

**'I paint for everyone' – the making of Utopia art**

**Chrischona Schmidt**

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## Declaration of authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

*Chrischona Schmidt*

October 2012

Chrischona Schmidt





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## **Abstract**

The history and development of the Utopia art movement in Central Australia over the past four decades is at the core of this research. This art movement – originally initiated as an adult education program teaching batik-making in the late 1970s – has since become nationally and internationally renowned. Much of its history, however, is unrecorded and photographs of the artworks and their records have not been kept in a database maintained by a community art centre or similar institution. Despite this lack of consistent, publically accessible documentation much has been written from fragmented and partial sources about some artworks and certain artists from Utopia, in particular those who appear to comply with Eurocentric paradigms.

Critics engaging with art from Utopia have situated and praised it by applying concepts from the lexicon of western art history, using parallels with ‘abstraction’ ‘abstract expressionism’ ‘impressionism’, noting visual similarities to European masters of the 20th century’. I question the assumption underlying some of these critiques that these visual similarities are solely a product of the artists’ responses to market demands as articulated by intermediaries, irrespective of their own vision or agency. Through close observation of artistic practices and negotiation processes between artists and art dealers, I demonstrate that artists’ agency can be uncovered. Throughout the history of the art movement artists have had to become their own agents in dealing with art dealers, wholesalers, curators and collectors. I argue that being one’s own agent in the art world might have a far greater influence on the art than has been discussed to date.

In this thesis I describe and define the different currents and sub-currents found in Utopia art, which reflect this agency, by focusing on genres, themes and styles. A close formal analysis of representative artworks, drawn from my documentation of an extensive corpus of works, combined with the methods of art history – such as qualitative interviews and observation of art practice and negotiation processes – reveals the influences and effects on the production of these artworks and their final form.

I argue that the impact of art dealers, the art world, families, other artists in the community, and the constraints associated with everyday life in a remote community all affect the creation of artworks. I see them all as ‘influences’ on the art practice and production. My analysis of works by more than 150 artists, through this framework, reveals similarities and differences in subject, theme and style, in particular the

distinction which can be seen in works produced by artists from Alyawarr and Anmatyerr language groups. This examination of artworks and relationships in the art world facilitates a better understanding of the emerging of local art movements, their development and their multi-layered histories. Furthermore it provides a point of comparison for further studies and research into Indigenous art histories throughout Australia.

## Table of contents

Declaration of authorship.....	I
Acknowledgements.....	II
Abstract.....	VII
Table of contents.....	IX
List of Figures.....	XIII
A note on orthography.....	XXXII
Acronyms.....	XXXIII
Prologue.....	1
Introduction.....	3
<b>Part I: Locating Utopia.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Introduction to Part I.....	11
1. Locating art from Utopia in literature and in public discourse.....	13
1.1 Introduction.....	13
1.2 Art from Utopia in literature.....	13
1.2.1 Ethnography of art and artists from Utopia.....	14
1.2.2 Women's role and land rights.....	15
1.2.3 Embodiment and women's ritual.....	17
1.2.4 Affect and kinesis.....	19
1.3 Art from Utopia in public discourse.....	22
1.3.1 The art market and exploitation of artists.....	23
1.3.2 The issue of authenticity.....	25
1.3.3 Inclusion of Indigenous art into the Western art canon.....	27
1.3.4 Modernity in Indigenous art.....	29
1.4 Conclusion.....	30
1.4.1 Myth-making and universal expressions.....	30
1.4.2 Agency of artists.....	34
2. Utopia – geography and history of the place.....	37
2.1 Utopia: The place and its people.....	37
2.2 Utopia's place in history: an overview from first contact with Europeans until 1980.....	43

3. A historical overview of the development of the Utopia art movement: the ‘inner’ art world.....	49
3.1 Introduction.....	49
3.2 From Batik to Paintings.....	50
3.3 The art centre story.....	63
4. A historical overview of the development of the Utopia art movement: the ‘outer’ art world.....	73
4.1 Introduction.....	73
4.2 Art dealers and their networks.....	73
4.2.1 Rodney Gooch, Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce – their network.....	74
4.2.2 Donald and Janet Holt.....	76
4.2.3 Tim Jennings and the <i>Mbantua Gallery</i> network.....	79
4.2.4 Art coordinators and their networks.....	80
4.2.5 Hank Ebes and his network.....	81
4.3 Conclusion.....	83
<b>Part II: Agency of Artists.....</b>	<b>85</b>
Introduction to Part II.....	87
5. Interactions with the art world.....	89
5.1 Introduction.....	89
5.2 Structures and art facilities in Utopia.....	90
5.2.1 The art centre model and its failings in Utopia.....	90
5.2.2 Constraints of everyday life in Utopia and its impacts on the creation of artworks.....	93
5.3 Art dealers and their relationships with Utopia artists.....	96
5.3.1 Dealers of Fine Art.....	96
5.3.1.1 Excursus: Christopher Hodges – an example of a fine art dealer.....	99
5.3.2 Dealers of Commodity Art.....	100
5.3.2.1 Excursus: An example of an art-as-commodity dealer: Tim Jennings – gallery owner and art dealer.....	103
5.3.3 Dealers in between categories: Donald and Janet Holt.....	105
5.3.4 Relationships between art dealers and artists.....	106
5.3.5 Relationships between art dealers.....	108



5.4 One-on-one artist-dealer relationships and the rise of the solo artist.....	111
5.5 Conclusion.....	114
6. Art practices in Utopia.....	115
6.1 Introduction.....	115
6.2 What is an artist?.....	115
6.3 Artists and ‘occasional art producers’.....	120
6.4 Quality markers.....	122
6.5 What do artists paint for whom?.....	127
6.6 Artists as agents.....	133
6.7 Conclusion.....	135
<b>Part III: The Diversity of Artworks.....</b>	<b>137</b>
Introduction to Part III.....	139
Three Currents in Utopia Art.....	143
7. Everyday life in art from Utopia.....	145
7.1 Introduction.....	145
7.2 Bushtucker and bush medicine stories.....	148
7.3 Narrative paintings.....	169
7.3.1 Children’s story books and the <i>Altyerr</i> hunting series.....	171
7.3.2 Camp scenes.....	176
7.3.3 Massacre paintings.....	180
7.3.4 Captain Cook series.....	187
7.3.5 Football paintings and sculptures.....	189
7.4 The everyday in sculptures.....	193
7.5 Conclusion.....	194
8. Ritual in art from Utopia.....	199
8.1 Introduction.....	199
8.2 <i>Awely</i> and women’s ceremonies.....	199
8.2.1 Different approaches to <i>awely</i> and women’s ceremonies.....	199
8.2.2 Painting <i>awely</i> on bodies and canvas.....	201
8.2.3 <i>Awely</i> sculptures.....	221
8.3 Men’s rituals.....	228

8.3.1 Men's body designs and ritual sculptures.....	231
8.4 <i>Kwertaty</i> and <i>atham-areny</i> spirit sculptures.....	238
8.4.1 <i>Kwertaty</i> sculptures.....	238
8.4.2 <i>Atham-Areny</i> spirits.....	239
8.5 Conclusion.....	243
9. Abstraction in art from Utopia.....	245
9.1 Introduction.....	245
9.2 Bushtucker stories.....	250
9.3 Dreaming stories.....	263
9.4 Conclusion.....	275
10. Life, art, career and visual repertoire of Emily Kam Kngwarray.....	279
10.1 Introduction.....	279
10.2 Who was Emily Kam Kngwarray?.....	281
10.3 The discourse of the art world around Kngwarray's art.....	286
10.4 Themes, form, and innovation.....	299
10.5 Subject matter, themes, and topics.....	300
10.6 Conclusion.....	316
11. Emily Kam Kngwarray and the artists of Alhalker.....	319
11.1 Introduction.....	319
11.2 Emily Kam Kngwarray's painting school?.....	319
11.3 Alhalker artists.....	321
11.4 Emily Kam Kngwarray's legacy.....	339
11.5 Conclusion.....	339
Conclusion to Part III.....	341
Conclusion.....	345
Appendix.....	351
Collections visited from March 2008 until December 2011.....	351
Fieldwork highlights.....	353
References.....	355

## List of Figures

### Chapter 1:

Fig. 1: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awelarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291 x 801.8 cm, NGV, Melbourne, in Neale (2008b:166-167).

Fig. 2: Kathleen Petyarr: *Mountain devil lizard dreaming (with winter sandstorm)*, 1996, 183.5 x 183.5 x 3.5 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.

Fig. 3: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *The Alhalker Suite*, 1993, 22 canvas panels, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 90 x 120 cm, NGA, Canberra, in Neale (2008b:120-121).

Fig. 4: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Earth's Creation*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 4 panels, each 275 x 160 cm, collection of Mbantua Gallery, Alice Springs, in Neale (2008b:124-125).

Fig. 5: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Last series*, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 128 x 82 cm, corporate collection

### Chapter 2:

Map 1: outstations map issued by Urapuntja Council (Utopia) the lines indicate the borders of the Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trust area, made in 2008 by Urapuntja Council

Map 2: The Plenty and Sandover Highways (detail), in Westprint (2006)

Fig. 1: This is *Mendit*, a permanent rockhole, located past Camel Camp. (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt, September 2010).

Fig. 2: Photo of a rock art at a site near a permanent water hole, located past Camel Camp (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt, September 2010).

### Chapter 3:

Fig. 1: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Emu Woman*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 2: Jeannie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72, woodcut, various collections (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 3: May Belly: *Untitled*, 1990, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72, woodcut, various collections (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 4: Mavis Holmes Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72, woodcut, various collections (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 5: Mavis Penangk: *Untitled*, 1990, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72, woodcut, various collections (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 6: Nia Fliam & Agus Ismoyo together with Lena Pwerl: *Goanna and Wayang*, 1995, 112.5 x 238 cm, batik on silk, MAGNT, Darwin, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.

#### Chapter 6:

Fig. 1: Genevieve Loy Kemarr painting with the squeeze bottle, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt (September 2010).

Fig. 2: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled No.1*, 1990s, 135 x 106.5 irregular shape, acrylic paint on canvas, set of five, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.

Fig. 3: Angelina Pwerl's studio, Camel Camp, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt (October 2009).

Fig. 4: Angelina Pwerl: *Atham-Areny Story*, acrylic on canvas, 2008, 90 x 60 cm, private collection.

Fig. 5: Angelina Pwerl: *Anekwety (Conkerberry)*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas 151.5 x 90.5 cm, private collection.

Fig. 6: Angelina Pwerl: *Plum Dreaming*, 2000, synthetic polymer paint on canvas 183 x 183 cm, private collection.

Fig. 7: Angelina Pwerl: *Atham-Areny Story*, acrylic on canvas, 2008, 120 x 90 cm, private collection.

#### Chapter 7:

Fig. 1: Daisy Kemarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 2: Joy Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 3: Glory Ngal: *Tharrkarri (Honey grevillea)*, 1993, 192 x 112, batik on silk, QAG (Detail), Brisbane, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 4: Lily Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

- Fig. 5: Barbara Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 6: Elsie, Rosie and Matilda: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 7: Annie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 8: Julie Kemarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 9: Janie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 10: Audrey Morton: *Ilyarnayt 2*, 2009, 164 x 111cm, batik on Japanese silk, private collection, Photo: Peta Appleyard Gallery, <http://www.petaappleyardgallery.com.au/exhibition/17> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 11: Rosie Kunoth Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 12: Dora Mpetyan: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 13: Bidy Kemarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 14: Pansy Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 15: Mary Ngal: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 16: Mary Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 17: Lena Pwerl holding a quickly made coolamon for carrying sugar bag (native honey). Photo Chrischona Schmidt, October 2010
- Fig. 18: Margaret Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 19: Renee Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 20: Artists from the Utopia region: *Awely Anter*, 2008, desert grasses, raffia, wire, various sizes up to 1200 mm, private collection, Photo: Jenny Taylor, in Keller (2010:33).

- Fig. 21: Patsy Long: *Untitled*, 2008, Drypoint [monoprint], edn 1/1, 19 x 12.5cm [image]; 28 x 19cm [paper], CDU Art Collection, Darwin, Photo: CDU.
- Fig. 22: Patsy Long Kemarr: *Anyerleng*, 2009, batik on Japanese silk, 51 x 176 cm, private collection, Photo: Peta Appleyard Gallery, <http://www.petaappleyardgallery.com.au/exhibition/17> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 23: Lena Pwerl: *Anker-Anker*, 2009, batik on Japanese silk, 97 x 109cm, private collection, Photo: Peta Appleyard Gallery, <http://www.petaappleyardgallery.com.au/exhibition/17> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 24: Rosie Kngwarray: *Arwerl, arntetyek-arelh, interlpentayerr, amikw, ilpengk*, 2009, batik on Japanese silk, 92 x 111cm, private collection, Photo: Peta Appleyard Gallery, <http://www.petaappleyardgallery.com.au/exhibition/17> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 25: Dorothy Kunoth: *Interlpentayerr*, 2009, batik on Japanese silk, 95 x 110 cm, private collection, Photo: Peta Appleyard Gallery, <http://www.petaappleyardgallery.com.au/exhibition/17> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 26: Dorothy Kunoth: *Untitled* 2008, Drypoint [monoprint], edn 1/1, 18.5 x 12.5cm [image]; 28.5 x 19cm [paper], CDU Art Collection, Darwin, Photo: CDU.
- Fig. 27: Lily Lion Kngwarray: *Ilyarnayt, alhepalh*, 2009, batik on Japanese silk, 103 x 110 cm. private collection, Photo: Peta Appleyard Gallery, <http://www.petaappleyardgallery.com.au/exhibition/17> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 28: Dorothy Kunoth: *Untitled*, 2008, Drypoint [monoprint], edn 1/1, 19 x 12.5cm [image]; 28 x 19cm [paper], CDU Art Collection, Darwin, Photo: CDU.
- Fig. 29: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 30: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 31: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 32: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 33: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 34: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.



- Fig. 35: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 36: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 37: Julie Purvis: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, paint on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 38: Eileen Kngwarray: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 39: Judith Kngwarray: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, spp on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 40: Judith Kngwarray: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, paint on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 41: Annie Petyarr: *Camp Scene*, 1988, batik on silk, 110 x 230 cm, NGV, Melbourne, in Ryan (2008:65).
- Fig. 42: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 43: Hazel Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 44: Katie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72 (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.
- Fig. 45: Judith Kngwarray: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 46: Michelle Holmes Pwerl: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC (detail), Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.
- Fig. 47: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on paper, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 48: Anna Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72 (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.
- Fig. 49: Katy Kemarr: *Fighting the Bluecoats*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 119 x 44.5 cm, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 50: Hazel Kngwarray: *Military Attack – Ammaroo Station 1903*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 73.5 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: RAG.
- Fig. 51: Scotty Kemarr: *Military Hiding in bush ca. 1903*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 52: Kylie Kemarr: *Massacre by Military at Ammaroo Station*, 1999, 118 x 70 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 53: Ada Bird Petyarr: *The day the army shot them all in ceremony*, 1999, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 54: Audrey Kngwarray: *Hanging at Delmore*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 55: Lucky Kngwarray: *The shooting at Waterhole No.3*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 56: Kylie Kemarr: *Arrival of Captain Cook (in the Titanic)*, 1998, 59 x 119 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, MAGNT, Darwin, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.

Fig. 57: Kylie Kemarr: *Arrival of Captain Cook*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 53.5 x 57.5 cm, MAGNT, Darwin, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.

Fig. 58: Church at Camel Camp, photo Chrischona Schmidt, October 2009

Fig. 59: Dinni Kunoth Kemarr: *Camel Camp Church*, n.d., acrylic on linen, 150 x 110 cm, private collection, Photo: Indigenart - Mossenson Galleries,

[http://www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 60: Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Bush Football Carnival*, 2010, 151 x 151 cm, acrylic on linen, private collection, Photo: Indigenart - Mossenson Galleries,

[www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 61: Dinni Kunoth Kemarr: *Andrew McLeod (Adelaide Crows)*, 2007, 117 x 16 x 25cm, acrylic on bean tree, AGWA, Perth, Photo: Indigenart - Mossenson Galleries, <http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/exhibitions/kemarre.asp> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 62: Janice Kngwarray: *Spotted dog*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on wood, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 63: Lilly Kngwarray, Michelle Kngwarray: *Bird family*, 1995, 58 x 18 x 18 cm, 52 x 15 x 15 cm, 23 x 9 x 9 cm, synthetic polymer paint on carved mulga wood, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.

Fig. 64: Louie Pwerl: *Kangaroo (Wally)*, no date, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on wood, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.

Fig. 65: Anna Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72 (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.



Fig. 66: Mary Akemarr and family: *Camp Scene and Women's Body Designs*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 113 x 90 cm, Gantner Myer Collection, in Isaacs (1999:97).

Fig. 67: Lucky Morton Kngwarray: *Camp Scene*, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 162 x 125 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: RAG

#### Chapter 8:

Fig. 1: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Table 1: *Awely* body painting designs for six different countries and Dreamings in the Utopia region

Fig. 2: Janice Kngwarray: *Women's body paint design*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 3: Nora Petyarr: *Bush Tomato*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, no measurements, private collection, in Biddle (2007: Plate 6).

Fig. 4: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1989, 151.2 x 91.1 cm, synthetic polymer paint on composition board, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, in <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/1544> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 5: Gloria Petyarr: *Grass Seed*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, no measurements, private collection, in Biddle (2007: Plate 7).

Fig. 6: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Body Paint Design*, 1999, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 7: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 8: Yam Dreaming site near Boundary Bore, September 2010 (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt).

Fig. 9: Permanent rockhole near Camel Camp, October 2010 (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt).

Fig. 10: Rene Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, 90x60 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, HaC (detail), Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.

Fig. 11: Glory Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72 (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 12: Myrtle Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72 (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 13: Michelle Holmes Pwerl: *Ancestral Scene*, 1988, ca. 116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm, batik on silk, HaC, in Brody (1990:175).

- Fig. 14: Betty Beasley Kemarr: *Women's Ceremony*, 1988, ca. 116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm, batik on silk, HaC, in Brody (1990:165).
- Fig. 15: Katie Kemarr: *Kurrajong Seed Dreaming*, 1988, ca. 116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm, batik on silk, HaC, in Brody (1990:139).
- Fig. 16: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Untitled*, n. d., 91 x 92 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, private collection, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.
- Fig. 17: Nancy Kunoth Petyarr: *Mountain devil dreaming*, 1996, 87 x 74 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.
- Fig. 18: Violet Petyarr: *Arnkerrth (Mountain Devil lizard) Dreaming*, 1997, 203 x 115cm, batik on silk, NGV, Melbourne, in Ryan (2008:71).
- Fig. 19: Violet Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1997, 90 x 122 cm each, pair, synthetic polymer paint on two canvases, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 20: Gloria Petyarr: *Untitled*, 2002, 92.5x123 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 21: Violet Petyarr: *Mountain Devil Lizard (Awely)*, 7-part series each 120 x 30 cm (only three of them here), acrylic on linen, Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg, in *Spirit & Vision* (2004:168-169).
- Fig. 22: Violet Petyarr: *Awely - Mountain Devil Lizard*, 1995, 121 x 79 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.
- Fig. 23: Violet Petyarr: *Body Paint Design*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 205 x 203.5cm, Corrigan Collection of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Aboriginal Art, in McCulloch Childs and Gibson (2008:51).
- Fig. 24: Gloria Petyarr: *Awely (for the mountain devil lizard)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 x 152cm, AGNSW, Sydney, Photo: AGNSW.
- Fig. 25: Minnie Motorcar Pwerl: *Untitled*, n.d., acrylic on canvas, 90 x 150 cm, private collection
- Fig. 26: Minnie Motorcar Pwerl: *Awely Atnwengerrp (Women's ceremony from the Atnwengerrp)*, 2000, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 165.8 x 348 cm, QAG, Brisbane, Photo: QAG.
- Fig. 27: Minnie Motorcar Pwerl: *Untitled*, n.d., 91 x 46 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, private collection
- Fig. 28: Emily Pwerl: *Awely Atnwengerrp*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 75 cm, private collection
- Fig. 29: Emily Pwerl: *Awely Atnwengerrp*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 90 cm, private collection

Fig. 30: Katie Kemarr: *Untitled (Awely)*, 1994, 83 x 47 x 28 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 31: Janice Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1994, 72.5 x 35 x 29 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 32: Audrey Kngwarray: *Awely (woman with dog)*, 1994, 66 x 23 x 31 cm, papier-mâché, wool, wood, wire, feather, synthetic polymer paint, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 33: Exhibition photo at RAG, Mt. Gambier in 1998, Photo: RAG

Fig. 34: Lucky Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1994, 93 x 35.5 x 28 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 35: Janice Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1994, 90.5 x 38 x 28 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 36: Hazel Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1994, 68 x 35 x 27.5 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 37: Lucky Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1994, 67 x 33 x 28 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 38: Mary Kemarr: *Awely*, 1994, 82 x 27.5 x 28.5 cm, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint, wire, wool, feather, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 39: Lilly Kngwarray: *Irrwelry Awely*, 1993, 83 cm (height), synthetic polymer paint on wood, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, in *Utopia Sculptures*

[http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10\\_niagara.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/utopia_10/utopia_10/utopia_10_niagara.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 40: Wendy Mpetyan: *Female figure*, 1998, 49 cm (height), synthetic polymer paint on wood, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, in *Utopia Sculptures*

[http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10\\_niagara.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/utopia_10/utopia_10/utopia_10_niagara.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 41: Launa Purvis: *Female figure*, 1998, 53 cm (height), synthetic polymer paint on wood, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, [http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10\\_niagara.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/utopia_10/utopia_10/utopia_10_niagara.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 42: Maggie Panunga: *Female figure*, 1998, 52 cm (height), synthetic polymer paint on wood, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, in *Utopia Sculptures*

[http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10\\_niagara.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/utopia_10/utopia_10/utopia_10_niagara.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 43: Unknown: *Female figure*, ca 2000, 48.5 cm (height), synthetic polymer paint on wood, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, in *Utopia Sculptures*

[http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10\\_niagara.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/utopia_10/utopia_10/utopia_10_niagara.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 44: Wally Pwerl: *Irrwelry Awely*, 1993, 92 cm (height), synthetic polymer paint on wood, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, in *Utopia Sculptures*

[http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10/utopia\\_10\\_niagara.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/utopia_10/utopia_10/utopia_10_niagara.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 45: Billy Morton Petyarr: *Man figure*, ca 1990, 92 x 19 cm, synthetic polymer paint on wood, AGNSW, Sydney, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 46: Billy Morton Petyarr: *Untitled*, ca 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, 76 x 14 x 13 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 47: Billy Morton Petyarr: *Yerrampa (Honey Ant Dreaming)*, 72 x 16.5 x 16 cm, ca 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 48: Paddy Club Petyarr: *Honey Ant Dreaming*, 1999, etching on paper, 33 x 25 cm, private collection, Photo: Woolloongabba Art Gallery,

<http://www.wag.com.au/exhib/2011/UtopiaArtists/DivineGeometry/works.html> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 49: Billy Morton Petyarr: *Yerramp (Honey Ant Dreaming)*, ca 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, 142.5 x 8 x 11 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 50: Billy Morton Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1998, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on wood, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 51: Wally Pwerl and Janice Kngwarray: *Male Figure*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, no measurements, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 52: Wally Pwerl: *Alkerrylyp (evening star Dreaming)*, 1991 (repainted 1998), synthetic polymer paint on wood, 79.5 x 20 x 18 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 53: Wally Pwerl: *Alkerrylp (evening star Dreaming)*, 1991 (repainted 1998), synthetic polymer paint on wood, 79.5 x 20 x 18 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 54: Unknown: *Untitled*, n.d., 77 x 17 x 17 cm, synthetic polymer paint on wood, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 55: Wally Pwerl: *Spirit Man*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on softwood, 88 x 17.5 x 17 cm, NGA, Canberra, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 56: Wally Pwerl and Janice Kngwarray: *Kwertatye Man*, 1989, 109 x 32 x 32 cm, synthetic polymer paint on wood, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 57: Billy Morton Petyarr: *Kewtaty*, 1988-89, 86.4 x 22 x 16 cm, synthetic polymer paint on beanwood, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/1542> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 58: Kathleen Petyarr: *Untitled* 1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72, (The Utopia Suite), various collections, Photo: AGNSW.

Fig. 59: Angelina Pwerl: *Atham-Areny Story*, acrylic on canvas, 2008, 90 x 60 cm, private collection

Fig. 60: Angelina Pwerl: *Atham areny Story*, not dated, acrylic on Belgian linen, 120 x 120cm, private collection

## Chapter 9:

Fig. 1: Jackson Pollock: *No.5*, 1948, Oil on fiberboard, 2.4 m × 1.2 m, private collection

Fig. 2: Gerhard Richter: *Untitled*, 1985, 23.9 cm x 31.9 cm, Oil on paper, private collection

Fig. 3: Piet Mondrian: *Composition with Gray and Light Brown*, 1918; Oil on canvas, 80.2 x 49.9 cm; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas

Fig. 4: Utopia Batik Group and Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1981, no measurements, batik on cotton, NGA, in Neale (2008b:57).

Fig. 5: Angelina Pwerl: *Bush Plum*, 2006, 119,5 x 94 cm, acrylic on linen, private collection, Photo: Niagara Galleries, [http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists\\_worx/pwerle/pwerle\\_08/pwerle\\_08.html](http://www.niagara-galleries.com.au/artists/artistpages/artists_worx/pwerle/pwerle_08/pwerle_08.html) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 6: Angelina Pwerl: *Bush Plum Dreaming*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas 175 x 177 cm, MAGNT, Darwin, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 7: Angelina Pwerl: *Untitled* 1988-9, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 8: Angelina Pwerl: *Bush Plum Country*, 2003, 200 x 200 cm synthetic polymer paint on canvas, private collection, Photo: Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery, [http://www.cooeeart.com.au/aboriginal\\_exhibition/39/artworks](http://www.cooeeart.com.au/aboriginal_exhibition/39/artworks) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 10: Polly Ngal: *Emu Seed and Bush Plum*, 2009, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 199 x 111.5 cm, private collection

Fig. 11: Kathleen Ngal: *Bush Plum*, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 152 x 152 cm, private collection

Fig. 12: Gladdy Kemarr: *Bush Plum*, 2009, 90 x 60 cm, acrylic on linen, private collection

Fig. 13: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *Untitled* 1997, 91.5 x 60.5 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 14: Kathleen Petyarr: *Mountain devil lizard dreaming (with winter sandstorm)*, 1996, 183.5 x 183.5 x 3.5 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.

Fig. 15: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *Awely*, 1990, no measurements, screenprint, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 16: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *Emu Dreaming*, 1988, ca 116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm, batik on silk, HaC, in Brody (1990:81).

Fig. 17: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *Untitled*, 2002, 92.5 x 123 cm, synthetic polymer paint on linen, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 18: Gloria Petyarr: *Body Design*, 2003, 25 x 30 cm, screenprint, Basil Hall Editions, Darwin, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 19: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *Leaves*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 20: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *Medicine Leaves Story*, acrylic on canvas, 123 x 123cm, n.d., private collection

Fig. 21: Gloria Tamerr Petyarr: *untitled (leaves)*, 2004, acrylic on polyester, 210 x 180 cm, private collection

Fig. 22: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush Seeds*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 198 x 120 cm (detail), private collection

Fig. 23: Angelina Pwerl: *Bush Plum*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 120 x 330 cm, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.

Fig. 24: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *My Country*, November 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

- Fig. 25: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush Yam*, 2007, synthetic polymer on linen, 220 x 117 cm, private collection
- Fig. 26: Gladdy Kemarr: *Anwekety (Bush Plum)*, 2010, 61 x 91 cm, acrylic on linen, private collection
- Fig. 27: Kudditji Kngwarray: *My Country*, 2004, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 200 cm, Araluen Collection, Alice Springs, Photo: Araluen Collection.
- Fig. 28: Lindsay Bird Mpetyan: *Flock Pigeon Dreaming*, 1988, ca 116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm, batik on silk, HaC, in Brody (1990:73).
- Fig. 29: Lindsay Bird Mpetyan: *Angula Country men's business number 3*, 1995-96, batik on silk, 267 x 113.5 cm, (detail), AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.
- Fig. 30: Lindsay Bird Mpetyan: *Bush Plum*, 1999, etching, 32 x 49 cm, CDU Art Collection, Darwin, Photo: Northern Editions, <http://www.northerneditions.com.au/gallery/Urapuntja-Artists/Lindsay> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 31: Lindsay Bird Mpetyan: *Untitled*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 58 x 110 cm, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: RAG.
- Fig. 32: Lindsay Bird Mpetyan: *Ilkatjera and Atapila at Arimala Soak*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 90 cm, Gantner Myer Collection, in Isaacs (1999:91).
- Fig. 33: Cowboy Loy Pwerl: *Bush Turkey Dreaming*, 2007, 199 x 237, synthetic polymer paint on linen, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.
- Fig. 34: Cowboy Loy Pwerl: *Untitled*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90 cm, Delmore Downs Collection, Photo: Delmore Gallery, <http://www.delmoregallery.com.au/?c=698> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 35: Cowboy Loy Pwerl: *Bush Turkey Story*, 120 x 200 cm, synthetic polymer paint on linen, n.d., private collection
- Fig. 36: Dreaming site near Iylenty, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt (September 2010).
- Fig. 37: Genevieve Loy Kemarr: *Bush Turkey Dreaming*, 2009, synthetic polymer paint on linen, ca. 150 x 230 cm, private collection, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 38: Genevieve Loy Kemarr: *Bush Turkey Story*, synthetic polymer on linen, 96 x 96 cm, n.d., private collection
- Fig. 39: Genevieve Loy Kemarr: *Bush Turkey Story*, synthetic polymer on linen, 121 x 92 cm, n. d., private collection
- Fig. 41: Nancy Petyarr: *Mountain Devil Dreaming*, 1997, 123 x 120 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.

Fig. 42: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 2010, 90 x 60 cm, synthetic polymer paint on linen, private collection, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 43: Genevieve Loy Kemarr: *Untitled*, synthetic polymer on linen, 125 x 113 cm, n.d., private collection

Fig. 44: Kathleen Petyarr: *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, 2007, 122 x 122 cm, private collection

Fig. 45: Kathleen Petyarr: *Untitled* 1988-89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

#### Chapter 10:

Fig. 1: Paul Klee: *On a Motif from Hamamet*, 1914, tempera on board, 27 x 22.5 cm, Kunsthalle Basel

Fig. 2: Claude Monet: *Nymphéas*, ca 1915 (n.d.), oil on linen, no measurements, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

Fig. 3: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Pencil Yam (Anwerlarr)*, 1980 batik on silk, 270.5 x 84.2 cm, NGV, Melbourne, in Ryan (2008:50) and <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/68943> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 4: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Lizard*, n. d., no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on wood, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 5: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Ininti seed necklace*, ca 1983, ininti seeds, wool, 98 cm long, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 6: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (car door)*, 1993, 100 x 91 x 12 cm, synthetic polymer paint on metal and glass, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: RAG

Fig. 7: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (watering can)*, 1993, 35 x 52 x 22 cm, synthetic polymer paint on metal, RAG, Mt. Gambier, Photo: RAG

Fig. 8: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1996, 61 cm x 46 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas and wooden frame, corporate collection

Fig. 9: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Body paint)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

Fig. 10: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Utopia Panels*, 1996, 262.8 x 84.7 cm each, 22 panels, synthetic polymer paint on linen, QAG, Brisbane, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 11: Photo of 'Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye' exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, August 2008



Fig. 12: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Kam*, 1991, 137.8 x 303.1 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/1714> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 13: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Emu Woman*, 1988-89, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 14: Ruby Kngwarray: *Blue Tongue Lizard Awely*, 1988-89, 92 x 61 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 15: Annie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988-89, 92 x 61 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 16: Gina Petyarr: *One Dreaming (Yam Story)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, HaC, in *Utopia – Ancient Cultures, New Forms* (1999:43).

Fig. 17: Marcia Pwerl: *One Dreaming (Yam Story)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, HaC, in *Utopia – Ancient Cultures, New Forms* (1999:43).

Fig. 18: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *One Dreaming (Yam Story)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, HaC, in *Utopia – Ancient Cultures, New Forms* (1999:42).

Fig. 19: Utopia Batik Group and Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1981, no measurements, batik on cotton, NGA, in Neale (2008b:57).

Fig. 20: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Last series*, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 128 x 82 cm, corporate collection

Fig. 21: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Pencil Yam (Anwerlarr)*, 1980 batik on silk, 270.5 x 84.2 cm, NGV, Melbourne, in Ryan (2008:50) and <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/68943> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 22: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Shirt*, 1979, 68.3cm (centre back), 55.5 cm (sleeve length), batik on cotton, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/5396> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 23: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Arlatyite Dreaming*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 125 x 221cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 24: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Alagura (my country)*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 130 x 200.9 cm, AGSA, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Fig. 25: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awelarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291 x 801.8 cm, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/57498> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 26: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Alhalker)*, 1992, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 165 x 480 cm, AGNSW, Sydney, Photo: AGNSW.

- Fig. 27: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 233.5 cm x 79.5 cm x 4 cm, private collection
- Fig. 28: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Awely)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 6 pieces, each 190 x 56.7cm, private collection
- Fig. 29: Yam Dreaming site near Boundary Bore in Utopia (September 2010), Photo: Chrischona Schmidt.
- Fig. 30: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1989, 30.1 x 45.0 cm, synthetic polymer paint on composition board, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/1544> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 31: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, August 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 71 x 169 cm, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.
- Fig. 32: Photo of emu footprint sand drawing by Genevieve Loy Kemarr, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt (October 2009)
- Fig. 33: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Emu Story*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150.6 x 121.8 cm, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/2599> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 34: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Anaty (wild potato)*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 151.2 x 91.1 cm, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/2600> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 35: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1992, 110 x 84 irregular shape, synthetic polymer paint on metal (car door), glass, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.
- Fig. 36: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Man*, synthetic polymer paint on wood, n. d., no measurements, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 37: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Emu Dreaming*, 1988, 236 x 117,5 cm, batik on silk, HaC, Perth, in Neale (2008b:51).
- Fig. 38: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Wild Orange Dreaming*, 1989, 120 x 89.7 cm, synthetic polymer paint on linen, HaC, (detail), in Neale (2008b:67).
- Fig. 39: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Awelye)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on paper laminated to canvas, 100.7 cm x 213.0 cm (total size of 3 panels), AGNSW, Sydney, Photo: AGNSW.
- Fig. 40: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *My Country*, November 1994, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, FUAM, Adelaide, Photo: FUAM.

#### Chapter 11:

- Fig. 1: Photo of Pencil Yam (in Lovegrove 2002:56).

- Fig. 2: Photo of the pencil yam flower and plant (in Lovegrove 2002:57).
- Fig. 3: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush Seeds*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 198 x 120 cm (detail), private collection
- Fig. 4: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush Yam*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 220 x 117 cm, private collection
- Fig. 5: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 2010, 90 x 60 cm, synthetic polymer paint on linen, private collection, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 6: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awelarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291 x 801.8 cm, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/57498> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 7: Nancy Petyarr: *Mountain Devil Dreaming*, 1997, 123 x 120 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA
- Fig. 8: Cowboy Loy Pwerl: *Bush Turkey Dreaming*, 2007, 199 x 237, synthetic polymer paint on linen, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA
- Fig. 9: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush Yam Seeds and Flowers* (detail), synthetic polymer on linen, 178 cm x 180 cm, n.d., private collection
- Fig. 10: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 233.5 cm x 79.5 cm x 4 cm, private collection
- Fig. 11: Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Yam Seeds* (detail), n.d., synthetic polymer on linen, 117 x 94.5 cm, private collection
- Fig. 12: Gloria Petyarr: *Untitled (leaves)*, 2004, acrylic on polyester, 210 x 180cm, private collection
- Fig. 13: Nancy Kunoth Petyarr: *Mountain devil dreaming*, 1996, 87 x 74 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA, Adelaide, Photo: AGSA.
- Fig. 14: Violet Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1997, 90 x 122 cm each, pair, synthetic polymer paint on two canvases, AGSA, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 15: Helen Kunoth Kngwarray: *Atnwerrlarr* (detail), 2009, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 54.5 x 91 cm, private collection, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt
- Fig. 16: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Anaty (wild potato)*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 151.2 x 91.1 cm, NGV, Melbourne, Photo: NGV, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/2600> (last sighted 14/03/2012).
- Fig. 17: Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Utopia Bush Football*, n.d., 90 x 117 cm, acrylic on canvas, private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, [www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 18: Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Federation Square*, n.d., synthetic polymer paint on linen, 151 x 111 cm, private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, [www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 19: Dinni Kunoth Kemarr & Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Big Eagle*, n.d., 68 cm, acrylic on Bean Tree Wood (*Erythrina Vespertilio*), n.d., private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, [http://www.indigenart.com.au/dynamic/display\\_ex.asp?id=227](http://www.indigenart.com.au/dynamic/display_ex.asp?id=227) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 20: Dinni Kunoth Kemarr: *Dinni's Dream Team*, 2009, height 60 cm, width variable, acrylic on wood, private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, <http://australianartfair.com/fair/galleries/gallery-detail/?id=50> (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 21: Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Melbourne at night*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 121 x 121 cm, private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, [www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 22: Josie Kunoth Petyarr and Dinni Kunoth Kemarr: *Melbourne Story*, 2007, acrylic on linen, no measurements, private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, [www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 23: Poly Ngal: *Bush Plum Country*, 2003, synthetic polymer on linen, 122 x 90 cm, private collection

Fig. 24: Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Sugar Bag*, 2010, 91 x 121 cm, acrylic on canvas, private collection, Photo: Indigenart – Mossenson Galleries, [www.indigenart.com.au/\\_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp](http://www.indigenart.com.au/_common/frames.asp?content=content/exhibitions.asp) (last sighted 14/03/2012).

Fig. 25: Jeannie Petyarr: *Bush Yam Dreaming*, n.d., acrylic on canvas, 146 x 85 cm, private collection

Fig. 26: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Untitled*, n.d., 90x30 cm, acrylic on linen, private collection

Fig. 27: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Of My Country, Aneltyeye*, 2002, synthetic polymer on linen, 213 x 120 cm, private collection

Fig. 28: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Untitled*, n.d., acrylic on linen, 180 x 120 cm, private collection

Fig. 29: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Yam Dreaming*, 1998, acrylic on linen, 120 x 90 cm, private collection

Fig. 30: Kudjitji Kngwarray: *My Country*, 2004, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 200 cm, Araluen Collection, Alice Springs, Photo: Araluen Collection

Fig. 31: Kudjitji Kngwarray: *My Country*, n.d., acrylic on Belgian linen, 175 x 146 cm, private collection

Fig. 32: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Last Series*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 65cm, Nangara Collection

Fig. 33: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Yam Seed Dreaming*, 2006, 204 x 187, acrylic on canvas, private collection

Fig. 34: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awely*, 1989, 152.2 x 121.8 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Collection of Simon and Julie Ford

Fig. 35: Kudjitji Kngwarray: *Emu Dreaming*, 1995, 80 x 124cm acrylic on canvas, private collection

## A note on orthography

The orthography I have used throughout this thesis is that employed in the *Central & Eastern Anmatyerr to English Dictionary* (2010), compiled by Jenny Green for the Institute of Aboriginal Development (IAD) in Alice Springs.

