also been celebrated by Indigenous activists and artists as recognition of their aesthetic achievement, releasing their peoples from their subhuman classification among the flora and fauna of natural history and from the living death of representing the "primitive" stages of human evolution.

The artworks under discussion were created at the intersection of Anglo-Australian and Indigenous culture and society, exhibiting a power that calls to many. They were clearly intended to communicate Indigenous values and understandings of the world and the place of humans in that world. They emerged—beautiful and strange—as "gifts" offered to those who had presumed to colonize them.

This book is a conversation between an anthropologist/ethnographer and an art critic, historian, and theorist. We are aware of the historical implication of anthropology within colonial systems of racial classification and in the ongoing persistence of cultural control. Similarly, we recognize that art history's service to cultural privilege and to the demands of art markets can discolor its value as a practice of disinterested research and education. Nevertheless, as we will show, several anthropologists and art historians have contributed significantly through their writings and exhibitions to the scholarly understanding of this art and to its public appreciation.[2]

Our focus or subject is six paintings created by Indigenous men from the "Aboriginal settlement" of Papunya in the early 1970s. These works should be understood as transpositions of their *Tjukurrpa*—the corpus of knowledge of "Country" (or landscape), ancestral beings and stories, traditionally performed in ceremony, with decorated objects and body decoration—onto two-dimensional surfaces using acrylic or polymer paint. In that sense, these objects are an emergent form. At the same time, they are anchored in and express elements of a cultural tradition of great antiquity and profound depth.

The conversation in this volume brings our two disciplines together to do what these paintings ask of us: to respond to their several dimensions in a spirit—and, we hope, a practice—of coevality.

Transcultural Curating

One of the disciplinary practices that anthropologists and art historians have in common is curating. Exhibitions in museums and galleries are the occasions on which the research materials and the interpretive insights of both professions are made public. These are reinforced by publications of many kinds, from specialist journals through scholarly monographs to books intended for the general public. The outpouring of art from the remote communities has called these professions together, among others, and asked them, in effect, to use their expertise to amplify its voice, to use their languages—so well established in the wider world—to help build bridges across which certain kinds of understanding might walk. Each profession has much to offer, but the offerings are different. Whatever their internal differences of approach, anthropologists study the processes of human cultures and the interactions of people and the articulation of these in social formations. Art historians prioritize the creation of works of art, seeking to understand how, when, and why they were made, and with which effects. For fifty years now, outstanding practitioners of these two disciplines have been drawn to study and to write about the art made at Papunya and in its region. Their contributions, however, do not constitute the whole bridge, the entire field of interpretation that enables the transcultural conversation to take place. The artists have also recruited another important modern discipline to assist their cause: curating as a practice of collecting, caring for, and exhibiting works of art.

Today, catalogs of major exhibitions of Indigenous art will typically feature statements by the artists, an essay by the curator about the aims of the exhibition, another by the anthropologist closest to the community, and one by an art historian reflecting on the evolution of the art on show. All have distinct informational and educational purposes, yet the exhibition as a total experience implies that these purposes are convergent. And for exhibitions of Indigenous art, as well as for the discourse around it, the implication is that Indigenous values should be foregrounded. These are defined by Yamatji curator and scholar Stephen Gilchrist as "presencing the ancestral, surfacing alternative histories, spatialising the deep local, and enfolding audiences in evocations of the ceremonial."[3] Such values were strikingly evident in the exhibition *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, curated by Hetti Perkins in 2000, as they have been, since the 1990s, in the exhibitions and projects of several other Indigenous curators, among them Djon Mundine, Brenda L. Croft, Margo Neale, and Gilchrist himself.[4]

We both have very strong memories of the exhibition *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, as part of the cultural program of the 2000 Summer Olympics. It was arranged by Arrernte and Kalkadoon curator Hetti Perkins, along with two other Indigenous curators, Cara Pinchbeck and Jonathan Jones.[5] From rooms filled with mostly small, early paintings on boards to large-scale canvases, often collectively painted, many by women artists, and a *Kiwirrkura* ground painting using public symbols from sacred ceremony made by several of the artists, the 150 works were selected in close consultation with the communities to show the origins of art making at the remote desert settlement of Papunya since the early 1970s ("Genesis") and to emphasize the extraordinary quality of its continuing creativity ("Genius") (see fig. I.1). In a recent interview, Perkins tells how she faced down opposition to the use of the word "genius" in the title and how she dealt with the controversy caused by her decision to display the works without titles and wall texts. Instead, she had numbered them and offered sheets in each room with the titles and other basic information:

> Because people walk up and read the title and move on. We really wanted to take that out and make people look at the pictures. Our guiding philosophy was that these artists are making these pictures for a reason: for you to look at them and to feel them and hear them, as well as see them. . . . [T]hat show really had to cut a line through the dross, the mythologizing of "songlines" and "spirituality" and so on. We wanted to show that these are actually concrete works made by people who have their own histories and stories. They are not just generic stories, but they are their own, as you can see in the work. Because everybody's work is different. That's the part that really materializes in the paintings. . . . [T]he effect of a good show is, that you see that there are personalities, that there are distinctive engagements, and so on. That's a huge thing for people to recognize.[6]