Where I have quoted from or cited texts that use different orthographies, I have let their spellings stand. I have also not altered the original spelling of titles of artworks. Sometimes, however, I have standardized the spelling of place names and skin names.

## Acronyms

AGNSW	Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
AGSA	Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
AGWA	Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
AIATSIS	Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra
ANU	Australian National University, Canberra
CAAMA	Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Alice Springs
CDU	Charles Darwin University, Darwin
CLC	Central Land Council in Alice Springs
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DACOU	Dreaming Art Centre of Utopia
FUAM	Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide
HaC	Janet Holmes à Court Collection
MAGNT	Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
NATSIAA	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, also Telstra Art Award
NGA	National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
NGV	National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
QAG	Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
RAG	Riddoch Art Gallery, Mt. Gambier
WAM	Western Australian Museum, Perth



## Prologue

It was a September day in 2009 when I went to the camp behind the council building as I had done every morning for the past few days during my second trip to Utopia. However, this morning the camp was empty. Driving by, I learnt that there was a meeting going on at the council building, so I quickly made my way over there.

I felt very much out of place when I realized that I had clearly disturbed a men's meeting in the courtyard behind the council building. Nevertheless, Cowboy Loy Pwerl asked me to sit down next to him. The conversation continued seamlessly. As I caught up with it: I realized that it centred around me: where I had to go, what I had to learn and the sequence in which this had to occur. This meeting set the pattern for my learning schedule for the trips to country that were to come. From this day on I drove to Cowboy's camp in the morning and either picked up his sister-in-law, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray – who helped me with translations from Anmatyerr, or Alyawarr, to English – or one of Cowboy's two wives, Helen's older sisters, Carol Kunoth Kngwarray and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray. Through them I was introduced to important men and women, who told me their stories: about *altyerr*, the country, their lives and their artworks.

Every time I left Utopia I had learnt something about the lives of these artists and their inspirations, however, every time I was left with questions for the next trip. When I returned months later my learning regime would simply be picked up at the same point where I had had to leave during the previous visit.

These stories, trips to country and many hours of watching artists paint have enabled me to understand the art from Utopia in a new way. They added the voice of the artists and contextualized them into a time and place: the here and now.





## Introduction

All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. (Becker 1982:1)

Utopia is an Aboriginal community in the Central Desert of Australia; it is also the place from which an internationally renowned art movement emerged. An historical analysis of the dynamics of this art movement, which was created through negotiations between various players of the art world, is at the core of this research. This analysis provides insight into the development of a localised art movement by looking at the notion of agency in the Utopia art movement. My analysis will trace the history of the Utopia art movement from multiple angles in an effort to facilitate better understanding of the complex processes involved in the creation and shaping of artworks. I will focus upon the various actors involved in the creation of the art movement and show their interdependency. Furthermore, an overarching structure will be revealed, linking the different types of relationships between artists, dealers and the audience to the creation of artworks: their themes, styles and place within the art market. Thus, I will demonstrate the connections that exist between the artwork's place in the market, and the relationship between the artist and the dealer, which leads to a positioning of the art movement overall nationally and internationally. A close analysis of the negotiation and production processes will highlight how artists have become agents and exerted agency in these situations. Further, their agency will be traced in the artworks, which become expressions of this agency, by analysing the artists' choice of themes and the styles they employ. I will analyse continuities and changes in the art of particular artists who are crucial to understanding the development of the art movement.

The main questions underlying this research are: how has the Utopia art movement been shaped and what were the primary factors influencing its development? A set of sub-questions follow:

1. Who were the main actors in the shaping of the Utopia art movement and how were they influential, both within and outside of the community?
2. How does the art market influence localised art production?

### 3. How do negotiation processes manifest themselves in the artworks?

Each of these questions engages with larger theoretical discourses: those of agency, the recording of local art histories, the art world, matters of taste and quality in art, and the questions around dynamic change and inter-relationality. In the majority of studies of Indigenous Australian art, the focus of discourse has been on the writing of local art histories in order to facilitate comparisons between different communities and their particular experiences. My research will address this topic; contributing to all aforementioned areas of discourse in differing ways, which I will expand upon below. I combine methods from social anthropology and art history, such as qualitative interviews, participant observation and formal analysis in order to approach the research questions.

In my study of Utopia art I intended to include as many voices as possible, so I approached the movement from a number of different angles. On the one hand, I approached players of the 'outer' art world with connections to Utopia art and relationships with the artists: art dealers, curators, gallery owners, wholesalers, former community art coordinators, staff of umbrella organisations such as Desart, art coordinators from art centres in proximity of Utopia, and finally visitors to exhibitions. On the other hand, I conducted fieldwork at Utopia in an effort to give voice to the players of the 'inner' art world. This included interviewing artists about their artworks, observing the long hours involved in painting and batik-making, and being taken to important sites on country to learn the related Dreaming stories and being taught about various significant plants. I spent approximately three months in the community during four trips to Utopia between 2009 and 2011. These experiences have enabled me to include the emic voice of the actors in this research and to contextualise the artworks both socially and historically.

The qualitative methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation were also ever-present in my search for artworks. Early on in my research I discovered that no continuous art centre had existed in Utopia. While this emerged as a crucial element in the development of the area's art movement, it also shaped my research approach. The lack of a continuous well established art centre or the equivalent in Utopia created a vacuum as far as sales records are concerned. An art centre, like any art gallery or auction house, keeps records of incoming and outgoing works. Generally such a centre would be the wholesaler of the majority of works produced within the community. In

order to look at continuity and change between artworks over time, such records are crucial. Thus, aside from interviewing and being a participant observer, I had to actively locate artworks; something I limited to collections within Australia.

The multi-sited ethnography included that I visited state collections and their temporary exhibitions of Utopia artworks, as well as many other art galleries that showcased Indigenous art. Despite a lack of centralised records for Utopia artworks, I was able to gain an overview of the types of work circulating in the art market and the end of the market into which they fall. I was able to access over 40 key collections and documented 1700 artworks created over the past four decades, which I recorded in an image database. However I actually viewed many more, since I was also able to access storage facilities of a large number of different art dealers<sup>1</sup>, each holding large numbers of works collected over the past two decades.

My visual records of these works document a proportion of the total art production within Utopia over that period. However, this sample is more than sufficient to reflect on the underlying structures which create taste and determine the inclusion of artworks into the canon, especially in light of the varied nature and significance of the collections which I sourced. My analysis of themes and styles in Part 3 of this thesis focuses on a selection of these artworks and thus demonstrates the ways in which they become expressions of agency throughout processes which move them from the desert into the art galleries (Gell 1999; Myers 2002; Morphy 2008).

Volunteer work was particularly significant for my research project. It provided me with the opportunity to engage with two sides of the art world: exhibitions and collections on the one hand, and the artists and their creative process on the other. Volunteering at the National Museum of Australia during preparation for the 'Utopia: the Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye' exhibition and accompanying symposium, I was able to observe how discourses around Utopia art develop and the underlying intentions of such 'blockbuster' exhibitions. Further, as this exhibition had travelled from Japan – Tokyo and Osaka – to Canberra, the symposium in Canberra enabled me to gain the perspective of many Japanese collectors regarding their experience of Utopia art; thus adding an international and cross-cultural layer to my research.

Another avenue opened by volunteer work was my participation in a two-week print making workshop conducted by Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education in

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<sup>1</sup>Refer to the Appendix for a detailed list of the collections.

Ahalper – one of Utopia’s outstations – during my first trip to Utopia. Here I was confronted with the opposite end of the art world’s spectrum: the artists, their working conditions and living environment, within the setting of an adult education project by the Batchelor Institute. Throughout my research I strove to understand discrepancies between each end of the art spectrum and how an artwork moved from one end (e.g. production) to the other (e.g. sale and exhibition in Australia) and sometimes even beyond (e.g. into the international art world).

Throughout my research cross-cultural encounters and negotiations played a major role. Eastern Anmatyerr and Alyawarr artists have primarily negotiated with the market through European Australian art dealers, who mediate their relationship with collectors. However on some occasions artists do negotiate directly with collectors. At times artists from Utopia will travel to exhibitions, particularly those shown in various capitals around Australia, and both see and interact with the audience that their artworks attract. Such events allow them the opportunity to observe reactions to their artworks and to meet potential buyers.

It is necessary to note that there is one part of the art market with which my research does not engage with: the auction houses and other sectors of the secondary market. Companies such as Sotheby’s and Christie’s host annual Indigenous art auctions. Such auctions reflect the current trends and interests of collectors, the ranking of artworks in terms of monetary value, and finally, the desirability and collectability of an artist’s work, in as much as it is reflected in the monetary ranking of artworks. Auction houses and their sales records are one of the few places in which cultural value becomes clearly equated to cash value. The guidelines determining the cash value of an artwork do not greatly differ from those of art galleries: provenance, authenticity, whether or not it is a fine example of the artist’s, certainty of dating and, increasingly, with reference to Indigenous art, the additional criterion that the work has been ethically sourced.

The Global Financial Crisis, occurred during my research, and had an impact upon the primary and secondary art markets, resulting in reduced prices and fewer sales of Utopia artworks. This, as well as the accessibility of relevant collections, steered my focus towards the systemics of Utopia’s “production of high culture” (Myers 2011). Negotiating with the multiple players in the art world, I investigated the involvement of

each with the localised history in an attempt to understand their roles and the influence they had on Utopia artworks<sup>2</sup>.

Influence is one of the key concepts underlying this research project. In particular, the influence of the late Emily Kam Kngwarray on her one countrywomen and –men of Alhalker<sup>3</sup>, on the future generation of artists who follow her, and her influence on the community at large. Kngwarray was the most renowned artist of the Utopia art movement. She was the subject of a major exhibition, the second devoted to her work, at the outset of my research project. She became the initial focus of my research. However, my aim was always to place her within the context of her community, as an integral part of it, rather than approaching her work as that of an isolated artist, which has often been the case to date.

In an effort to trace the influences bearing upon Kngwarray's work, it was necessary that I meet with art dealers and collectors; but also that I should investigate her obligations to family and community members. By widening my research to her extended family and others who knew her, I was able to assess Kngwarray's legacy in both the community and in the 'outer' art world, where she and her story of national and international acclaim have become one of the defining examples of an Indigenous art star.

This thesis is structured in three parts. The first part contextualises Utopia in literature and discourse; then examines the area's history and geography both prior to, and during the development of, the art movement.

The second part of this thesis centres on the underlying structures of the art market and negotiations between various players of the art world. Here, the main focus is upon art dealers and artists and their relationships with each other. The agency artists exert is discussed with reference to the techniques, materials, themes and styles that they apply to their art depending upon their relationship with the art dealer or potential buyer.

In the third and final part I return to Utopia artists and their *œuvres*, comparing the artworks with one other. The first three chapters are dedicated to three different currents

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<sup>2</sup>In meeting and interviewing various players in the art world I experienced being thrown out of galleries, being shouted at and belittled in front of others. At first, not many art dealers were willing to speak with me and most doubted my intentions and interests. Further complicating this research was that few dealers were inclined to allow me access to their records. However, in most cases, once I had gained their trust I was allowed into dealers' storage facilities.

<sup>3</sup>This concept of one countrymen and –women was introduced by Fred Myers and refers to social groups formed through their connections to one country.



in Utopia art: the first being about the everyday life, the second about ritual life and the third, abstraction. Each of these chapters has a slightly different character since they allow me to introduce different aspects of the context of production. Everyday life situations were often depicted in series created in group projects, hence a number of group projects form the core of this chapter. Ritual in art from Utopia is presented through the divide between men's and women's business. As the rituals differ between men and women so do the depictions of it. These currents are limited to certain periods and the interactions with particular art coordinators and/or dealers. Abstraction can be found in works of men and women alike and is not limited to one period but has been a continuous theme of stylistic development in Utopia. Six painters and their works will be given as examples for the changes and continuities over time. At the basis of all their works is the *altyerr*<sup>4</sup>, the travels of the ancestors through country.

In these three chapters I provide examples of connections between themes, motifs and styles and show how certain themes occur in different styles as part of different currents. Further, I demonstrate how one artwork can be placed simultaneously within two categories due to its multiple layers of meaning or stylistic references. Major practitioners of certain stories or styles will be introduced in each chapter. By drawing on literature about other Indigenous art movements across Australia I contextualise the Utopia art movement in wider regional developments in Indigenous arts. Finally, by looking at agency of artists, expressed in negotiation processes, creation processes as well as in artworks, a multi-layered understanding of the Utopia art movement and its developments over time emerges.

The thesis concludes by focussing on Emily Kam Kngwarray and the nature of her relationship to and continuing influence on other artists. In one chapter I provide a brief biography followed by an overview of the themes and styles in her *œuvre*. The final chapter explores the repertoires of other Alhalker artists, highlighting Kngwarray's influence upon them, while at the same time revealing their individuality.

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<sup>4</sup>*Altyerr* is the Eastern Anmatyerr word for Dreaming.



## **Part I: Locating Utopia**



## **Introduction to Part I**

The history of the Sandover region, including Utopia, and the Utopia art movement are shaped by interactions between Aboriginal people and European settlers. These first four chapters of the thesis explore the inter-relationship of Aboriginal peoples' and European settlers' lives. By illuminating the intertwined histories of the past, in relation to settling the area through pastoralists as well as in regards to the art movement, the particularities of the development of the Utopia art movement over four decades will become clear.

The first part of this thesis introduces the reader to the discourses around Utopia art, in the public domain and in academia, and the locality of Utopia, its geography and history since first contact. Chapters 3 and 4 give an historical overview of the Utopia art movement since its beginnings in the late 1970s. Together these four chapters provide a background for the reader to understand the current situation of art practices in Utopia and their development over time, which will be addressed in the following parts of the thesis.



## Chapter 1: Locating art from Utopia in literature and in public discourse

### 1.1 Introduction

Art from Utopia has been explored in a wide range of literature in addition to academic writing by art historians and anthropologists of art. Utopia art has been the subject of numerous articles or features in newspapers, magazines, journals, TV programs and in the catalogues of commercial and curated exhibitions; with each speaking to different audiences. A wide range of topics have been at the core of these multiple engagements with art from Utopia. They are all integral to the topic of this thesis since they have been factors in the recent history of Utopia art and must be addressed at the outset. In reviewing these various discourses about art from Utopia a gap emerges. This gap in research and discourse is the basis of this thesis.

The following analysis of the different discourses around art from Utopia and Indigenous art in general, introduces the complexity of the Utopia art movement and its development over time. It highlights the connections between artists, art dealers, collectors, private buyers, curators, the art market and the art world, as well as researchers, critiques and institutions. The discourses and discussions examined in this chapter will be re-examined in different chapters throughout this thesis in order to address them in greater detail and to explore their influence with reference to particular examples.

### 1.2 Art from Utopia in literature

In this section I will cover previous research done on the development of the Utopia art movement of the Sandover region, or the Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trust<sup>5</sup> area. A number of themes have emerged in the writings on Utopia art including the role of Indigenous women within their communities, aesthetic motivations and affect, embodiment, movement, as well as a range of broader discussions of Indigenous Australian art. Partly based on ethnographic, sociological and art historical approaches, such research reflects the richness and complexity of art from Utopia.

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<sup>5</sup>This is the name of the area to which Alyawarr and Easter Anmatyerr speakers gained freehold title in 1980. Formerly this area was known as Utopia Station and the name Utopia is commonly used when referring to the area. Within this thesis I will use the common name Utopia, as this is the name used to identify art and artists from the area: Utopia artists, Utopia art.

### 1.2.1 Ethnography of art and artists from Utopia

The most recent ethnographic research on the artists from Utopia was conducted by anthropologist, Su Dalglish, who conducted 18 months of fieldwork at Mosquito Bore<sup>6</sup> in 1998-1999<sup>7</sup>. The resulting doctoral dissertation (2000) is a thick description<sup>8</sup> of the everyday living circumstances of artists from Mosquito Bore at that time. Her thesis situates these artists at a social, political and historical point in time and by doing so creates an understanding of the artists and the constraints within which they live (2000:264). Dalglish illuminates the precarious living standards in Mosquito Bore, and for all of Utopia; weaving the history of the art movement into the history of the Sandover Region (2000:56ff). Her personal observations and experiences with this group of artists for the first time creates a space in which artists can speak about their art and be included in discussions of artworks. Through her shared daily routine with the artists, Dalglish witnessed negotiations with art dealers and the exploitation of some artists by art dealers.

Dalglish draws many parallels between Utopia and accounts of other desert communities, such as Nancy Munn's *Walbiri Iconography* (1973) and Fred Myers' articles on Pintupi art (1995, 1999). Her focus is primarily on the lives of the artists, and Dalglish does not spend much time investigating the form of the art. She concludes that she "did not find a similarity of traits in artworks, except that perhaps one could say there is a discernible sense of individuality, and often of energy and exuberance" (2000:258). In her eyes, the works of Utopia artists are all so different that they can only be an expression of the artists' individuality (Ibid.).

Michelle McDonald undertook her research for her Master's thesis in sociology<sup>9</sup> around the same time as Dalglish, but never lived in Utopia. She was only able to accompany an art dealer into the community on a short trip. Consequently, she took a different approach to Dalglish in her analysis of the art movement for her thesis (1999). At the core of her research are the art dealers, art coordinators, collectors, and gallery owners

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<sup>6</sup>Mosquito Bore is one of the outstations in the Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trust area. I will discuss the locality and geography of the Utopia homelands in the next chapter.

<sup>7</sup>Jenny Green (2010) has also researched the women artists of Utopia and their sand drawings. This is the most recent ethnographic study in the area.

<sup>8</sup>This term stems from Clifford Geertz (1975) and it implies a very detailed and layered account of the situations experienced and analysed.

<sup>9</sup>McDonald undertook her degree at the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University. However, her research focuses entirely on the art market and its interactions with the Utopia art movement. The approach she takes throughout her thesis is sociological.

who had been working with Utopia artists for some time. McDonald identified and interviewed important players in this field and tried to elucidate the complex history of the Utopia art movement through these interviews. Her research was part of the highly politicized debate around the exploitation of Indigenous artists; providing a detailed study of the Indigenous art market at the time and the role of Utopia art within it. During her research Utopia artists were already selling their work to several art dealers and McDonald followed these different artworks as they travelled well-worn paths to the eastern shores of Australia.

Through surveying art galleries' holdings and interviewing art dealers, McDonald was able to write an ethnography of Utopia's place within the art world's practices. However, due to problems with the art coordinator at the time, McDonald was unable to gain permission to stay at Utopia and therefore could not include the artists' voices in her work (1999:30)<sup>10</sup>. Like Dalglish's, her research did not analyse specific artworks, nor did she analyse the different types of relationships between artists and art dealers. McDonald's thesis as a consequence does not show how the different types of relationships established by dealers affected the form of the artworks produced. McDonald and Dalglish wrote their theses during a highly politicized time for Indigenous art and this is reflected in their works, as both are very much concerned with the question of exploitation and ethical behaviour towards Aboriginal artists. While Dalglish acknowledges that some artists 'have learnt to work the system' and take advantage of it, this observation does not lead to a closer analysis of the relationships between artists, art dealers and the wider art world(2000:155). Both theses provide relevant input into the complex dynamic which I explore throughout this thesis.

### **1.2.2 Women's role and land rights**

In the *Anmatjirra and Alyawarra Land Claim to Utopia Pastoral Lease*(1980) women from the region were active in demonstrating their connections to land. One facet of this was the Utopia women's presentation of knowledge and rituals (*awely*) about country to the judge<sup>11</sup>. The final rulings in this case acknowledged the role and importance of 'managers' in Indigenous societies, whereas prior to this the emphasis had been

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<sup>10</sup>McDonald did not specify her problems, however, emphasized that it was impossible for her to gain an entry permit and therefore undertake any research within the community.

<sup>11</sup>These testimonies were accompanied by batiks created for the hearings by the women (see Green 1998).



primarily on the 'owners' of Dreaming sites<sup>12</sup>. This included recognition of the importance of women's knowledge and rights to country and Dreaming. After successful land claim hearings, inalienable freehold title to the Utopia pastoral lease was granted to the Anmatyerr and Alyawarr people in 1981 (Green 2005:190)<sup>13</sup>.

Diane Bell – a feminist anthropologist whose research had focused on the Kaytetye women located north-west of Utopia – was the main female anthropological consultant for this land claim<sup>14</sup>. Her monograph *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1983) became a reference point for much subsequent research into women's roles in Aboriginal societies.

Previously anthropological research was male-oriented, influenced by the fact that the majority of anthropologists had been men. Consequently, the role of men in Aboriginal societies was promoted as of greater import and influence than that of women. Rather than understanding men and women in a complementary relationship, women were seen as subordinate and their rituals and ceremonies less relevant. Bell, as well as Annette Hamilton (1987), investigated women's roles within Indigenous society and showed their importance and power.

The role of women in the Utopia art movement has been very strong. It has often been considered a women's art movement; with men playing only a minor role, if one at all. The importance of senior women in Indigenous society was celebrated with reference to Utopia art.

Françoise Dussart writes that Walpiri female ritual leaders from Yuendumu (another central desert community, west of Utopia) only hold their strong position as *yamparru*<sup>15</sup> for about a decade and are then asked to stand down (2000:104). They take on leadership role between 50 and 60 years of age. However at Utopia Emily Kam Kngwarray is acknowledged to have remained a ritual leader for over three decades. During the Utopia land rights hearings in the late 1970s Kngwarray was already one of the most important women in the region. Her status was made clear again in the 1984 film *Women of Utopia*, in which Emily Kam Kngwarray 'bossed' the younger women around. If we assume that Dussart's finding can be applied more generally across

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<sup>12</sup>Personal communication with Nicolas Peterson (March 2011). Refer also to Young (1987:157).

<sup>13</sup>I will elaborate on that in Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup>See *Anmatjirra and Alyawarra Land Claim to Utopia Pastoral Lease, Report by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Mr Justice Toohey, to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and to the Administrator of the Northern Territory* (1980), Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>*Yamparru* is the Warlpiri word for a female ritual leader.

Central Australia then Kngwarray's extended role within the Utopia region is unusual. Her niece Nancy Petyarr, on the other hand, owner of *Atnangker* and manager of *Alhalker*, fulfilled all criteria for a female ritual leader as outlined by Dussart (2000:98): "Women who became business leaders generally showed long-standing interest in ritual life and kin relatedness, an interest encouraged by family members." Leadership is attained "in their fifties and retain[ed] for no more than a decade, after which the arc of their ritual power begins to decline, either by personal choice or as a result of social pressure" (Ibid. pp. 104). Petyarr was a "part-time performer, ever-ready participant, part-time pedagogue, [and] full-time diplomat" (Ibid. pp. 101).

### 1.2.3 Embodiment and women's ritual

The discourse on embodiment and affect as it engages with art from Utopia is closely related to the issue of women's roles within Indigenous society. In this debate, similarities between the performance of ritual and the processes of painting are central. The perspective on embodiment approaches the act of painting as a performance and the painting itself as an expression, an embodiment of the performance. The core of this form of analysis is women's ritual and the meanings associated with the art and the ritual performance.

Jennifer Biddle (2001, 2003, 2006), by drawing comparisons with art from Warlpiri women west of Utopia (2007), argues that there is an embodied experience to painting. She looks at the tradition of women's ceremony, *awely*, and the transfer of these ceremonial designs –traditionally painted on breasts – onto canvas. In her analysis the breasts as well as the canvas simply become surfaces onto which one paints designs. These designs belong to certain Dreaming stories and the rights to paint them means ownership rights to that Dreaming and thus, to the country of that Dreaming (2007:27). However, rather than telling a particular Dreaming story, Biddle argues that the stories for such paintings become less important: than what the paintings *do*, which becomes the key aspect (2007:39).

In relation to Kngwarray's work Biddle asserts that her lines from the *Utopia Panels* are in fact 'writing': "This is a writing which is seemingly unauthored and meaningless unless you are an 'insider' who knows the code" (2007:51). Her whole discussion of Kngwarray's work centres around the questions of writing and how, by painting the

lines on canvas, Kngwarray was in fact 'mocking' the importance of writing and the attention it gets in Western society (Ibid.). Kngwarray's lines are marks<sup>16</sup>, and as such they refer to *altyerr* as well as *awely*<sup>17</sup>.

*Awely* is about looking after country; caring for it and nurturing it (2007:73). For the performance of *awely* designs are painted upon the body, the same designs women transfer onto canvas. The body, breasts and canvas all become surfaces for Dreaming stories: they bear the imprints of these stories and become almost synonymous with them (2007:75). Biddle argues that the transfer of these designs onto canvas is an act of articulating and claiming land rights to that particular country (2007:31, 107). Every painting depicting these women's body painting designs is therefore an assertion of land rights, according to Biddle. She understands the act of translating/transferring paint from breasts to canvas to be a highly political one, akin to fighting for land rights and native title. The very fact that women's ceremonies and their designs were used in the Utopia land claim to demonstrate traditional ownership of the area reinforces the importance of these political claims in women's art.

Biddle's claims are general and almost universalistic in regards to the marks made. Her interpretations do not give the viewer a deeper understanding of the lines' origins or meanings. Rather, she intimates a commonality of meaning across the Desert, if not across all Indigenous Australian societies, which is sourced in women's ceremonial practice. In Chapter 8, I will return to Biddle's analysis about women's ritual and the discourse regarding women's role in Indigenous society in order to create a deeper understanding of ritual in art from Utopia. In Chapter 10, I will juxtapose Biddle's interpretations of the marks in Kngwarray's artworks with those found in the rock art sites and information given to me by Kngwarray's countrywomen, Carol Kunoth Kngwarray, Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, and Helen Kunoth Kngwarray, about the significance these marks.

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<sup>16</sup>Marks in this case refers to body painting as well as the marks made by ancestors, such as rock formations or other signs of their travels. These marks get replicated in ritual as body painting.

<sup>17</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010).

#### 1.2.4 Affect and kinesis

Movement in all its meanings forms the basis of this section: the movement of Kngwarray's arm and body whilst painting, the vibration of the surface in the paintings, the affect of paintings from Utopia, and the need to move in order to see the works at their apex of glory in exhibitions are some of the movements associated with art from Utopia. These different kinds of kinetic factors form a bridge between the literary discourse and the public discussion, as will be discussed below.

In her 2002 dissertation, artist Sue Lovegrove discusses space in the context of Kngwarray's painting *Big Yam Dreaming* (Fig. 1).

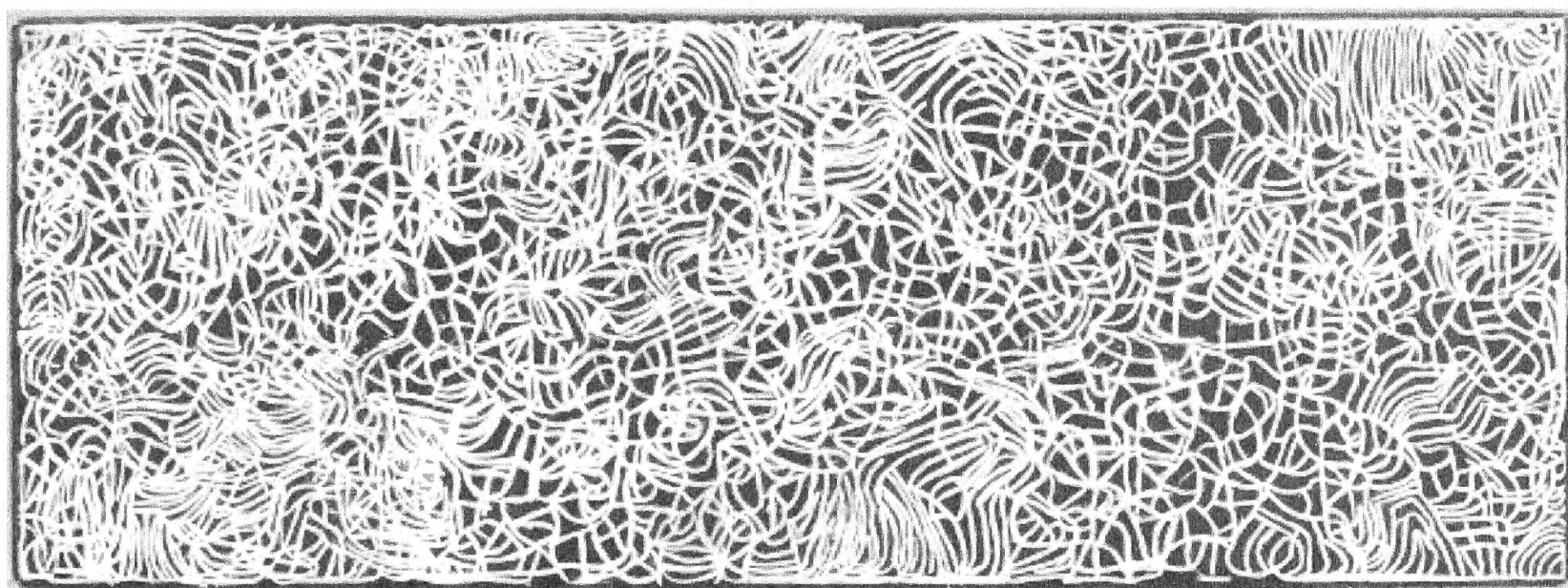


Fig. 1: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awelarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291x801.8 cm, NGV

In accordance with Lovegrove I see this work as a prime example of Kngwarray's thought processes whilst painting<sup>18</sup>. However, rather than looking solely at the production process and the physicality of Kngwarray's actions whilst painting, as did Lovegrove, my analysis of the role of movement in Kngwarray's work will consider the vibratory affect of her creations.

The surfaces of Kngwarray's works, as well as that of other Utopia artists, appear to move and vibrate. The imagery in the paintings seem to simultaneously move into and out of the canvas and sometimes even from one side to another. This visual dynamic can also be seen in Utopia batiks. Motifs and marks are rarely static: they do not seem rest in one place as tends to be the case with, for example, certain uniform concentric designs. Such kinetic effects are primarily found in women's works. Kngwarray's niece, Kathleen Petyarr, similarly creates vibrating works (Fig. 2); works that move inside the

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<sup>18</sup>This is particularly visible in the films of her painting *Big Yam Dreaming*, shown at the 2008 'Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye' exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.



canvas, seeming to reach out and draw the viewer in through the power of their optical illusions.

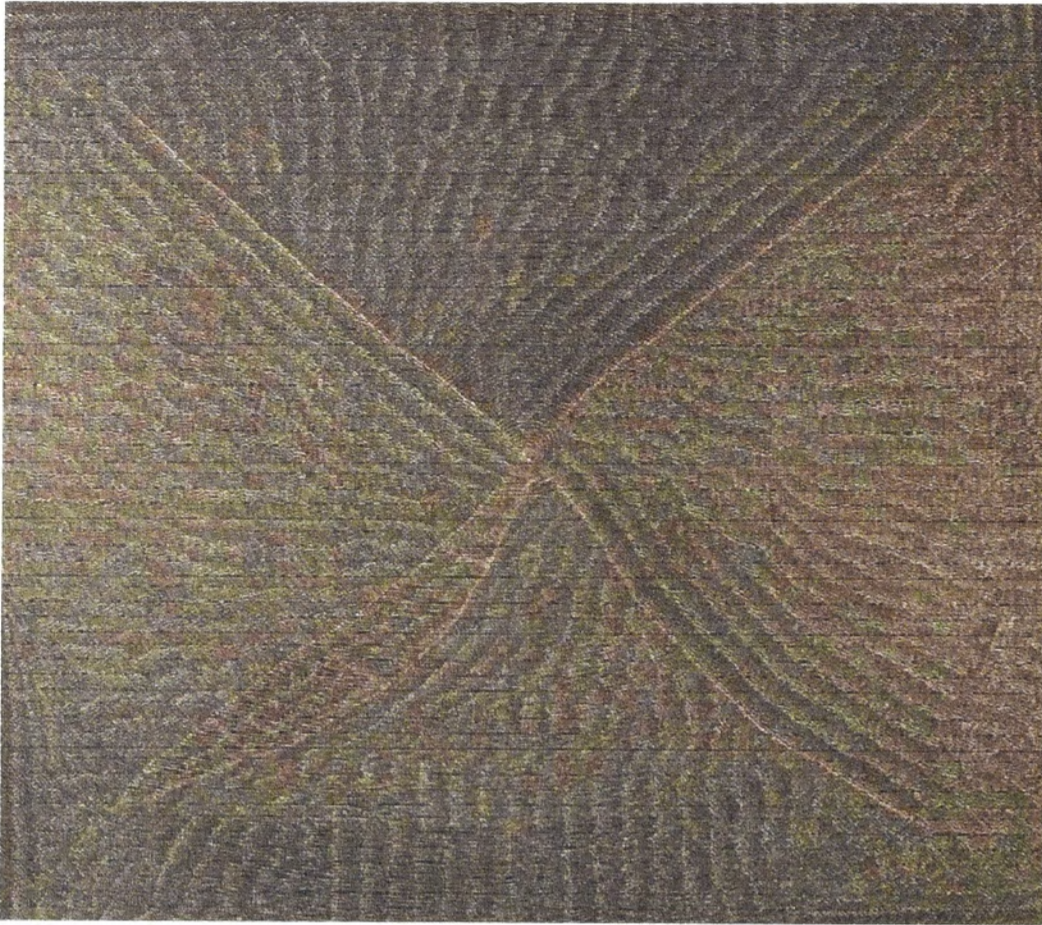


Fig. 2:  
Kathleen Petyarr: *Mountain devil lizard dreaming (with winter sandstorm)*, 1996,  
183.5x183.5x3.5 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA

Despite Lovegrove's analysis of the importance of movement during the creation process, no further research has examined other moments of movement or vibration within the works of Utopia artists.

The shimmering effect, also a form of movement, has been discussed by Howard Morphy in relation to Yolngu art. The importance of movement within artworks is particularly pertinent in relation to the artists' value system of artworks, as the shimmering effect establishes ancestral presence (1991). Kngwarray's paintings and their vibration can thus be understood as representing the ancestral presence of *Alhalker*, something that will be discussed further in Chapter 9 as well as in Chapter 10.

To see the landscape through [these paintings] is to experience it, to live it, engaging all surface points at the same time, virtually, actually. [...] To look is to become-with the landscape, to move from within as much as from above, experiencing the Dreaming not as an outsider to the everyday. (Manning 2009:179)

In her recent publication, *Relationscapes – Art, Movement, Philosophy* (2009), Erin Manning discusses the movement of Kngwarray's paintings and how this in turn creates movement in the viewer: "movement is felt as the canvas becomes a point of departure in a vast network of alliances of which the human body is but one aspect" (2009:178). Further, Manning argues that "[Kngwarray's] paintings emote vibrations that are rhythms" (2009:179). They create the sensation of being in country, ask the viewer to



feel *Alhalker* through them and convey an intangible concept of the Dreaming (Ibid. pp.179ff). In Chapter 10 I will expand upon this and show how this strong vibration of the painting has become a key stylistic aspect of Utopia art<sup>19</sup>.

In Biddle's analysis of desert art (2007), she too highlights the potential of artworks to move their audience. Through affect these works touch the viewers and move them (2007:15). When experiencing Kngwarray's art, visitors to her exhibitions<sup>20</sup> describe being moved in many different ways: being touched, feeling joy, sadness or being overwhelmed by the artworks. The moving nature of Kngwarray's works became a dominant theme when I observed and talked to viewers in front of artworks in the exhibition at the National Museum of Australia. Emotions seem to swell during these visits as people across generations, and from various cultural backgrounds, are moved by her art. Kngwarray's audience is broad, cross-cultural and reacts sensitively to her art. Despite her work triggering so many emotions, for some as deep as crying in front of a painting<sup>21</sup>, art critics have tended not to discuss this quality of her work: the quality of creating affect, of moving the audience, not just physically but also mentally and emotionally. The works connect with the audience's senses despite their being provided with little information about the work's meaning.

The fact that her art speaks to people and touches them across cultural barriers has meant for some art critics that it has universal meaning. This is reinforced by the scarce amount of information regarding the works' meaning given at most exhibitions. However, in discussions with Utopia artists about the depiction of *Alhalker* in Kngwarray's works, it becomes clear that they believe the moving power of the artworks lies in the importance of the Dreaming. In his 1983 article Moyle highlighted the role of localised Dreamings and Dreaming stories in the songs and music of Alyawarr people from the Sandover region (1983:70). He asserts that these local Dreamings have great importance within the community and play a major role in their ritual lives, but that this did not extend beyond the boundaries of the community (Ibid.

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<sup>19</sup>Rex Butler (2002) talks about this as the aura of Aboriginal art.

<sup>20</sup>I have interviewed visitors to two exhibitions, *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* and *Gooch's Utopia*, in order to find out about their thoughts, impressions and emotions towards the works. These interviews took place in September 2008 and October 2008 respectively. Additionally, I have analysed interviews with exhibition visitors to the *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* exhibition in Japan.

<sup>21</sup>Mayumi Uchida describes this at the Emily Symposium in Canberra in 2008 (refer to transcript: [http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/emily/NMA Responses 20080823.html](http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/emily/NMA%20Responses%20080823.html), last sighted 14.11.2011).



pp. 81ff.). This emphasis on localised Dreamings and the role of travelling Dreamings will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

Finally, another form of movement – which I will only mention briefly – occurs in the context of viewing art at exhibitions: this is in the physical encounter of the viewer with the object. When confronted with certain artworks the visitor has to move back and forth in order to properly perceive both the broad impact and intimate detail of the work. This was particularly the case in the exhibition *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, for the *Alhalker Suite* (Fig. 3), which consists of 22 panels.



Fig. 3: Emily Kam Kngwarreye: *The Alhalker Suite*, 1993, 22 canvas panels, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, each 90 x 120 cm, NGA

### 1.3 Art from Utopia in public discourse

I will now examine various public discourses in which art from Utopia plays a role. These discussions take place in newspaper articles, in hearings and submissions to the *Senate Inquiry into the future of Aboriginal arts and crafts*<sup>22</sup>, in television shows<sup>23</sup>, as well as in symposia<sup>24</sup> and exhibitions. Rather than being limited to an academic audience, these discourses circulate throughout the public; access to them is open<sup>25</sup> to any interested person, regardless of prior knowledge about the topic.

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<sup>22</sup>The Senate, Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: *Indigenous Art - Securing the Future - Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*, 20 June 2007, Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, Canberra and [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous\\_arts/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/submissions/sublist.htm) (last sighted 16/11/2011) for submissions to the Inquiry.

<sup>23</sup>A film by Ronin Films was made in 2008 about the creation of the exhibition *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* and aired on ABC TV in 2009 ("Emily in Japan – The making of an exhibition 2009"). Personal communication with Andrew Pike (April 2011).

<sup>24</sup>The main symposium referred to in this context is the *Emily: 'Why do those fellas paint like me ...?'* symposium for the *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* exhibition's opening weekend, 22-23 August, 2008 at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>25</sup>Transcripts from all presentations at the *Emily: 'Why do these fellas paint like me?'* symposium are available online (<http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/series/emily-kame-kngwarreye-series/>, last sighted 16/11/2011).



In these discourses, art from Utopia has an ambivalent place. On the one hand, it has received much positive attention through Kngwarray and her exhibitions, which have resulted in her prominent reputation as an Indigenous abstract painter. On the other hand, her niece, Kathleen Petyarr, has been the focus of an art world scandal involving fakes and frauds. Furthermore, the lack of a continuing art centre in Utopia may have created a situation that enables the exploitation of artists by art dealers.

### 1.3.1 The art market and exploitation of artists

A heated debate about the ethical trade of Indigenous art has arisen across Australia in recent years<sup>26</sup>. Historically, this has been an ongoing concern since the late 1980s for art coordinators and art dealers working with Utopia artists (Rodney Gooch cited in Dalglish 2000:153). In central Australia Indigenous artists are often reported to be underpaid and abused by art dealers: working in terrible conditions such as within sheds, locked up in rented rooms without food or water or even kidnapped and brought to towns in order to paint<sup>27</sup>. Indigenous artists are presumed to be victims<sup>28</sup> of the Western art market in instances when an inability to read or write fluently in English can place them at the mercy of the dealers, agents and collectors. When present, art centres can serve as mediators between these parties. They often function as both wholesaler and retailer.

Art centres are community-owned and -run and their profits return to the community organisation, rather than into the hands of art dealers. In art centres artists are 'looked after' by staff: who distribute materials, document, promote and market art works, and distribute payments for works sold. Art dealers may have no direct contact with artists (Healy 2005); when contact does occur it is often mediated by art centre staff. However, in instances, where artists travel together with art coordinators to gallery openings (Wright 1999:285) to meet the art dealers, gallery owners and collectors, this is often

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<sup>26</sup>See The Senate, Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: *Indigenous Art - Securing the Future - Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*, 20 June 2007, Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, Canberra and the submissions for that, [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecitac/committee/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous\\_arts/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecitac/committee/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/submissions/sublist.htm) (last sighted 16/11/2011).

<sup>27</sup>These shocking working conditions were the subject of an ABC *4Corners* episode: *Art for Art's Sake*, 28/07/2008, which investigated issues surrounding ethical trade in the Indigenous art market (<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2008/s2314182.htm>, last sighted 16/11/2011).

<sup>28</sup>In 1990 Roger Benjamin (73) suggested a different relationship and considered the engagement of Indigenous artists with the Western art world as a form of empowerment.

part of an on-going dialogue that may have commenced previously at the art centre. Such relationships between artists and gallery owners or art dealers are framed within the paradigm of the art centre's management structure; and rarely based upon direct negotiation. The negotiations that do take place are usually between the art dealer and the art centre staff, and between the art centre staff and the artists. Therefore, art coordinators act as brokers and mediators between both ends of the art world. Without the art centre functioning as the "middle man" artists have the choice to either stop working or become their own agents.

The art centre model is found widespread throughout Australia and seems to work in most places<sup>29</sup>. How well it functions often depends upon the staff and their relationships with the artists (Wright and Morphy 2000:224ff). Strains on art coordinators are tremendous and their skill-set needs to be considerable in order to address all the obligations and responsibilities of their position (Ibid. pp. 239ff, 289)<sup>30</sup>.

Nevertheless, many artists do not paint exclusively for their community art centre. It is in such instances – where Indigenous artists are painting for those other than their community's art centre – that the many issues of ethical trade emerge. The art centre in Utopia has now been closed almost a decade, which raises the question: how do these artists market their art? In Chapters 5 and 6 I address this and examine, in particular the extent to which artists are able to exercise agency in the negotiation process with art dealers. Do they become their own agents from time to time? How does this agency manifest itself in their artworks? These types of questions have rarely been raised in relation to Indigenous art. Up until now, the focus has rather been on the ethical behaviour of art dealers<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup>The Senate, Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: *Indigenous Art - Securing the Future - Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*, 20 June 2007, Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, Canberra, p. 27-47.

<sup>30</sup>82 art centres are operating at the time of writing in remote Indigenous communities across the three states of Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia (see [www.ankaa.org.au](http://www.ankaa.org.au), last sighted 31/01/2012). Several reports have looked into the development of art centres in remote Indigenous communities over the past three decades (Altman 2005:6-7; Altman 1989; Mercer 1997; Wright 1999, 2000; Wright and Morphy 2000; Myers 2002).

<sup>31</sup>There is a wide range of literature dedicated to ethical trade and art centres (see for example Morphy 1983, Altman and Taylor 1990, Taylor 1996a, Altman 2000, Altman et al 2002, and Altman 2005)

### 1.3.2 The issue of authenticity

A scandal regarding art from Utopia, which received much media attention, occurred in 1997. Kathleen Petyarr, who had moved to Adelaide from Utopia in the early 1990s, had allegedly let her partner paint her entry painting for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Art Award (West 2000, McCulloch 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d). Claims by her former partner, Ray Beamish, put her in the spotlight for receiving help in the production of her paintings<sup>32</sup>. The scandal brought to light issues of authenticity and highlighted some of the difficulties the Western art world has understanding Indigenous Australian art practice.

Despite the fact that, throughout the history of Western culture, art has been created within workshops (such as those of Donatello, Raffael and Rubens) without problems of authenticity emerging, Petyarr, as well as many other Indigenous artists, have come under attack for working together with their partners. The concept of delegating tasks to apprentices – in order to teach them but also to create more paintings<sup>33</sup> – seems to be perceived as fraudulent in the eyes of the art world, rather than a strategy much used historically by European artists. The authenticity of an artwork can only be guaranteed if the artist painted the whole painting by her- or himself and there is great concern in the art world that an artwork may have been created by someone else in the family,

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<sup>32</sup>*Gallerie Australis*, since 1992 Kathleen Petyarr's exclusive representative, sent a painting of hers to the 13<sup>th</sup> Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) in 1996. Petyarr had been living for several years together with her Welsh partner Ray Beamish, even prior to their move to Adelaide in the early 1990s. They had lived in Ilyenty and 3 Bore before settling down in Adelaide<sup>32</sup>. Beamish, at the time Petyarr's de facto partner, sometimes helped her out with her paintings. Traditionally in Indigenous societies, spouses would help each other out with paintings as they were being taught by their partners about the designs, and they would have rights to painting certain subjects owing to them being handed on through their relationship<sup>32</sup>. When *Gallerie Australis* sent in Petyarr's work for the competition, the relationship between Beamish and Petyarr had after ten years ended. In the following year Beamish went to the public and claimed that he had painted most of the Telstra Award entry painting (McCulloch-Uehlin 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d, 1997e).

Prior to Beamish's claim, Ebes had gone to Adelaide and filmed Petyarr and Beamish painting. He had also acquired paintings, which he claims had been painted by Beamish, despite the design being Petyarr's. In the heat of the discussion Ebes staged Beamish in his gallery in Melbourne: in the front window of the gallery was Beamish sitting and painting (Personal communication with Hank Ebes, January 2010). This stirred the media even more and the decision from the Award Committee was highly anticipated. Questions about the rights of spouses to paint the Dreamings of their partners under guidance and the particular case of a non-Indigenous spouse painting the Dreaming became a public matter of interest. The NATSIAA Committee ruled that Petyarr would remain the winner of the 1996 NATSIAA, with the reasoning that it was Petyarr's Dreaming and country painted and that she held the rights to it (West 2000:39ff.; Ryan, C. 1997). Petyarr agreed to acknowledge Beamish as her co-worker in several paintings, but insisted that the rights to the Dreamings painted were handed down to her and her sisters by her grandfather (Ibid.; Schulz and Simmonds 1998). And Personal communication with Penelope Hoile (October 2008) and with Hank Ebes (January 2010).

<sup>33</sup>This is traditionally common practice among Indigenous Australian artists and has in fact been discussed by Taylor (1996a, 1996b) in detail.

community, or even from another community. During my research I was often asked by art dealers whether I would investigate the authenticity of artworks. Such questions point towards the fact that there is still a need for better communication between artists and dealers and for an established set of rules regarding authenticity. The decision of the NATSIAA Committee in 1997 indicated some possible rules: Petyarr remained the winner of the 1996 NATSIAA and Beamish was considered her helper, painting under her instructions.

It is not only Petyarr's works that have been discussed in relation to authenticity; Emily Kam Kngwarray's works were also part of these debates. An early example of this was a commercial exhibition in Melbourne in 1991 held at the *Alcaston Gallery* in which several Utopia artists 'painted an Emily'<sup>34</sup>. Family members as well as fellow countrywomen created yam paintings similar in style to the ones Kngwarray painted. Rather than instigating an eruption of assertions that Kngwarray was involved in fake paintings, this exhibition educated the audience about the methods through which Indigenous artists 'learn how to paint' and highlighted that a particular image is associated with a certain Dreaming and consequently it is possible for a number of artists from the same country to paint it.

As Taylor showed in relation to Maningrida artists, Indigenous artists go through phases of apprenticeship in painting. One of these stages is the 'copying' of the 'master' (Taylor 1996b:70ff). In order to learn the full array of topics and their representations, one first has to learn how to depict them just like the teacher does; it is only at a later stage that an artist can become innovative and create his or her own styles. Therefore most artists will have learnt from a teacher or master – that is, a person of the same country who is very knowledgeable in terms of art and ritual. This learning happens first from mastering their style, in order for the apprentice to become autonomous at a later date.

The exhibition at *Alcaston Gallery*, referred to above took place prior to the 1997 discussion of Petyarr's work. The implications of the debate around fakes and frauds, for Petyarr's reputation and career, were never mentioned in the media. Nevertheless, a retrospective of her work was shown in 2001 at the Art Gallery of South Australia, which also travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney<sup>35</sup>. Petyarr's work

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<sup>34</sup>Personal communication with Beverley Knight (October 2008).

<sup>35</sup>The exhibition was called: *Genius of Place- The work of Kathleen Petyarre*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 9May – 22July 2001.



has since then changed little from her early x-shaped templates. Therefore, the scandal may have had an indirect impact on her artistic innovation by preventing her from experimenting and exploring new styles.

### 1.3.3 Inclusion of Indigenous art into the Western art canon

Both major retrospectives of Emily Kam Kngwarray's art – one at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1998 and the other at the National Museum of Australia in 2008 – pursued the objective of creating a place for Indigenous art within the canon of Western art. Through comparisons with Western modernists from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the similarities and differences of styles were emphasised<sup>36</sup> in order to show how, without formal training in the history and techniques of painting, one can become a modern artist. This reflects a Eurocentric approach towards the artworks, which failed to take a count of the artist's voice despite the omnipresence of her statement:

Whole lot, that's all, whole lot. [Awely] (my dreaming), [Arlatyey] (pencil yam), [Arkerrth] (mountain devil lizard), [Ntang] (grass seed), Tingu (dingo puppy), [Ankerr] (emu), [Intekw] (small plant, favourite food of emus), [Atnwerl] (green bean), and [Kam] (yam seed). That's what I paint, whole lot<sup>37</sup>;

It was also a form of myth-making: Kngwarray became a 'modernist hero' as critiqued by Benjamin (1998:47), a 'genius' as emphasized by Tatehata (2008:32) and only comparable to European masters (Neale 2008b:218).

To incorporate Kngwarray's *œuvre* by analogy within the Western canon was perceived as an elevation of her work (Ibid.). Her reputation as an internationally-acclaimed artist would increase if she was identified not as an Indigenous artist, but as an artist in her own right; a contemporary or modern artist with an Indigenous background, yet capable of painting just like those of the Western tradition. Artist Tracey Moffatt, an Indigenous woman, experienced this discourse from another angle: Moffatt wanted to be considered a contemporary artist rather than being labelled an 'Indigenous artist' (Moffatt in Smee 2001, cited in Summerhayes 2007:19ff; see also McLean 2008b). She deliberately

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<sup>36</sup>This was particularly done in the wall texts as well as in certain sections of the catalogue (see Schmidt 2009:36; Neale 2008, for example the comparison with Monet can be found on page 123). The main contributors to this theory are Terry Smith 1998, 2008, Margo Neale 1998, 2008, and Akira Tatehata 2008.

<sup>37</sup>The comment by Kngwarray – (quoted in Margo Neale (eds.): *Alhalker: The art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, 1998, inside cover) – is in the catalogue, preceding all texts. It was also placed at the beginning of the *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, in 2008.



removed herself from Australia and moved to New York and refuses to participate in exhibitions in which she would be represented as an Indigenous or female artist. In some ways this has certainly raised her profile in the art world, as she is no longer recognised solely by her Indigenous background. Nevertheless, Kngwarray did not actively steer her profile in this direction, as did Moffatt. Rather, art dealers and curators, elevated Kngwarray's profile by comparing her with non-Indigenous artists when they exhibited and wrote about her works.

The comparisons went as far as attributing every phase in Kngwarray's *œuvre* to a Western master (see the 2008 exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra): *Earth's Creation* (Fig. 4) was a Claude Monet

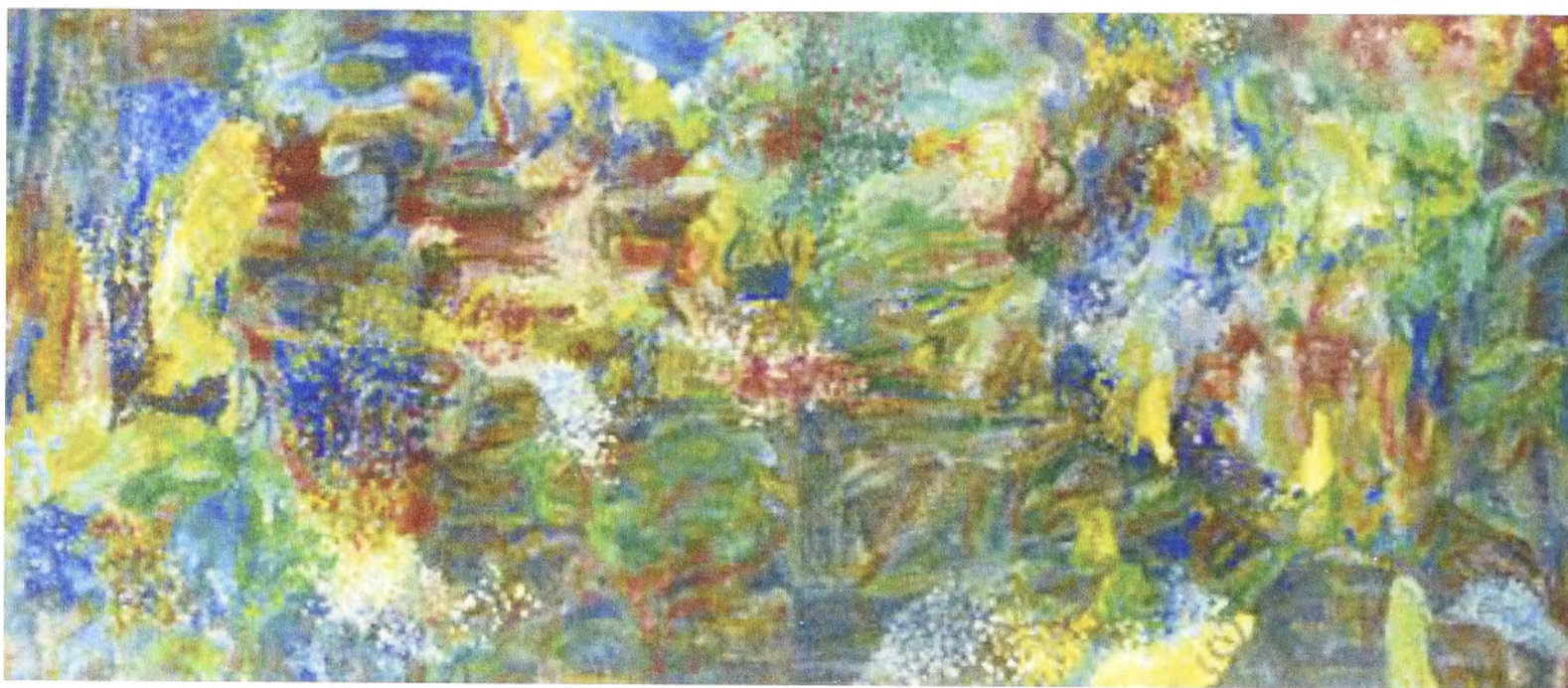


Fig. 4: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Earth's Creation*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 4 panels, each 275 x 160 cm, collection of Mbantua Gallery, Alice Springs

and her *Last Series* (Fig. 5) was like a series of Mark Rothko's field paintings. In general, her abstraction is purported to remind the viewer of Gerhard Richter<sup>38</sup>.



Fig. 5:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Last series*, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 128x82 cm, corporate collection

<sup>38</sup>Terry Smith 2008, paper at the *Emily: 'Why do these fellas paint like me?'* symposium, [http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/emily/NMA\\_Smith\\_20080823.html](http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/emily/NMA_Smith_20080823.html) (last sighted 16/11/2011).



The comparison between Kngwarray and Western artists, however, did not stop at assertions of certain paintings looking similar to those of Western artists. Kngwarray's paintings have been compared to those of Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionist movement, as Benjamin highlights (1998:47) and with which I agree, without a close analysis of the processes by which the works were created or an account of the significance of their meaning to the artist or her community<sup>39</sup>. The intentions of the artists in creating their works, as well as the techniques used to do so, were left unaddressed; what was included was merely the appearance of the final paintings in the eye of the western viewer. To compare only the outcomes, the product or the finished paintings, is to neglect – even negate – the importance of the artist's intentions, practice and the meanings depicted. This exclusion of Kngwarray's voice, intention and art practice is on the one hand justified with the argument that she did not understand the art world and therefore was in no position to act against it (Preziosi and Farago 2012:62); and on the other hand with the argument that her influence is so intertwined with the demands and wishes of curators and collectors that her voice is indeterminable (Ibid.).

#### **1.3.4 Modernity in Indigenous art**

Within this final discourse an assumption is implicit: artworks from Utopia are 'modern'. They leave the traditional behind and enter into an Indigenous modernity (McLean 2008). Here, the traditional is only seen as a source of inspiration in the form of rituals and stories associated with Kngwarray's Dreaming and is no longer considered part of her repertoire. Kngwarray's body paintings, as well as her sand drawings, become the traditional aspect of her work. Utopia art, through Kngwarray and the work of other Utopia artists, epitomises modernity in Indigenous art (Ibid.).

The discussions of formal similarities between the works of Kngwarray and modern Western artists – such as Piet Mondrian, Claude Monet, Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock and Gerhard Richter – point towards several underlying issues related to the audience. The inclination to compare Kngwarray's *œuvre* to that of other admired modern artists, and to include it within the Western canon, shows that stylistically her art falls within the

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<sup>39</sup>This specific point led to a heated discussion at the Australian Anthropological Society Annual Conference, University of Western Australia, July 2011, during the presentation of my paper: Abstraction in Art from Utopia.



present taste of the audience (see Benjamin 1998:47). In fact, these Western artists have in a way prepared the audience for Kngwarray's works.

On the other had the assertions that Kngwarray had no awareness of Western or European art<sup>40</sup> may in turn be an overstatement. She may well have been indirectly influenced through her negotiations with the art market. By this I refer to her close interactions with art dealers, through her responses to their reactions to her works, and their demands for particular paints and certain types of artworks<sup>41</sup>. Neale (2008) and Tatehata (2008) have depicted Kngwarray as a person completely unaware of Western art and, in fact, almost as if she had 'reinvented the wheel' of abstract art. I argue that on the one hand, Kngwarray is part of a continuous development in Indigenous art; and, on the other hand, that her art could only have been so well-received because the audience was ready for it – prepared by the many abstract and modern Western artists (McLean 2008:23). From this, Kngwarray can be understood as one of the first Indigenous artists to forge the path of Indigenous modernity as Ian McLean suggests (2008:27ff).

#### 1.4 Conclusion

In this introductory chapter I focussed on a number of themes that have been taken up in the literature on Utopia art – including newspaper articles and academic engagements – and extended into public discourse. One factor that most of these discourses have in common and that became visible when drawing them together is the absence of the artist's voice. This is particularly poignant in Emily Kam Kngwarray's case. This silencing of living and non-living artists takes agency away from them. This thesis aims to locate instances, in which artists' agency can be seen and wherever possible to incorporate the voice of the artists. Through this approach a different art history of the Utopia art movement can be written: one which highlights the artists as active agents in shaping its development.

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<sup>40</sup> This constitutes part of the myth of Kngwarray.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Hodges mentioned this in his paper, 'An artist first and foremost', at the *Emily: 'Why do these fellas paint like me?'* symposium in 2008; explaining how sometimes art dealers showed Kngwarray photos of her other works and demanded similar paintings ([http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/emily/NMA\\_Hodges\\_20080822.html](http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/emily/NMA_Hodges_20080822.html), last sighted 16/11/2011).

### 1.4.1 Myth-making and universal expressions

Kngwarray's influence on other Utopia artists was recognized early on by Rodney Gooch, as well as various other art dealers (see McDonald 1998:232), and found expression in the *Alcaston Gallery* exhibition in 1991<sup>42</sup>. But what were the influences Kngwarray experienced? Influences on her art, style and repertoire are likely to have come from within the community and her family, from art dealers, collectors and curators, but also from her trips to metropolises around Australia. Her experiences are just one example of the way these forces have influenced Utopia and, indeed, Indigenous artists across Australia. This is despite several critics claiming that Kngwarray never encountered Western art and somehow magically transgressed Western art history through her own innovation (see McLean 2008:27, Benjamin 1998, Neale 2008, Smith 2008, Tatehata 2008) In fact, Kngwarray did go to art galleries during her visits to the Australian shorelines<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, Gooch had books of modern Western art in his house in Alice Springs that he would show to Utopia artists<sup>44</sup>. Finally, he encouraged the use of bold colours and reduced designs by Kngwarray and other artists<sup>45</sup>.

The impact of her quick rise to fame cannot be underestimated when looking at Kngwarray's development as an artist; she has been highly influential in terms of satisfying the art market's needs, whilst at the same time staying innovative and creative rather than repetitious (Hodges 1998:40ff). Nevertheless art critics and dealers have characterised these influences purely in the negative; claiming that they blurred her 'real' art<sup>46</sup>. They have ignored the fact that every artist needs to sell artworks in order to live and by doing so, always ends up participating in a negotiation process between market demands and their own artistic expression<sup>47</sup>. *L'art pour l'art*<sup>48</sup>—the modern concept of creating artworks for their own sake is, according to the art curators and

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<sup>42</sup> I will elaborate upon this exhibition in Chapter 10.

<sup>43</sup> One of these gallery visits is mentioned by Jenny Green in relation to the Keating reception, where Kngwarray was awarded the Australian Artist's Creative Fellowship from Australia Council in 1992.

<sup>44</sup> Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (September 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (September 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Personal communication with Michael Iwanoff (March 2010).

<sup>48</sup> This concept was first introduced by Victor Cousin (1792-1867), a French philosopher. "The exaggerated one-sidedness of the doctrine that art may have no ulterior motive, religious, political, social, or moral, hardly survived the turn of the century [...] But the more moderate form of the doctrine, in which it is held that aesthetic standards are autonomous, and that the creation and appreciation of beautiful art are 'self-rewarding' activities, has become an integral part of 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic outlook." (Oxford Dictionary of Art 2001:8-9)

dealers, found in Kngwarray's works (Cadzow 1995). I argue, however, that her work is in fact part of a social, economic and creative process.

In Hodges' (1998) writing and Smith's (2008) paper on Kngwarray the artworks are depicted as expressions in themselves, without need for further explanations, solely existing as artworks. Their inherent meanings are only mentioned in order to satisfy the audience's need for and interest in spiritually-influenced artworks. Their religious content elevates the works whilst, at the same time, the reduced explanations of meanings make them objects of aesthetic appeal for collectors to admire (McLean 2008:27). They become generalised expressions of religious beliefs and spiritual power. It is almost as if Indigenous abstract art is enhanced in its significance because its meaning is not easily accessible to the viewer. The artworks become mystical objects with which the collector can enhance their persona.

Biddle understands the lack of information provided to the viewer to be a deliberate act of omission by the artist (2007:35ff). According to her, artists have intentionally decided not to share their stories. The reasons for such non-disclosure may be manifold: to let the artworks speak for themselves (see Hodges 1998); as a strategy employed by the art dealers to move the artworks out of the ethnographic realm and into that of fine art, in which artworks supposedly do not need context in order to be understood and appreciated; or finally, as an artist's reaction to the limited interest shown in the real meanings of their artworks.

Not only is very little known about the meaning of artworks from Utopia – their background and production process – but little is known about the artists themselves (Hodges 1998, Brody 1997, Neale 2008)<sup>49</sup>. In general, Kngwarray is depicted as an elderly Indigenous lady, a ritual leader, who created batiks before taking up painting in her 80s. In the writings about her she is represented as, almost reduced to being, an Indigenous person who has not had much interaction with the European-Australian world: her recollection of first meeting a white person is often emphasised<sup>50</sup>. Kngwarray becomes an emblem of the 'untouched' Indigenous person. Through these few often-repeated<sup>51</sup> facts, a myth about the person is created; a myth that in fact exoticizes her.

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<sup>49</sup>In the recent ABC TV series *Art + Soul* Jenny Green gave some new insights into Kngwarray's life (aired October 2010).

<sup>50</sup>Brody (1997:76) describes this encounter, which is then cited by others.

<sup>51</sup>See various exhibition catalogues (Neale 1998, 2008) as well as articles (Perkins 2010).

There seems to be a desire to further remove her life from contact with Western society in order to emphasise the apparent fact that someone without much knowledge about Western culture can create artworks that are just like Western modern artworks. Kngwarray never attended a Western fine art school, yet she paints like artists from this tradition. Thus without having been in contact with Westerners her artworks speak to Westerners<sup>52</sup>. All the elements of this myth create an image of the 'other', but an 'other' who can create paintings that transcend all cultural barriers.

Aside from Jennifer Green, the linguist and former adult educator, only the curator Anne Marie Brody has interviewed Kngwarray about her life and work. Neither has subsequently published extensively on this topic: thus, knowledge and documentation of Kngwarray's life is scarce<sup>53</sup>. This lacunae facilitates the myth-making process as the fact of not-knowing and not being able to find out more is in itself very alien to a Western society, where everything is documented, reported and openly accessible.

Christine Nicholls' co-authored catalogue for the 2001 solo exhibition *Kathleen Petyarr: Genius of Place* on Kathleen Petyarr and her work provides a basis for an in-depth visual analysis. Nicholls interviewed Petyarr for this exhibition catalogue. In this account Petyarr's life story and her Dreaming story of *Arnkerrth*, the Mountain Devil Lizard are central. The inspiration for her paintings comes from the Dreaming story of *Arnkerrth*, given to her by her paternal grandmother (2001:11).

In contrast to articles about Kngwarray's works, the main article in the exhibition catalogue for Kathleen Petyarr's show argues for an iconographic explanation of one of her paintings (2001:15). The Mountain Devil Lizard paintings by Petyarr depict the travels of *Arnkerrth* in an x-shape (Fig. 2). This cross almost becomes a template in Petyarr's paintings. Petyarr's paintings can be made more accessible to the audience via the decoding of the iconography as has been done in the case of some Western desert artists (see Myers 2002) and Yolngu artists (Morphy 2008). Petyarr's works become legible to the audience; understandable and not solely an allusion to country as Kngwarray's works are interpreted. They are a representation of the ancestral travels, and thus of Petyarr's country (2001:10ff).

Although Nicholls' gives the evidence for a close analysis of Petyarr's works, she never discusses the transformations of Petyarr's work over time; how she learnt to paint or

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<sup>52</sup>Smith called this 'bridgework between cultures' (Smith 1998:41, in McLean 2008:27).

<sup>53</sup>Perkins (2010:151) and Hodges (1998:41) both mention this lack of comments from the artist.

create batiks. It is almost assumed that Petyarr, like Kngwarray, was a natural talent; never having learnt from anyone but her father, paternal grandfather and grandmother about the Dreaming. All of Petyarr's sisters were painting at the time the monograph was written and they all hold the same Dreaming (Ibid.). In fact they all started creating batiks together. Petyarr was thus embedded in this family of artists; but rather than showing the social world in which Petyarr's talents evolved and were nurtured, the book focuses on Petyarr as an individual. This exhibition catalogue creates the impression that there are no questions about Petyarr and her work left unanswered after having read this biographical approach to her work. The show and accompanying catalogue were created at a point in time during which it was argued that art has the capacity to speak for itself. Therefore the visual analysis of Petyarr's development was not included in the catalogue and created another form of myth-making.

In both of the above publications the learning and teaching processes of the artist go unmentioned. Seemingly Kngwarray and Petyarr are self-taught; they are only influenced and inspired by their Dreamings. It appears as if both lived within a vacuum where the rules of learning and teaching ritual did not apply. I will argue to the contrary that both artists lived in an environment rich in artistic expression, where both learnt Dreaming stories and artistic techniques from their family and peers at an early age and that this continued well into later stages in their lives.

Discussions about the 'genius from Utopia' continued even after the 2008 Kngwarray exhibition. In 2009 Mbantua Gallery in Alice Springs held a solo show of Lena Pwerl's works and called her the next 'genius'; passing on the title awarded to Kngwarray in 2008 and Petyarr in 2001.

A unique example of the inclusion of an artist's voice can be found in the interview between Margie West, Jenny Green and Kathleen Petyarr (2007). The interview took place on 27 November 1993 and focused on a single batik created by Petyarr and Margaret Petyarr in 1989. Petyarr describes the different topics of the batik, the sources of inspiration for it, and the stories associated with it. She identifies every single section of the batik. This particular and unique example of an explanation of an artwork by a Utopia artist shows how many more layers of meaning can be revealed through the process of exegesis.



### 1.4.2 Agency of artists

Having examined the discourses above in which Utopia art has been contextualised, the following currents become clear: Utopia artists are often considered victims by the art world and their agency is not recognized. Artists' voices have rarely been included in discussions about Utopia art<sup>54</sup>. The particularities of their art movement have largely been ignored in favour of celebrating individual artists, such as Emily Kam Kngwarray and Kathleen Petyarr. Finally, Utopia artworks have become emblems of an Indigenous modernity through comparisons with Western modern artworks, with the art movement overall becoming symbolic of a women's art movement.

As I have shown in relation to Utopia art there are several gaps in the literature around Utopia art as well as Indigenous art in general. In reviewing the field of Aboriginal art studies, it is clear that formal analyses of abstract artworks have been limited<sup>55</sup>. There have been a number of studies that have focused upon the translation of artworks or iconographic explanations of them, following on from Nancy Munn and her pivotal work *Walbiri Iconography* (1973). But studies of the aesthetic qualities of artworks have been fairly limited. The surface qualities, which Morphy describes in relation to Yolngu art (2008), have seldom taken a central role in discussions about Indigenous art. Indigenous aesthetics and understandings of aesthetics have therefore rarely been included in discussions about Aboriginal art.

Approaches to Indigenous art have largely overlooked Indigenous aesthetics and Indigenous value systems – monetary and aesthetic. There has been an emphasis on meanings of Indigenous art, and on how meanings are created through art practices. Indigenous value systems have been partly investigated by analysing the meanings of works and their importance – for example Dreaming stories, connections to country and kin. The links between Indigenous value systems and Western monetary value systems, however, have been neglected in the examinations of fine art and its value. Furthermore, Indigenous value systems of 'mwurrah'<sup>56</sup>, 'nice', 'quick' and 'rubbish' artworks have not been included in discussions about ethical trade<sup>57</sup> and/or Indigenous aesthetics. I will show in the second part of this thesis how Indigenous aesthetics, Indigenous value systems and ethical trade are linked.

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<sup>54</sup>Rare examples of their inclusion are found in Green 1981, 1985, 1998, 2005, 2007, West, Green and Petyarr 2007, and Brody 1990, 1997.

<sup>55</sup>Examples for the discussion of these can be found in Morphy (1990, 2008) and Carty (2011).

<sup>56</sup>*Mwurrah* means good in Eastern Anmatyerr.

<sup>57</sup>Although Eric Michaels discussed these in 1994.

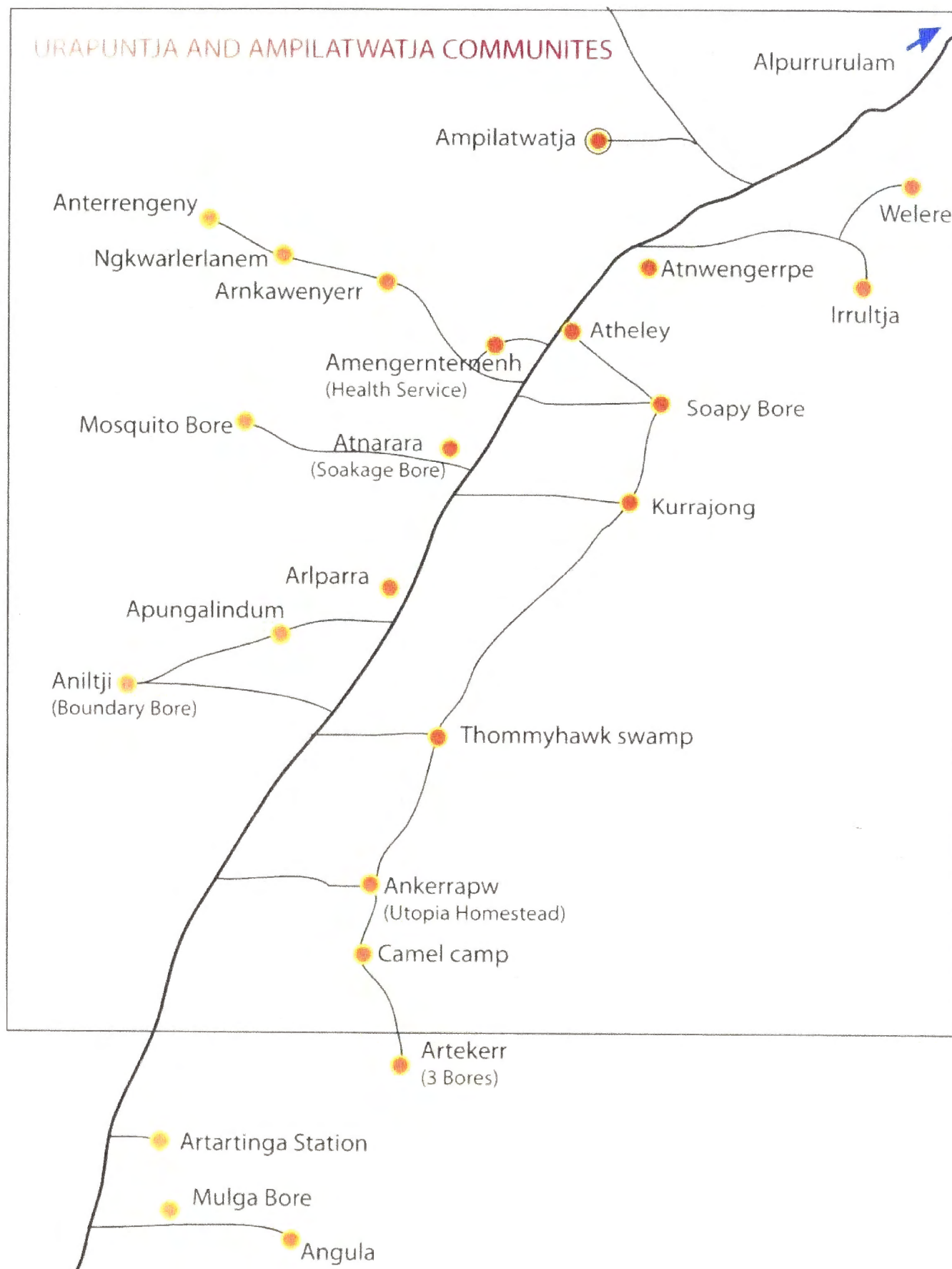
Through discussions with artists about their respective relationships with art dealers, artists' agency becomes obvious. Furthermore, value systems and quality expressions in relation to artworks that emerge within these discussions indicate an Indigenous aesthetic understanding. To return to the artworks and understand the artworks as expressions of artists' agency gives another dimension to the analysis of artistic creativity in Utopia, in which style and theme form the core.



## Chapter 2: Utopia – geography and history of the place

### 2.1 Utopia: The place and its people

Utopia or the Urapuntja Council<sup>58</sup> consists of 16 outstations (Map 1).