In the interview, she was responding to the following remark by one of us (Fred Myers) who had explained the value of his research into the paintings, following the invitation to do so by his volume's Pintupi authors, first issued in 1973 and renewed to this day: "The thing is that people don't actually know what's in the painting. And if you know something about what is in the paintings, you can see what they've done, like what makes them artists, right? Of course, it's beautiful, and they have a great sense of color and balance and all of those things, but there is more there."[7] Working out ways to engage those who "walk up and read the title and move on" remains a central challenge

I.1 Charlie Tjapangarti, Kenny Williams Tjampitjinpa, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, and Bobby West Tjupurrula making a *Kiwirrkura* ground painting, *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2000. Photograph by Fred Myers. Used with permission of participant and living relative Bobby West Tjupurrula.

to all involved in the many-voiced discourse that is contemporary Australian Indigenous art. So is the need to articulate the more that is there: more than the mythologizing "dross"; more than the simple, shorthand "stories" that can too often bring looking to an end, as if that is all there is to see; and more than the "great sense of color and balance" and all those self-isolating aesthetic "things."

Story and Form

With these challenges and examples in mind, we set out to tackle a smaller issue within this larger whole, one that is, nevertheless, at the essence of art writing: the offering of detailed, descriptive interpretations and evaluations of particular works of art. Despite the by now quite large literature about this art, close, extended readings of individual works are relatively rare. We won-

dered whether something helpful might emerge if we two—longtime but occasional interlocutors, and representatives of two disciplines that have focused on this art—were to seize an opportunity to stand before some works by Australian Indigenous artists and to work together to articulate what these paintings were inviting us to see. In our first exchange about these matters, over twenty years ago, Myers posed the problem in these terms:

> The contemporary traffic in culture in this domain connects not simply the Aboriginal community and the "Western" market, but also distinctive disciplinary traditions with respect to the rather vexed object of "Aboriginal acrylic painting"—an "awkward relationship" between what I would call a "localism" (which I identify with anthropology) and a "cosmopolitanism" (which I identify with what I will loosely call "the art world"), as the objects and activities observed by anthropologists circulate as new forms of difference.[8]

To test where this awkwardness stood now, we took up a chance to look at not just some random sample of "Aboriginal acrylic painting," but a cluster of what were among the earliest painted at Papunya. The proximate occasion of our conversation was an exhibition of several works from the John and Barbara Wilkerson collection, shown at the residence of the Australian Consulate-General in New York. Along with contemporary works by desert-based artists, selected from the collection of Steve Martin and Anne Stringfield, for a few months during 2022, the exhibition made 1 Beekman Place, in Midtown Manhattan overlooking the East River, seem a distant outpost of the remote Indigenous communities in the deserts of Australia.

While our conversation as presented here is an edited and expanded transcript of what was said, it includes several notes aimed at informing those not familiar with the artists, the movement, or the circumstances of its flourishing. In the remainder of this introduction, we will outline these circumstances. We will then sketch out the main stages in the discourse around this art, to introduce some of its themes and many of its protagonists, with whom we engage as we talk about the paintings.

Papunya Tula

Understanding the paintings requires understanding where, when, and what they came from. The township of Papunya was established by the Australian federal government in 1959 around a reliable water source (the bore at Lyappa soakage), 240 kilometers (150 miles) west of Alice Springs. It aimed to serve

as a settlement and a place of cultural assimilation for a variety of Indigenous peoples who had, over the preceding half century, been displaced from their traditional homelands by pastoralism, missionaries, drought, and, in the 1950s and 1960s, the policy of securing a complete census of the continent's population. The town sits on the land of the Honey Ant ancestors and their descendants, *tjarla* in the Pintupi-Luritja language of the area. As settlement advanced, the white administrative center was surrounded by the homes of several peoples, the Western Arrernte closest to the middle, as it is their traditional land, and the other peoples—the Anmatyerr, the Warlpiri, the Pintupi, and the Luritja—camping in the directions oriented toward their traditional lands. Papunya also had its own local cultural politics and projects. Although many inhabitants were in frequent contact with non-Indigenous station owners, contract workers, welfare officers, and the like, others were relatively recent arrivals at such settlements. Contacts with other Indigenous peoples had occurred over millennia, yet they required renegotiation in such changing circumstances. The township was designed for 400 people, but by the early 1970s the Indigenous population of Papunya was close to 1,400. Renegotiation was a constant factor in everyday life for everyone at the settlement, including those interested in painting. As we shall see, renegotiation became a definitive aspect of the artistic practice.

One key moment was the painting of five murals on the exterior walls of the Papunya School between June and August 1971. By far the largest symbols displayed on the most prominent wall were devoted to the Honey Ant Dreaming. Up to forty men from several language groups were involved at various times, but Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa was the leading Indigenous artist. Accompanied by Mick Wallankarri Tjakamarra, the elder with main authority for the Honey Ant Dreaming at this place, Tjampitjinpa had approached Geoffrey Bardon, a recently arrived, young art teacher, who would become the first advisor, documenter, and proponent of these artists, with a sketch for the main mural. Bardon recalls the moment when he intervened in the painting process to question the inclusion of "European" figurative renderings of honey ants in parts of the design. After consulting the other men present, Kaapa erased these figures and replaced them with publicly permissible versions of signs for the presence of these sacred ancestors. Bardon exults: "It was a moment of glory for Western Desert people as we, Old Bert Tjakamarra, Old Mick Tjakamarra, Bill Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Long Jack Phillipus and the others, watched and the first hieroglyph was put on the wall, lovingly and beautifully with Kaapa's sinuous, marvelous technique."[9] Three years later, these murals, and one by Bardon himself pictur-

I.2 The Men's Painting Room, Papunya, August 1972. *Back row, from left:* Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, Timmy Payungka Tjapangarti, Wartuma (Charlie Tarawa/Tjaruru) Tjungurrayi, Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri. *Front row, from left:* Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi, Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi, unidentified man, Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa (hidden by painting). Photograph by Michael Jensen.

ing the school community in ideal terms, were painted over during a routine renovation of the school.