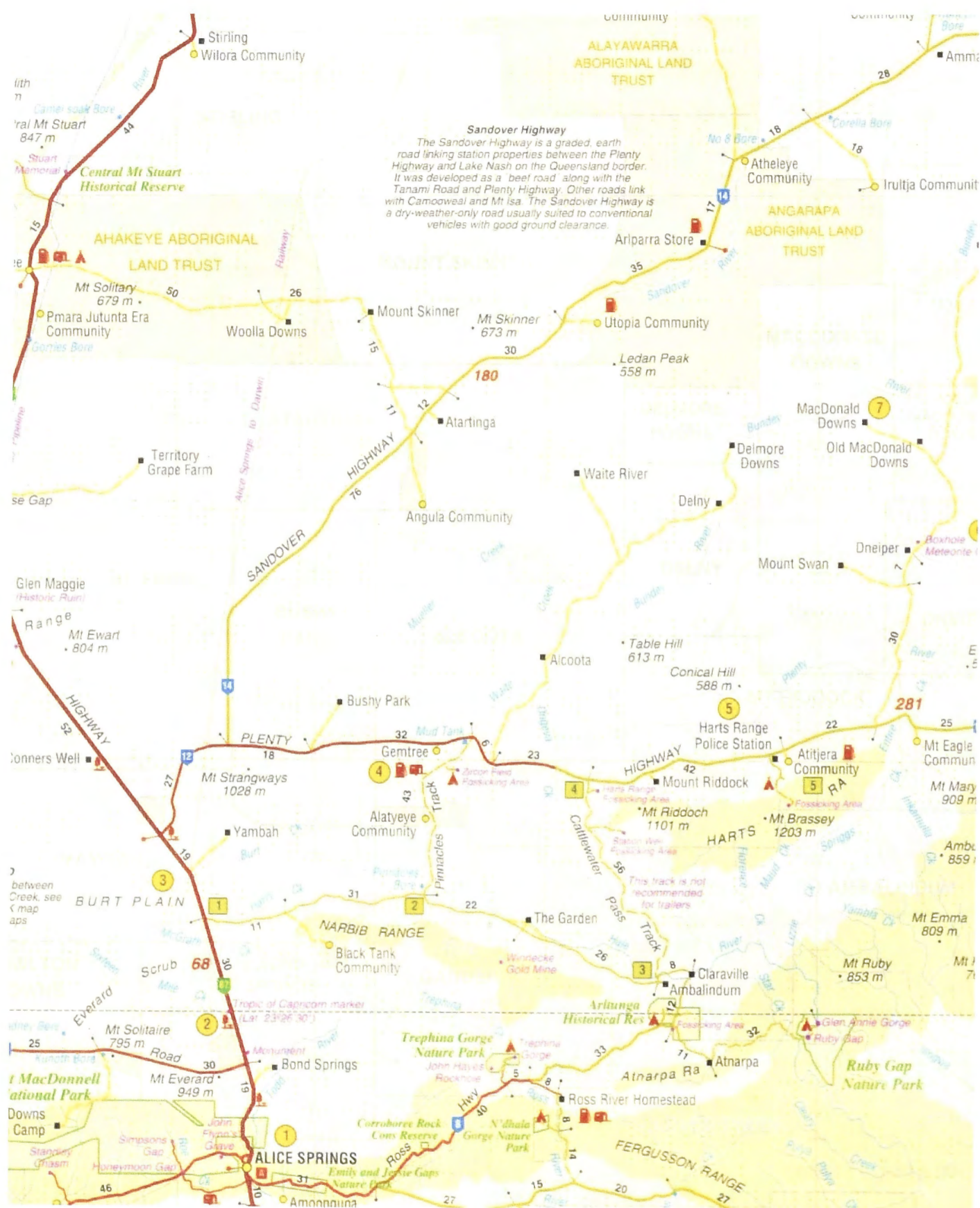


Map 1: outstations map issued by Urapuntja Council (Utopia) the lines indicate the borders of the Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trust area, made in 2008 by Urapuntja Council<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>58</sup>With the introduction of the Shire system in 2009, Urapuntja Council was integrated into Barkly Shire. The CEO of the Urapuntja Council became the Shire Services Manager (SSM) and the head-quarters for the shire were relocated to Tennant Creek.

<sup>59</sup>Some of the spellings of these place names do not follow the *Central & Eastern Anmatyerr to English Dictionary* 2010, the guideline to which I will adhere in this work.

The area is situated roughly 230 km north-east of Alice Springs along the Sandover Highway (Map 2), which used to run along the Sandover River, or in Anmatyerr, Urapuntja.



Map 2: The Plenty and Sandover Highways (detail), Westprint 2006

This highway is not sealed and only irregularly graded. Despite the relatively short distance to Alice Springs, the outstations of Utopia can be cut off for weeks at a time during summer months after heavy rainfall; thus isolating the Utopia community and making it remote. Similarly, the outstation roads are irregularly maintained and, depending on the rainfall, can be difficult to pass. Therefore, access to some outstations can at times be difficult and outstation residents' access to the shop in Ahalper can be



very limited. Surrounding station shops are frequented by community members as access to these are, at times, easier than is the main shop in Ahalper<sup>60</sup>.

In May 2009 I travelled to Utopia for the first time; accompanied on this road trip by the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education team. After leaving the Stuart Highway I noticed the change in landscape, with the Narbib Range becoming visible to the east. As we turned off the Plenty Highway, which leads to the Queensland border, and onto the Sandover Highway the landscape sprawled in front of us. No great mountain ranges lie on the road to Utopia, only small hills, ridges and rocks. Generally the land is flat and covered in Mulga trees. The highway winds its way through cattle country and Utopia appears incongruous amidst the surrounding cattle stations. The Sandover Highway, in days past, was composed of roads that are now in disrepair; with the rerouting of the highway, these old roads are now used only as shortcuts between outstations.

Artists in Utopia live on different outstations and thus, infrequently work together or see each other's work. During my 2008 through 2011 trips to Utopia I came to notice the great mobility of its people. People moved in between camps and outstations; sometimes even between different communities and Alice Springs. These moves may only be for one night or for weeks, even months, at a time. Often these moves follow the death of a community or family member, which often leads to a place being completely vacated as everyone moves to a 'sorry camp'<sup>61</sup>. In certain cases this temporary move turns out to be for a longer period of time<sup>62</sup>. After a while people will return to the outstation or house previously vacated, but I have seen houses left vacant for over two years due to the death of a family member.

Despite all these moves, people remain within certain areas to which they have rights. For example, Ahalper, the service hub and more or less centre of Utopia, is "everyone's country and therefore everyone is allowed to live there"<sup>63</sup>. However, within Ahalper people orientate their camps towards their country: to the South, North, East or West,

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<sup>60</sup>The spelling of place names is taken from the community map handed out to me by Shire Services Officers in September 2010.

<sup>61</sup>Prior to my first trip to Utopia someone had passed away in Iylenty, which led to a complete exodus of the families living there. After more than a year had passed people slowly began moving back.

<sup>62</sup>One of the families I worked with moved to a 'sorry camp' in May 2009 and still had not moved back to their outstation by the end of this research period, in 2011.

<sup>63</sup>Personal communication with Cowboy Loy Pwerl (September 2010). By 'everyone' Pwerl refers to all Eastern Anmatyerr and Alyawarr people of the Utopia homelands.

depending upon the outstation and its geographical orientation to their Dreaming country. There are not many houses in Ahalper as it is sacred country.

Artists can be found in most outstations across Utopia; however, there are outstations or areas where artists seem to live in greater density. Within the boundaries of Utopia there are four outstations in which larger groups of artists live: Arnkawenyerr (also called Rocket Range), Iylenty (or Mosquito Bore), and Camel Camp, as well as Ahalper, the service hub, where everyone congregates. Outside the boundaries of Utopia are more outstations, some of which also have a high density of artists in residence, such as Irultja and Akay (Mulga Bore). Smaller groupings of artists exist too, such as Josie Kunoth Petyarr's and Dinni Kunoth Kemarr's family in Apungalindum who only recently moved to there from Camel Camp.

The five main groups of artists are each based on related sets of kin. At the core of the Iylenty group are the seven Petyarr sisters and their families, Cowboy Loy Pwerl, his siblings and their families. The Arnkawenyerr group (which formerly lived at Ngkwerlerlanem) comprises of the sisters Audrey, Lucky, Sarah and Ruby Morton Kngwarray; their mothers Queenie Kemarr, Mary Morton Kemarr and Katie Kemarr; and Wally Pwerl and his wife Janice Kngwarray. The group which lives at Camel Camp consists of the three Ngal sisters and their families: Polly Ngal, Angelina Ngal/Pwerl and Kathleen Ngal. The Apungalindum family also used to live in Camel Camp as Polly Ngal is Josie Kunoth Petyarr's mother. The ties between these family groups are strong and became increasingly visible upon deeper acquaintance.

Angelina Pwerl/Ngal was married to Cowboy Loy Pwerl's older brother, Louie Pwerl. After Louie's death in 1998<sup>64</sup> and the accompanying 'sorry business'<sup>65</sup>, Angelina moved back to live with her natal family. As she is childless she now lives with her close friend Gladdy Kemarr in Camel Camp, a short distance from the Ngal family groups. Louie Pwerl was an artist, as well as one of the most important ritual leaders in the community<sup>66</sup>. He held great power and his brother – Cowboy Loy Pwerl – and sister – Lena Pwerl – have followed on in his footsteps. Cowboy Loy Pwerl's children are

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<sup>64</sup>Date taken from Design and Art Australia Online, University of New South Wales Library: <http://daaouat.library.unsw.edu.au/bio/louis-pwerle> (last sighted 17/11/2011).

<sup>65</sup>'Sorry business' describes the mortuary rituals and the grieving accompanying the death of a person. For the latest research in this field see Gaskin et al. 2008. I observed such rituals in September 2009 when Kathleen Ngal's daughter passed away in a car accident, when the car in which she was travelling flipped over on a dirt road. In this case the sorry business was marked by both a traditional and Christian funeral and mass, with the Christian funeral including the wailing of the women.

<sup>66</sup>Personal communication Cowboy Loy Pwerl (September 2009 and 2010).

related to Mary Morton Akemarr and her family via their mother's side<sup>67</sup>. Cowboy Loy Pwerl's wives, Carol and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, have links to Antarrangeny and therefore, to the people living in Arnkawenyerr as well as to people living in Akay.

The outstations beyond the boundaries of Utopia – Irultja and Akay – are home to two large groups of artists. Situated to the north of Utopia, Irultja falls under the shire services of Ampilatwatja, as do the nearby outstations of Welere and Atnwengerrp. Minnie Pwerl her family and her sisters Emily, Galya and Molly live at Irultja. Lindsay Bird Mpetyan and his family live at Angula and Akay on the southern end of the highway.

The links and connections between the aforementioned families become particularly visible when tracing their genealogies<sup>68</sup>. Most artists in Utopia, including Irultja, can trace their family back to six sisters and their children. The names of these women are still in living memory and the family trees I collected reach back to a time prior to the region's contact with European settlers.

Distances in between different outstations are significant. Distances between the closest service hubs and stores vary depending on the outstations. From Akay it takes one and a half hours to travel to both Ahalper and Alice Springs, and Bird's family prefers to visit Alice Springs. As the people from Irultja are much closer to Ampilatwatja, they mainly get their supplies there and hardly ever go to Ahalper to shop. This means that although some relationships are strong and important people do not see each other as much<sup>69</sup>. For example Lindsay Bird Mpetyan is uncle to Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and her sisters yet they rarely see each other.

People use the shops at surrounding stations, not just because of their proximity, but also because the selection is much wider than that in the Ahalper store. In the cattle station era when people from Utopia were employed in the cattle industry, people used

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<sup>67</sup>Personal communication Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (October 2010).

<sup>68</sup>Collecting and ensuring the correctness of every detail of a family tree is extremely difficult, which is the reason why I have chosen not to include them in this thesis. However, Dalgleish (2000) included the genealogies she collected for Mosquito Bore.

<sup>69</sup>Members from Irultja, Welere and Atnwengerrp, and Camel Campare said to prefer hunting over buying food at the shop. I have been told many times, 'they live traditional way'. This again implies that contact with members of these outstations is limited (Personal communications with Genevieve Loy Kemarr, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray, September – October 2009, and September – October 2010).



to travel to various stations to pick up their rations<sup>70</sup> and today they make similar trips for shopping. In most of these stores it is possible to find all materials needed to create paintings: various acrylic paints in different sizes, all sorts of brushes and canvas, often cut to size for the customer. Shopping is done on almost a daily basis and so too is travel. Shortcut roads lead to the different stations<sup>71</sup>.

In my travels with community members throughout Utopia, the sites most eagerly shown were the permanent waterholes; seemingly of great significance to everyone. Most of these were rockholes and they were dispersed throughout the country. They lie in between outstations; not directly along roads, but close to old tracks. On many occasions I was told that in times past these waterholes used to be the resting places of people, but that young people did not really know about them these days<sup>72</sup>.

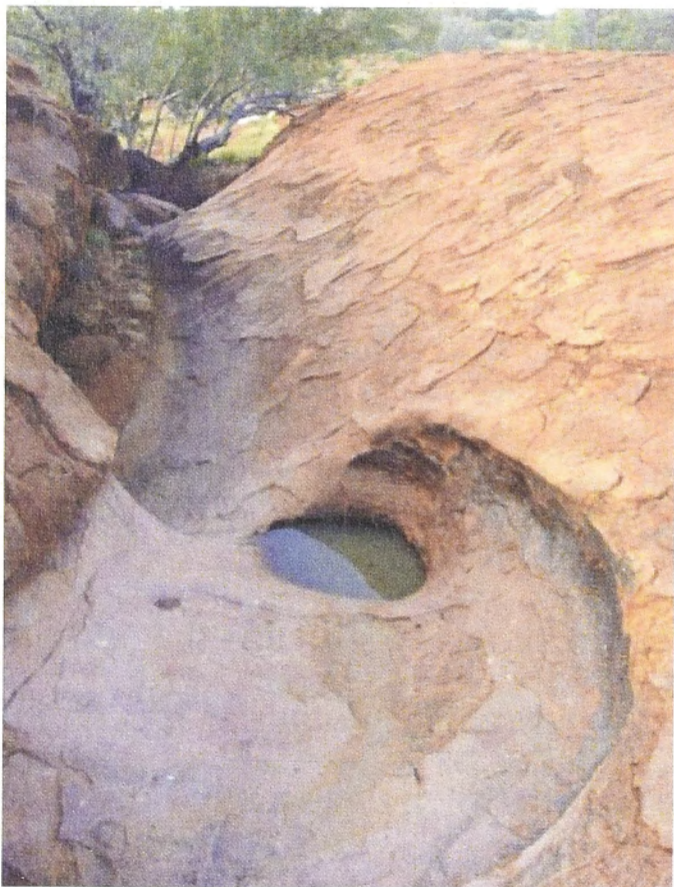


Fig. 1:  
This is *Mendit*, a permanent rockhole,  
located past Camel Camp. (Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt, September  
2010).

Some rockholes were snake Dreaming sites and others considered ‘just’ an old place where people used to live (Fig. 1). However, one of these sites in particular was adorned with remarkable rock paintings; which occur in a number of places in the Utopia region (Fig. 2).

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<sup>70</sup>See Rowse (1998) for a history of rations, and Pwerle Ross and Whitebeach (2007) for a personal account of station times in the Sandover region.

<sup>71</sup>‘Shortcut roads’ can either be old station roads, former cattle tracks or old paths created over time through frequent use. These roads are not sealed and there are no signs to navigate through them. Further, they are not marked on maps and one can easily get lost using them. Some people prefer using shortcut roads, despite their being effectively longer than main outstation roads. I assume this has to do with old travel paths and sacred places one should not see. This was the case for the path taken to Antarrengeny, where the road went past Arnkawenyerr, which was close to a sacred men’s place.

<sup>72</sup>Personal communication with Don Onion Pwerl, Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray, Carol Kunoth Kngwarray and Cowboy Loy Pwerl (in September and October 2010).





Fig. 2: Photo of a rock art at a site near a permanent water hole, located past Camel Camp (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt, September 2010).

Some of the Dreaming sites associated with community members are situated on cattle properties adjacent to Utopia. People travel to them by way of ‘shortcut roads’. Access to these places is often quite difficult, as such roads and tracks are not maintained and there appeared at times to be no path at all. One of my trips to Utopia occurred in September, a time of year when a great deal of surface water remained from the heavy falls earlier in the year, allowing me to see some of the region’s usually dry creeks flowing.

## 2.2 Utopia’s place in history: an overview from first contact with Europeans until 1980

The country is marked by the extensive history of cattle stations. Despite being criss-crossed by Dreaming tracks, the Sandover Region was first ‘explored’ by Europeans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1878 Charles Winnecke and his party conducted a trigonometrical survey of the area (Bucknall 1996:320). During this expedition the region’s landscape was mapped and the features were named by Winnecke. In comparison with the country west of the telegraph line<sup>73</sup>, the Sandover region appeared extremely dry and therefore, unwelcoming to settlers (Richardson 2001:67). Such assessments of the fertility of the country proved to be important for the local Indigenous population, as it meant that settlement of the area was delayed until much

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<sup>73</sup>The Overland Telegraph line was established from Adelaide to Darwin via Alice Springs in the 1870s.



later<sup>74</sup>. In the 1920s settlers arrived in the Sandover Region from three directions – the north-east, the south and the west – and chose land for their stations (Ford 1966; Hartwig 1965; Lyon and Parsons 1989; Richardson 2001:69).

Stories of ‘white men’ preceded their arrival in the Sandover region, somewhat preparing the local Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr population for what was to come. In 1923 three different families established cattle stations in the region: the Chalmers, Holts and Kunoths. The latter were the two brothers Kunoth, who in 1926 became the first leaseholders of Utopia Station. According to an anecdote, the origins of the station’s name go back to the following event:

The first lease-holders of Utopia, the Kunoth brothers, set up camp after the First World War. They gave the name Utopia to this part of the country following a stroke of good luck. Apparently, after a long and arduous journey, the men, low on supplies, came across some rabbits so tame they caught them by hand. This put them in mind of an earthly Utopia (Nichols, Celli and Parker 1998:2, in Richardson 2001:75).

As Devitt (1988) writes, within a short period the Sandover River region was settled by a variety of station owners:

In the following two decades (1920s and 1930s) stations important to contemporary Aborigines were also established – for example, Alcoota, Atartinga (previously Woodgreen), Utopia, MacDonald Downs, Waite River, Bushy Park, Mount Skinner (previously Harpers Springs), Delny, Mount Riddoch, Woola Downs and Derry Downs (1988:34, in Richardson 2001:74).

Nevertheless, the local Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people stayed on their traditional land and were not moved to ‘supercamps’ as were the Pintupi and Warlpiri in Papunya and Yuendumu respectively (Meggitt 1984; Myers 1991)<sup>75</sup>. The Indigenous people of the Utopia region experienced great changes to their lifestyle due to European settlement, particularly because of the introduction of cattle to the country, which destroyed many native plants and bush foods. Many members of the local population began working on the stations, becoming stockmen or servants. They often moved from one station to another, depending on the availability of work. The flexibility entailed in station work suited the lifestyle of many Anmatyerr and Alyawarr people, who have always been very mobile (Devitt 1988:40). Working on the stations meant that they did not have to

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<sup>74</sup>Young (1987) accounts the Anmatyerr experience of European settlement, in which other Anmatyerr areas were settled much earlier than the Sandover region.

<sup>75</sup>McKnight (1986) highlights some of the conflict and issues when large groups of unrelated Aboriginal people live together.

leave their country and enabled them to continue to access Dreaming sites and maintain the ceremonies that related to country.

However, there are many stories of ‘cheeky’ (aggressive) station owners who punished Aboriginal stockmen severely with the whip or ‘flogged them’ (Dave Ross in Richardson 2001:82). Some station owners took part in the ‘Sandover Massacre’ (Johannsen 1993:66). ‘Nugget’ Morton, the lease-holder of Ammaroo Station, and Constable George Murray were “complicit in the ‘Sandover Massacre’ where one hundred or more Aborigines were either shot or poisoned with strychnine in retribution for spearing cattle” (Richardson 2001:76; Johannsen 1993:66). Stories about these events are part of the living memory of the Utopia community and provide the underlying themes of a series of paintings<sup>76</sup>.

This era was one of Indigenous people working on stations and farms across the area. But people had the option of spending time in the bush or taking a break. Not all Indigenous people in the area worked on stations; some remained ‘hiding’ in the bush, trying to maintain a traditional lifestyle. On occasions they would visit one of the stations in order to pick up rations<sup>77</sup>. Indeed some people chose to lead a fairly traditional life only occasionally visiting the stations for rations. Thus contact remained limited for some time.

This all changed, however, through the introduction of the pastoral award, which ensured equal pay for all workers in 1967. Many Aboriginal people subsequently lost their work on stations; but, at the same time, another change was on the horizon for the local population. However this period of station life ended with the introduction of award wages. One consequence of this was to bring to an end the era of Aboriginal people working on the stations, since unable to afford award wages Aboriginal people in many cases were dismissed and even turned off the land.

The Chalmers, who had acquired Utopia Station from the Kunoths, had decided to return the station to the local Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people. Previously, in the 1960s, they tried to do so but failed. After long discussions in 1976 the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission bought Utopia Station on behalf of the resident Aboriginal population. This was followed by a land claim process to return the land to the local Indigenous population. The recent introduction of the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the

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<sup>76</sup>See Chapter 8 for a detailed description of the events by Wally Pwerl.

<sup>77</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Violet Petyarr (September 2009).

Northern Territory provided the framework for the claim, which resulted in the Utopia community gaining inalienable free-hold title to the Utopia homelands in 1980<sup>78</sup>. During this period, the women played an important role in asserting the continuity of their relationships to country.

The 1970s also saw the development of the outstation movement across many regions of the Northern Territory. The movement involved the people leaving the main settlements and mission stations and establishing themselves in smaller settlements on their own country. The first outstations across the Utopia homelands were set up before the land claim was even settled, and illustrates the strength of determination of the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people of the Sandover River region to and reside on their country once again.

The mobility of previous times, in which people worked on the different stations across the region, still exists today and is reflected in their visits to these stations for shopping. During such trips, people stop along the way; go hunting, looking for seeds and reconnecting with country. In spite of people having lived on and around stations for more than half a century, they have never left their country.

Although people from Utopia had never left their country and they have maintained strong relationships with it, some traditional knowledge has been lost due to the settlement of Europeans in the region: not only knowledge regarding country, but also that of language (Richardson 2001:89). Life changes were dramatic for the local Indigenous population and for some, too much to bear. Devitt (1988) suggests that the introduction of Western foods was a causal factor in the loss of ritual and knowledge about Dreaming, as some foods were replaced with Western foods<sup>79</sup>. Knowledge of food gathering processes was slowly lost, as were the rituals and stories associated with them. This loss of knowledge was compounded by “the ‘flagon times’ of the pre-land claim era” (Richardson 2001:89), during which many local men passed away due to “unhappiness about pastoral occupation” and the introduction and dispensation of alcohol, some knowledge of the Dreaming and the Law has been lost (Devitt 1994:6).

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<sup>78</sup>For the details of this refer to *Anmatjirra and Alyawarra Land Claim to Utopia Pastoral Lease, Report by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Mr Justice Toohey, to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and to the Administrator of the Northern Territory* (1980), Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

<sup>79</sup>For example, see Tim Rowse and his examination of the introduction of flour and its consequences for central Australia (1998). This is only one of many commodities brought to this area by Europeans.

The history of the Sandover region shows that even when the local Aboriginal population stays on their country, other factors may change their lives dramatically. A loss of traditional knowledge can still occur; in fact, during my stay many voiced the fear that more is gradually being lost through the demise of senior elders.





## Chapter 3: A historical overview of the development of the Utopia art movement – the ‘inner’ art world

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the movement of European settlers into the Sandover region and how this impacted upon the lives of local Aboriginal people. This chapter will examine the history of Utopia’s Indigenous art movement. I analyse the history from various angles and highlight the influence of art coordinators and art dealers on the development of the art movement. Art dealers, coordinators and the art market can influence areas on all aspects of artworks, such as the materials and techniques chosen at any point in time, the styles developed by the artists. The continuities and variations in the artworks produced will be further discussed in the subsequent chapters in which I address the three main currents I identify in Utopia art.

This chapter examines the development of the local art world in Utopia. I will address the historic beginnings of the art movement, from Jenny Green’s arrival in 1976 until the sale of the first canvas works under Rodney Gooch in the summer of 1988/89. In the second part of the chapter I will discuss the art centre and its different art coordinators. These coordinators have shaped the art movement through their engagement with the artists: it is under their supervision and encouragement that different types of collaborative projects have taken place.

In her recent monograph *Painting the Song* (2009) Diana James discusses the history of the Kaltjiti art movement in Fregon South Australia. She does so in relation to artists’ choice of materials and techniques, as well as the impact of art coordinators and their engagements with the art world. At the core of her analysis are questions of influence; particularly, connections with the wider desert region and understandings of Indigenous aesthetics. Despite Kaltjiti’s art movement spanning over a longer period of time than that of Utopia’s, certain similarities in their development emerge upon examination. One of the most significant points of comparison is the influential role of art advisors and teachers in relation to the development of the art in Ernabella<sup>80</sup>, Fregon and Utopia. Another is the fact that changes in materials and techniques do not necessarily equate to changes in style or topics: this is evident in the art from Fregon as well as Utopia.

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<sup>80</sup> Kaltjiti artists moved to Fregon and separated from the Ernabella art centre in 1975. They had learnt batik and drawing at the Ernabella mission prior to that. In addition to that they had also created drawings for Mountford in the 1940s (James 2009:26ff, 67).

James' monograph indicates a local art history of an Indigenous art movement. The interconnections between artists, art coordinators, art dealers, art practices, social environment and finally, techniques and materials each constitutes a different layer of an art movement. It is the aim of this chapter to delineate and track how all of these aspects are interwoven and form the history of the Utopia art movement.

### 3.2 The Beginnings

The history of the Utopia art movement is situated within the larger development of Indigenous art movements across Central Australia. In 1971 Geoffrey Bardon, an art teacher, went to Papunya (another Western Desert community) to work at the community school. He noticed the children in his classes drawing and painting, which triggered the idea of having them paint a wall of the school building. Some older men within the community discovered his intention and interfered, as the children had no right to paint the wall; instead, these men ended up painting it (Bardon 2004:20ff). This was the beginning of what has since become known as the Papunya Tula art movement. During the first five years of this movement the artists and their works became well known throughout Indigenous Australia, and word of their success spread rapidly (Bardon 2004:29ff and 36ff). Bardon's arrival in Papunya, and his subsequent work as the community's first art coordinator, is hailed as the beginning of the Western Desert Art movement (Johnson 2010:3). However, one could trace this movement even further back by highlighting the links between Papunya artists and Albert Namatjira.

Namatjira was inspired to paint by various Western artists who had travelled through Hermannsburg, where he lived. However, "Rex Battarbee's [visit] was the most important in terms of [...] Namatjira's development as a painter" (French 2002:4). For topics in his works, Namatjira drew from his Dreaming sites and other important places around Hermannsburg (French 2002:14ff, 29). His works were very popular and he quickly rose to fame. In 1957, he

was given the dubious privileges that constituted citizenship for an Aboriginal person in the Northern Territory at a time when these rights would not be shared with other 'full-blood' Aboriginal people who remained wards of the state. (French 2002:18)

This constituted a huge leap between two worlds and Namatjira sometimes struggled with his ambiguous role. One of his privileges was that he could drink in hotels and take

bottled liquor home; however, his extended family was not allowed to do so. “This anomalous situation was to lead to Albert Namatjira’s arrest and conviction on charges related to the supply of alcohol to members of his extended family” (French 2002:19). He served his sentence of six months, later on reduced to three months, in the government settlement of Papunya (Ibid.). Subsequently, Namatjira’s health deteriorated and in 1959 he passed away in the Alice Springs hospital after several different bouts of illness (Ibid. pp.21). Yet for many decades to come his desert landscapes decorated Australian households and these prints became part of the national identity.

A number of Papunya artists knew Namatjira, whom they approached to learn the techniques of watercolour painting (Megaw and Megaw 2000:202). While Hermannsburg is located approximately 150 kilometres northwest of Papunya, the men knew of Namatjira and his paintings due to Aboriginal people’s high mobility and close kin relationships across vast distances (Ibid). Several missions supplemented their income through the sale of artefacts created by Aboriginal people<sup>81</sup>. Hence some people had participated in a wider art market or art economy for quite some time – long before Bardon’s arrival in Papunya. Similarly, while Jenny Green, who introduced batik making at Utopia, arrived there only in 1976, men and women from the area had for a long time carved boomerangs, coolamons and other artefacts for cattle station owners and their personnel<sup>82</sup>.

Green came to Utopia as an adult education teacher in order to teach the local Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr people literacy and numeracy skills (Green 1998:39). In response to demands made by local women, Green’s adult education classes turned into classes on driving, sewing and batik making. These first batiks were tie-dye and woodblock printed batiks<sup>83</sup>. The growing interest in creating batiks inspired the creation of the workshop run by Yipati Kunytjiti Brown and Suzanne Bryce.

Suzanne Bryce worked for the Institute of Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs, conducting batik workshops at various communities throughout the 1980s (Green 1998:40)<sup>84</sup>. Brown had worked with the older female artists at the Ernabella Arts Centre prior to marrying and moving to Fregon cattle station in 1974. She then worked as a

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<sup>81</sup> Examples for this would be the batik-making in Ernabella.

<sup>82</sup> Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010).

<sup>83</sup> Personal communication with Lena Pwerl (September-October 2010).

<sup>84</sup> Personal communication with Diana James (October 2011).

skilled batik artist at the Fregon art centre from 1975-76<sup>85</sup>. Together Bryce and Brown taught Green<sup>86</sup> and the women of Utopia to use the *canting*<sup>87</sup> and 'paint' with wax on cloth. The early batiks created were clothing items sold at football games and the funds were then used to buy new supplies and keep the classes running (Green 1998:39)<sup>88</sup>.

In 1978 Green was joined by her friend Julia Murray who, like her, had graduated from The University of Melbourne and had a strong commitment to helping out in remote Indigenous communities<sup>89</sup>. Murray came up for a vacation, arriving on a camel; but due to the flooding of the roads, ended up staying and "fell in love with Utopia" (Murray in McDonald 1999:53). Becoming the first art coordinator of Utopia, Murray remained in the community until 1982. Green helped out with the batik group when needed but began to concentrate on her interest in researching the languages of the region<sup>90</sup>. Unlike Bardon in Papunya or Battarbee in Hermannsburg, neither Green nor Murray had any formal training in fine arts or as art teachers; yet both had artistic sensibilities and enjoyed engaging in such endeavours (Murray 2008:119).

Through Murray's appointment, what had started off as an adult education program with Green turned into an arts program (Richardson 1998:168ff). Working as an art coordinator was an arduous job and Murray was paid very little of her hours; she struggled for every little bit of funding and to get more batiks sold (Ibid.; and McDonald 1999:54). Her contract only covered ten hours a week, yet she worked full time. She had to constantly write applications to get more funding in order to sustain her position (Ibid.).

At the time Murray, Green and several other teachers lived in a house near Utopia Homestead<sup>91</sup>. Utopia Homestead, which is now one of the outstations, was the centre of the community when Green and Murray arrived (Richardson 2001:146). However, after the land claim hearing concluded and the Utopia pastoral lease was handed over to the traditional Indigenous owners, people moved back to their country. They chose to create outstations close to or on their traditional homelands (McDonald 1999:53) and, thus,

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<sup>85</sup> Today, Brown is an accomplished acrylic artist at Kaltjiti Arts.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Jenny Green (January 2010).

<sup>87</sup> A *canting* is an Indonesian batik tool, with which the hot wax is applied to the batik.

<sup>88</sup> Personal communication with Jenny Green (January 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Richardson (2001:93f.) points out that the Utopia homestead resembled a hippie commune during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

<sup>90</sup> Personal communication with Jenny Green (January 2010).

<sup>91</sup> Personal communication with Helen Kunothe Kngwarray and Elizabeth Kunothe Kngwarray (September 2009).

maintaining the art movement became a very difficult job. Access to people, who were scattered around a very large area, was much harder than it is at present. Roads were not regularly graded and driving from one outstation to another could take hours. Nevertheless Murray persevered in these difficult circumstances. The batik group had an old van with which they accessed the outstations and drove into town to sell batiks and replenish supplies<sup>92</sup>. Murray soon began to distribute materials to the women at their outstations and they started to create batiks in situ. While originally women would work together in large gatherings, along the riverbed of the Sandover River for example, this changed once they moved back to country.

Grants from the Commonwealth Education Department and the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australian Council for the Arts enabled the group to buy silk for their batiks and to formally establish themselves as the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* (McDonald 1999:54, Dalglish 2000:144). Thus initially the group was funded by two different sources, both of which had different agendas tied to their funds, which differs from other Indigenous art movements and their beginnings.

In 1980 the first exhibition of Utopia batiks was held in Alice Springs at the Mona Byrnes Gallery, Artworks and was attended by all members of the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* (Green 1998:42). Some of Green's glass paintings were included in this show alongside the Utopia women's batiks (Ibid.). This exhibition marked the transition from producing batiks as 'flash' clothing at the football games to creating batiks for a Western arts and crafts market. Rather than creating designs on cloth, to be turned into pants or shirts, the fabric used was changed to silk, lengths of which were hung at their first show (Murray 1998:53). The second show, *Floating Forests of Silk – Utopia Batik from the Desert*, took place a year later in Adelaide at the Adelaide Festival Centre Gallery. Once again a group of twelve women, together with Green and Murray, travelled in the batik truck to Adelaide for the opening (Murray 2008:121). As Dalglish points out, this show was instrumental in drawing attention to Utopia batiks and several public institutions acquired batiks after having seen them in Adelaide (2000:146).

The next milestone for the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* was a trip made by Murray and three female artists – Joy Petyarr, Rosemary Petyarr and Nora Petyarr – to

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<sup>92</sup> There are a number of stories regarding how Emily Kam Ngwarray learnt to drive in this truck (Perkins 2010:151). I don't think this is relevant to your thesis and you should take it out (though I admit it is a cute fact).



Indonesia in 1982 for the first ever collaborative project of Utopia artists (Murray 1998:54). Cross-cultural in character, this project between Indonesia and Indigenous Australia aimed at an exchange of new batik techniques. This was the first time the artists had ever been to another country and Murray noted that Indonesia's visible poverty left a far greater impression on the artists than did the actual batik workshops (Ibid.).

In the larger history of the art movement, this trip marks the first encounter between Utopia artists and Indonesian artists. From this point on exchanges between Indonesian and Utopia artists became ongoing and proved to be very fruitful for both groups. In fact knowledge about Indonesia gained from this first trip was disseminated and built on by other artists who participated in subsequent trips in the 1990s (see Green 1998:45ff.).

Not long after this trip Murray stopped working as an art coordinator and left the community. The art coordinators who followed tried to keep the enterprise afloat and staged many shows throughout Australia (Boulter 1991:26ff). Yet the difficulties of sustaining funding for the project and the art coordinator's position, combined with those of travelling between outstations in order to supply artist with materials, strained successive art coordinators: four coordinators followed on from Murray in the next five years (Ibid. pp.28)<sup>93</sup>.

Batik sales were often very slow as the cloth would travel from Utopia to Alice Springs and then possibly further, to one of Australia's major metropolitan centres. Such strains – of working with artists who expected payments straight away, despite the slow sale of their work – were issues Bardon mentioned in regards to his work in Papunya<sup>94</sup>. It is likely that any art coordinator would have experienced difficulty working in these conditions, particularly in light of the lack of funding support.

Aside from these practical issues, the fact that the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* was creating batiks rather than paintings would have further limited sales. At the time batiks struggled due to their categorisation as a craft rather than an art. Being sold as a craft item meant that the profit made would always be less than that received by other artists

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<sup>93</sup>Despite the difficulties of this period a highlight was the 1984 production of the film called *Utopia Women*. This film featured the day-to-day routine of an art coordinator and in a number of instances showed the sale of batiks, their collection from artists and the preparations necessary for their creation.

<sup>94</sup>See *Mr. Patterns* (2003), a film by Catriona McKenzie. It tells the story of Geoffrey Bardon and his memories of the beginnings of the Western Desert art movement.

producing equivalent acrylic paintings. The sixth Utopia art coordinator, Rodney Gooch, came to this realisation and consequently introduced acrylic on canvas painting.

In 1987 Gooch, who was then working as shop manager for the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), was asked by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) to take over guidance of the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* (Boulter 1991:29). Gooch first came to Alice Springs in the late 1970s while on his way to Afghanistan where he wanted to ride camels (Boulter 1991:28; McDonald 1999:58)<sup>95</sup>. He stopped in Alice Springs and started working for CAAMA, a community-focused and -run organisation, while Philip Batty was the director (Batty 2008:27). Gooch recorded local music in Indigenous communities and sold the tapes at the CAAMA Shop in town (Ibid.). CAAMA became the first outlet for Indigenous music in Central Australia. For his work, Gooch travelled a widely throughout the desert and visited Utopia many times (Gooch 1990:7). When Gooch was asked to take up the position working for the batik group he did so, while continuing to work in his position as CAAMA shop manager. Originally he was offered funding for two positions to run the batik project. In addition a car would be provided so that the artists would have been able to visit him in Alice Springs (Boulter 1991:29; McDonald 1999: 59). However, this offer did not eventuate and Gooch only received \$17,000 annually to run the group, which he used entirely for purchasing materials (McDonald 1999:59).

As Gooch continued to manage the CAAMA shop, he had to divide his time between working in the shop and driving to the various outstations of Utopia. On these trips he camped overnight out bush beyond the outstations<sup>96</sup>. He regularly toured all Utopia outstations in order to pick up batiks, pay the artists and hand out materials. He used this initial phase as a starting point to familiarise himself with the people, their work and the system of sales. In his first six months, no group projects were recorded and Gooch himself states that the first group project he instigated was *A Picture Story* in 1988 (Gooch 1990:7). During his early trips to the outstations, Gooch began to recognise the labour put in to producing batiks.

Gooch understood the problems of the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* early on; in fact, he was called in to 'rescue' the group. The group was placed under the umbrella of CAAMA due to financial issues and, through his work at the CAAMA store, Gooch soon realised that the batiks did not sell well or fetch great sums (Dalglish 2000:147).

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<sup>95</sup>Gooch decided not to go to Afghanistan in the end but stayed in Alice Springs.

<sup>96</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch, September 2009.

Working with musicians Gooch had experienced the effort necessary to establish, promote and profile artists (Gooch 1990:7). Using this knowledge Gooch began establishing a network of art dealers and collectors across Australia and, to some extent, overseas (Batty 2008:26-31); a network that would facilitate the explosion of the Utopia art movement and become Gooch's legacy.

Gooch's first step was establishing connections with potential buyers around the country, building on his contacts from the CAAMA Shop. Rather than leaving the CAAMA Shop as the only outlet for Utopia artworks, Gooch began contacting artists, art dealers, collectors and curators; drawing on the networks of colleagues and friends in an attempt to create an entrance into the fine art world for the *Utopia Women's Batik Group*. Gooch introduced the batiks into a fine art market in order to sell them with a different profile and at a higher price: as artworks rather than craft pieces.

Christopher Hodges from the gallery Utopia Art Sydney recalls how he first became involved:

In the beginning of 1988 I bumped into a woman who was a representative of the CAAMA Organization, [who was] returning from an exhibition that... they'd staged in Canberra [and] which had not gone terribly well. An exhibition of batik by the Utopia community and, also, they had some paintings there from the Papunya Tula artists. I met her at a friend's house where she was staying on her way back through Sydney and she showed us these batiks at a dinner party that we were at. And I said I could probably sell a couple for her, if she was interested, because I knew some people who had never been able to buy this work in Sydney and [had] never seen it before...

And then from there, I did sell that work. And I met Rodney Gooch, who was the manager of CAAMA Shop, and travelled to Alice Springs to meet the Utopia community. As a part of that, we staged an exhibition in our home [in Sydney] at the time of the gay Mardi Gras in 1988, which was the first time that we'd had an exhibition of art from Utopia, and we also had some Papunya Tula canvases at the same time. And that was a broad range of contemporary art lovers – not Aboriginal quite so much as contemporary art people – [who] came to the house. And that was, I suppose, the beginning.<sup>97</sup>

These initial steps raised an interest in the Utopia batiks at the high end of the fine art market. Through Gooch's contacts the batiks reached a different audience than artworks that were being sold in tourist, craft and ethnographic shops and galleries.

Another major factor in the Utopia art movements gaining recognition was the purchase of the group project *A Picture Story* by Robert Holmes à Court and his wife Janet. The

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<sup>97</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).

private collection's in-house curator at the time, Anne Marie Brody, was shown batiks of *A Picture Story* by Hodges (McDonald 1999:60ff). Prior to the sale Gooch had decided that the group project was only ever to be sold as a complete set (Gooch 1990:7) and subsequently the complete set of 88 silk batiks was acquired for the Robert Holmes à Court<sup>98</sup> Collection in Perth.

As Hodges mentions, the connecting theme of all 88 batiks is 'country': "One of the reasons [the project] was such a success is that it fitted in well with community values. A sense of equal worth was a key – each person would tell their story" (1999:20). Gooch suggested some sort of framing for the batiks as a stylistic element (Brody 1990:19). Most batiks from *A Picture Story* are framed by a border of stripes in two or three colours. Many artists who participated in this project refer to these stripes in their short descriptions of the batiks, noting these to be the designs used for the body painting of their *awely*<sup>99</sup> (see Brody 1990). Green interviewed the artists about their work, documenting the story depicted within each batik. Subsequently these stories came to be included in the English and Eastern Anmatyerr/Alyawarr publication that accompanied the exhibition, occupying the page opposite the batik's photo. Today this remains one of the few sources documenting the stories of Utopia artworks and including the artists' voices<sup>100</sup>.

This collection was exhibited and travelled widely, touring countries such as Ireland, Germany, England, and most recently Holland<sup>101</sup>. This exposure of Utopia artworks drew the artists into the international arena. Suddenly curators, collectors and art dealers were seeking out these works and, through their connections, widening the circle of interest.

After the success of this group project Gooch recognised the market reality that 'craft' would never sell within the same price range as 'fine art'. It was during an exhibition trip with Hodges and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri to the USA that Gooch accepted that in the art world painting had a greater appeal and wider market than batiks,. This determined him to trial painting with Utopia artists (McDonald 1999:61ff).

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<sup>98</sup> The collection has since changed names twice, first to Holmes à Court Collection and last year to Janet Holmes à Court Collection.

<sup>99</sup> *Awely* is the Eastern Anmatyerr word for women's ceremony.

<sup>100</sup> Within the catalogue, artists were grouped in relation to their place of residency at the time of creating the batiks. In fact, Gooch meticulously noted on the back of the artwork where it was made up until his death.

<sup>101</sup> Georges Petitjean included the details of this exhibition at his lecture at the University of Queensland Art Gallery in August 2011.



In a decisive move the next group project set – *A Summer Project* – was to comprise acrylic paintings on canvas. Gooch distributed 100 canvases and after a week collected 81 (Boulter 1991:32)<sup>102</sup> of them, which were subsequently exhibited in Perth. Most artworks from this project were again bought by the Holmes à Court Collection. Continuities between the batiks and these first paintings are evident, such as their being ‘framed’ in the same way by the artists.

Gooch’s approach to *A Summer Project* was unprecedented: he gave the artists four colours – ochre, black, white and red – canvases all of the same size and free choice of topic or theme for the painting. The fact that there was no topic given to the artists, such as plants or Dreaming stories in the *A Picture Story* project, resulted in the works’ visibly unbounded thematic and stylistic choices. The most prominent work, often discussed, from this first painting project is Emily Kam Kngwarray’s *Emu Woman* (Fig. 1).

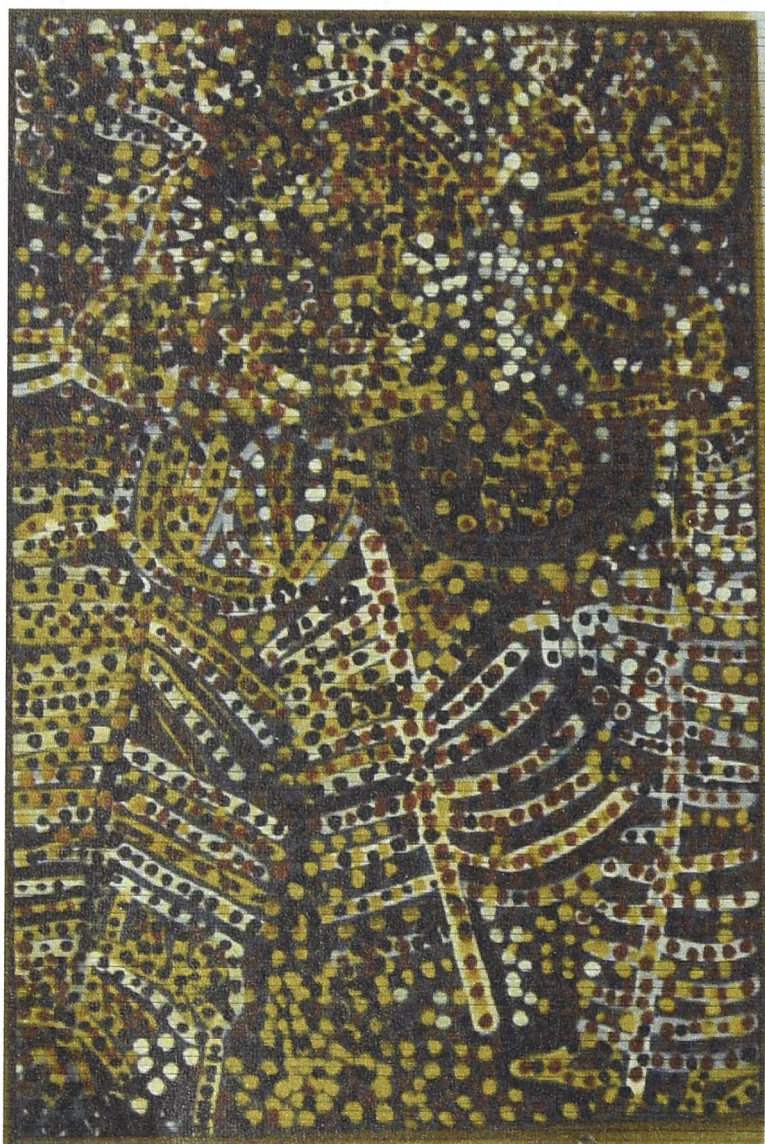


Fig. 1:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Emu Woman*,  
1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm,  
Hack, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

<sup>102</sup>This is the number given by Boulter (1991). In February 2009, 80 works from *A Summer Project* were included in the Janet Holmes à Court Collection. Marc Gooch recollected in a personal conversation that some of the works were sold to other private buyers and not to the Holmes à Court Collection (September 2009). As I was unable to locate the other works from this project I cannot determine with certainty how many paintings Gooch collected. Anne Brody remembered the trip to collect the paintings, as she accompanied Gooch and recalls collecting 88 paintings (Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody, February 2009).



Prior to *A Summer Project* Gooch paid all artists the same amount for their artworks. However, through the success of the group project and in particular through Emily Kam Kngwarray's subsequent success this would change. Anne Marie Brody recalls, when Gooch saw *Emu Woman* he was struck by it<sup>103</sup>. This moment is significant insofar as it marks the first time that a work by Kngwarray was highlighted, talked about and received special attention. One could argue that the other artists may not have known about Gooch's reaction; however, it was so unusual and beyond the norm of his treating everyone the same way that it is likely that such remarks and focus on one artwork would have been noticed and discussed by the other artists in the community. This was a turning point in Utopia. Yet in most respects the styles and topics depicted in the first set of Utopia canvas paintings shows continuity and follows on from the batiks.

Detailed comparisons of Utopia paintings and batiks reveal these continuities and show that despite the change of materials and techniques, there is consistency in the artworks' styles and choice of themes. There are analogies between the process of batik production and the aesthetic effect that is built up and the technique and composition of these early paintings. These analogies can be found in the art practices: Utopia artists applied wax with brushes during batik-making and as a consequence the skill in the 'drawing' of lines had been previously mastered by them. And the analogies can be found in the technique: when creating a batik one works with several layers of colours, starting with the lightest. This creates the finished effect of a dark background in the last step of the creation process. Most of Utopia's early paintings are on dark backgrounds – dark brown or black – letting the figures or motifs spring out from that dark colour. Although the techniques and the creation processes differ the effect of them are similar in these late batiks and early paintings.

Another similarity between Utopia paintings and batiks is the choice and representation of topics: examples of recurring themes in artworks are flora and fauna, as well as landscapes and camping scenes. Nature is a topic dominating batiks, while the narrative themes (landscapes and camping scenes for example) – although existent in batiks – became more frequent in painting. Flowers and plants appear interspersed and are sometimes the overarching topic of the entire batik. Thus, they are repeated on cloth many times over: for example, painted on with a brush and then again using a *cap*<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>103</sup> Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009).

<sup>104</sup> A *cap* is an Indonesian tool for batiks. This tool was only used after the artists' 1994 visit to Indonesia (see also the film *The Golden Cord* by Hilary Furlong).

These figurative and narrative topics already existed in the early batiks and can be found in the first set of paintings from 1988/89 up until present day<sup>105</sup>. They reflect therefore a part of the thematic and stylistic repertoire of Utopia artists.

The choice of colours in the paintings from *A Summer Project* appears very different to those used in batiks, lending a rather sombre brown tone to the overall collection. This stands in dramatic contrast to the bright and powerful colours of the batiks. The decision to use the four colours associated with traditional body painting and the decoration of boomerangs and spears was deliberate. It was influenced by the presumed marketability at the time of artworks painted in this colour range as this colour scheme was seen to be 'authentic' (Boulter 1991:32). By limiting the colour range to 'traditional' ochre tones, Gooch was trying to increase the chances of acceptance of these 'new' works within the already established art market of authentic Indigenous art. Furthermore, with this choice of colours Gooch was responding to a broader market issue: Australian audiences were ready to accept 'traditional fine art' but not yet 'contemporary art' from Aboriginal artists<sup>106</sup>.

Gooch continued down the path of group projects and tried to motivate the artists to experiment with different techniques and media. The next group project was the *Watercolour Series*, once again purchased by the Holmes à Court Collection. The Holmes à Court Collection holds the first three major group projects from the *Utopia Women's Batik Group*, each in a different medium (Ibid.).

Having successfully introduced painting to the community, Gooch, and artists Hodges and Helen Eager instigated *The Utopia Suite* project: a woodblock printmaking project. In order to teach the artists the technique, Hodges and Eager went to Utopia's various outstations and demonstrated it in situ. Gooch later picked up the finished woodblocks and sent them to Hodges in Sydney, who then printed the artists' proofs. *The Utopia Suite* is a series of 72 prints with an edition of 20, many of which found their way into various public collections across Australia as complete sets<sup>107</sup>. Like the previous projects, it shows variety in the themes and styles prevalent in Utopia at the time: bushtucker (Fig. 2), hunting stories (Fig. 3), landscapes (Fig. 4) and abstract prints (Fig. 5).

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<sup>105</sup> The different topics will be analysed in Part III, Chapters 8-10 of the thesis.

<sup>106</sup> See also Morphy's discussions on the developing market 1983 and 2008 for this.

<sup>107</sup> *The Utopia Suite* is part of the National Gallery of Australia collection, the Flinders University Art Museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery.

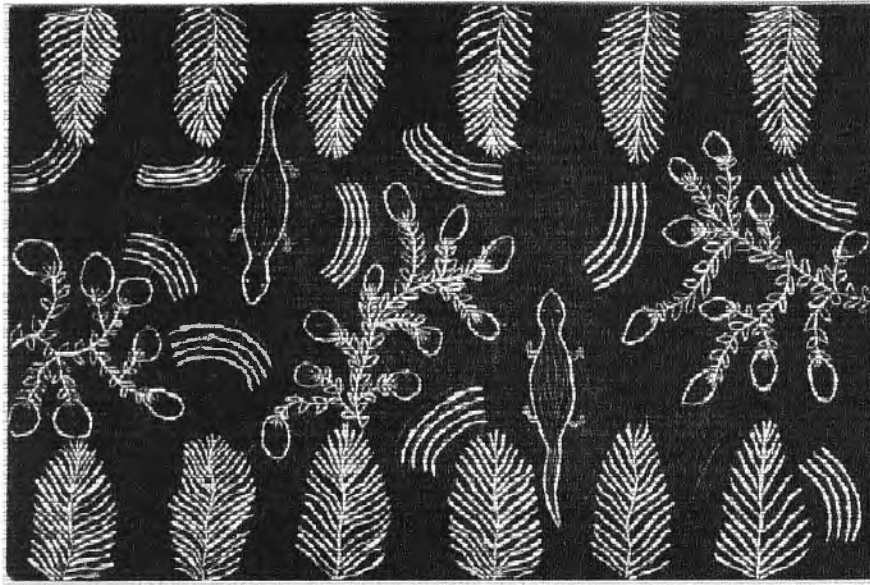


Fig. 2:  
Jeannie Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, 1990, 30 x  
44.9 cm image, 37.6  
x 52.2 cm sheet, one  
of 72, woodcut,  
various collections  
(The Utopia Suite)

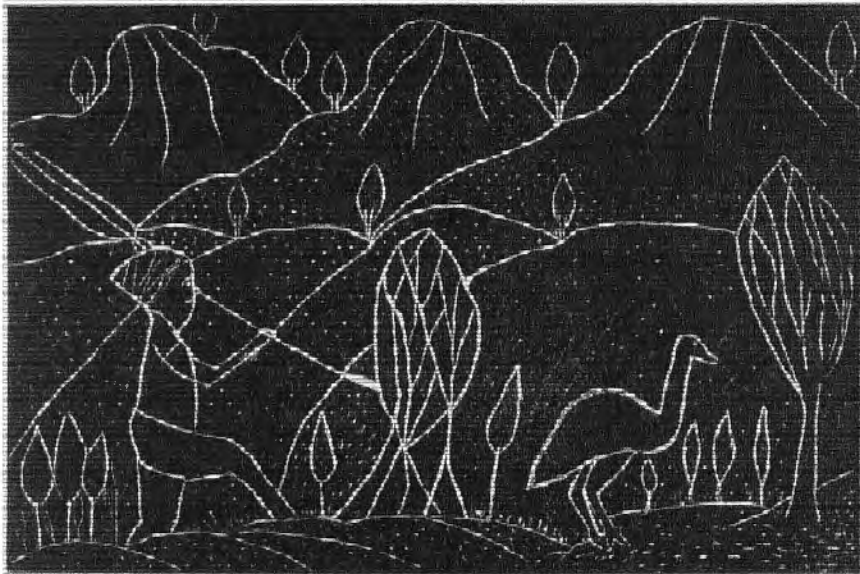


Fig. 3:  
May Belly: *Untitled*,  
1990, 30 x 44.9 cm  
image, 37.6 x 52.2  
cm sheet, one of 72,  
woodcut, various  
collections (The  
Utopia Suite)



Fig. 4:  
Mavis Holmes  
Petyarr: *Untitled*,  
1990, 30 x 44.9 cm  
image, 37.6 x 52.2  
cm sheet, one of 72,  
woodcut, various  
collections (The  
Utopia Suite)

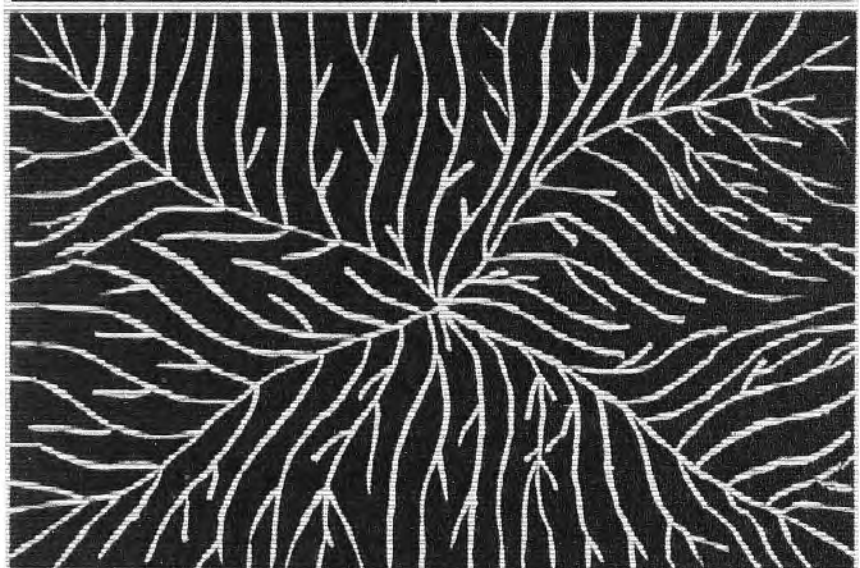


Fig. 5:  
Mavis Penangk:  
*Untitled*, 1990, 30 x  
44.9 cm image, 37.6  
x 52.2 cm sheet, one  
of 72, woodcut,  
various collections  
(The Utopia Suite)

These four group projects were the largest in size ever undertaken in Utopia<sup>108</sup>. All three series provide an overview of the variety of styles and topics in Utopia. Further, they

<sup>108</sup>Most participants in these group projects were women; with male community members seemingly detached from the art movement. An exception to this gender division is Lindsay Bird Mpetyan, who created a batik for *A Picture Story* (see Brody 1990:72-73).

demonstrate the ease with which the artists were able to learn new techniques; experimented with them and succeeded in them.

With the acquisition of *A Picture Story* by the Holmes à Court Collection and the transition to painting on canvas, a decisive change occurred: the art market took notice of Utopia artists (McDonald 1999:62). Gooch describes this development during a conversation with Dalglish in November 1998:

The whole system of supply and demand on the community was such that the turnover was what you would have expected after such a project had been running for over twenty years. ... It was something really out of the blue. It was extraordinary what happened out there. (2000:148)

The sale of *A Picture Story* and *A Summer Project* to the Holmes à Court Collection moved Utopia artworks out of the crafts realm into the fine arts arena. It created a sudden demand for Utopia artworks that challenged Gooch's capacities (Ibid. pp. 150ff). Links between artists and the art world – that is art collectors and dealers – were forged through these early sales. While previously public institutions had purchased artworks from Utopia, such sales did not have nearly the same effect as those to a private art collector<sup>109</sup>. Other dealers immediately became interested in Utopia art and “[at] this point, he says: Things became even more frenetic.” (Gooch 1998 in Dalglish 2000:150).

By mid-1989 Gooch decided to slowly withdraw from his close involvement with the artists, as outsiders were increasingly coming into the community and instigating debates about higher payments. Despite the large sums earned through the sales of their artworks, artists were under almost constant demand for money by their families (Dalglish 2000:151ff). Geoffrey Bardon reported similar difficulties in Papunya in regards to payments<sup>110</sup>; they are a constant issue with which art coordinators struggle on almost a daily basis. During the initial stages of the art movement Gooch was able to postpone the emergence of such issues by his policy of equal pay for all artists. Yet with fame and success came increased demands from families of the artists who earned more than others (Ibid.).

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<sup>109</sup>For example, the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory had acquired batiks from Utopia in the 1980s.

<sup>110</sup>See McKenzie (2003) film.



In part related to these developments, Gooch finally decided to quit his position as art coordinator in 1991. He moved to Perth for twelve months<sup>111</sup>. During this time Utopia artists frequently rang him on the telephone, asking him to return to Alice Springs in order to resume working with them. While he finally agreed to return to Central Australia, Gooch decided to switch from the role of community art coordinator to that of independent wholesaler<sup>112</sup>.

Before discussing Gooch's establishment of his private business, I will explore the history of the art centre over the subsequent decades. Under Gooch, no art centre had been established, but once he left, Allan Glaetzer and the Urapuntja Council set one up at Ahalper in Utopia.

### 3.3 The art centre story

Allan Glaetzer, Jan Ross-Manley, Simon Turner and Narayan Kozeluh ran the Utopia art centre in succession to one another. The centre was first called *Urapuntja Artists Utopia* and later, *Sandover Arts*. Originally the art centre was run under the umbrella organisation Desart, subsequently replaced by a collaboration between the Central Land Council and Desart. The closure of the art centre in 2002 is marked by a court case against Narayan Kozeluh, the former art coordinator of *Sandover Arts*<sup>113</sup>. Since then the art centre has remained closed and until recently no further discussions regarding its reopening have arisen. Yet other options have been explored, to which I will turn briefly in the final section of the chapter. Firstly I will elaborate upon the history of Utopia's art centre and demonstrate the difficulties involved in its successful maintenance.

The time frame of McDonald's research begins with Allan Glaetzer's role as art coordinator and ends when Jan Ross-Manley took over from Glaetzer. Approached by several female Utopia artists in 1989, Glaetzer participated in a council meeting during which it was decided that he would coordinate the *Utopia Women's Batik Group*. Subsequently Glaetzer was asked by the male Utopia artists to establish an arts and crafts business for the community, which in 1994 resulted in the art centre. Glaetzer and

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<sup>111</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008 and November 2011).

<sup>112</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch (September 2009).

<sup>113</sup>Personal communication with Narayan Kozeluh (September 2008 and October 2010).

Peter Gunner, the Council Chairman for Urapuntja Council<sup>114</sup> at the time, “applied successfully to ATSIC for money for a Women’s Centre and Art Centre” (McDonald 1999:79ff). These centres received enough funding to employ another co-ordinator – Molly Jandke – to help with the supervision of the batik practice, including dyeing and quality control. However, Jandke had little interest in Aboriginal art and soon left. Vesna Rozman followed on from her and became Glaetzer’s co-worker (Ibid. pp.80-81).

Living in the community Glaetzer attempted his own projects with Utopia artists. One of them initiating painting with ochres became something he saw in retrospect as his financial ruin (Ibid. pp.81-82). Found throughout the Utopia homelands, ochre was available to all and held meaning due to its use in traditional body painting. However, the art market’s response to these ochre works was negative, preferring an exhibition of Kngwarray’s acrylics to a group exhibition of Utopia artists working with traditional materials (McDonald 1999:82). This commercial failure meant the end of Glaetzer as art coordinator. Nevertheless, after having left the community art centre he continued to sell artworks from his home in Alice Springs. Glaetzer’s short-lived position is interesting in its own right, as it highlights another trend in dealings with Utopia art: the community art advisor working for the community and then for themselves as an independent art dealer. Gooch had chosen to become an independent art dealer prior to Glaetzer doing so; however, he never operated in both positions at the same time. The potential confusion of roles caused by people occupying both the position of arts advisor and private dealer has been suggested, as a possible contributory fact in the art centre’s eventual failure. This is an issue that John Oster, director of Desert, mentioned with reference to Utopia:

The managers [of the art centre] were not strongly aware of their responsibilities in that area -- in various cases [they] became more private dealers than staff working in an art centre. And that's very, very difficult and created a lot of dysfunction in those art centres, and had to do with their dysfunction and falling apart.<sup>115</sup>

After Glaetzer left the community as arts advisor Jan Ross-Manley took up the position in 1995. In between Glaetzer and Ross-Manley another important collaborative project took place, which resulted in a trip to Indonesia that fostered connections between batik

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<sup>114</sup> Until 2009 the name for the council of the Utopia homelands was Urapuntja Council. As part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response councils were grouped into shires. Since then Utopia has become part of the Barkly Shire.

<sup>115</sup> Personal communication with John Oster (September 2008).

artists and led to the important collaborative exhibition *Hot Wax*<sup>116</sup>. This show became a touring exhibition and was featured in Sydney's 1997 *The Festival of Dreamings* at the Powerhouse Museum. Together with Ross-Manley batik artists travelled to Sydney for this festival and held workshops to engage with their audience<sup>117</sup>. Ross-Manley's expertise was in batik production; therefore she decided to focus on batik artists perhaps more than on painters, sculptors or people working in other art<sup>118</sup>. Her presence in the community resulted in an incredible surge in batik production and greater engagement in collaborative works, such as print workshops with Basil Hall and Northern Editions<sup>119</sup>.

Both McDonald and Dalgleish, who conducted their research during the time Ross-Manley served as art coordinator, experienced difficulties working with her and found her overprotective of the batik artists (McDonald 1999:13ff; Dalgleish 2000:200). Hence, perhaps because of difficult personal relationships, much less was recorded about this phase in the history of the art movement than might otherwise have been the case. I will therefore focus on the two known major collaborative projects that took place under the guidance of Ross-Manley, in order to show her influence on the Utopia art movement.

By drawing attention away from painters and giving room to batik and print techniques, Ross-Manley invested in new group projects. The *Hot Wax* project was a collaborative venture between artists from Utopia and batik artists from the Brahma Tirta Sari workshop in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The collaboration was financially supported by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) in Darwin and its South East Asian and textile curator at the time, James Bennett<sup>120</sup>. Bennett accompanied Green and a group of female Utopia artists to Yogyakarta in 1994. The group of artists consisted of: Lena Pwerl, Ada Bird Petyarr, Hilda Pwerl, Myrtle Petyarr, Violet Petyarr, Gloria Ngal, Joy Petyarr and Barbara Weir. The first step to the collaboration took place at the Ahalper art centre, where women were asked to draw Dreaming designs, motifs or elements on paper<sup>121</sup>. These drawings were then sent to the workshop in Indonesia in

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<sup>116</sup>See *Hot Wax* exhibition catalogue as well as the film *The Golden Cord* by Hilary Furlong.

<sup>117</sup>The Powerhouse Museum records, accessed in March 2010.

<sup>118</sup>I was not able to determine whether Ross-Manley was in fact employed as manager of the batik group rather than as an arts coordinator.

<sup>119</sup>Personal communication with Basil Hall (January 2010).

<sup>120</sup>MAGNT records, accessed January 2010.

<sup>121</sup>Personal communication with Nia Fliam (April 2010).



order to create *caps*<sup>122</sup> from them. Upon the Utopia artists' arrival in Indonesia the finished *caps* were presented to them. Not only did the women go on to create batiks with their own *caps* and learn new batik techniques<sup>123</sup>, but they also worked closely with the artists Agus Ismoyo and Nia Fliam (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6:  
Nia Fliam & Agus Ismoyo together with  
Lena Pwerl: *Goanna and Wayang*, 1995,  
112.5 x 238 cm, batik on silk, MAGNT,  
Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

The overarching theme chosen for the works were the traditional beliefs and stories of both groups. The second part of this collaboration was Ismoyo and Fliam's journey to Utopia and other Indigenous Australian communities, where they gained insight into the culture and lives of the artists. In 1995 *Hot Wax* was first shown at the MAGNT in Darwin, subsequently touring Australia as a travelling exhibition in 1997. Yet this did not mark the completion of the project: Ismoyo and Fliam continued working on the batiks until 2005<sup>124</sup> and some were exhibited in 1999 at the Asia-Pacific Triennial 3 in Brisbane. Partly because of the extended nature of the project not all batiks started in 1995 during the trip to Yogyakarta, ended up in the MAGNT collection. Overall *Hot Wax* was a stepping stone in the more than decade-long collaboration between the Yogyakarta-based artists Ismoyo and Fliam and the Utopia artists Lena Pwerl, Ada Bird

<sup>122</sup>The *cap* is an Indonesian batik tool. It is a metal stamp with which one can create evenly patterned batiks.

<sup>123</sup> Hilary Furlong went with the group to Yogyakarta and filmed the whole trip. The film shows many instances of learning the new techniques. (*The Golden Cord*, from Ronin Films 1995).

<sup>124</sup> Personal communication with Nia Fliam (March 2010).



Petyarr, Hilda Pwerl, Myrtle Petyarr, Violet Petyarr, Gloria Ngal, Joy Petyarr and Barbara Weir<sup>125</sup>.

A second major collaboration initiated by Ross-Manley, which also had long term effects, was the participation of a group of Utopia artists in a print workshop run by Basil Hall and Northern Editions in 1996 at the Charles Darwin University in Alice Springs<sup>126</sup>. Some of the artists had previously created a woodblock for *The Utopia Suite*, while others had no experience with print techniques. The first group was small, with only six artists participating in the workshop. The second project consisted mainly of men. Ross-Manley's husband travelled with them to Darwin where he joined in the print-making.<sup>127</sup> Basil Hall continued to work with Utopia artists on various pursuits over the following decade: for example, collaborating with the community art centre and arranging for a group of prints from Kathleen Petyarr and her granddaughter Abie Loy Kemarr to be exhibited with Gallerie Australis<sup>128</sup>. One difference between this collaboration and the collaboration with Brahma Tirta Sari is that Hall did not give topics to the artists, neither did he etch for himself. Instead Hall taught the artists about the different stages and processes involved in print-making. He worked with the artists to show them how they can achieve the desired results. Hall produced the prints, first with Northern Editions and then with his own business, Basil Hall Editions. Decisions regarding the colour of prints were made in conjunction with the artists and subsequently the prints were created in Darwin. The plates were then returned to the community art centre; however, I could not determine their whereabouts during my fieldwork.

These two large group projects shaped the time of Ross-Manley's presence in the community as an art coordinator. Several problems arose that lead to bankruptcy of *Utopia Awelye Batik Aboriginal Corporation* and therefore to Ross-Manley leaving the community. The events were reported about in a newspaper article by Dennis Schulz in *The Age*, in November 2000:

An art centre in the Utopia area that regularly produces work by some of Australia's best-known indigenous artists recently went bankrupt with batiks and

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Personal communication with Basil Hall (January 2011). The conference was called "Kaltja Business Conference".

<sup>127</sup> In various art centres it has been observed that men tend to create art if there are male art coordinators working there and vice versa. Therefore men's growing interest in the art centre may well be attributed to the fact that Ross-Manley's husband was present and engaged with the artists.

<sup>128</sup> Personal communication with Basil Hall (January 2011).

paintings worth thousands of dollars unaccounted for [...]. ATSIC took the unusual step of defunding the Utopia Awe[l]ye Batik Aboriginal Corporation, sending it into liquidation.

The Awe[l]ye Batik Corporation was operated by Jan Ross-Manley. According to the report, Ross-Manley's two-year reign divided a community of artists. In an area that has 200 working artists, the report alleges, Ross-Manley marketed the batik prints of only five or six. One ATSIC executive described the report, written in 1998, as the most critical of any Aboriginal organisation he had ever read.

Excerpts from the report include: "It was apparent to the review team that management acts alone in an undercurrent of hostility and mistrust... Two prominent Aboriginal artists advised the review team that prominent Aboriginal artists are threatened, coerced and herded against their will to complete projects... Management record keeping is described as chaotic with the result that some artist payments are up to two years in arrears.

"As far as the review could ascertain, Utopia does not have a receipt book to record either direct sales or sales made on consignment through galleries... It is our opinion that the Utopia Art Centre's contribution to the Aboriginal community is overwhelmingly negative."

Because ATSIC never terminated Ross-Manley's job, even while defunding the centre, she was able to put in a successful claim to the liquidator for unpaid wages. She also received a \$70,000 grant from the Australia Council after the corporation had been liquidated. (Schulz 2000)

In response to this article about Ross-Manley, she sued for defamation and won in 2004 an out-of-court settlement (The Mayne Report 2011: Australians who have sued for defamation<sup>129</sup>). Ross-Manley's dismissal was contentious and may have reflected the difficulties of the job of art coordinator and the multiplicity of roles they are expected to undertake.

The problem of mismanagement, lack of clarity about responsibilities, mentioned by Oster, and the great issue about record keeping pervaded the ensuing history of the art movement<sup>130</sup>. The difficulties that arose for the art centre encouraged the artists of Utopia to develop even closer relationships with independent art dealers. Although there has been much written about the success of art centres as a model for Aboriginal community art businesses, the artists of Utopia have had quite different experiences with arts coordinators and art centres. These intra-community developments had an impact on the strength of relationships with wholesalers and art dealers, which in turn influenced the agency of the artists. Utopia artists became aware of the different options of selling artworks. It has been argued that Ross-Manley's emphasis on the batik artists

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<sup>129</sup>See: <http://www.maynereport.com/articles/2009/03/10-1024-2493.html>, last sighted 01/03/2012

<sup>130</sup>Personal communication with John Oster (September 2008).

rather than working with painters, meant that those producing paintings had to find buyers themselves and learn to negotiate effectively. From selling a few artworks on the side in the late 1980s to early 1990s, sale of paintings at this stage occurs largely through private sales rather than through the art centre.

Simon Turner, the newly appointed arts coordinator for *Urapuntja Artists Utopia*, tried to change these relationships that had developed between artists and art dealers, and to strengthen the position of the art centre as the exclusive wholesaler. *Urapuntja Artists Utopia* was established after the *Utopia Awelye Batik Aboriginal Corporation* had gone into liquidation. ATSIC funded the new art centre through Desart (Simon Turner in Jenny Green 2009a). Turner, a formerly Brisbane-based artist<sup>131</sup>, set up his own networks with art dealers across the country and did not draw much on existing ones between artists and dealers in the southern states. He may have been building on contacts that he had established throughout his career as an artist. During his time at *Urapuntja Artists Utopia*, his engagement with the artists focussed in part on group works. He shifted the attention away from the batik artists towards the painters and encouraged some sculptural work. At the time he most certainly had to compete with independent art dealers in acquiring works from the artists. The art centre no longer had the status of exclusivity that had been achieved in some other communities: Too many dealers had already made their way into the community and established long-standing relationships with the artists. To establish exclusive relationships between the art centre and the artists was almost impossible in an environment like this.

Turner's network of art dealers included fine art dealers, who had specialized in Indigenous Australian art, but who were not as well known in the community as the art dealers they had worked with through Rodney Gooch for example. The choice of such a variety of art dealers as representatives of *Urapuntja Artists Utopia* meant that the different quality works would be easily supplied to the multiple ends of the market. During Turner's time two noteworthy projects were developed in addition to the ongoing engagement with Basil Hall and Northern Editions. These were the *Seven Sisters [Petyarr]* project<sup>132</sup> and *Utopian Modern Women's Collection 1999-2002*, which was exhibited at Co-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery in Sydney, in 2008. The first project for the first time involved the seven sisters Petyarr: Gloria, Kathleen, Myrtle, Violet, Ada,

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<sup>131</sup>Desert Power: Aboriginal Artist Launches new style, in Alice Springs News 18/8/1999, <http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/0629.html>, (last sighted 21/04/2011).

<sup>132</sup>The project took place during Turner's time at Urapuntja Arts, however, his involvement in it was very limited (Personal communication with Simon Wright, January 2012).

Gina and Nancy. They painted a large canvas together, and the painting was filmed. Before the painting process, started long discussions took place amongst the sisters in regards to the topic of the painting such as the particular space each person would paint and the colours to be used for each section. The main story of the painting was the country for *Arnkerrth*, Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming that they inherited *atnangker* from their grandfather and father. An exhibition followed in Brisbane at the *Brisbane City Gallery* in 2001. During the exhibition other works accompanied the large painting, however, all of them focussed on *awely* – women’s ceremony and body painting<sup>133</sup>. This project was unique in having family members intentionally paint together their shared *altyerr*, *Arnkerrth*. It gave them the opportunity to express their connections with each other as well as their different responsibilities in regards to looking after *atnangker*.

The second project is the *Co-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery* exhibition in 2008, and showcased the peaks of several artists from Utopia. Although the works were exhibited in 2008 at a private gallery; they had all been created between 1999 and 2002 while Turner was working as the community art coordinator for *Urapuntja Artists*. Their key themes and styles were represented with some exemplary works. The sheer size of the works was unusual, for some of the artists had previously worked only with smaller canvases. Ranging between two and three metres in length, these very large works almost seemed to aim for an institution rather than a private collector. The projects provide the major available record of Turner’s period at Utopia I could access during my research<sup>134</sup>.

The northern Alyawarr community of Ampilatwatja got their own art centre in 1998<sup>135</sup>. Narayan Kozeluh, was approached by some artists to see if he was interested in helping the artists and setting up an art centre for the community<sup>136</sup>. At the time he was living in Ampilatwatja with his wife, a teacher in the community at the time, and their children. Ampilatwatja did not have an art centre prior to the one established by Kozeluh’s. He had to start from scratch in setting up the networks and facilities – having run an art centre before.

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<sup>133</sup>Personal communication with Simon Wright, who was the exhibitions manager at the time at Brisbane City Gallery (January 2012).

<sup>134</sup>However, I know that a database was set up and maintained during Turner’s presence as art coordinator.

<sup>135</sup>The inaugural show of the art centre was staged at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art in 2000.

<sup>136</sup>Personal communication with Narayan Kozeluh (September 2010).



During this period *Urapuntja Artists Utopia* and *Artists of Ampilatwatja* became a single art centre, *Sandover Arts*. *Sandover Arts* received funding not only from ATSIC but also from the CLC. When Kozeluh was developing the art centre at Ampilatwatja, he was rung one morning to come to Ahalper and talk for the artists at a meeting with representatives of Desart, ATSIC and the CLC scheduled for the day<sup>137</sup>. The general gist of this meeting was the intention to shut down the art centre and leave the artists without any further community organisation managing the arts. The situation was very tense between the artists, ATSIC representatives as well as Desart and the CLC. The decision was made with the support of the artists to turn to Kozeluh for help and asked him to run the art centre. This increased his work load tremendously but he took it on nevertheless. Kozeluh's relationships with the artists in Ampilatwatja as well as in Utopia were very close, and he genuinely cared about the artists and tried to encourage many new artists to experiment with various media and techniques. The support for an art centre that covered Ampilatwatja was a factor in the revival of art coming from the northern Alyawarr which has flourished over the past decade. Kozeluh started investing his own money into the art centre in order to help it become more successful in less time. He saw the artists flourish and nurtured the relationships with them: he was taken out bush on several occasions to attend ceremonies and to learn about the Dreaming. This deep bond was crucial to him and the community when he took Desart and the CLC in 2005 to court (Finnane 2005). In the proceedings Desart and the CLC claimed that he lacked records for artworks sold and income yielded through them. Another major problem was how the money was managed and what happened to the material after he left. After the court case Kozeluh maintained his relationships with artists from both communities and has instigated exhibitions in Melbourne, Alice Springs and Brisbane<sup>138</sup>.

The court trial was followed by the closure of the art centres in Utopia and Ampilatwatja. The artists of Utopia were left alone in regards to the management of art. When I arrived in 2008, I was shown the old Women's and Art Centre: A derelict building at the edge of Ahalper, not occupied and falling apart. Since the closure of the art centre in 2002, no further money has been given to the community in order to set up another art centre or to support the community on this path. Since Kozeluh left there has

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<sup>137</sup>Personal communication with Narayan Kozeluh (October 2010).

<sup>138</sup>The latest exhibition, held at *Woolloongabba Art Gallery* in Brisbane from 16 December 2011 until 21 January 2011 was called *Divine Geometry*, the previous exhibition took place at *Peta Appleyard Gallery* in Alice Springs from 7 March until 3 April 2009, was called *The Ever Present Past*.

been no art centre in Utopia as well as no art coordinator. However, the structures of dealings between the artists and the art market, that developed in the late 1990s, have become reinforced and in fact made much stronger over the past decade. A great involvement of some wholesalers and a group of independent art dealers working closely with Utopia artists dominate the current situation, which was shaped originally in the late 1980s. These networks and their dissemination of Utopia artworks right across Australia and the world is the focus of the following chapter.