It is estimated that between 1,200 and 1,500 paintings on boards of various kinds were produced at Papunya between 1971 and 1973. In his 2004 book, *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story*, Bardon documents nearly five hundred of them.[10] A few hundred quickly entered the collection of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, where they were rarely shown due to concerns about their secret content. Many were acquired in Alice Springs as souvenirs. Others entered museums or private collections in Australia and abroad. Despite the assiduous efforts of marketeers, especially since the 1990s, many are presumed lost or destroyed.[11] In August 1972, the Papunya Art and Craft Council was established to manage the distribution of art materials and the sale of works. Four months later, the artists renamed it Papu-

nya Tula, evoking a small hill east of the town, a Honey Ant Dreaming site. In 2022, Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd., the artist cooperative, celebrated fifty years of continuous activity, which shows no signs of diminishing.

The Wilkerson Collection

The John and Barbara Wilkerson collection was put together mostly in the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, when several early works by the painters who became Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd. came onto the secondary market (that is, paintings that had been produced and sold earlier were being reentered for sale by the owners). This was developing as a new market, establishing fresh value in these works as "important Aboriginal art." Tim Klingender, Sotheby's auctioneer, was its primary champion. The stirring of this market was met with newspaper coverage that drove local and international recognition that a significant artistic phenomenon had emerged. The Wilkerson collection was formed in this context. It was inspired by an encounter in the early 1990s with a Water Dreaming painting by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, the only Papunya board shown at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin for many decades. Fittingly, a collection highlight is Warangkula's acclaimed *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa*, painted in 1972, which set price records. We discuss it in the conversation that follows. Most scholars and aficionados regard the Wilkerson collection as including some of the jewels of the early periods of the painting movement at Papunya and as certainly the best collection of such work outside of Australia. Several paintings from the collection have been loaned and exhibited at various venues around the world in accordance with the Wilkersons' aim to promote the "connoisseurship, scholarship, and education" through the sharing of their collection.[12]

Some fifty "early Aboriginal paintings from Papunya," all from the Wilkerson collection, were presented in the exhibition *Icons of the Desert*, which was shown at the Herbert Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, from January 10 to April 5, 2009; then at the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, from May 3 to August 2, 2009; and ending its tour at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, New York City, from September 1 to December 5, 2009 (see fig. I.3). It was guest curated by the Australian art historian Roger Benjamin with help from Andrew Weislogel, an associate curator at the originating institution. The overall framework was articulated by Benjamin in an essay in the exhibition catalog, identifying what he presented as the birth of an international art movement: "Beauty has many forms, but it is not every day that a new kind of

beauty is born to the world."[13] The installations differed at the separate sites, with the Grey Art Gallery deciding to place some paintings that the descendants of the painters regarded as not for public display in a more secluded gallery, a procedure replicated to some extent in the catalog, which removed several images of paintings from the printed catalog and placed them in a separate insert that would not travel to Australia.[14] Painters from Papunya Tula or their descendants were present at two of these venues. Various accompanying educational programs were offered. Myers, who had an ongoing relationship with painters from Papunya Tula since the early 1970s, participated in the catalog production and in events at the Grey Art Gallery and the Herbert Johnson Museum.

I.3 Unpacking *Icons of the Desert*, Grey Art Gallery, New York, late August 2009. Fred Myers looking at Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi, *Classic Pintupi Water Dreaming*, 1972. *Children's Water Dreaming (Version 2)*, 1972, is at left. Kingsley Tjungurrayi's *Stars, Rain, and Lightning at Night*, 1971, is in the background. Photograph by Faye Ginsburg.

Discourse, Agency

Our conversation occurs, most audibly, between ourselves, as we respond to the invitation of the six paintings to engage them in conversation. Two on one, we interrogate each painting in turn, in order to hear them speak, so to speak. And each painting made its distinctiveness and power known as we faced it. These early works are small but have inescapable presence.

Furthermore, we are, as you will see, also in conversation with the many-voiced discourse that has grown up around them. The insights and ideas of previous interpreters (as well as information they have provided, and their value judgments) are in our minds as we look. They are alive in our conversation, talking to us about these paintings, sometimes about their experience of them when they were being made, or when they were later exhibited in a museum show, or when they were published.

Interpretations of the achievement at Papunya in the early 1970s have often turned on the question of agency, with the authenticity of each artistic statement as a subtext. They explicitly or implicitly ask the following questions: Who was, who were, the driving force; how was this force exercised; and how did it shape the art?