## **Chapter 4: An historical overview of the development of the Utopia art movement – the ‘outer’ art world**

### 4.1 Introduction

Having examined the developments of the ‘inner’ art world, we now turn to the ‘outer’ art world of the Utopia art movement. While the ‘inner’ art world comprises of artists, art coordinators and art centre staff, the ‘outer’ art world consists of the art dealers and wholesalers who travel to Utopia and the networks that connect them to the national and international market. This chapter traces the history of engagement between artists and dealers: how specific art dealers have established contacts, relationships and networks at different points in time.

The second part of this chapter will highlight the move towards one-on-one artist-dealer relationships and how this is reflective of a general trend where, over the past decades of the Utopia art movement, the attention has shifted from the community-focused art group to the individual artist.

### 4.2 Art dealers and their networks

Various art dealers have made their way into Utopia over the past decades. This section of the chapter will highlight different approaches dealers have taken to gain access to the community and their varying backgrounds and interests in Utopia art. Each major art dealer or wholesaler has an established network spreading across Australia and the world. Some have become dual agents, art dealers and wholesalers, whilst others have remained in their position as either art dealer or wholesaler.

As an art coordinator, Rodney Gooch had established a network of dealers and collectors of Utopia art (see Batty 2008). Following in his footsteps various art dealers from across the country made their way into the community and started setting up their own networks. As these networks grew and Utopia became evermore connected to the Australian art world, the Utopia art movement gained international momentum. Several major players have been important to the development of the Utopia art movement over time and I will now introduce them, detailing their history and connection to Utopia.

Gooch’s move to Perth not only marked a change in terms of staff within the community, but ushered in a new era: an era, in which art coordinators’ engagement

with the art market would lessen, whilst the direct involvement between artists and art dealers would increase and strengthen. This shift towards artists' greater agency was partially facilitated by the focus of the art centre on batiks rather than painting, despite the fact that paintings were demanded by the market and fetched better prices. The increasing agency of artists is also due to various art dealers travelling into the community to buy directly from the artists in order to get to the 'source'.

The early 1990s were dominated by an enormous growth in demand for Indigenous artworks in the national and international art market<sup>139</sup>. Despite a recession in the early 1990s, the art market quickly rebounded and a particular interest in Kngwarray's paintings emerged. At the same time Utopia's community art centre had begun to limit its efforts to batiks, regardless of the art market's high demand for paintings from this area.

#### **4.2.1 Rodney Gooch, Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce - their network**

Upon his return to Alice Springs from Perth, Gooch became an independent wholesaler and art dealer. In his short time as art coordinator he had established a far-reaching network of art dealers, connoisseurs and collectors, as well as having encouraged the production of a wide range of high quality and innovative works from the artists. Admittedly, the seeds for this innovation were already visible in artists' batiks; however, the new range of media and techniques now facilitated the artists in exploring their manifold topics. As a private dealer Gooch continued to work with the art dealers with whom he had previously established contacts while art coordinator for CAAMA. These were, amongst others, Christopher Hodges from *Utopia Art Sydney*, Diane Mossenson from *Indigenart* and *Mossenson Galleries* (Perth and Melbourne), Beverley Knight from *Alcaston Gallery* (Melbourne), Michael Eather from *Fireworks Galleries* (Brisbane), Bill Nuttall from *Niagara Galleries* (Melbourne) and *Chapman Galleries* (Canberra). These locations indicate Gooch's Australia-wide network, with Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane represented by these galleries. Catering to the upper end of the fine art market, these dealers and their networks connected Utopia with galleries around the world. While some of the art dealers had initially sourced works from Utopia via the art centre, when the art centre's focus shifted towards batiks they either stopped showing Utopia art altogether or began to purchase it from Gooch. At least two

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<sup>139</sup>For further detail on that refer to Altman and Taylor 1990.



galleries, *Utopia Art Sydney* and *Alcaston Gallery*<sup>140</sup> in Melbourne were founded solely in order to represent art from Utopia. Over time their focus changed, with the former showing the works of Gloria Petyarr only on rare occasions and the latter ceasing to exhibit art from Utopia at all. These developments were influenced by politics within the Aboriginal art world as well as the situation particular to Utopia, where artists kept selling works to ‘just anyone’.

Rodney Gooch was joined in his business by his nephew, Marc Gooch in 1993. The latter arrived in Alice Springs in December 1993 and started working with his uncle straight away. He accompanied him on trips out bush and then, after a few trips, began going to Utopia on his own. Rodney Gooch made only four trips to Utopia after Marc began working for him, with his nephew making the weekly trips to Utopia and its outstations to source artworks and hand out materials instead. Uncle and nephew became business partners and set up the company *Goodfellow Arts*. This business name lasted only for a short time before being changed to *Mulga Bore Artists*, which remained the name until 2000.

Janet Pierce – who had started a degree in fine arts at the Geelong Institute of Technology but did not complete it – joined the Gooch’s business in late 1995, accompanying Marc on his regular trips out bush. In 1999 all three set up another business, *Marlu Productions*, which was overseen by Rodney Gooch and ran for about two years. From 2000 until his death Rodney Gooch’s own company was called *Red Dirt Art*.<sup>141</sup>

After Gooch passed away, Marc Gooch changed the focus of *Marlu Productions* operations with Utopia artists and limited the number of artists with whom he and his partner, Janet Pierce, dealt. Rather than engaging with a large group of constantly varying artists, Pierce and Gooch decided to limit their dealings to a dozen or so and to profile these. Thus, these three players are integral to the general development of the Utopia art movement and its shift towards promoting individual artists rather than the whole community.

A key factor in their relationships with artists for both Goochs and Pierce has always been the ability to instigate new experiments and challenges for the artists. Marc Gooch claims that the artists had always done their best when trying out new materials and

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<sup>140</sup>Personal communication with Beverley Knight (October 2008).

<sup>141</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch (April 2011).

techniques, as 'they would live up to the challenge'<sup>142</sup>. However, as indicated above, in 1992 Gooch was no longer the only person dealing with Utopia artists. Outside of his network of art dealers and connoisseurs, other dealers had started to make their way into Utopia and to build their own networks. I will now introduce some of the other main players and their networks. By illuminating these, it will become apparent how different dealers are connected with each other and different parts of the art market.

In comparison to his predecessors, Rodney Gooch tried to engage men as well as women from the very first stages onwards<sup>143</sup>. Perhaps as a man he could more easily interact with them and involve them in art production. The introduction of painting on canvas excited the men and made them interested in painting (Ibid.)<sup>144</sup>. However, the men did not paint for Gooch alone.

#### 4.2.2 Donald and Janet Holt

Donald and Janet Holt, the property owners of the adjacent cattle station, were approached first by some women in 1988 and soon after by a group of men from Utopia who wanted to paint<sup>145</sup>. Donald Holt recalls his wife's interactions with some Utopia women:

My wife Janet was approached by Emily, Lily and Joy Kngwarr[ay] several times in 1988 and asked to supply them art materials. I must admit I was not overly impressed by the first efforts, but after a few weeks I decided to sell a couple of my Papunya paintings through Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne in order to finance a big move into purchasing the Utopia paintings. I have continued to support and invest in Utopia art ever since. (Donald Holt, <http://www.delmoregallery.com.au/?c=672>, last sighted 14/04/2011)

Donald Holt was then approached by some men from Utopia, out of which a group of male paintings emerged. This was the first group of paintings by men and belongs to the Holt Collection at *Delmore Gallery*. This body of work forms a counterpart to the women's paintings in *A Summer Project* and the men's paintings depict the stories of ancestral beings, their travels through country and their interactions with each other.

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<sup>142</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch (April 2011).

<sup>143</sup>Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009).

<sup>144</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008). Other accounts of developments in art centres have highlighted the fact that Aboriginal men prefer to work with male art coordinators and Aboriginal women prefer working with female art coordinators. The early emphasis on men's works may have to do with the majority of art coordinators being male.

<sup>145</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010).

The focus of the paintings is a complimentary aspect of the Dreaming to those represented in the women's batiks and paintings. As men look after a different part of the Dreaming, their paintings depict a different component of these Dreaming stories<sup>146</sup>. The men and women who approached Janet and Donald Holt soon began painting for them.

Holt grew up on the cattle station Delmore Downs, which borders on the former Utopia station. His family was one of the first settlers in the region and has lived there for generations:

My grandparents were pioneers who departed from a little town called Mungindi on the Queensland – New South Wales border in 1921. They left in a covered wagon with a few hundred sheep, thirteen horses, some goats, a handful of chickens and four calves. Much of their route was unexplored with very little available water. Dependent on rain, they often had to wait at waterholes until they were filled. No white women and very few white men had been before them on the route they took in to the Northern Territory.

After making a temporary camp on the Plenty River, my grandfather proceeded to get to know the country and the local Aborigines. From the beginning my grandparents and their children had a good, strong relationship with the Eastern Arrernte, Anmatyerre and Alyawarra people. (Ibid.).

Holt himself grew up side-by-side with Aboriginal children of the area and he has maintained close and friendly relationships with the people:

Until I was sent away to boarding school at the age of eight, I hardly saw any other white kids apart from my brothers, sister and a stray cousin or two. As teenagers we shared lots of fun mustering on motorbikes and horses, chasing kangaroos and perenties (giant lizards), tracking brumby horses and swimming in the waterholes. (Ibid.).

Through his grandfather and father he was exposed to Aboriginal art and artefacts from an early age:

My grandfather used to collect Aboriginal artefacts. He never sold them, preferring to store them in big tea chests. I knew he valued them as he occasionally showed us an exceptionally well made weapon, explaining how it was made and why. From the early 1950's my mother collected and displayed beautiful art on the walls at Delmore. In the 1960's she collected quite a few of the Hermannsburg watercolours. (Ibid.).

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<sup>146</sup>I will further expand on the particularities of the choice and depiction of themes in Part Three of the thesis.

In a personal conversation with me, Holt recollected how his mother used to paint and how he grew up with these artworks surrounding him. This appreciation of art was of crucial influence when he set up *Delmore Gallery* in 1989<sup>147</sup>.

His former wife, Janet Holt, used to work in Papunya for *Papunya Tula Arts* as an art coordinator. Through this work Janet Holt had become familiar with recording stories of paintings, getting art supplies, developed knowledge of the different materials used and established links with various art galleries across the country. The Holts maintained a comprehensive recording system from 1989 until present, in which they tracked all art works ever purchased by them<sup>148</sup>. Their recording system is an invaluable source in the contentious history of the Utopia art movement, since artworks commissioned and purchased by the Holts permit one to trace artistic developments.

In summary, from as early as 1989 Rodney Gooch and Donald Holt worked with the artists of the Utopia community. Christopher Hodges described Gooch's and Holt's relationship as one of 'rivalry' between them:

I can still recall how disappointed [Rodney Gooch] was because those women had been making batiks since the late '70s and a few people had made a few private ones, as they were called in those days, but no one had ever systematically undermined the community organization<sup>149</sup>.

Gooch felt that 'his girls', as he used to call the female artists from Utopia, had betrayed him by working with someone else. This sentiment persisted despite his becoming an independent art dealer. Gooch questioned whether other art dealers would have the same interest in art from Utopia as he did. His relationships with art dealers who travelled into Utopia and purchased works from artists in situ were tense. Gooch and the Holts were joined in the early 1990s by a variety of other art dealers who made their way into Utopia in order to source artworks directly. These other dealers gained access to Utopia artists in a multitude of ways: for example via art coordinators, by driving into the outstations and starting to purchase works, or by artists offering works to them<sup>150</sup>.

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<sup>147</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010).

<sup>148</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).

<sup>150</sup>The latter phenomenon has been particularly widespread in the last decade with artists driving to surrounding stations offering their works, or selling to private buyers travelling into the community.



### 4.2.3 Tim Jennings and the *Mbantua Gallery* network

One art dealer who started buying art from Utopia while Allan Glaetzer was the Centre's art coordinator was Tim Jennings. Jennings had worked in Ahalper as a police officer in the 1980s, meaning that people knew him and felt comfortable around him. He set up a store on Gap Road in Alice Springs and started taking artworks for payment from people:

Well I had a store, a general store. And it had a little art section in it, and 99.9% of our customers were Aboriginal people, and they would bring in art. I would buy it from them, and store it in boxes most of the time.<sup>151</sup>

From this little shop Jennings developed a gallery.

In the early 1990s Jennings used to drive out to Utopia with a store truck and provide people with food: "The store had a truck that used to go to Utopia. We'd trade supplies every week. So I got to know the Utopian people very well."<sup>152</sup> Jennings subsequently set up *Mbantua Gallery*<sup>153</sup>. He regularly sent out a truck with painting supplies, paints, brushes, canvases and linen. The truck picked up paintings from many other outstations in addition to Utopia. Jennings described the dramatic changes he experienced:

It's been an incredible change. When we first got involved with the Utopian art, we took it and it was probably the odd carving. Prior to that, it was batik, but I wasn't involved with the batik. I was most certainly around the acrylics when it came.<sup>154</sup>

Jennings has, over the years, also bought from artists outside of the Utopia area; however, his focus has always been on the Utopia artists, with his gallery promoting them since the early 1990s. *Gallery Mbantua* now has three branches: one in Todd Mall in Alice Springs, one in Mornington Peninsula and one in Darwin. Beginning by buying the odd painting here and there from artists when he owned the shop at the Gap in Alice Springs<sup>155</sup>, Jennings' business developed to the point where now his gallery in Todd Mall is the largest gallery in all of Alice Springs. The gallery includes a museum in an upstairs area, which displays Jennings' collection of Utopia artworks accompanied by explanatory texts as well as photos of artists, the Utopia region and plants<sup>156</sup>. Jennings

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<sup>151</sup>Personal communication with Tim Jennings (September 2008).

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup>The name has changed and is now *Mbantua Fine Art Gallery and Cultural Museum*.

<sup>154</sup>Personal communication with Tim Jennings (September 2008).

<sup>155</sup>Personal communication with Tim Jennings (September 2008).

<sup>156</sup>As of November 2011 the Alice Springs gallery has been downsized and the museum has become free of charge.

has been very successful over the years and expanded not only locally but also internationally. He has become a wholesaler of Utopia art for galleries in Europe and North America; France, Germany, and the USA in particular.

#### 4.2.4 Art coordinators and their networks

As outlined in the previous chapter Allan Glaetzer was the art coordinator for the art centre in Utopia in the early 1990s. Through his position he had built up a network of art dealers, which differed greatly from Gooch's. Amongst Glaetzer's connections were Hank Ebes from the *Aboriginal Gallery of Dreamings* in Melbourne, Michael Hollows – formerly Ebes' partner and now owner of three galleries in Alice Springs, Sydney and Melbourne – and Lauraine Diggins from *Lauraine Diggins Fine Art* in Melbourne. All of these art dealers set up their own relationships with artists over time, bypassing Glaetzer; thus this network became autonomous and self-sufficient. Glaetzer's role as mediator and source of artworks vanished not long after a show he organised received negative criticism. As was reported by McDonald (1999), this show received a poor response from the public and critics. It was a group show of ochre paintings from various Utopia artists. Glaetzer was devastated by the critics' response and during his interviews with McDonald, was already considering ceasing work with Utopia arts.

The next Utopia art coordinator who became a private art dealer after having left the community was Simon Turner. Turner, who held a fine arts degree from Griffith University in Brisbane, made his way to Utopia where he was able to build on his existing network of art dealers and connoisseurs established through his own background<sup>157</sup>. He drew on these relationships by organising exhibitions and sales during his time as an art coordinator. After having left his position as art coordinator, Turner moved back to Brisbane and started to work in the gallery sector himself: *Woolloongabba Art Gallery* (WAG) became his new venture until 2008. He sold art from Utopia at WAG as well as art from other Indigenous communities across Australia. By the time I commenced my research and discovered his involvement with the art movement, Turner had already sold the gallery. Since his departure, only one exhibition of Utopia art has taken place at the Woolloongabba Art Gallery. I was not

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<sup>157</sup>Throughout my research I was unable to meet with Simon Turner and interview him about his involvement in the history of the Utopia art movement and the galleries he dealt with. However, a personal communication with Simon Wright (January 2012) highlighted Turner's personal networks through his studies at Griffith University.

able to interview Turner about his time at Utopia, his projects, plans and the circumstances under which he left the community. Little seems to be known about his involvement in the history of the art movement and further research would be needed to illuminate the developments during this period.

#### 4.2.5 Hank Ebes and his network

One of the dealers who gained access to Utopia art through Glaetzer during his time as art coordinator was Hank Ebes. Ebes sourced his first group of artworks from Utopia through Glaetzer. Yet Ebes quickly became an independent operator in his dealings with Utopia artists. He was a pilot by training and made his way to Utopia via Delmore Downs, being introduced to artists by the Holts. He had already developed a strong interest in Aboriginal art and had been involved as an art dealer since 1988/89. For a few years, Michael Hollows and Ebes were partners:

Michael Hollows sourced not the first lot, Michael didn't want to get into the Aboriginal art, but he knew Malcolm Jagamarra Maloney, who is a nice guy, and we've worked with him for a long time. [...] So he introduced us to the Aboriginal art. I then bought paintings so that I could have a good look and see if I liked it. Some of it I liked, and some I thought mediocre and left me cold.<sup>158</sup>

Ebes recalls in a conversation regarding the way in which their partnership drew to a close:

I bought him out. I bought the company from him. He stayed... he wanted to live in Alice Springs with Shirley and his son. The two daughters still worked for me for a while. We fell out over a number of things. It's not really important. It was good that we split up because he wanted to go in a completely different direction.<sup>159</sup>

Hollows started getting his supplies through Glaetzer's co-worker Rozman and maintained the relationships with artists through this connection; however, after they decided to split their businesses, he never worked with Ebes again. From there Ebes decided to strengthen his position by sending his own agent – Fred Torres – to Utopia in order to get more Emily Kam Kngwarray paintings, but also to 'cut the broker out': "Fred came into my life in 1992, relatively early. Michael was already gone."<sup>160</sup> With his own personal middle-man, Ebes stopped buying from Glaetzer; however he would

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<sup>158</sup> Personal communication with Hank Ebes (January 2010).

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

never personally buy from artists, but always kept someone working exclusively for him sourcing on the ground<sup>161</sup>.

Ebes' agent from 1992 onwards was Fred Torres, son of Barbara Weir, who is the adopted daughter of Emily Kam Kngwarray (Fortesue 2008:91). Torres was by training a tradesman and not an artist or art dealer. As Weir was taken away from her family as a little girl, she had to re-learn her language when she returned to Utopia later in her life. She re-discovered her family alongside Torres (Ibid. pp.91; Geissler 2006:36ff.). He and his siblings grew up without close relationships to their mother's side. Their language skills were limited too when they first went to Utopia (Fortescue 2008:111).

From the very beginning of his engagement with Indigenous arts Ebes was interested in promoting Indigenous artworks internationally (McDonald 1999:81), something he has continuously pursued<sup>162</sup>. During his involvement as an art dealer of Aboriginal art, his efforts centred upon promoting Aboriginal art overseas, particularly in Europe. He staged many large exhibitions of Utopia and Papunya Tula art in Holland and France and claims that the first major international exhibition of Emily Kam Kngwarray's works was organised by him in 1999<sup>163</sup>. He closed his gallery in 2008 and now only works privately without a retail centre<sup>164</sup>. For almost two decades Ebes was a major player in the Utopia art movement. He was influential in promoting artworks, in getting publicity and also in creating a larger international audience<sup>165</sup>.

Ebes' middle-man or person-on-the-ground, Fred Torres, quickly discovered that his family ties were strong. He soon set up his own business and became an art dealer independent from Ebes. His gallery *Dreaming Art Centre of Utopia* (DACOU) was based in Adelaide; however, in 2009 he moved his main gallery to Melbourne and opened others in Broome, Alstonville and Sydney<sup>166</sup>. Torres' network may currently be the largest of all art dealers involved with Utopia art. He not only operates as a gallery owner and art dealer, but his foremost interest has been as a wholesaler. His primary markets are overseas and he caters to a wide international market, including the lower

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Recently he put artworks from his stockrooms online as he started selling them through auctions, see: [www.agodauctions.com.au](http://www.agodauctions.com.au) (last sighted 19/11/2011).

<sup>165</sup> His input was crucial in the Telstra Art Award scandal in 1997, which I will discuss in Chapter x.

<sup>166</sup> The main retailer for DACOU in Sydney is *Gallery Savah*, however, DACOU now has its own gallery space and warehouse in Sydney. (For further information refer to the DACOU webpage: [http://dacousydney.com/contact/info\\_2.html](http://dacousydney.com/contact/info_2.html), last sighted 26/01/2012).



end of the market such as art fairs in Asia and Europe. Within Australia he dominates the wholesaling market of Utopia artworks, and many galleries I visited over the past years had sourced their works through him and referred me to him when asked about the works. Of all the major players in Utopia art, Fred Torres is the only Indigenous art dealer. Further, he is the only dealer with a family connection to the artists. Unfortunately, during my research period I found it impossible to arrange a meeting with Torres despite multiple attempts.

### 4.3 Conclusion

Over time many art dealers made their way into Utopia; however, aside from the ones described, their engagements were rather short-lived. In addition to the dealers I have discussed in this chapter there is an ever-changing body of art dealers located in Alice Springs; yet these have not been major players in the development of the Utopia art movement. The majority of works from Utopia have been purchased by the art dealers considered in this chapter.

In this chapter I have introduced the main players of the ‘outer’ Utopia art world: art dealers and wholesalers who have interacted with artists from Utopia for over two decades. They have acted as the interface between the artists and the audience. They have mediated between them and through their purchases channelled their buyers’ opinions to the artists. I have shown how each art dealer has made its way into Utopia and how over time they built their networks across Australia and throughout the world. In the beginning some art dealers worked together collaboratively or gained access to the community through collaboration. Yet this does not mean that their relationships with artists are similar or that artists see all dealers in a similar light.

The particularities of the different relationships between art dealers and artists are discussed in the following chapter. I will analyse the structures underlying these relationships and whether a connection between the type of artist-dealer relationship and the character of the artworks produced for the dealer exists. Finally, different dealers situate themselves in various ways in relation to the market, which again influences the kind of works they seek out. Are Utopia artists aware of the multiple markets and, if so, how do they differentiate between these? Subsequently, how might this be traceable in

the art practices and artworks? These questions will be explored in the following chapter.

## **Part II: Agency of Artists**





## Introduction to Part II

After having examined the history of the Utopia art movement, it is important to explore a particularly significant aspect of its development that so far has been neglected in the literature: the agency of artists<sup>167</sup>. Utopia artists have shaped the art movement by dealing with art dealers one-on-one. Over the past four decades, Utopia artists have worked within an art centre environment with art coordinators and for art dealers, wholesalers, art collectors and private buyers. In each of these different work situations, Utopia artists have exercised agency through the choices they made on multiple levels when dealing with different people with a variety of professional interests. How these choices manifest themselves is discussed in the next two chapters.

A great deal of literature about Utopia art, as well as comments by art dealers, focuses on the notion of exploitation. Yet artists in Utopia have been quite active in engaging personally with wholesalers and art dealers from different parts of the art market. These two chapters will illuminate how artists have become their own agents and how agency is found in the ways in which various types of relationships between all kinds of art dealers and artists have developed over time. Finally, by looking at the artists' agency, these chapters question a simplistic notion of exploitation and demand a re-thinking of the involvement of Indigenous artists in the development of art movements across Australia.

The keys to understanding the development of the Utopia art movement are structures and their failings, constraints within which artists act and negotiate, and finally, artists' relationships with wholesalers and art dealers. As described in Chapter 3, the art centre in Utopia had a rather unstable history, which has influenced the way artists have determined their choices in regards to getting materials and selling their works. Firstly I will explore what an art centre can facilitate within the community and how this relates to the history of the Utopia art movement. I will then describe how the constraints of the current situation have led to an increase and intensification of one-on-one artist-dealer relationships, some of which have been in existence for 20 years. Relationships are therefore another key to understanding the development of the Utopia art movement: relationships between artists and art dealers (including wholesalers), between artists and from Utopia and artists from other regions and countries, and finally between artists and their audience. I have alluded to the importance of inter-artist relationships in Chapter 3,

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<sup>167</sup>By 'artists' I refer here to every person who creates artworks, irrespective of how often they do so and how much they earn by doing so.

noting the collaborative projects with Brahma Tirta Sari and Basil Hall for example. However, the relationships between artists and their audience that I will explore here are much less tangible than those previously discussed. While the artist-audience relationship is based upon dialogue, art dealers, wholesalers, collectors and art coordinators mediate such dialogues. As was mentioned in Chapter 4 and will be expanded upon in the following chapter, Utopia artists have been involved in these multiple dialogues from an early point in the region's engagement with the art market. Further, these dialogues have become a crucial element in the development of the art movement. To conceptualise this engagement as a dialogue – rather than as an exploitative influence bearing upon artists – one must position both sides as active participants in the process. Within this framework all players within the art world become actors and exert agency. I argue that this often-times cross-cultural dialogue is key to understanding the different ways agency is expressed by Utopia artists and how 'influences' within the artworks can be traced.

Chapter 6 will approach artists' agency from another angle by looking at techniques. To choose between different kinds of materials and brushes as well as between various topics is a way of exercising of agency. Making decisions regarding to whom an artwork will be sold – be it an art dealer, wholesaler or an independent buyer – is again an exercise of agency. Finally, to make value judgements on the works of others as well as their own in accordance with criteria specific to Utopia artists and then using this criteria when selecting a buyer for their work is yet another way in which artists exert agency.

In the following section I will argue that by examining the various ways artists negotiate with potential buyers, influence their artworks or modify them for different buyers, artists' agency becomes tangible. Within the constraints of everyday life, Utopia artists make choices that enable them to create artworks which are meaningful to them and which enable them to respond to the requirements of the market.

## Chapter 5: Interactions with the art world

### 5.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have outlined the historical developments of the Utopia art movement, with a focus on the ‘inner’ art world in Chapter 3 and the ‘outer’ art world in Chapter 4. The following chapter will analyse how Utopia’s ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ art worlds are interdependent and have developed in a symbiotic manner. The difficulties of establishing and maintaining an infrastructure for the arts in Utopia are connected with the ever-increasing influx of art dealers in the community. The first part of this chapter will examine the role of the art centre in Utopia and its failings, and it will highlight the constraints under which artists live, and which consequently influence the artistic choices they make.

As established in the Chapter 4, art dealers working with Utopia artists have different professional backgrounds and networks; yet they also have different kinds of relationships with the artists whose work they source. The second part of this chapter will examine various forms of artist-dealer relationships. By analysing these relationships and their structures, two distinct groups of art dealer emerge. These two larger groups have been created based upon each dealer’s relationships with artists from Utopia and their intentions in selling the works, as well as their background and interest in Indigenous art. The first group is made up of artists, art collectors and connoisseurs who have become art dealers who focus upon promoting and profiling artists. The second group consists of people with various professional backgrounds, such as tradesmen, who have changed careers to work in Indigenous arts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, because of their background outside the art industry or the art world, these art dealers put greater emphasis on the business side of their dealings with Indigenous artists; while the emphasis of the former group lies in promoting the artists and developing them and their profiles. This chapter provides a case study of one art dealer from each these groups, as well as an art dealer who does not easily fit into either category. Having analysed the different artist-dealer relationships, I will then briefly examine relationships between art dealers from both groups. Doing so will illustrate how the challenges faced by Utopia artists parallels those of many other Indigenous artists as discussed in the 2007 Senate Inquiry: *Indigenous Art - Securing the Future*.

The lack of an art centre in Utopia has meant a focus on solo artists in the past decade, which at the same time has enabled artists to increasingly exert agency in the shaping of

the Utopia art movement. It is important to note that the art market valorises exclusive artist-dealer relationships (preferably facilitated through an art centre) above those of artists working for a variety of dealers. This chapter will close with examples of Utopia artists working exclusively for one art dealer, describing when and how such exclusive relationships come under pressure. I will conclude by arguing that the constraints of living circumstances affect artists' agency, and influences the ways in which their agency manifests itself through conscious decision-making.

## 5.2 Structures and art facilities in Utopia

Indigenous artists throughout Australia interact with the art world in different ways: through the structures of an art centre, through art dealers, through commissions from art collectors and through wholesalers. Generally, a certain structure exists which channels communication and negotiation processes between artists and art dealers. In most cases around Australia, this structure or facility is a community-run and -owned art centre. However, during the past decade, Utopia artists have worked primarily with dealers on a one-on-one basis. The various dealers can be grouped into two larger groups based on their relationships with artists from Utopia, their intentions in selling the works, and their knowledge about art. The first group of art dealers working with artists from Utopia are artists, curators and art enthusiasts who have become art dealers and who see their responsibility to be representing the artists and trading their works ethically. The second group of art dealers do not have a background in the arts nor are they art enthusiasts as such. Most of them are tradespeople. Members of this latter group are often labelled as 'carpetbaggers' by the first group of dealers and are considered to exploit artists. Before I elaborate further on the relationships between artists and dealers, I will first discuss the art infrastructure in Utopia to provide a wider context for understanding the development of these relationships.

### 5.2.1 The art centre model and its failings in Utopia

Art centres across Australia function in several ways: as a communal space where artists can work together; as a gallery space for visitors, buyers and collectors; as an administrative centre for arts within the community; and as a centre with combined functions that provides other, non-arts-related, services within the community. An art centre, therefore, can have many community functions and roles. The art centre model



brings funds into the community through sales of artworks. Not only do artists profit from this by being paid immediately when their art centre buys their artworks, but the community at large also benefits<sup>168</sup>. Art centres are community-owned and –run, giving the community control over their operations and objectives (Wright and Morphy 2000:19). In many communities this model works well, and artists will create artworks almost exclusively for the community art centre. However, many community art centres complain about the fact that artists also paint for independent art dealers (Ibid. p.35). Total exclusivity in relation to creating artworks solely for the art centre rarely exists, yet this remains the ultimate goal and expectation of art centres. Painting for private buyers and art dealers often occurs when artists go to town and need some cash for buying some groceries or getting get back to their community. In cases like these artists from communities across the desert will sit in Alice Springs’ Todd Mall and sell their works to tourists. Street sales are completely unregulated and generally only works of lesser ‘quality’<sup>169</sup> are offered at Todd Mall.

Art centres subsequently struggle with the issues of artists painting for art dealers or private sales, as when artists create works of lesser ‘quality’ their wider market profiles can be damaged. There is also awareness that artists may be exploited by dealers when they are in dire need of cash. Art centres believe that it is their responsibility to support artists in many different ways and to protect them from exploitation<sup>170</sup>. When an art centre has a continuous existence within the community and an established role, with art coordinators working in the best interest of the artists in the community, the art centre will benefit the community in many ways.

However, the situation of the art centre in Utopia differed from the model described above. History has shown that establishing and running an art centre in Utopia has been fraught. Several factors influenced the long-term existence and role of an art centre in the community: location and geography of the community, art coordinators and the community’s experiences with these, unity within the community, and continuity in the art centre’s practices.

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<sup>168</sup> An example of this is the dialysis unit set up in Kintore with the profits of its art centre.

<sup>169</sup> I employ the term ‘quality’ in relation to how the art market applies it, which reflects market value.

<sup>170</sup> For example art centres can be “museums or keeping places, art studios and workshops, cultural knowledge, maintenance and exchange centres” (Christina Davidson quoted in Miller, C 2010, Ethically sourcing Aboriginal art & how to be certain of provenance, *Guide to Indigenous Art Centres*, Australian Art Collector <http://www.artcollector.net.au/EthicallySourcingAboriginalArt> (last sighted 09/02/2012).

Art coordinators and their interests have influenced the Utopia art movement. Some art coordinators in Utopia favoured one group or an individual artist over others. For example, the art coordinator Ross-Manley focused her time on working with batik artists but not with painters, excluding the latter from the art centre and leaving them to their own means. Other art coordinators from the Sandover region became independent art dealers after leaving their jobs in the community, thus undermining the art centre and working on their own terms with artists. This resulted in continuity in dealings with artists, but prevented the art centre to some degree from succeeding as artists worked for more and more art dealers.

Another problem with Utopia's art centre was the occasional abrupt change in focus. At one point the art centre became a combined women's centre and art centre, then changed again into an aged care centre without art facilities. Even within the structures and domain of the community council, the art centre never remained long in the same location but was moved and merged, and the responsibilities of the centre were changed over time.

Gooch acted from Alice Springs, with no base in the homelands, and liaised with artists on a regular basis<sup>171</sup>. The first art coordinator, Murray, was based at Utopia Homestead outstation and travelled around the community. When an art centre was established, Ahalper was chosen for its location as this is the only place to which everyone has rights of country. Since the community is decentralised, the location of an art centre was crucial for accessibility purposes.

The history of shortcomings and failings of the art centre in Utopia is connected to another main topic of this chapter: the relationships between art dealers and artists' agency. The agency of artists is found in their navigations through the ever-changing circumstances of the art centre, particularly by their seeking out of art dealers when the art centre ceased serving them. Art coordinators like Ross-Manley, who favoured one technique over another, drove painters out of the art centre and into the hands of art dealers. On the flipside, art coordinators, such as Gooch, who then became dealers and wholesalers, also disrupted continuous work in the art centre environment and legitimised the entrance of other art dealers into the community. Independent art dealers can often pay much more for artworks from particular individuals than an art centre, and

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<sup>171</sup> Julia Murray also travelled around the outstations once they were set up and the people had moved back to their homelands. Rodney Gooch's approach was similar to Murray's, weekly visiting all outstations (see Chapter 3 for more details).

the revenues go straight to the artist, meaning greater income for the individual but no support for community arts.

### **5.2.2 Constraints of everyday life in Utopia and its impacts on the creation of artworks**

Utopia artists have been told time and again that they would have a much higher income if they dealt with only one art dealer who specialized in their works<sup>172</sup>. Most art dealers complain constantly about the fact that artists ‘lose their track’ and start painting ‘rubbish’<sup>173</sup>. Why is it then that most artists choose to paint for such a plethora of art dealers, when they know that the revenue from one high-end art dealer is much greater than that from a range of tourist art dealers? The key to understanding this behaviour is found by looking at the everyday life of artists in Utopia.

Artists in Utopia experience a number of constraints in their everyday lives that affect their creation of artworks. Constraints people are faced with encompass: poor housing quality and limited availability of housing, higher costs of fresh food and difficulties in purchasing it, humbug by family members<sup>174</sup>, divisions within the community, poor infrastructure, poor health<sup>175</sup> caused by low living standards, low levels of education<sup>176</sup> and few job opportunities within the community.

Certain constraints were also issues for the former art centre, such as the geography and protracted locality of Utopia. Thus, a major constraint under which most people in Utopia suffer is mobility. Connected to mobility is their ability to access resources, especially groceries and services.

The geography and locality of the community has also influenced the history of the Utopia art movement in another way: access to Utopia is relatively easy through the Sandover Highway<sup>177</sup>. This means art dealers as well as private buyers can make their way from Alice Springs into the community within less than three hours drive. Artists in

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<sup>172</sup>This phenomenon is not only prevalent in Utopia but appears right across central Australian Indigenous communities. It is often complained about by art dealers. Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).

<sup>173</sup>Personal discussions with Christopher Hodges (August 2008), Donald Holt (September 2010) and Marc Gooch (October 2010).

<sup>174</sup>I will expand on this in Chapter 6.

<sup>175</sup>The Utopia homelands have their own clinic with permanent staff (nurses and doctors). Several articles have reported on the success of the clinic and how this has influenced the wellbeing of community members (see for example Rowley (et al) 2008; Skelton 2008; Wilson 2009).

<sup>176</sup>In 2009 a high school was opened at Ahalper for students from the Utopia homelands.

<sup>177</sup>Refer to Chapter 2 for details on the location and geography of Utopia and its outstations.

turn can drive into town at short notice. The proximity to Alice Springs has facilitated close contact and exchange with a variety of art dealers who otherwise might have been reluctant to drive into communities and work with artists.

The locality of Utopia plays a major role in the daily lives of artists from the outstations. Despite being relatively close to Alice Springs, artists are widely dispersed across their homelands. At times reaching the local shop from an outstation can be more difficult than getting to town. These issues of accessibility increase during the summer months when more roads are flooded and are graded less frequently. For instance, in January 2010 when entire outstations were cut off from the Sandover Highway, artists could only drive to the Delmore Downs station to buy groceries. Subsequently, few art dealers or members of the public were able travel to Utopia's various outstations on a regular basis.

The constraint of mobility is very real and affects a large group of people in the outstations. During my research, I was often asked to come to the outstations to talk about their art and bring people to the store for grocery shopping. Getting home from the store was often easier than getting there, since a number of people might be at the store at the same time who could offer transport. Although Aged Care provides food to elderly community residents, many times problems arose when delivering the food to individuals. The store in Ahalper does not send a truck to the outstations, which is problematic particularly for older people who often have no access to cars. Getting to the local shop or having someone drop by with groceries is a requirement that is not easily met.

In the summer months when few art dealers travel to Utopia, regular commercial visitors, like the *Mbantua Gallery* truck, are much appreciated by the artists. This truck brings groceries directly to the outstation, offers a variety of foods and permits individuals to pay in-kind or through 'book-up' when no cash is at hand. Artists are not forced to buy from the truck; they do so by choice, although one must admit that choices are limited. Utopia artists are well aware of all resource-procuring options available to them.

Access to essential items is another type of in-kind payment that is sought after by artists. It is not only groceries that are vital, but also blankets, mattresses and sometimes even washing machines. It is in such cases of unmet necessities that exploitation becomes possible. Dalglish (2000:204ff.) reports one account in which paintings were



grossly undervalued – considering the price they would fetch at an art gallery – by the truck-driving ‘Hawker’. In this particular instance, groceries were exchanged for artworks as the artists were in need of food. As described by Dalglish, exploitation of the artists is tangible in situations of unmet needs<sup>178</sup>. While such accounts are abundant within literature and the media, I did not observe any obviously exploitative situations during my research. However, one artist told me that he and others preferred not to work with certain art dealers as they thought that these dealers did not pay them well or appreciate their works<sup>179</sup>. On the other hand, relatives of this same artist explained to me that they enjoyed working with Jennings and *Mbantua Gallery* specifically because when they visited him in town they were always fed well and looked after<sup>180</sup>. Every artist establishes relationships to art dealers differently and values them for varying reasons.

Handymen and tradesmen are highly valued by community members as these tradespeople travel very irregularly to Utopia. Often these tradesmen ask artists for artworks to take home<sup>181</sup>. In response, for example, a plumber will be asked to fix an additional toilet, broken for months, that was not scheduled to be repaired by him. For such essential services, artists consciously exchange their artworks for the services of tradespeople; which means that artists receive very little cash for their artwork in such cases. It is yet another form of in-kind payment for a service. It must be noted that the works given to tradespeople in exchange are similar in terms of quality as the ones exchanged for groceries with art-as-commodity dealers.