The first sustained writing on this art, which was the art educator Geoffrey Bardon's essays—unpublished in their original form, but used as the basis of chapters in his books *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* and *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*; and, with his brother, James Bardon, *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story*—moves between detailed descriptions of Bardon's role in every aspect of the painting process, short of applying brushstrokes with his own hand, and fulsome celebration of the independent inventiveness of most of the twenty-five or so men who regularly painted in the school rooms, the yard, his flat, and the Men's Painting Room (a World War II Nissen hut near the school, at times called "the Great Shed") during the early 1970s. A dedicated teacher committed to serving the interests of his students, their families, and these (as he soon discovered) remarkable men, Bardon veered in his writings between expressing the joys of creative confraternity and documenting the traumas of social isolation at Papunya—these writings are, as Una Rey puts it, "survivor memoirs" and all the more affective for that reason.[15] They are, as well, a remarkable effort at the witnessing of a phenomenon, as he was among the first non-Indigenous persons to recognize these paintings as an extraordinary gesture of transcultural translation on the part of the artists, one that required a complementary response.

Bardon's documentation remains an essential archive, not least because of the centrality it gives to painterly processes, to the extraordinarily inventive struggles of these men to translate their "sacred geographies," so mobile across time and space, onto the flat format of a transportable board. In his brilliant essay that prefaces *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story*, theorist Paul Carter lists the practical devices that Bardon introduced to channel the outpouring of creative energy triggered by the prospect of sharing their knowledge and, in their desperate circumstances, getting paid, however little, for doing so.[16] The first step required to prepare an artwork for circulation and sale is to decide that it is finished, ready to go. Carter claims that Bardon introduced this notion to the artists. More subtle constraints followed from the processes of recording each work when done. Photographing a painting, and identifying it on its back, does not strictly require deciding on its orientation, determining on top and bottom; done as a routine, however, it builds in orientation as an expectation. Labeling the work requires giving it a name. Linking the name to its subject matter, and explaining "the story" clearly, enhanced a painting's worth to those outside the community.[17]

One of the chapters in *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story* is titled "Subject Matter and Meaning and the Importance of the Idea of Story."[18] Elsewhere Bardon says, "For the Western Desert people there were usually no titles for the paintings, which were often named by me using conventional but also arbitrary terminologies. There is no physical horizon, only a conceptual one to enforce the certainty of a given meaning. A story was written so that word and image were the same; a painting was the worded image of the story."[19] The claim is not, obviously, that Bardon originated the great cycles and specific stories that constitute the Dreaming, nor the casual translation of them into English as "stories." Rather, he understood that the designs used in ceremony, and now being used in these paintings, were mnemonic pictographs, that (in Carter's words) "they employed a repertoire of *iconic* forms—concentric circles and lines—which (in the context of the story's telling) could be interpreted *conceptually*, as signifying the creative drama of the spiritual ancestors."[20] The Dreaming was and is replete with such dramas, which the men were anxious to convey and he to circulate for their benefit. "For the Western Desert painters and me, the making of each painting was like a theatrical and emotional act: I was concerned with the making of paintings with a Western Desert iconography and meaning to the exclusion of whitefella painting conventions, though with an efficient and artistically justified use of space."[21] He goes on to say that "the way the story was told

became a preoccupation with me since I felt that intelligibility must involve a story's disposition, that its meaning be readily understood."[22]

As you will see, our conversation is animated by the recurrent recognition that, for all such attempts (however well intended) to impose these normalizing constraints, the creativity of the artists constantly exceeded them. A dispassionate reading of his texts shows that these excesses excited, even at times delighted, Bardon as much as they aroused his anxieties.

On a more general level, however, prioritizing Bardon over the artists within the Papunya Tula story fits a model that recurs often in studies of Indigenous art made in modern times: an emphasis on the pivotal role of a non-Indigenous mediator in the production of Indigenous "nontraditional," "hybrid," or "modernized" forms, ideas, and practices. This model pairs one non-Indigenous person—understood as acting largely alone, often alienated in important ways from their peers—alongside several Indigenous people, understood as embodying the culture of a community, sometimes an entire ethnicity. It attributes, at least in the origin phases of the story, roughly equal agency to both. It takes both to be necessary, but neither to be sufficient, as a cause of the entire phenomenon. There is, of course, an infinity of nuance in play in these situations, as close study of any of them will quickly reveal. One such nuance is the emergence of Indigenous individuals who take leading roles in negotiating with the colonizers.[23] As we shall soon see, this, too, occurred at Papunya.

Bardon's roles as a mediator were taken up by a succession of arts advisors and other supporters, unbroken to this day. All soundly based knowledge of the early years is also indebted to the recordkeeping and the occasional commentaries of advisors from these times, among them Pat Hogan, Dick Kimber, Peter Fannin, John Kean, Andrew Crocker, and Daphne Williams.[24] The continuity of Papunya Tula Artists Pty. Ltd., which Bardon, along with leading men, was instrumental in founding, is the actual and legal basis of this succession. Non-Indigenous managers work under the oversight of an all-Indigenous board. The subsequent prolific output of art from Papunya and other "decentered centers" in the region (not least Yuendumu, contemporaneously), its impact as a model in other remote communities (including those in the north focused on bark painting), and its chancy but persistent succession planning have echoes, with varying degrees of success, in what are now over one hundred Indigenous art centers across the continent. Indigenous art in Australia is buoyed by federal, state, and local government funding and also supported by an uneven yet persistent market. It is driven

by wave after wave of Indigenous agency, in one remote community after another, and by individual artists and artist collectives in the towns and cities of Australia.[25] A system has emerged that eclipses similar ones elsewhere, including countries such as Canada that provide substantial support for their First Nations people. The decisive role of the Papunya painters in these developments became unarguable after exhibitions such as *Papunya: Genesis and Genius* in 2000.[26]

Sociologist Vivien Johnson's revisionary account, *Once Upon a Time in Papunya* (2010), responded to these factors as much as it did to her own direct and deep experience in the community, which began in 1980. She argues that the agency of the artists, in particular Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa, was as least as consequential for the formation and the evolution of Papunya painting as that of Bardon—perhaps, she implies, more so. She shows that before Bardon's arrival several of the artists were actively painting in ways that pointed pathways beyond the "hybrid modernism" already prevalent in the region—beyond, that is, the Hermannsburg School of watercolorists who pursued the legacy of Albert Namatjira. Using art historical tools such as close stylistic analysis and a forensic tracking of documents, she suggests that a "School of Kaapa" can be discerned as an early substyle within the larger but still, at this point, emerging art movement. It is distinguished by its "style of miniaturised depictions of ceremonial grounds, objects and performances on plain backgrounds."[27] Several of these artists were among those who joined the Men's Painting Room. They brought with them their already-existing interests, painterly skills, and sets of social relations, especially the leadership of Kaapa and Old Mick Tjakamarra.

A further revision is evident in John Kean's research and writing, not least in his 2023 book, *Dot, Circle, and Frame: The Making of Papunya Tula Art*.[28] An art advisor at Papunya from 1977 to 1979, Kean argues that the artists Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, and Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula were central to the greatest achievements of the early years, setting the framework, and the standards, for the subsequent flourishing, more so than any non-Indigenous actor, including Bardon. He locates the artists' inspiration in Namatjira's direct example as a money-making artist and as someone who "framed" sacred subjects in ways suitable for sharing with the noninitiated. Namatjira's well-known and widely valued landscapes, watercolors painted in the modified modernist style he learned from Rex Battarbee, featured not only tourist destinations.[29] The places he painted were also sacred sites; the natural features he highlighted were sacred beings.[30] Indigenous artists could see this clearly. Furthering the argument

for this lineage, Kean unearthed two watercolor and pencil drawings dating from 1948 and attributed them to Namatjira. They both diagram markings on nine elliptically shaped ritual objects, with *yalka* (bush onion) symbols shown on the most prominent. The schematic layout and geometrical harmonies in both drawings anticipate the "School of Kaapa" style, while the symbolic infill and use of dotting in the second one prefigures these usages within Desert painting more generally.[31]

Kean also locates Papunya firmly within Central Australia rather than just the narrower Western Desert region, characterizing the broader area as "a dynamically evolving contact zone" not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous inhabitants but also between diverse Aboriginal groups, each with "markedly different life experiences."[32] Three of the four key artists—Kaapa, Tim Leura, and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri—were Anmatyerr men and were cousins. All had been stockmen, were familiar with pastoralist modes of mapping, and were accomplished and successful carvers, familiar with marketing their wares. Johnny Warangkula, Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, and Wartuma (Charlie Tawara/Tjaruru) Tjungurrayi were Pintupi men who settled around Hermannsburg and then Haasts Bluff when they were children during the 1930s. Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi and Uta Uta Tjangala were members of a more traditional group of Pintupi, ritually more mature when their families settled there in the late 1940s and 1950s. As we have noted, Papunya became central to the region during the 1960s, home to the Haasts Bluff Pintupi. In the following decades, these convergences triggered what Kean calls "the shiniest of shards from this collision of cultures."[33] It also became the staging post for people's efforts to return to their tribal lands—the outstation movement—which in turn spawned several large-scale, many-storied paintings. Kean says that, "seen in retrospect, the convergence of these events in 1971, signifies the transition from 'modern art,' associated with the 'assimilationist policy,' to 'contemporary art,' associated with Land Rights and 'self-determination.'"[34]

This view echoes the argument, first provocatively proposed by Ian McLean in 2010, that Papunya Tula art had an especially early, and powerful, role in demonstrating the contemporaneity of distinct differences that soon became definitive of global contemporary art in general.[35] Alert to the ways in which contemporary conditions precipitate the conjunction of disparate temporalities, McLean reads Papunya Tula as the conjunction of a belated "contact art" and late modernist avant-gardism, as a breakthrough moment in several convergent art histories, infused with Indigenous assertion of ancestral power, an artistic "rattling of the spears," the practice of calling up that

power.[36] The placement of Papunya Tula painting has been a pivotal, ongoing topic in writing the history of Indigenous Australian art—indeed, of modern and contemporary Australian art as such.