Due to the unstable nature of the art centre within the Utopia community and the constraints within which residents live, artists have maintained relationships with outside art dealers, something that I anticipate will continue even if the planned cultural village<sup>182</sup> is established. I will now turn to and discuss relations between art dealers and artists and the way in which they are structured. I will explore a number of features of artists’ interactions with dealers, including the backgrounds of art dealers and their familiarity with the art market, their intentions when dealing with Indigenous people and their art, and the ways in which dealers negotiate with Indigenous artists from Utopia. The relationships between Utopia artists and art dealers are determined to some

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<sup>178</sup>I will expand on this below.

<sup>179</sup>Personal communication with Cowboy Loy Pwerl (September 2009).

<sup>180</sup>Personal communication with Lena Pwerl (October 2010).

<sup>181</sup>Personal communication with Louise Gabauer (February 2011).

<sup>182</sup>I will expand on the cultural village in the Conclusion.

extent by the markets with which they interact and the quality of art they seek for these markets.

### 5.3 Art dealers and their relationships with Utopia artists

Artists from Utopia have been involved with a variety of ever-changing art dealers and wholesalers since the introduction of acrylic paint on canvas in 1989. By examining artist-dealer relationships, two distinct groups of art dealer become apparent, with their interactions with artists varying significantly. Based upon close analysis of each art dealer's personal statements about their involvement with the artists over the past, and examination of their actual practice, the two groups into which I place dealers are 'Dealers of Fine Art' and 'Art-as-Commodity Dealers'. The categories are based on the background of the dealer, the degree of his or hers training in the arts and the importance of ethical trade for their mode of marketing to various art markets. I will provide one example of an art dealer from each group, as well as that of an art dealer/wholesaler who does not easily fit into either category. Having looked at the constraints under which artists in Utopia live, choices in the creation and sale of their works are revealed to be expressions of their agency. The various ways that artists maintain relationships with different kinds of dealers is undoubtedly a demonstration of this agency.

#### 5.3.1 Dealers of Fine Art

The dealers in this group mainly have a background in the arts themselves; chiefly as artists by training, art historians, former curators or art collectors who have become dealers. Most of these art dealers know each other and have interacted with each other in some way or another over time. Each became involved with Indigenous art, Utopia art in particular, for different reasons<sup>183</sup>. These dealers of fine art share an approach to dealing with Indigenous artists: they treat Indigenous artists from remote communities as if they were in any urban or Western art setting. This involves nurturing the artists' careers, helping to establish their individual identities, encouraging experiments as part of the artistic process, and emphasizing aesthetic quality. Finally these art dealers are highly selective in what they sell and how they source their works. As Bourdieu

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<sup>183</sup> Refer to Chapter 4 for elaboration.

concludes in *Distinction* (1983) selecting and promoting only a small number of artists and valorizing particular dealer-artist-relationships are key strategies in the creation of market value within the fine art domain.

For dealers of fine art, then, the emphasis lies on artworks that are exemplary for the artist and of the highest quality within their *œuvre*. Their most important goal is the representation of the artist, which does not involve promoting an artist's complete *œuvre* or creating a *catalogue raisonné*. Rather, their concern is choosing exceptional pieces that represent defining steps in the artistic career or what is assessed to be work of the highest quality. When choosing artworks from a wide span of a *œuvre*, dealers of fine art apply the criteria of the art market: such as innovation, craftsmanship or technique, style and composition. The artwork must fulfil all criteria to a very high standard to be chosen for an exhibition. These art dealers therefore prefer to wait for an 'exceptional' artwork rather than selling one, which is in their eyes, of 'inferior' quality.

Dealers of fine art are also willing to embark on new trends and styles and to hang shows that may not yet be to the taste of their audience. By doing so, the dealers hope to ignite a fire and to spur connoisseurs to recognise new artists or an exciting phase of a renowned artist's work<sup>184</sup>. Competition between dealers, the need to find new talents and to keep the standards of artworks high, are their main motivations. These art dealers are comfortable with artists who experiment with colours, with paints and other media, and with the sizes of their canvas or sculptures. They can also be willing to teach artists new techniques, opening new avenues of expression<sup>185</sup>.

From the point of view of these dealers, the preferred relationship between artists and themselves is one of exclusivity. Yet these art dealers rarely travel to Utopia or other Indigenous communities and thus are not able to establish or maintain these relationships independently. Therefore in order to have an exclusive relationship they need an intermediary or person-on-the-ground serving as a facilitator. Hence such art dealers' primarily deal only with community-owned and run art centres, which can provide the *in situ* connection. As Utopia has not had an art coordinator, art centre or

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<sup>184</sup> An example for this was a 1995 show by Emily Kam Ngwarray at *Niagara Galleries* where only black and white paintings were shown. This was very innovative at the time and the audience was perhaps not yet ready, as was reflected by the low sales figures. However, these artworks have become very famous over time and this indicates the rewarding nature of such a plunge (Personal communication with Bill Nuttall, March 2009).

<sup>185</sup> Artists and dealers Christopher Hodges and Helen Eager are examples for this as they made woodblock prints with the artists from Utopia in 1990, when Gooch was still working there as an art coordinator. (see Chapter 3 for details).

other form of official representative since 2002, dealers of fine art now receive artworks from a single source: Marc Gooch and his partner Janet Pierce, whom are considered to be ethical in their dealings as wholesalers. Other than those sourcing works through Gooch and Pierce, the majority of fine art dealers have ceased representing works from Utopia and await the opening of any kind of community arts facility<sup>186</sup>.

Fine art dealers have taken this step because difficulties can arise in interactions between themselves and Utopia artists due to the lack of an organisational structure<sup>187</sup>. Difficulties are frequently related to the distance between artist and dealer, such as a lack of understanding of the living constraints, needs and pressures under which artists live. The contexts of each are far removed from the other and this distance can often only be mediated by either an art centre or intermediary. The difficulties for dealers of fine art then become that artists paint for other art dealers and that the quality of artworks is not what is expected.

The fine art dealers feel frustrated that Utopia artists cooperate with a variety of dealers, including other fine art dealers and art-as-commodity dealers, as they fear that artists' reputations are at risk through this behaviour<sup>188</sup>. The perception is that artworks from a particular artist will be found across the various different kinds of art markets with no exclusive relationship to any one of them. This, it is believed, means that the work of the respective artist is devalued and less likely to be seen by the market as 'fine art'. Dealers of fine art define their goals to be selling ethically sourced art and trading in an ethical way with Indigenous artists<sup>189</sup>. Their interest lies in protecting artists from possible 'exploitation' by so-called 'carpetbaggers'<sup>190</sup>. However, it is undeniable that

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<sup>186</sup>Over the past decade in particular, this has meant that the top end of the fine arts market has been exposed less and less to new art from Utopia and a visible decline of such exhibitions has occurred. For example, while *Utopia Art Sydney* regularly exhibits art from Utopia, the shows from the last few years were more or less entirely drawn from stock and not new artworks.

<sup>187</sup>Beverley Knight from Alcaston Gallery has chosen to stop selling Utopia artworks since she feels she cannot guarantee their ethical provenance (Personal communication March 2009).

<sup>188</sup>Personal communication with Bill Nuttall from *Niagara Galleries* (March 2009) and Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (September 2009).

<sup>189</sup>This includes paying artists on a percentage basis of the work's final sale price rather than commissioning or acquiring a work in order to later sell it.

<sup>190</sup>A carpetbagger is a word deriving from the American Civil War, when northerners arrived in the south with their belongings in luggage made of carpet material. They were seen as unsavoury interlopers by the defeated southerners. Today, the expression is negative and refers to shady outsiders up to no good in a new location. In Indigenous art the term is used accordingly: 'Such a person is usually not Indigenous and seeks to obtain art from an artist at a price well below what that person knows or ought to know is a reasonable market price, with the intention of selling it on at a substantial profit.' (*The Senate: Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts – Indigenous Art – Securing the Future – Australia's Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector*, June 2007, p.101).



they emphasize these aims partly in order to protect their own business interests, which are founded on the Western model of exclusive relationships.

In sum, for dealers of fine art several points are of utmost importance: the exclusive nature of the relationships with artists, the way artwork is sourced, the work's authenticity and its provenance, the profiling of artists and the artwork's compatibility with their audience, which includes its quality and innovation.

#### 5.3.1.1 Excursus: Christopher Hodges – an example of a fine art dealer

*Utopia Art Sydney*, a fine art gallery in the heart of the city's art district, is owned and run by artists Christopher Hodges and Helen Eager. Opened in 1988, this gallery has always focused on contemporary Australian art, with a specialization in Utopia and Papunya Tula art, as well as featuring contemporary non-Indigenous Australian artists from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra<sup>191</sup>. As described in the previous chapter, Hodges sold Utopia batiks from his home prior to establishing the gallery. In the early years the owners were very involved in promoting Utopia art and creating profiles for the artists, in order to establish them in the fine art world. Hodges describes what happened after the first success:

One of the disgraceful things about the contemporary Aboriginal art world is that as soon as an artist is made, begins to make a reputation, the vultures and leeches of the world crawled out of the woodwork and swooped down. They bring them offers of fortunes and things like that, but none of those offers allowed them to develop properly. That's the big disappointment – that many of the people involved in selling Aboriginal art have no commitment to the artists beyond the commodity of the product that they sell.<sup>192</sup>

Further, Hodges found that other art dealers were not supporting the artists as much as CAAMA, Gooch or he himself had been. In fact, he claims:

All of the vultures picked off a good portion of the income of the community and CAAMA for example wasn't getting all of the returns. So for example [one] gallery owner [...] spent a considerable amount of money with the bloke across the fence, which is money that financed the bloke across the fence; it didn't finance CAAMA.<sup>193</sup>

In contrast to most other dealers – who in Hodges' opinion worked against CAAMA and Gooch – Hodges understood his role to be representing the artists and facilitating

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<sup>191</sup> See Utopia Art Sydney webpage: <http://utopiaartsydney.com.au/about.htm> (Last sighted 21/11/2011).

<sup>192</sup> Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

their development. By representing he refers to being in a constant dialogue with the artists and supporting their development:

If you have artists and you talk to them about art, then the artists respond to that. But if you only talk to artists about product, then they respond to that too. And representation of artists involves a dialogue about what you are doing, where it's going, and what will happen to this. And if somebody just comes in and says 'I need ten paintings by Friday or you owe me a \$1,000, that'll be 15 paintings by the end of the week', then you're not concerned about art. You're only concerned about product. And in fact the vultures of the world, you know, very few of them understand anything about art.<sup>194</sup>

In this last remark Hodges clearly differentiates between people with a genuine understanding of and interest in art, and those who have become art dealers in response to market demands. He calls the latter group 'vultures', as to him they exploit the artists, are not interested in promoting the artists or the works and do not invest in developing the artists. Finally, the commodity dealers' lack of knowledge about art means that, in comparison with fine art dealers, they are more interested in the saleability of works in the markets they work with rather than the aesthetic value of the works. In Hodges' understanding, the role of an art dealer is also defined by creating long-term relationships and maintaining these. Finally, he suggests that for fine art dealers the selectivity of artworks is important and highlights that criticism is at times necessary in order for an artist to grow. Clearly, he sees art-as-commodity dealers as not distinguishing between works and merely valuing them as a commodity.

In my interviews with various art dealers, Hodges was not alone in describing this other group of art dealers in such a forceful way. Others dealers who were a part of Gooch's network from early on echoed Hodges frustration, noting that the growing numbers of untrustworthy art dealers associated with the Utopia art movement were of great concern. For example, Beverly Knight remarked of the time during the early 1990s when Emily Kam Kngwarray's reputation was skyrocketing: "Every man and his dog were out there, carpetbaggers"<sup>195</sup>. Hodges is a strong example of dealers of fine art and succinctly highlights their intentions, engagements with artists and role within the Utopia art movement. It is clear from these interviews that certain modes of marketing are considered by fine art dealers to be more or less appropriate in a high art market.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Personal communication with Beverly Knight (October 2008).

### 5.3.2 Dealers of commodity art

The art-as-commodity dealers group consists mainly of non-experts who, through their various connections with the community, have gotten involved with artists and the selling of artworks. These dealers generally have no training in the arts and have learned about Indigenous art through interactions with the artists. In their eyes, their training came from being exposed to artworks over time. Most of these dealers became part of the art world by chance.

The interests of dealers of commodity art differ greatly from those in the first group: at the core of their dealings is not so much creating a fine art dealership as developing a business and making a profit. In conversations, this category of art dealers claimed to deal with artists in an ethical way; unlike the group of fine art dealers they were never willing to disclose information about their methods of payment, show any records of payment, or even show records of works they had acquired over the years<sup>196</sup>. In demonstrating their ethical credentials, dealers of fine art consider a key aspect and key strategy in valorising their work over that of other dealers the transparency of payments, records and provenance. Art-as-commodity dealers, however, sometimes pay in-kind and the records of these payments – if any exist – are likely to differ significantly from those of the former group<sup>197</sup>.

Art-as-commodity dealers source artworks directly from the artists: either in the community or through workshops they set up in Alice Springs, where artists come to paint for a day or two. During these stays, the artists often sleep and eat at the workshop. Sometimes these workshops also take place in Utopia, in the vicinity of outstations, as artists can then avoid travelling to Alice Springs and remain on their country while painting. Trips to purchase works from artists are, for some of these dealers, quite regular. Through this regular contact they are able to react to artists' needs and demands more or less immediately, which again may result in payments in-kind rather than cash for artworks.

Art-as-commodity dealers see 'quality' of artworks in direct relation to what sells and what interests the buyers in the art markets with which they engage. These markets differ from those of dealers of fine art: they may include the tourists market, as well as

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<sup>196</sup>In fact some of these art dealers were reluctant to speak to me, referred me to their wholesalers, and even asked me to leave their gallery.

<sup>197</sup>For more detailed information, refer to McDonald (1999) and Dalgleish (2000).

the market for art in the middle to upper price range. In general these art dealers do not develop markets; rather, they situate themselves within existing markets. Rarely do innovations emerge through the galleries of these art dealers. In fact, most of the artworks in their galleries seem to reflect the latest trends in terms of buyers' demands in the art markets with which they work. According to Utopia artists, these dealers were also more inclined to ask for 'another one like you painted last time'<sup>198</sup>. Over time such demands can lead to a standardization of artworks in the name of greater sales<sup>199</sup>. Yet replication of former paintings and styles in too great a number can result in the artworks and artists losing their appeal with the fine art market audience<sup>200</sup>. As yet, art-as-commodity dealers appear to have remained oblivious to the dangers of such practices. Only time will tell whether their approach will change in the face of declining interest in the artworks they sell<sup>201</sup>.

However there is a danger in drawing too categorical a distinction between the markets associated with the two broad kinds of dealers. The market for Aboriginal art is a developing one, one that extends internationally with preferences for particular artworks are changing over time. Dealers of art-as-commodity are themselves in contact with a wide range of clientele and are not necessarily going to be limited in their success by the fine art dealers conception of what their market is likely to be. Over time the markets with which the art-as-commodity dealers have engaged have to some degree changed and dealers who began by catering solely to the upper tourist market now also sell to collectors and to the higher end of the fine art market. They engage particularly with the overseas market and much of their high end fine art sales are to overseas customers<sup>202</sup>.

In some cases art-as-commodity dealers provide additional services to remote Aboriginal communities; such as the delivery truck that brings food to Utopia's outstations on a regular basis. Thus they fill gaps in the community's service provision and, in some cases, people become dependent on them. When this truck makes its run,

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<sup>198</sup>Janet Holmes à Court referred to this in her talk at the 'Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye' exhibition public program (August 2008).

<sup>199</sup>Gloria Petyarr's works for some art dealers have resulted in this (personal communication with Christopher Hodges, August 2008).

<sup>200</sup>These are buyers who generally purchase works from dealers in the first group.

<sup>201</sup>As long as dealers' interest in these works exists, artists will continue to create works for them. Thus, they work in a demand-supply relationship with each other.

<sup>202</sup>For example *Mbantua Gallery* offers all informational material on their artworks in multiple languages and DACOU has been holding exhibitions in France and Korea for a number of years (Personal communication with Tim Jennings, September 2008).



artists frequently choose to be paid in-kind rather than in cash<sup>203</sup> as the fresh food it brings would otherwise only be available from the local shop every two weeks<sup>204</sup>. This truck is valued by older artists with infrequent access to transport, as they are no longer solely dependent on others for transportation to the shop. In addition, the practice of exchanging artworks for groceries from the *Mbantua Gallery* truck enables relationships to be built and maintained over time. The regularity of the truck's visits to the outstations prevents the lapsing of relationships and goes beyond a superficial exchange. People maintain relationships with dealers and private buyers by way of selling artworks to everyone who asks for one<sup>205</sup>. However, it is the locational disadvantage experienced by Utopia's residents that prompts their willingness to exchange paintings for groceries and allows art dealers the opportunity to exploit them. Accounts of this exploitation were witnessed by Dalglish and are described in her dissertation (2000:204ff).

In summary, dealers of commodity artwork tend to work in firmly established art markets, where the quick turnover of artworks is largely guaranteed. They are less interested in developing artists or art markets. Through their regular contact with artists in the community, as well as in town, they are able to react quickly to artists' needs. Transparency (or lack thereof) in their dealings is influenced by the constant exchange of artworks, in-kind payments, cash payments and services provided; which presents opportunities for 'exploitation'.

#### 5.3.2.1 Excursus: An example of an art-as-commodity dealer: Tim Jennings – gallery owner and art dealer

Tim Jennings, owner of *Mbantua Galleries*, is an example of an art-as-commodity dealer. His three galleries all focus on Utopia art, with very few exceptions. His background – as detailed in Chapter 4 – was as a policeman and then owner of the store at the Gap, which had previously been a mission store. When Jennings took over the

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<sup>203</sup>Refer to Dalglish (2000).

<sup>204</sup>However Dalglish notes in her PhD thesis, that during her time in Utopia, the food brought by the truck was rarely fresh and that often even the discounted food was priced extremely high (give example, e.g. more than twice the price from the store). Therefore, for one painting an artist would only receive one bag of shopping (Dalglish 2000:204ff).

<sup>205</sup>This points to the importance of relationships for Aboriginal people. Family and kinship are at the centre of Indigenous people's lives and tightly linked to the system of demand sharing. Involvement in this type of relationship with art dealers means that artists can also ask for things as they are never 'even'.

mission store he also took over its truck, which had made regular deliveries to the mission. Initially, when Jennings drove the truck to the outstations, community members did not realize that it was no longer tied to the mission. His relationships with community members in Utopia are partly based on these early encounters.

Both Dalglish (2000) and McDonald (1999), who have done research on the Utopia art movement previous to my fieldwork, give examples of Jennings' dealings with the artists. The accounts of these researchers provide insights into the ways in which artworks were acquired by the *Mbantua Gallery* truck. In McDonald's account it was the driver, the so-called Hawker<sup>206</sup>, who appeared to make decisions about the quality of the paintings (McDonald 1999:84); however Jennings would have the final say about what to keep and what to send back.

Dalglish reports that during her fieldwork in Mosquito Bore the Hawker visited on a regular basis. People paid for food and goods with paintings; however, the food was often of inferior quality – including rotten eggs and over-ripe fruit. In her example, when an artist payed for food with a few artworks, Dalglish calculated the goods purchased as well as the paintings chosen as in-kind payment. The results are astounding: The retail prices in town for the goods would have been around \$128 and comparable paintings sold for \$2200 (Dalglish 2000:204ff).

The use of a 'book-up' system also appears to be widespread<sup>207</sup>; occurring in the accounts of Dalglish and was referred to by artists during my own fieldwork in Utopia. With the book-up system an artist may buy food from the Hawker without having any paintings at the time to pay; the charge is then noted on their account and the artist must pay at a later stage. This works the other way as well, with an artist trading quite a few paintings at one time without buying from the truck. This form of 'savings' can be used for major purchases; in one case, an artist bought a car<sup>208</sup>.

In addition to dealing in artworks, Jennings produces merchandise and giftware decorated with Utopia artworks; such as notepads, can holders and pens. His galleries show a wide range of artworks: from those of a 'tourist' size and price, to those at the high end of the fine art market. As Jennings himself rarely drives out to the community nowadays, artworks are chosen by his staff or his daughter Dale Jennings, who has

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<sup>206</sup> The person who does the truck runs may change, however, he/she is always called the Hawker.

<sup>207</sup> For example Dinni Kunoth Kemarr and his wife Josie Kunoth Petyarr explained to me that they still owed Jennings because of the 'book-up' system (October 2010).

<sup>208</sup> Lena Pwerl did this in 2010 after a solo show of her works opened at *Mbantua Gallery*.

recently begun making the trips more frequently. Jennings' gallery also sells a video about one of his trips out to Utopia and his website offers several other short videos that exemplify trips out bush by his staff in order to demonstrate his business' integrity.

During my stays in Utopia, I did not witness 'the Hawker', payments in-kind, or 'book-ups' in practice; although Utopia artists related to me occurrences of each. The prevalence of such systems is one reason that some dealers of fine art demanded guidelines for ethical trade<sup>209</sup>.

### **5.3.3 Dealers in between categories: Donald and Janet Holt**

Janet and Donald Holt, the station owners of Delmore Downs, have a longstanding relationship with many artists from Utopia. In the previous chapter I outlined the history of the Holts involvement with Utopia artists and their backgrounds in relation to Indigenous arts. While some fine art dealers have categorised Janet and Donald Holt as members of the art-as-commodity dealers group, these assumptions may have changed over the past decades<sup>210</sup>. The Holts do not fit easily into the group of fine art dealers or the group of art-as-commodity dealers; they hold a special place. Donald Holt is a cattle station owner and while he might have an interest in collecting Indigenous artworks, this was not his main income or profession<sup>211</sup>. Although Donald Holt's relationships to the Eastern Anmatyerr and Alyawarr people is founded on a common history of living together on the land, rather than his interest in their art, he grew up with a mother who was a great art enthusiast, painted herself and collected Indigenous artworks<sup>212</sup>. Janet Holt is knowledgeable about Indigenous arts, having worked in an arts environment during the earliest years of the Papunya art movement. Thus jointly the relationship the Holts have with the artists differs greatly from that of every other art dealer. Despite the Holts' background in Indigenous art, they do not easily fit into the first category of art dealers.

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<sup>209</sup>The Senate, Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: *Indigenous Art - Securing the Future - Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*, 20 June 2007, Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, Canberra and the submissions: [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous\\_arts/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/submissions/sublist.htm) (last sighted 22/11/2011). Another concern of fine art dealers is the fact that when some artists stay in town with art dealers, living in their workshops or sheds, they are forced to paint from dusk until dawn in order to pay off their 'book-up' debts.

<sup>210</sup>Personal communication with various art dealers throughout my research.

<sup>211</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010).

<sup>212</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (October 2010).

Finally, what distinguishes the Holts from other art dealers, wholesalers and entrepreneurs engaging with Utopia artists, is the simple fact that they 'live next door'. They are within reach and have a well-stocked store on the station. Artists can come any day of the week to sit and paint or simply accompany someone else when doing so. Artists have often sought refuge on Delmore Downs station, especially Emily Kam Kngwarray during her later years when art dealers and journalists pursued her relentlessly. Janet and Donald Holt had close relationships with many artists prior to their fame and have always been genuinely interested in supporting them<sup>213</sup>. The accessibility of the Holts by artists lends itself to a different relationship than those held by any art dealer, wholesaler or private citizen who drives into the community for only a day or so.

A similarly unique relationship between dealer and Utopia artists is found in Fred Torres, who is the grandson of Minnie Pwerl and the son of Barbara Weir; both of whom were adopted by Emily Kam Kngwarray (Genocchio 2008:181ff.). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Torres was first employed by Ebes and started off sourcing artworks in the community for Ebes. He became independent and set up his own warehouse and galleries, ran his own workshops in the community, and sold the works through his networks. Torres' business relies on his relationships to the artists as their grandson and nephew. His connections are mainly with the families living in Irultja, from whom most of the works sold through him are sourced. Artists who work with him do not work with or for any other dealer. Torres and his mother, Barbara Weir, who is deeply connected with the business, therefore have a monopoly over the works from Irultja. They rely in their business-making on the relationships with artists from their family.

#### **5.3.4 Relationships between art dealers and artists**

Relationships between artists and art dealers overall differ depending on the length of their relationship, their expectations of each other, their experience working together over time and their level of satisfaction with the working relationship. Artists call upon different art dealers for different needs, reflecting the variety of relationships as well as the agency of artists.

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<sup>213</sup>Throughout my research Donald Holt was very supportive and emphasized his problems with art dealers who were, according to him, not interested in supporting the artists.



Artists create artworks for art dealers from both groups. Art-as-commodity dealers tend to build relationships with community members over a long period of time. Some art dealers from both groups sell art to the complete spectrum of the art market, while others specialise in one section of it. The grouping of dealers here reflects the personal relationships dealers have with artists, how these evolved and how the art dealers understand their role as such. Therefore the grouping is not based on the markets or audiences of the art dealers – despite an existing connection between their intentions and interests in Indigenous art and their clientele.

Different art dealers engage with different art markets and audiences<sup>214</sup>. This means that the relationship between dealers of fine art and artists is distinct in many ways. These relationships develop over time and have an emphasis on quality in artworks: the meanings they convey, their saleability in a particular market and their innovation within the artist's *œuvre*. In contrast to art-as-commodity dealers, the relationships between artists and fine art dealers are not dependent on quick sales, payments in-kind or other favours<sup>215</sup>. The focus of this relationship is on the appreciation of the artworks by both parties. Both groups understand and value the artwork for its fine execution, meticulous work, exercise of skill and mastering of techniques, and so forth. It is in this relationship only where critique of artworks plays a major role and is exercised quite broadly.

Artists discriminate between artworks by calling them (in ascending value) 'rubbish ones', 'quick ones', 'nice ones' or '*mwurrah*<sup>216</sup> ones'. In accordance with the distinctions made and the criticism given by dealers of fine art, artists produce artworks of a distinct 'quality' for them. Only the latter category is acceptable for dealers of fine art. All non-*mwurrah* paintings or sculptures are generally only purchased by art-as-commodity dealers. Though again, as we will see, these distinctions need to be applied with reference to particular forms of art work, and qualitative judgements are not precisely fixed over time.

The concept of time for fine art dealers is different to that of the artists: the time spent working on a piece is largely irrelevant to the dealers, but not so for the artists. Dealers of fine art wait for a work that they consider exceptional but the time taken to produce

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<sup>214</sup> Nevertheless some overlap of art markets may exist.

<sup>215</sup> However, some wholesalers who supply dealers of fine art may have relationships with artists similar to art-as-commodity-dealers; doing favours or handing out cash.

<sup>216</sup> *Mwurrah* means good in Anmatyerr, refer to Green (2010).

an exceptional work depends on the style of the work concerned. A finely detailed painting infilled with precise dotting will take much longer to produce than a painting that comprises a limited number of bold brush strokes to create its effect. There will be quick ones and *mwurrah* ones in both cases. The completion of a work comprising bold brush strokes may take the artist only a short while and be recognised as an exceptional work by the fine art dealer. Yet, as will be explored in the next chapter, artists consider the time invested in creating a work to be a major factor in the valuation process.

With artists interacting with a multitude of art dealers, creating competition and rivalry amongst them, how do these art dealers interact with each other?

### 5.3.5 Relationships between art dealers

The two groups of art dealers are distinct in several ways: their intentions in dealing with Indigenous art, transparency in their records and payments to Indigenous artists, ways of negotiating with Indigenous artists and the different art markets with which they interact. Quality and quantity of artworks sourced are other factors that distinguish between the two groups. Both groups value these two factors differently: the quality of the brushstroke, the paint used, the composition of the artwork and the overall similarity of the works created by an artist are all factors in value assessment.

Yet how do these two groups of dealers interact with each other? Surprisingly, some work together. As I have outlined in the previous chapter, Gooch set up a network of art dealers across Australia. Gallery owners from this network know each other and some were even in contact before the network was established. Others began working together<sup>217</sup>, but later ended their partnership. However, dealers of fine art consider art-as-commodity dealers not to be trustworthy in many ways and believe them not to act ethically towards Indigenous artists. In very few cases have dealers of fine art worked with art-as-commodity dealers: they generally will not source artworks through them and if they do so, will not willingly disclose this information.

I know of only one art dealer who first sourced Utopia works through Rodney and Marc Gooch, but who now relies upon Fred Torres<sup>218</sup>. Again, only a few of the art-as-

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<sup>217</sup>For instance, Fred Torres, a former tradesman, first worked for Hank Ebes and Ebes developed his contacts with the community through Donald Holt. Personal communication with Hank Ebes (January 2010).

<sup>218</sup>Personal communication with Michael Eather (March 2010).

commodity dealers work with the upper end of the fine art market, and some of art-as-commodity dealers act as wholesalers as well, distributing Utopia artworks across the world: including the USA, France, Holland, Germany, the UK, Korea and Japan<sup>219</sup>. Thus, they do not, as a rule, interact with dealers of fine art as they work with very different art markets and audiences. Yet slowly both groups of dealers are expanding their networks to include more international sales and connections.

There seems an almost implicit agreement for each group of dealers to stay out of the other's way. Sometimes, however, this boundary is breached by art-as-commodity dealers to the frustration of dealers of fine art<sup>220</sup>. There has grown to be almost a competition over artists, with exhibitions of the same artist's works occurring concurrently in two different galleries<sup>221</sup>. In sum, the relationship between these groups of art dealers is at times quite tense, particularly because dealers of fine art believe art-as-commodity dealers to exploit artists and not to interact with them ethically. Hence, both 'camps' are, to a certain degree, rivals. This rivalry is not only founded upon competition within a tight market, but also upon the political debate concerning ethical trade in Indigenous arts.

The debate around exploitation was brought to the foreground by the 2007 *Senate Inquiry into the Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector*. This Inquiry granted anyone the ability to voice their opinion or concerns in relation to the Indigenous visual arts and crafts industry's future. Amongst the vast number of comments received by the committee, quite a few referred to issues of 'unethical trade'. This topic came to polarize the debate, as dealers of fine art spoke of 'doing the right thing' in contrast to those who 'exploited' Indigenous people<sup>222</sup>. Subsequently a national code of conduct in Indigenous art was called for, to which art dealers can now become official signatories<sup>223</sup>.

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<sup>219</sup>Personal communication with Hank Ebes (January 2010).

<sup>220</sup> A recent example of this is *Mbantua Gallery's* showing of Dinni Kunoth's works. Kunoth used to create carvings and paintings almost exclusively for Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce, yet his works are now sourced by Jennings.

<sup>221</sup>For example, artworks by Angelina Pwerl/Ngal were shown by *Niagara Galleries* and *Lauraine Diggins Fine Art* at the same time in January 2010. Yet *Lauraine Diggins Fine Art* offered the works at a much lower price than did *Niagara Galleries*, thereby underbidding the market established by *Niagara Galleries* over a decade ago.

<sup>222</sup>Refer to the Parliament of Australia webpage for all submissions:  
[http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous\\_arts/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/submissions/sublist.htm) (last sighted 17/10/2011).

<sup>223</sup>Problematic in regards to the code of conduct is that anyone can sign up, yet the monitoring of acting accordingly is at this stage fairly limited.

Owing to expressions of concern by dealers of fine art and this Senate Inquiry<sup>224</sup>, the discourse regarding artist-dealer negotiations came to emphasise images of the exploited, victimised artists and the exploitative art dealer. This promoted the notion that Indigenous artists in remote communities had no understanding of the value of their artworks in the gallery context, could not discriminate between 'good' or 'bad' artworks themselves, and were dependent upon dealers for this<sup>225</sup>. Upon deeper examination of this discourse, the implication is that Indigenous artists have no real understanding of money or the value of their artworks in monetary terms<sup>226</sup>. This reading of the negotiation process between an Indigenous artist and the art dealer is then that the art dealer dictates the size of the painting, its style, the materials used and lastly the price of it, which Jennings describes in his submission to the Senate<sup>227</sup>; the Indigenous artist is merely the 'producer' of the artwork who sells their masterpiece for little money, only to find later that it has been sold at auction for \$200,000. This has certainly been the case in the past, yet both sides of the Indigenous art world have changed<sup>228</sup>.

This perception was fuelled by an ABC 4Corners show that aired in 2008<sup>229</sup>, in which the practices of unethical art dealers in Alice Springs were uncovered<sup>230</sup>. These included locking Indigenous artists in compounds or hotels where they were expected to paint for days with little food, water or a break, only to be paid as little as \$50. The paintings produced under these conditions were implied to have then been sold for large amounts of money to the wider art market, leaving the artists with almost nothing in return. This portrayal infers that all Indigenous artists working with art-as-commodity dealers are exploited by these and that no monitoring body was in place.

Within this framework of exploiter and exploited, or victim and oppressor, the 4Corners report leaves no room to ask why these Indigenous artists did not escape from the hotels

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<sup>224</sup>The Senate Inquiry and its implications deserve greater attention than space provides and would be a worthwhile avenue for further research on policy making in Indigenous arts.

<sup>225</sup>Particularly in relation to Utopia art, refer to Lauraine Diggins' submission:

[http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous\\_arts/submissions/sub26.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/submissions/sub26.pdf) (last sighted 22/11/2011).

<sup>226</sup>This may sometimes be the case and can lead to an artist easily being exploited by an art dealer. Yet, in other cases the artist understands the negotiation and agrees to the amount given to him/her even if aware of the unequal exchange.

<sup>227</sup>Refer to Tim Jennings' submission for more detail on the changes and other hurdles of dealing with Indigenous artists from Utopia:

[www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous\\_arts/submissions/sub24.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/submissions/sub24.pdf), last sighted 22/11/2011).

<sup>228</sup>Ibid.

<sup>229</sup>Refer to: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2008/s2314182.htm> (last sighted 17/10/2011).

<sup>230</sup>This program did not focus on one community or art dealer. Artists from Utopia and their works were not featured in this show.



in which they were imprisoned. Did they have no choice? Were they in fear for their safety at the hands of these dealers? The implications of such media accounts not only affect the art world in general, but also have particular relevance for art dealers who – may or not – deal in an ‘ethical’ way with artists<sup>231</sup>. In accordance with this view artists have no agency and are simply instruments in the production of artworks. However I contend that in Utopia, artists’ agency is reflected in their choices to paint for specific wholesalers and art dealers, in the different materials they use, the multiple styles they execute and in the varying rates of pay they demand for each work. These particular expressions of agency would be rendered moot should artist-dealers relationship be solely exclusive, as preferred by fine art dealers<sup>232</sup>.

#### 5.4 One-on-one artist-dealer relationships and the rise of the solo artist

In the past decade, the lack of an art centre structure in Utopia has meant that artists had to become their own agents and engage with the Western art world without mediation. The fine art dealers’ preferred model is exclusive artist-dealer relationship, in which the dealer or his/her wholesaler works one-on-one with the artist, pushes the artist to his/her limits and promotes the artist extensively nationally and internationally. Dealers of fine art are heavily invested in these relationships and value them highly. For Utopia artists such relationships have led to successful high-profile careers, with artists exclusively represented by different galleries: for example Gloria Petyarr by *Utopia Art Sydney*, Kathleen Petyarr by *Gallerie Australis*, and Angelina Pwerl by *Niagara Galleries*.

Kathleen Petyarr moved to Adelaide in 1992, where she has since been in an exclusive partnership with David Cossey and *Gallerie Australis*. Petyarr was, for a time, one of the few Indigenous artists with such a relationship. In some ways, Petyarr’s relationship with Cossey mirrored the Western art market ideal of exclusivity, with one artist working for one art dealer only. However, Cossey’s relationship with Petyarr also diverged from this model as not only did he pay, profile and promote her, he also built a place for her to live and work, accommodated her family when they visited and

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<sup>231</sup>Throughout my many interviews with art dealers, each made claims of not being a carpetbagger and interacting with Indigenous artists in an ethical way.

<sup>232</sup>This is notwithstanding that extensive accounts of exploitative behaviour within the urban context of Alice Springs over the past decades have emerged. Exploitation of Indigenous artists may include inhuman working conditions for artists, in which they are forced to work. However, it requires precise documentation and evidence in order to be able to make judgements about any dealer’s behaviour. To date these accounts have not eventuated in legal action and are a matter for further research.

occasionally even cooked for her. Thus the exclusivity of their relationship was not only founded upon fair monetary payments, but also a close personal affinity<sup>233</sup>.

A more recent example of a close artist-dealer relationship is that between Bill Nuttall, *Niagara Galleries* and Angelina Pwerl. Facilitated by her relationship with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce, Pwerl is one of the few Indigenous artists represented by *Niagara Galleries*. The gallery's general focus is on contemporary, rather than Indigenous Australian, art. Yet over the years *Niagara Galleries* has hosted solo shows for Pwerl: promoting her work, profiling her and exposing her works to an international market<sup>234</sup>. The first exhibitions of Pwerl's work at *Niagara Galleries* date back to the early 1990s<sup>235</sup>; a time when she, Kathleen Petyarr and Gloria Petyarr were amongst a small group of Utopia artists with exclusive representation. The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was eventful for Angelina Pwerl, having three solo exhibitions at *Niagara Galleries* in Melbourne. Through these shows her profile rose, interest in her works increased, and her artistic practice became refined.

The emphasis on representing and profiling individual artists can be traced by examining the prevalence of solo exhibitions, as opposed to group exhibitions, over the last two decades. Emily Kam Kngwarray and Gloria and Kathleen Petyarr each had solo shows during the 1990s. However, throughout the 2000s Utopia artists have increasingly been cast in the spotlight through solo exhibitions. This development began after Kngwarray's death and during Minnie Pwerl's rise to fame.

Kngwarray's death marked a moment of great loss to the Utopia community: the loss of an elder, a sophisticated ritual leader, a great teacher, a highly innovative artist and holder of the largest income in the community. Her death left a gap that some saw to be filled by the emerging artist Minnie Motorcar Pwerl<sup>236</sup>.

Pwerl started painting when Turner and Kozeluh were working in the Sandover region<sup>237</sup> and became increasingly productive over the years due to support from her family: particularly her daughter, artist Barbara Weir, and grandson, Fred Torres the art

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<sup>233</sup>This exclusive relationship between them meant that during the Telstra Award scandal, mentioned in Chapter 1, Cossey stood by Petyarr and supported her.

<sup>234</sup>Personal communication with Bill Nuttall (March 2009 and October 2010).

<sup>235</sup>Recently the situation has changed: the exclusivity of this relationship was compromised when Pwerl started painting for other dealers, such as *Lauraine Diggins Fine Art*.

<sup>236</sup>Personal communication with Beverly Knight (October 2008).