Tjungunutja and *Kunatinpa*

The depth of Indigenous agency was asserted in the very name of the exhibition *Tjungunutja*, *from having come together*, held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 2017.[37] Bobby West Tjupurrula, son of one of the early painters at Papunya, and one of the Indigenous cocurators of the show, offered this name, explaining to the gallery curator Luke Scholes that his relatives (Pintupi newcomers and others) had negotiated a "shared identity" at Papunya through sharing knowledge of their Dreamings, their ceremonies, with other peoples there. At one point in the conversation, Bobby traces the path from ceremonial sharing and collaboration to painting. He turns to the other men and says,

> "Your group and us all *tjungurringu* [came together], from the west." Long Jack [Phillipus] replied: "Whole lot, right. Warlpiri, Anmatyerr, some Pitjantjatjarra, Pintupi. That's how they were, wasn't it." Bobby West: "That the one we call *Tjungunutja*." Sid Anderson: "*Palunya kula* [it is exactly that]. They were working together. *Tjungunutja*." Bobby: "When you made those boards, did those designs [stories] on the boards, self and self. Together you put them. Like *punyunyu* [novices], teaching them, East side, north side, west side, that one."[38]

This, he urged, was the foundation for the mutuality of the painters at Papunya. Importantly, this process had begun in the late 1960s, prior to the arrival of Bardon, and in parallel with the activities of Kaapa and other Anmatyerr artists. "After that," Bobby said, "after Tingarri, that's when they did the dot painting, body painting. Then they did that [Honey Ant Dreaming] mural at the school."[39] This is a claim that the outpouring of painting at Papunya was a by-product of the need for the different peoples obliged to live at Papunya—most of them on foreign land, displaced from their own country—to negotiate ways of living and working together: the outcome, first and foremost, of an Indigenous history.

Bobby West Tjupurrula and his cocurators also stressed another key element in how the painters thought about their work: it enabled the articulation of a relationship between themselves and the larger white/Australian society—with those they call *walypalas*. As Bobby said,

> At the conclusion of *punyunyu* [a ceremony for novices], we do what we call *kunatinpa* [ceremonial gift]. It's like when you go to church. You sit and listen and then when that *ingkata* [pastor] has finished speaking they ask you for one dollar or two dollars. The reason they ask for that money is because the *ingkata* has shared his knowledge. . . . We [the Indigenous curators], we're giving you our knowledge. This is the first time we're giving this knowledge in this way and you're giving us *kunatinpa*. We expect this, this is the way it should be.[40]

This is a call for the relationship to be one of hospitality, an exchange of gifts, a sharing of that which you can give for the benefit of both. We see our conversation as a modest effort, one among others, to meet this obligation.

Politics of the Gift

Hetti Perkins and the other Indigenous curators mentioned earlier have repeatedly drawn attention to the significance of Indigenous art and particularly Papunya Tula painting as expressing or articulating a claim or path to self-determination. In many remote communities, where conditions of scarcity prevail, the painting movement is a leading and reliable source—in some places, one of the few—of continuous income. As such, it is vital to the transfer of traditional knowledge between generations on which self-determination depends. That this has persisted for several decades, despite the abuses of exploiters, the vagaries of the art market, and the sensationalizing of its contradictions by racist elements in public media, is a testimony to the commitment of all involved.[41]

While the political agency articulated in these works, their claims over country and the value of their own culture in the face of assimilative pressures, might have seemed a barrier to their recognition in some discourses of art, lessening their "autonomy" as artworks, it has been central to "the work of art" as the painters have seen it, to the cultural, social, and political work that it does—not least, facilitating a return to the traditional lands of those exiled at Papunya.[42] In this last, political purpose, the painting movement has been, and continues to be, a vital enabling factor.

More broadly, the nationwide recognition accorded these paintings has led to greater knowledge and acceptance of Indigenous presence and creativity. Their imagery, as circulated on Land Rights posters, has increased understanding of Indigenous relations to country, and this has leveraged philanthropic support for such needed services as the establishment of an

Indigenous-controlled organization to provide remote local dialysis treatment for the epidemic of kidney failure in Central Australia.[43] Indigenous protocols expressed in terms of intellectual or cultural property—about who owns the paintings and what can be shown or must be restricted—have also entered legal and museological domains once dominated by Western property regimes. This trajectory allows us to see that the hopes of the older people that the revelation of their knowledge would establish stronger relations with those to whom it is revealed (*yutinu*) or given (*yungu*) have, to a meaningful degree, been realized. Despite the fears of many who foresaw cultural destruction following from the sharing of this art, the painting movement has, in many remote communities, instead become a vehicle of self-determination.

The Aestheticist Diversion

Hovering to one side of these debates about how to respond to these artworks is the wish to have no debate at all. In the exhibitions he organized in the early 1980s, one Papunya arts advisor, Andrew Crocker, sought to "migrate these paintings from ethnography to art." Each opened with this wall label: "Much could be said of the genesis of the Western Desert School and also of its role in the artists' society. I think that for the purposes of this exhibition the paintings should be allowed to exercise their own aesthetic appeal and that explanations of content and symbolism be best kept to a minimum."[44] These sentiments echo in some presentations of recent work by Indigenous artists who, it is urged, are by now so versed in the languages of contemporary art that they have transcended their obligations to kin and country and have become, for example, "simply painters: some of the finest abstract painters this planet has ever seen."[45] While true, there is nothing simple about it. Such attitudes misunderstand abstraction as an artistic approach, the diverse languages of contemporary art, and what essentially propels these men and women to make the kind of art that they do. It is a wish to assimilate this art into categories conventional within Western art but presumed to be universal. These Indigenous Australian artists are not making a peripheral contribution to the history of Western modernism. Within the broader range of negotiations that we have described, they are introducing to the world a set of painterly practices that are at once traditional, modern, and contemporary.[46]

Seeing, Speaking, Silence

Each step in the evolution of the discourse we have just sketched—from Papunya itself to the global contemporary art world—enriches and expands the overall picture while at the same time filling in the details of who did what, when, and with which effect. Being familiar with these and several other important contributions, we were excited to test their insights against the evidence of the actual artworks that generated them. In the expanding body of writing about this art, there is, too, a growing interaction between disciplinary approaches, a more subtle weaving of voices, in the discussion of the artworks themselves. But sustained analyses of individual works are still rare. Sharing the story and then showing how the artist tells it remains the default mode.

Thirteen paintings from the Wilkerson collection were on show at the Australian Consulate-General's residence. Having decided to focus on the earliest works, we centered the following conversation on six that were painted in 1971 and 1972, with comparative remarks about others made at the time and since. Most of the others in the exhibition were painted in subsequent years.[47]

This conversation emerged during the pandemic, in New York City (of all places), and from a twenty-five-year history of dialogue between us. While deeply influenced by Indigenous artists and curators, and their knowledge shared with us over the years, we can only articulate what we know and what we can see, speaking together in front of these paintings. We do so in the hope that our conversation might add something to the ongoing discourse, bridge some of its interpretive gaps, as we look closely at a selection of these artworks, striving to unpack how they were made, when, why, and with what impact during those crucial early years of what became a remarkably diverse and resilient, continuously self-replenishing art movement.

Notes

Introduction

Epigraph: Long Jack Phillipus to Luke Scholes, Papunya, September 2010, cited in Luke Scholes, "Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra," in Ryan and Batty, *Tjukurrtjanu*, 92.

1. On the Western art-culture system, see Nelson Graburn, "Introduction: The Arts of the Fourth World," in Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, 1–32; and James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 215–51. On the location of Indigenous Australian art within this system, see Myers, *Painting Culture*.

2. Scholars of the creative output of other Indigenous peoples in Australia offer insights of equivalent value, and richly suggestive parallels. For example, anthropologist Howard Morphy, in books such as *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* and *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories*, identifies a range of subtle devices that nuance the use of certain templates derived from ceremonial markings on the body, and from designs used in rock and sand painting, when Yolngu artists addressed the challenge of how to present Dreaming imagery on the rectangular support of a section of bark cut from a tree. Other works that might be mentioned specifically in relation to the Central Australian movement include Carty, *Balgo*; Carty and French, "Art of Central Australia"; Brooks and Jorgensen, *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time*; and, for the Kimberley, Sprague, *The Stranger Artist*.

3. Gilchrist, "Indigenous Curatorial Interpellations," 254.

4. Landmark exhibitions by Indigenous curators include the following: Djon Mundine: *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1988), *Tyerabarrbowaryaou* [I shall never become a white man] (with Fiona Foley, 1994), and *The Native Born* (1996); Hetti Perkins: *Blak art* (1993), *Fluent: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie, Judy Watson* (1997), and *Papunya: Genesis and Genius* (2000); Brenda L. Croft: *Culture Warriors* (2007) and *Still in My Mind: Gurindji Location, Experience and Visuality*

(2017); Margo Neale: *Emily Kame Kngwarreye* (2008) and *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* (2021); and Stephen Gilchrist: *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia* (2016).

5. Perkins and Fink, *Papunya Tula*.

6. Perkins, "Stories I Can Tell," 82.

7. Myers and Skerritt, *Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu*, 82.

8. Myers, "Traffic in Culture," 239.

9. Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 17. For a detailed account of these events emphasizing the agency of the several people involved, see Kean, "Digging for Honey Ants."

10. Geoffrey Bardon, "A Selected Catalogue," in Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 92–501.

11. The development of secondary market interest in these works is traced in Johnson, *Once Upon a Time in Papunya*, chap. 5.

12. John and Barbara Wilkerson, "Collectors' Foreword," in Benjamin, *Icons of the Desert*, 7.

13. Benjamin, *Icons of the Desert*, 21. At the time of this exhibition, there were fifty-eight Papunya paintings in the Wilkerson collection. Subsequently, ten more were acquired.

14. See Myers, "Paintings, Publics and Protocols."

15. Rey, "Bardon's Legacy." See also *Mr. Patterns*, dir. Catriona McKenzie (Film Australia, 2004, 55 min.).

16. Carter, "Introduction."

17. At the same time, there was some recognition that focusing on the "story," or the religious significance of the works, impeded their recognition as "art" in the prevailing discourses of the time. Bardon's successor as art advisor, Peter Fannin, recognized the importance of this in marketing the work. He conceived a special category, "fine art-ethnology," to elevate the work from the category of "tourist art." The "stories" were seen as important sources of value, but the productivity of the artists meant that the documentation imposed a huge stress, especially when the backlog of undocumented paintings prevented them from moving to market. The reason Fannin asked Myers to help with documentation at Yayayi in 1973 was because he, like Bardon, could not keep up with the output of paintings.

18. Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 50–65.

19. Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 239.

20. Carter, "Introduction," xvii. It seems likely that Bardon was aware of the anthropologist Nancy Munn's early work and publications on Walbiri sign systems. See Munn, "Walbiri Graphic Signs"; and Munn, "Visual Categories."

21. Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 27.

22. Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 30.

23. See the many examples in Phillips and Vorano, *Mediating Modernisms*. The colonial structure also obtains for non-Indigenous cultural mediators who were

not modernists, those who disseminated and interpreted Indigenous traditional and neotraditional cultural products.

24. See, for example, Hogan, "Notes and Inventory."

25. For example, the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Cooperative in inner-city Sydney, active since 1987. See Fordham and Duhrkoop, *Boomalli Prints and Paper*.

26. See French, *Seeing the Centre*; and McGregor, *The Life and Times of Albert Namatjira*.

27. Johnson, *Once Upon a Time in Papunya*, 18, and chaps. 1 and 2. Johnson has done invaluable work on the artists' biographies in *Aboriginal Artists of the Western Desert* and *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, and through her monographs, *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri* and *The Art of Michael Nelson Jagamara*. The role of Kaapa has some parallels to individual Native American artists, as profiled in A. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift*. Peter Sutton has discussed other Australian examples of such mediators in *The Politics of Suffering*.

28. This book is based on his dissertation of the same title, submitted to the University of Melbourne in 2020. As it happened, we were both examiners of Kean's outstanding dissertation. Regarding the several people who had important roles in the developments at Papunya, see Scholes, "Unmasking the Myth."

29. See Edmond, *Battarbee and Namatjira*.

30. Colin Jack-Hinton, director of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, made this point in his book *Aboriginal Art Past and Present*, 19–20. See also Burn and Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask"; and Smith, "Albert Namatjira and Margaret Preston."

31. *Untitled (Yalka no. 1)* and *Untitled (Yalka no. 2)* are in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. They are plates 13 and 14 in his dissertation. He discusses them on pages 57–60. See also Kean, *Dot, Circle, and Frame*, 46–47 and plate 16.

32. Kean, "Dot, Circle, and Frame," i.

33. Kean, "Papunya," 7.

34. See his essay in Scholes, *Tjungunutja*.

35. McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, introduction, and in particular his essay on pages 333–45.

36. McLean, *Rattling Spears*, chap. 5.

37. Sid Anderson, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, Michael Nelson Jagamara AM, Joseph Jurra Tjapaltjarri, Bobby West Tjupurrula, and Desmond Phillipus Tjurpurrula with Luke Scholes, "Tjungunutja (from Having Come Together)," in Scholes, *Tjungunutja*, 117–27.

38. Scholes, *Tjungunutja*, 119.

39. Scholes, *Tjungunutja*, 118.

40. Scholes, *Tjungunutja*, 118–19.

41. See, for example, Congreve, "Investigations"; and Acker, *Somewhere in the World*; comments in Myers, "The Work of Art."

42. When Wartuma Tjungurrayi and Uta Uta Tjangala spoke to Myers in 1973,

they made clear some of the stakes: that the paintings were their stories, from their fathers and grandfathers, from and about their country; that they were concerned whitefellas might steal them; that they wanted to be compensated for them; and that the paintings expressed their hope to go back to their own country and to get a windmill there. Cited in Myers, *Painting Culture*, 25. See also Myers, "'We're Saving a Way of Life.'"

43. The Purple Truck dialysis unit is discussed in Paul Sweeney, "Art of Resilience," in Myers and Skerritt, *Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu*, 89.

44. Crocker-curated exhibitions included *Mr. Sandman Bring Me a Dream* and a one-man show, *Charlie Tjaruru Tjungurrayi: A Retrospective 1970–1986*. See Crocker, *Mr. Sandman Bring Me a Dream*, 10; Tjungurrayi and Crocker, *Charlie Tjaruru Tjungurrayi*.

45. Scholl, "Preface," 9.

46. On this general question, see Smith, "Country, Indigeneity, Sovereignty." For an approach to the matter of Indigenous abstraction and its differences from abstract painting in the Western modernist tradition, see Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter."

47. The others were Wartuma (Charlie Tarawa/Tjaruru) Tjungurrayi, *Moon Love Dreaming of Man and Woman—Medicine Story* (1971); John Scobie Tjapanangka, *Pintupi Women's Bush Tucker Dreaming* (1972); Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi, *Mystery Sand Mosaic* (1974); Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Dreaming Story at Warlugulong* (1976); and Willy Tjungurrayi, *Pulpayella* (1976).

Chapter One. The Eternal Recurrence of Origins

1. Cited in Benjamin, *Icons of the Desert*, 79.

2. By this, Bardon meant that it showed "no more than the elements and the coefficients of a story and [required] no ornamentation." A similar work from this time, *Stars at Night*, by Old Walter Tjampitjinpa, is praised as "a valid simplification of a perceived object, an image for a star, in fact, an observed twinkling star." See Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 106 and 105, respectively.

3. Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 106; Johnson, *Once Upon a Time at Papunya*, color section.

4. Johnson, *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, 58.

5. It is instructive to compare the dynamism of this painting to the one other known work by Kingsley Tjungurrayi, his *Water Dreaming*, also painted in 1971, using synthetic polymer powder paint on scrap wood. It exhibits a straightforward composition, with three vertical bands of conventional signs (flowing water and ceremonial objects with water designs), each different yet complementing each other, and three lines at one end ruling it off. Bardon's comment seems apt: "The simplicity of the patterning marks this painting as an archetypical example of its subject when technique and European materials were rudimentary." Bardon and Bardon, *Papunya*, 170. This was the mindset with which we