<sup>237</sup>Pwerl participated in different group projects at *Urapuntja Artists Utopia* and *Sandover Arts*; for example an etching project with Basil Hall (personal communication with Basil Hall, January 2011).

dealer (Genocchio 2008:182). During her 2009 *Mbantua Gallery* exhibition, although Pwerl passed away in 2006, she was praised by the media as the new ‘genius’ of Utopia (Ebes quoted in McCulloch-Uehlin 2005:85), following in the footsteps of Kathleen Petyarr and Emily Kam Kngwarray<sup>238</sup>. Utopia appears to be the place for ‘genius’ in art, with this term being so frequently deployed in reference to the artists that its value has become inflated. Interestingly, common to all those deemed the next ‘genius’ of Indigenous art are three attributes: being elderly, a ritual leader and female.

In the past decade, major changes occurred in the local art world of Utopia: Minnie Pwerl passed away in 2006. Kathleen Petyarr’s success stagnated. Her exclusive gallery, *Gallerie Australis*, closed in 2009 and although Christopher Hodges at *Utopia Art Sydney* held a retrospective of Gloria Petyarr’s works in 2010, these were works from the peak of her career. In 2008 the largest overseas Emily Kam Kngwarray exhibition was hosted in Tokyo and Osaka. When this exhibit returned to Australia, to be staged in Canberra, it received little media attention: despite the exhibition’s accompanying film, *Emily in Japan – The making of an exhibition*, screened on ABC national television, the exhibition’s coverage was by far greater in Japan<sup>239</sup> than in Australia.

A silence around Utopia artists has emerged in the last few years. While some artists continue to stand out, being nurtured by one-on-one relationships with art dealers, group artists are no longer a focus of any dealers. Currently successful Utopia artists have made their names as individuals and not as part of a wider art movement.

Despite the continuous efforts of art dealers to maintain exclusive relationships with artists, Utopia artists choose to work with a variety of art dealers. For example, although Kathleen Petyarr has worked with Cossey for almost two decades, when she returns to Mosquito Bore on holidays one can find artworks by her in galleries around Alice Springs; works which were most probably not sourced through *Gallerie Australis* but sold by her to the gallery. In the following chapter, I will investigate how artist-dealer relationships are maintained by the artist when the art dealer is aware that the artist sells their works to other dealers. Further, I will demonstrate that this practice occurs in Utopia when artists exercise their agency and actively choose the dealers to whom they will sell a specific work in accordance with their creation’s style and topic.

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<sup>238</sup>Petyarr’s solo exhibition at the MCA was called: *Kathleen Petyarr – genius of place*. Kngwarray’s travelling exhibition was called: *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*.

<sup>239</sup>For *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* the Japanese venues recorded the highest number of visitors for all international contemporary art exhibitions (personal communication with Margo Neale, August 2008).

As I have shown, multiple relationships between artists and dealers exist. The fact that Aboriginal artists from Utopia choose to work with a variety of art dealers indicates the value given to each relationship for differing reasons. The value lies in multiple factors: the relationship's facilitation of access to resources such as groceries, a place to stay when visiting town or obtaining cash when in need; but it also can lie in friendship, a shared history, respect and/or an emotional connection between dealer and artist.

The allocation of kinship or 'skin' names to non-Indigenous visitors to Indigenous communities throughout the Central Desert has frequently been documented. This practice is undertaken so as to integrate the neophyte into the community. However, this is not a practice commonly found in Utopia and art dealers are generally referred to by their given name. This indicates that these relationships differ in their development from those of other desert communities. In Utopia art dealers are not integrated into the kinship system and therefore are not considered to be related to the artist. This creates a distance in relationships that does not exist between community members; firmly establishing the dealer as an 'outsider', with the exception of Fred Torres. Reasons why relationships with art dealers differ in Utopia from those of other desert communities are the longer contact history and the fact that people from Utopia have worked on stations and with European Australians for almost a century.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that agency – of art wholesalers, dealers and coordinators, as well as for the artists and their communities – is more complicated than existing discourse has indicated. I have shown the category of 'art dealers' to be too limited, given their differing and even contrary interests. For artists interacting with the art world, art centres and art coordinators play various roles depending on the multiple variables explored above. When taking into account the constraints on the everyday lives of Utopia artists, their agency emerges in the way they establish, maintain and negotiate their relationships with the art world over time. The agency of artists is a crucial factor in understanding the failings of the art centre in Utopia and the increase in one-on-one artist-dealer relationships.

The next chapter will explore what it means to be an artist and how artists' agency is expressed in creation processes: the choice of materials, techniques and topics all reflect



an artist's agency. By examining the agency of artists', another crucial point of the Utopia art movement becomes tangible: the consistent diversity of artworks produced partly as a result of artists working with a variety of art dealers.

## Chapter 6: Art practices in Utopia

### 6.1 Introduction

The relationship between art dealers and artists impacts upon the artworks produced for each dealer, as most artists are aware of the clientele and market with which each dealer engages. This chapter aims to highlight the agency of artists – expressed through the multiple styles and techniques used in creating artworks – when negotiating relationships and earnings with art dealers. Exploring motivations for producing specific art forms, such as the value criteria applied during the creation process and the negotiation involved in selling the artwork, this chapter will illuminate causal factors behind the multiple problems presented in the establishment and maintenance of an art centre as well as in the maintenance of long-term exclusive artist-dealer relationships. I argue that the relationships between artists and ‘occasional art producers’, artists and art dealers, and artists and art collectors play an influential role in the creation of artworks.

### 6.2 What is an artist?

Dealers in art from Utopia work with a variety of people, not all of them would be considered artists. Some might be better termed ‘occasional art producers’. For the purpose of this research, being an artist in the Utopia community will be discussed in relation to: the income earned through creating artworks, the regularity of artwork produced and the time taken to produce the works. A person who earns their living by selling his or her artworks can be considered a full-time artist, although he or she may hold supplementary income for example, through welfare payments<sup>240</sup>.

However, if a person only produces a painting or sculpture occasionally – for example, twice a year in order to afford petrol money for the next sports weekend in another community<sup>241</sup> – this person is not considered to make a living as an artist. They do this work in order to get a certain amount of money and reach their goal, which can be

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<sup>240</sup>Employment in Utopia is very limited, some of the service providers employ Indigenous staff: the shop employs some Indigenous staff, the shire services have some Indigenous employees, so do the clinic and the school. However, there is by no means work for everyone and the hours are limited too. A new program, called *Alyawarr Ingkerr-wenh*, between the station owners of the surrounding stations and members of Ampilatwatja community tries to secure employment on stations for Indigenous workers. In the future this business will be expanded to include most of the Sandover region.

<sup>241</sup> ‘Target work’ means to work enough to save up money in order to achieve a goal, such as the purchase of a car or petrol. For a more detailed examination of ‘target work’ see Arthur (1994) and Peterson (2005).

considered a form of target work. By differentiating between artists and ‘occasional art producers’, I highlight that not every person from Utopia who creates an artwork spends most of his/her time doing so. It acknowledges that a much larger group of people exists, who have created artworks at some point in time, than are visible in the art market at any point in time and that people move in and out of the art market.

In practice, throughout their lives many people will shift between earning the majority of their income from art making and then, ceasing this production, rely on alternative sources of income. Certain women, in particular those who primarily have worked with the batik medium and do not want to paint, very rarely make artworks today, as few opportunities exist to create batik<sup>242</sup>. I will consider this latter group of people who, for various reasons, create art on an irregular basis as ‘occasional art producers’. As noted above, some may do this as they prefer working with another medium such as batik or prints, while others may only create artworks as a way of making ‘quick cash’. Those who deploy art as a means to ‘quick cash’ are treating the creation of artworks as commodity production, obtaining money independent from welfare, CDEP or other government sources. However, the ‘occasional art producers’, who enjoy working with batik for example, put in a lot of time and effort, and discuss the works amongst each other. They make the works for the satisfaction it brings them and indeed may not be motivated by commodity production. This group of artists, however, constitutes a rather small percentage of the total population as would be the case in any society.

The distinction between artists and ‘occasional art producers’ has no qualitative bearing upon the artworks produced; rather, it defines their level of engagement with the art market. The art world categorises and ranks artists, as fine art creators or souvenir artists for example; yet this in itself has little relationship to the artist’s engagement with the market or frequency of art production. It does not reflect the fact that many artists who create fine artworks also engage with the lower end or even tourist art market. Some are able to switch styles and quality from one painting to another<sup>243</sup>. Furthermore, an artist’s standing is by no means static and any artist’s work can rise to fine art status

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<sup>242</sup>Opportunities to create batiks or prints are limited for a range of reasons: the materials need to be organized, including naphthol dyes, silk, wax and all the tools for batik making and for print making the wood for woodblocks or plates for etchings need to be brought into the community and then send off to a printmaker studio. All these techniques demand organization prior to the workshops.

<sup>243</sup>Personal observation throughout my fieldwork in Utopia during 2009 and 2010 and personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010) and Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (October 2010).

or fall to a lower art status<sup>244</sup>. This rise and fall of artists and their work reflects the unpredictability of the art market and the changing taste of clientele. What may have been sought after yesterday is by no means the interest of today. This dynamic system is not specific to Indigenous art, but characteristic of the art market in general.

My focus is therefore on the two groups of people from Utopia who create art, the 'occasional art producers' and those who earn a living from their art, and how they interact and engage with the art world. I will highlight the differences that can be found in their artworks in accordance with the relationships they have with art dealers, collectors or people working in or travelling through Utopia. Distinctions, such as time taken to produce a piece, the effort involved and the quality of material used, can be considered markers of quality. These distinctions, among others, are among the ways in which artists in Utopia exert their agency.

'Agency' of artists or in artworks is a much-discussed concept in the anthropology and sociology of art and cultural production. The complexity of how certain artworks become favoured over others and the underlying structures of these processes was the subject of Pierre Bourdieu's 'Distinction' (1984). In this monograph Bourdieu focused upon the reception of artworks, their place in society and how this is related to the 'taste' of the different social classes. However the practice of creating an artwork and the agency expressed by the artist through the artwork was not included in this research. In one of his subsequent books, 'The Field of Cultural Production' (1993), Bourdieu reflects more on the role of the artist. Zhang (2009) has recently critiqued this work in relation to contemporary Chinese artists and their agency and found Bourdieu's model of artists' agency to be rather inflexible and limiting in its understanding of why and how artists act:

Artists in Bourdieu's theory of cultural production are [...] reduced by [...] reductionist logic. The motivation upon which they act seems to be unsatisfactorily one-dimensional-individualistic, rational, instrumental, mechanistic, unreflexive in the last instance. [...] the artist as an actor for Bourdieu comprises two contradictory sets of qualities: on the one hand, the artist enters the profession of art as a sanctified priesthood, adopting religiously the Kantian doctrine of pure aesthetic. [...] On the other hand, the same artist is also an instrumental careerist, a seasoned entrepreneur who strategizes with every means at hand to consolidate his or her power within the field of art, or even more ambitiously, to secure a place in the canon. (p.20ff)

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<sup>244</sup>For example Emily Kam Ngwarray's batiks were at first considered to be of poor quality, especially by her fellow artists. Yet her perseverance in the batik medium brought her rise to fame, as they portray her development as an artist.



Further, according to Zhang “Bourdieu’s understanding of the motive of cultural producer falls short [...], very limited agency [is] granted to the artist under Bourdieu’s theorem” (p.22). Therefore, in order to understand the ways in which artists act, express agency and, in some instances, even become their own agents, one needs to examine the process of production, the creative processes and the art practice of an artist.

An approach towards artists’ agency that has explored agency from this perspective is Howard Morphy’s ‘Art as a Mode of Action’ (2009b). Evolving out of a critique of Alfred Gell’s ‘Art & Agency: an anthropological theory’ (1998), in which Gell highlighted the agency of the object. Morphy’s analysis also engages critically with Appadurai’s ‘social life of things’, in which objects adhere meaning through exchange, having travelled or being placed somewhere (Appadurai 1986). The intention of the artist in creating the object is neglected in the two latter studies and the point of critique for Morphy’s article. Hence, the framework for this chapter is the lack of detailed research on artist’s agency and how this is expressed in artworks.

Fred Myers (2002) explored artists’ agency in relation to an artwork’s promotion and influence upon exhibitions, and thus, the reception of the artwork nationally and internationally. Exhibitions in New York, such as the recent ‘Icons of the Desert’ (2009) exhibition, are examples of artists exercising agency in regard to art produced by their forbears: in this exhibition artists played a major role in influencing how certain paintings were shown, that were not to be seen by Indigenous women (Myers 2011): After much consultation with the artists, a special room was created for paintings with male-specific content, a warning for women intending to step into the room was posted at the entry. According to Myers, another factor that reflects the agency of artists is how much of the underlying stories are revealed to the audience. The question of revelation and concealment, which links back to the principles of visible and invisible (Myers 1986), is a major area in which artists to exert agency.

Other ways to express one’s agency in art practice are through innovation and style. Christiane Keller (2006) examined the role of innovation in her analysis of Rembarrnga sculpture-making in Maningrida. She found that innovation was a key concept for artists and a way to distinguish themselves from others, to create their signature. In my analysis of artists’ agency I will focus on style: examining in particular technique and creative processes, quality markers and processes of negotiation. Innovation, repertoire,

teaching and learning processes will be highlighted in following chapters where I will examine particular artists' *œuvres* and themes.

The following sections will firstly demonstrate how artists use art as a mode of action and negotiation. Secondly, 'quality markers' in the practice of Utopia artists will be highlighted. Finally, I will turn to how artworks can be expressions of the relationships between artists and art dealers, which again can be traced back to a certain quality<sup>245</sup> of the works, themes chosen and styles applied.

### 6.3 Artists and 'occasional art producers'

The primary group of people creating artworks are the 'full-time' artists. This encompasses all who paint on an almost daily basis. Most of these artists spend at least half of their day – if not their whole day – painting or carving and have been doing so over a long period of time, some for over 35 years. They pay no heed to the days of the week and continue to work diligently even on Saturdays and Sundays. Some artists choose to drive to the Delmore Downs Station homestead as this location provides a quiet space where they are fed throughout the day. After a full day's work, they leave and drive for one and a half to two hours back to their outstations, often only to return the next day<sup>246</sup>. While travelling to use such spaces lends itself to regularity in artwork creation, locations in which such spaces occur vary constantly as 'studios' are created and recreated due to the movement of artists from one outstation to another, or even within an outstation (Isaacs 1998: 140ff). Some of these artists earn considerable amounts of money through the sale of their artworks and, in some cases, make their living this way. This money allows artists to contribute to the income of family members by way of 'demand sharing'<sup>247</sup>. Almost every one of Utopia's artists to some extent supports a large group of family members<sup>248</sup>.

Occasional art producers, almost by definition, do not contribute to the community's economy to the same extent, since the income earned through the sale of their artworks is neither substantial nor regular enough. 'Occasional art producers' and their engagements with the art market are often driven by the desire to earn an immediate

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<sup>245</sup> As in the previous chapter, 'quality' in this context is used as an art market term, commonly applied by art dealers as well as artists in relation to artworks.

<sup>246</sup> Personal observation during my stays in Utopia in 2009 and 2010.

<sup>247</sup> For a discussion of demand sharing refer to Peterson 1991; 1993 and Macdonald 2000.

<sup>248</sup> This is often discussed in mainstream media and is depicted as the exploitation of artists by their family.

return. It is relatively easy to find a buyer in the community, for example staff at the clinic or, in the past few years, Northern Territory Emergency Response personnel, who come to the community for short trips.

During the art centre period, 'occasional art producers' as well as artists created works for both groups of art dealers. However, through the shift to intensified one-on-one artist-dealer relationships, the majority of 'occasional art producers' work for art dealers from the second group. This relates to the reasons why they make artworks, such as financial pressures or needing access to resources.

All community members are related to each other as classificatory or consanguine kin, which defines their interactions with each other. The greatest difference between 'occasional art producers' and full-time artists is the income earned. Aboriginal people in Utopia, like many throughout Australia, live in an economy of demand sharing (Peterson 1991, 1993; Macdonald 2000). This is not a form of sharing based on generosity or reciprocal exchange; rather, demand sharing entails family members making claims on the assets, goods, and capital held by their kin. These claims are predominantly regarding food and money. If one member of the family earns more than other family members, the demands made upon this person increase. Such demands at times become great and it is then hard for a person to respond to all. While there are ways of saying 'no', I have rarely seen these used for close family<sup>249</sup>; although when extended family made demands, they were quite often turned down by saying that there was no food left or that the person had not enough money for her- or himself. Artists find themselves under constant demands from family members, which may in certain cases be intensified; such as when the artist owns a car.<sup>250</sup> Demands are made for money, food, to be driven somewhere and finally to give the car to someone else. Some artists only paint for family members who want a car and have asked for it. Demand sharing therefore is to some extent another constraint people live with and one that puts great pressure on artists to keep producing and keep earning large sums in order to feed the entire family and maintain relationships to family members by reacting to demands made.

Artists' choices are influenced by the pressures of demand sharing and the desire to be able to react to demands. Choices are made in relation to whom they paint what kind of

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<sup>249</sup> This was so difficult for some family members that they gave all their food away and stayed up all night because they were so hungry (personal observation September 2010).

<sup>250</sup> Again this is not particular to artists but happens to everyone having a car.

painting for: many artists who create fine artworks also engage with the lower end or even tourist art market. Some artists are able to switch styles and quality from one painting for example to another<sup>251</sup>. Their choice therefore to work for art dealers from both groups depends to a great deal on their living circumstances as it does for ‘occasional art producers’, who see the sale of an artwork often as an avenue to create cash when needed.

In distinguishing who may be the right dealer to sell an artwork to, artists apply quality criteria. Different art dealers expect different artworks as their buyers have varying expectations, which again maintains diversity in Utopia art<sup>252</sup>. Artists apply their quality criteria of ‘good’, ‘nice’, ‘rubbish’ and ‘quick’ ones, which differ to some extent from the art market ones.

#### 6.4 Quality markers

Quality markers are a way for artists to determine the quality they give to or see in an artwork. The quality an artist sees in an artwork differs from the quality that members of the art world – such as art dealers or art collectors – may find in the work. While the quality attributed to the work may depend upon similar categories for both sides, the notions of these categories can differ greatly. An example of that is the time an artist invests in creating the work. Finally, quality and its markers change depending on the art market; this applies equally to the various types of art markets, such as that of tourist art or the fine art market, but also to the national and international art markets.

The overall quality markers I was able to distil from conversations with artists in Utopia are:

1. Time creating the artwork
2. Effort put into ‘thinking of’ the artwork and creating it in one’s mind
3. Materials used: quality of paint, brush or squeeze bottle, quality of canvas or linen
4. Technique, such as use of a brush, stick or multiple sticks

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<sup>251</sup>Personal observation throughout my stays in Utopia from 2009 until 2011, and personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010), and Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (October 2010).

<sup>252</sup>I will discuss this diversity in the art from Utopia in the following three chapters.



5. Cleanliness: damage, degradation, and soiling, such as stains from dogs or children
6. Composition

These quality markers are particular to painting and would be different for carvings and batiks. As I focus upon painters, I will elaborate on the quality markers used to distinguish between artworks in this medium.

The quality of artworks is expressed through various comments ranging from ‘good one’ to ‘rubbish one’. Very refined and highly valued work is in general only done for highly paying art galleries. Such galleries have established long-term relationships with the artists, yet are not afraid to reject a painting if they consider the quality of the painting to be low<sup>253</sup>. Artists are aware of this possibility and pay increased attention to quality factors such as a ‘clean canvas’: i.e. no spilling of paint, no dog footprints or children’s footprints etc. If the canvas of a high quality painting looks ‘dirty’ it will be painted over and started again<sup>254</sup>. Attention is paid to every detail: choice of colours, paints, linen (Belgian linen or canvas), background colour and priming, as well as clean sticks (skewers) and brushes or squeeze bottles.

Technical developments and market demand can interact to change artistic practice. Fine dotting with sticks was highly valued both by the artists and by the market. It is highly valued by the artists in part because it requires a great deal of time, focus and hard work in its creation. However it is becoming rare as the time demanded for creating such a painting is enormous and because this effort is rarely appropriately rewarded. During my time in Utopia, I saw only a handful of paintings being done with a single stick; with the squeeze bottle more or less taking its place. The squeeze bottle is more economical in terms of paint and at the same time creates more uniform dots. Paints do not dry up in squeeze bottles and colours can be mixed within it without waste. Compared to having to change sticks or clean them, which can result in an irregularity of dots, the squeeze bottle is efficient and effective. One can cut a part of the nozzle off to create a wider or finer dot and also use the squeeze bottle like a pen to incorporate drawings into the paintings (Fig. 1).

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<sup>253</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010), Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (October 2010) and Christopher Hodges (August 2008).

<sup>254</sup>In September 2010 I observed Cowboy Loy Pwerl repaint an entire canvas because a dog had walked through the wet paint.



Fig. 1:  
Genevieve Loy  
Kemarr painting  
with the squeeze  
bottle, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt  
(September 2010)

This is not possible with sticks and can only be done with a paint brush, yet the effects were never as refined. The preference for this new technique nevertheless rests on its economical use of paint<sup>255</sup>. As the styles achieved with this technique are quite close to the ones done with a single stick, the expected earning range for these paintings is relatively high, yet not as high as those created with a single stick.

The difference between using a stick, several sticks and a squeeze bottle is not only about the efficiency of paint usage but also about time. Time, as mentioned above, is a crucial factor for artists when talking about artworks. For example, one artist explained to me: “I made four batiks in two weeks, I am a hard worker”<sup>256</sup>. Another stated “this one took me three weeks; a lot of work”<sup>257</sup>. Finally, Angelina Pwerl said about one of her paintings: “for one-stick Bill, long time, many dots, only one stick”<sup>258</sup>. These three comments, which are just a small number of similar statements related to me during my field trips, connect time and labour with quality of work. The longer it takes to create an artwork, the more detailed the work, the finer the dot, the more intricate the painting, and the higher the value. Thus an exceptional artwork takes a lot of time to create; not

<sup>255</sup> Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010).

<sup>256</sup> Personal communication with Rosie Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010) about the Batchelor Institute batik workshop in May 2009.

<sup>257</sup> Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr (September 2009) about one of her recently finished paintings.

<sup>258</sup> Personal communication with Angelina Pwerl (October 2010). ‘One-stick Bill’ is the name Pwerl uses to refer to Bill Nuttall at Niagara Galleries, the sole person for whom she will create these paintings and thus explaining her moniker for him. Pwerl’s relationship with Gooch and Nuttall and the works she creates for them will be discussed below in a case study about the influence of such relationships on topic choice and styles of artworks.



only due to the process of painting, but also the time taken ‘thinking it’<sup>259</sup> into existence. ‘Thinking’ an artwork consists of the time taken by an artist to think about composition and theme<sup>260</sup>. The temporal relationship to quality is therefore closely related to labour.

But labour time ‘thinking’ and producing an artwork are not the sole components of its creation. One must have already invested in learning about the Dreamings – its stories and various depictions – in order to create their own style: all of which is part of the creation process. The acquisition of a skill set that enables one to create the artwork is similar to an apprenticeship. Over years artists have to acquire knowledge about the rituals and Dreaming stories. They have to learn how to paint certain Dreamings, as the iconographic repertoire is in most cases defined<sup>261</sup>.

Artists’ concepts of quality differ greatly from the art world’s perception of ‘fine artwork’. An example for this discrepancy can be found in Emily Kam Kngwarray’s line paintings (Fig. 2).

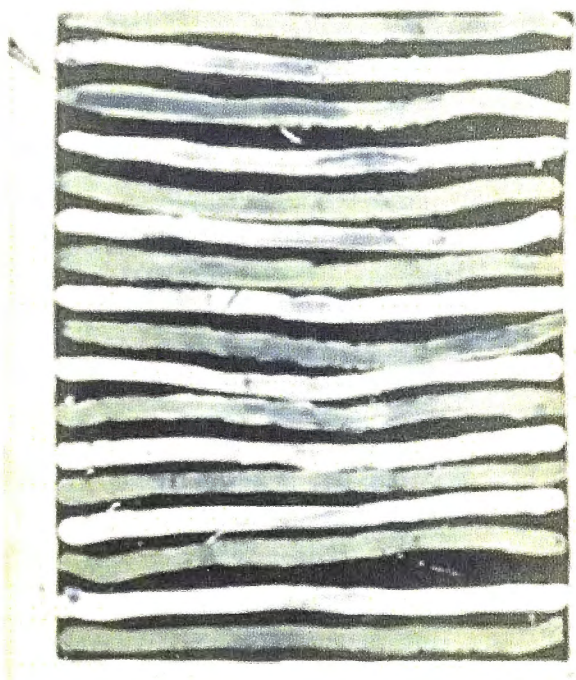


Fig. 2:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled No. 1*, 1990s, 135 x 106.5 irregular shape, acrylic paint on canvas, set of five, AGSA

These line paintings took her at most an hour to complete, yet they are considered great works of art. Hence, the time factor of producing a work does not equate with market value. Artworks that have taken more time to create, and are considered more valuable by other artists, may not be valued as highly by the art market. The underlying concept of hard work yielding great income does therefore not correlate with the notions of quality and value in the art world. Nonetheless, several art dealers pointed out to me

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<sup>259</sup>Personal communication with Lena Pwerl and Jeannie Pwerl (October 2010).

<sup>260</sup>Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr (September 2010).

<sup>261</sup>For a detailed analysis of the apprenticeship system in Arnhem Land refer to Taylor (1996b). I will return to the concept of apprenticeships in Chapter 7.

how hard Utopia artists work<sup>262</sup>. In fact, this was one of my first observations in Ahalper during the Batchelor Institute batik workshop. The artists arrived between 8 and 9 am and worked steadily until 5 pm every day; not leaving until told that the workshop was finishing. This work ethic is a crucial factor when assessing the quality artists give to their works.

Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr speakers reportedly lived around and worked on stations prior to getting their land back; engaging in the local labour market<sup>263</sup>. This labour market valued workers who put in a great deal of time and effort to do something correctly. During seasonal work, a hard worker would be remembered and employed in the following season.

Techniques and materials used for the creation of a painting vary greatly. They affect the value of the works: high quality paints are given to the artists by multiple dealers. While these are only intended to be used for the paintings created for the respective dealer, in most cases artists swap the paints around, mix them up and use them on paintings for others.

Should an artist solely use high quality paint, the overall value of the painting increases. This is preferable to the art dealer, who does not appreciate a mixing of inferior and high quality paints. The same applies to brushes and canvas or linen. Dealers supply artists with brushes and linen or canvas and only in very rare cases do artists have to purchase these themselves. However, if artists create a painting on the linen provided to them by one dealer and then sell it to someone else or give the linen away, this may cause friction between the dealer and the artist. A dealer wants the artist to use the supplies only for paintings that he or she will purchase from the artist and not for paintings for other dealers or private buyers. These problems arose in Rodney Gooch's time and have by no means abated.

There are aesthetic and technical benefits to the use of quality materials in painting. Higher quality paint, for example, will flow more smoothly; the paint sets differently on the surface and will shine or shimmer more than inferior quality paint.

A variety of materials and techniques are used to achieve different effects and styles in painting. One example of this is the multiplicity of techniques for dotting: double-

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<sup>262</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010) and personal communication with Nathan King (September 2008).

<sup>263</sup> Compare this to Chapter 2.



dotting, single dotting, the one-stick dot, the big dots, the many-stick dots; all of which are just some of the possibilities for creating dots. One distinguishing factor is whether there is one layer of dots or several. The next primary distinction is the application technique of the dot; whether by stick, brush, squeeze bottle or multiple sticks. Each gives different effects, but also varies in the amount of time involved. A small dot created with a skewer is the most detailed and time-consuming way to create a painting. On the other hand, to take many skewers in one's hand, dip them in paint and apply them to the canvas is considered far more efficient but produces a work that other artists would call a 'quick one'.

'Rubbish one' can be a 'quick one' and depend on the time invested but can also be related to the final category: composition. If the composition of the painting is not pleasing to the eyes of the artist it is likely to be called a 'rubbish one'. It is a painting, in which the colours possibly do not work together or the different iconographic elements of the painting seem not to speak to each other. 'Rubbish ones' are joked about and the opinion of the buyers of these is not taken seriously.

In summary, the quality of materials used, together with the techniques applied and time invested defines for the artists the quality and value of the painting. The quality of an artist's work, as seen by other artists, can be traced back to their long-term engagement with Dreaming stories and apprenticeships, leading to a work ethic that enables art to be produced for a fine art market. I will now turn to a consideration of the factors affecting what artists choose to paint for different art dealers and the different techniques and materials that they employ.

## 6.5 What do artists paint for whom?

The decision-making process about what an artist paints for each dealer is influenced by many factors: the relationship between artist and dealer, family pressures, possible financial returns and the need for cash. Yet another prime factor is the prospect of exhibitions: the experience of travelling, the pride of seeing one's artworks in galleries around the country – and indeed, the world – and meeting admirers of one's works. To exemplify these factors and show how they affect the decision, as well as the negotiation-process, I will discuss Angelina Pwerl and her works.

Pwerl is a senior artist who created batiks prior to painting and has tried out many other mediums and techniques. Her deceased husband, Louie Pwerl, was an accomplished artist in his own right and shared a joint artist-in-residence program and exhibition with Kngwarray at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (Caruana 1998). As early as 1996 a solo exhibition for Angelina Pwerl's works was held at Niagara Galleries in Melbourne. At this time most art dealers interested in art from Utopia were still focused on Emily Kam Kngwarray and, to a lesser extent, Gloria Petyarr. However Bill Nuttall, who had exhibited works from Utopia prior to this date, together with Rodney Gooch offered Pwerl her first solo show. Nuttall's previous Utopia exhibitions solely showcased sculptures, the only other works from Utopia he shows to this day<sup>264</sup>. Nuttall was the sole representative of Pwerl's works for almost a decade; initially sourcing all works via Rodney Gooch and subsequently by Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce.

In the last few years the situation has changed: Pwerl not only paints the occasional piece for dealers other than Gooch, but has started to work with a variety of dealers, as well as painting for private buyers. When I first visited her in her camp in September 2009, her way of negotiating these relationships became quite clear to me. I asked Pwerl about her works and if she could show me some of them. She led me to a little tree, which she had fashioned in a 'studio'. A shelter made out of sticks and branches was where Pwerl stored all paintings and materials, and where she would retreat to paint (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3:  
Angelina Pwerl's  
studio, Camel  
Camp, Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt (October  
2009)

Many rolled up canvases and linens were piled on top of the shelter: she unrolled one after the other for me, always asking whether I liked them – at this stage, Pwerl was still

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<sup>264</sup> Angelina Pwerl's last solo exhibition was combined with an exhibition of Utopia sculptures at Niagara Galleries January 2010.



convinced that I was an art dealer. On the back of each canvas a stamp or the name of the dealer who provided the canvas could be found. Only a couple were not labelled and were offered to me for purchase. Each canvas was different from the previous one – different in style, paints and size – each for a different dealer. In general, two major themes were depicted: Bush Plum Dreaming and *Atham-areny*<sup>265</sup>. Bush Plum Dreaming or *Anweketey* Dreaming was depicted by Pwerl through seas of dots in different sizes and colours. The *atham-areny* spirit beings, however, were painted as figures and with a brush, rather than with a stick as in *anweketey*. Both themes therefore have styles through which they are expressed. The colour range for both themes varies quite dramatically: *atham-areny* are painted in vivid colours, some of them even appearing neon (Fig. 4).

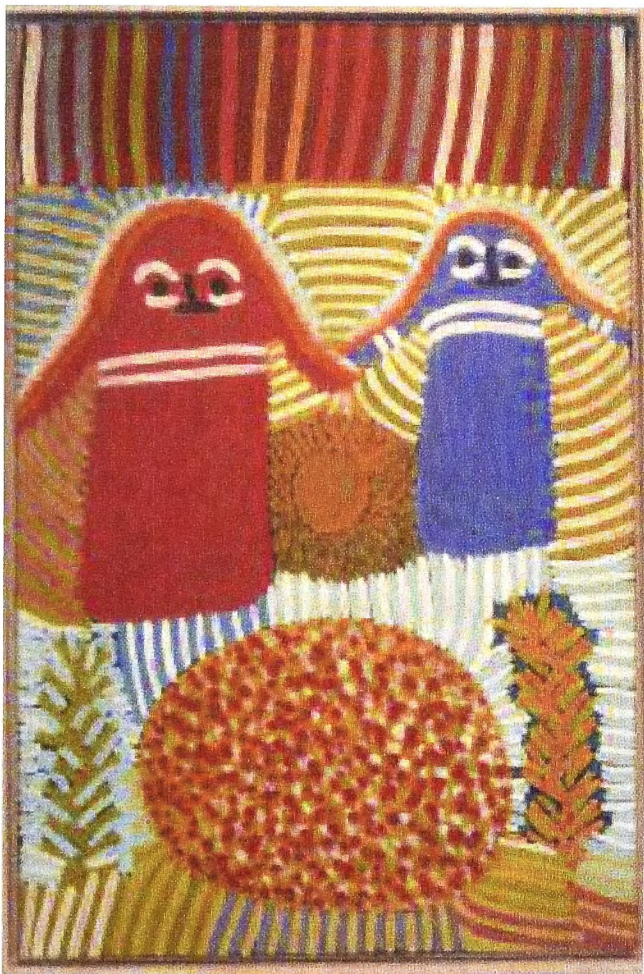


Fig. 4:  
Angelina Pwerl: *Atham-Areny Story*, acrylic on canvas, 2008, 90 x 60 cm, private collection

*Anweketey* are dots: sometimes white on dark monochrome backgrounds, such as red, grey or black (Fig. 5), and sometimes red, yellow and orange dots of different sizes on dark, monochrome backgrounds (Fig. 6).

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<sup>265</sup>These are spirit beings. I will discuss them further in the chapter on ritual in art from Utopia.





Fig. 5:  
Angelina Pwerl: *Anekwety*  
(*Conkerberry*), 1999,  
synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, 151.5 x 90.5 cm,  
private collection



Fig. 6:  
Angelina Pwerl: *Plum*  
*Dreaming*, 2000, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas  
183 x 183 cm, private  
collection,

For Pwerl, both themes are important and about *Altyerr*. While presently she chooses to paint these themes for different people, this was not always the case.

Pwerl's Bush Plum Dreaming paintings used to only be sold through *Niagara Galleries* or Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce as wholesalers. Gooch and Pierce would send the paintings to Nuttall, who then decided which to put in a solo show and whether or not to take the others to national or international fairs or send them back to Gooch and Pierce. In the last five years this changed, with Bush Plum Dreaming paintings also being sold through two other major art dealers: *Lauraine Diggins Fine Art* and *Delmore Gallery*. The latter is Donald Holt's gallery and the former Lauraine Diggins'. Diggins was introduced to Pwerl by Holt on Delmore Downs, where Pwerl goes regularly to paint. Diggins travels to Utopia on a regular basis, about twice a year, to hold two-week workshops. For the workshops, Diggins brings out the materials to Utopia and lets some of the artists know in advance but in general they find out once she gets there. All



paintings done during the workshops are bought by Diggins and taken to Melbourne<sup>266</sup>. During one of Diggins' trips, Pwerl agreed to paint for her too.

Gooch and Pierce, as well as Diggins, take Pwerl to exhibition openings across Australia. Nuttall submits Pwerl's works to competitions, such as the Telstra Award; and Diggins has sent in Pwerl's works for the Wynne Prize. Both are interested in raising the profile of this artist. However, with both being based in Melbourne, they are in competition with each other.

Pwerl reserves her very fine dotting of a single skewer for Bill Nuttall: 'one-stick Bill'. Her paintings for Bill are on monochrome backgrounds, primed by Gooch and Pierce, and brought out to Camel Camp where Pwerl lives. They provide her with high quality white synthetic polymer paint for these paintings. She thins the paint down with water in a tin can lid. Every time she dips the fine skewer in the paint she can make three to four dots: 'tic, tic, tic', as she said to me. Her works for other art dealers involve different size sticks, not just the skewer. She uses the ends of brushes to create larger dots and these have different colours than the fine ones. Further, she may even use several sticks at once and create more consistent fields of dots by doing so. In general, painting *anweketey* often takes Pwerl many days and sometimes weeks.

The three major art dealers to whom she sells her paintings invest in their relationship with her. She sometimes drives daily to Donald Holt at Delmore Downs to paint there, sometimes she goes into town to stay with Gooch and Pierce for a week or more to paint at their house, and sometimes Diggins comes out to Camel Camp and facilitates workshops *in situ*. All three dealers are available to her at different times and are called upon by her to meet various needs: buying a car, shopping for the family, or giving her \$50 when she is in town.

The second major theme in Pwerl's paintings is the spirit beings, *atham-areny*. These she has not only painted, but also turned into representational sculptures. Of the three previously discussed art dealers Nuttall, Holt and Diggins, the latter is the only one who acquires and sells the *atham-areny* paintings in her gallery. However, other art dealers purchase these as well; Pwerl sells them happily to any buyer travelling into the

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<sup>266</sup>This is the case with all workshops facilitated by an art dealer: they bring out the materials, provide the artists with food while they hold the workshop and take the works with them to their gallery. Artists get paid either directly after the workshop for all paintings or they receive the money into a bank account in a short while after the art dealer has left.

community and asking for a painting. These paintings take Pwerl less time to create as she uses a brush rather than a stick and the figures are in bold, unmixed colours (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7:  
Angelina Pwerl:  
*Atham-Areny  
Story*, acrylic on  
canvas, 2008,  
120 x 90 cm,  
private collection

The canvas size of these paintings is more often much smaller than that used for the *anweketey* paintings. I first encountered Pwerl's *atham-areny* paintings at Mbantua Galleries in 2009, as Jennings has exhibited these paintings for a few years and has sold some to galleries in Europe. Pwerl receives far less money for *atham-areny* paintings and asks for far less money when trying to sell these, than she does for *anweketey* paintings. In the Australian art market these paintings fetch less money and only recently, through a more widespread interest in naïve Indigenous art, have they gained an audience. Pwerl's *atham-areny* paintings are popular in Europe and demonstrate that the value criteria applied in Australia are not the same as in other countries.

In summary, the *anweketey* paintings are reserved for only a few art dealers, mainly Nuttall, Holt and Diggins get variations of them, while the *atham-areny* paintings are sold to anyone. Thus Pwerl distinguishes between different dealers as well as private buyers. Such choices and behaviour reflect Pwerl's knowledge of each art dealers' clientele and expectations. She deliberately decides what to paint for whom.

Pwerl's understanding of the art market is not an exceptional case in Utopia. Artists talk amongst themselves and information about income, art dealers and dealers' expectations is shared. Artists understand the preferences of dealers and the price they are willing to pay for certain artworks. I joined several Utopia artists when they visited art galleries in Alice Springs: their trip was made to find out how much the works yielded at the market end. Such information was also sought by accessing the internet and searching different



galleries<sup>267</sup>. This information-seeking functions to change or reaffirm the artists' ideas about their works and how much they should be asking from the dealer.

Other expressions of artists' agency can be detected by looking at the notions of 'a quick one', 'a rubbish one', and 'a good one'. In contrast to Pwerl's distinction between two different art dealers, for whom she paints two themes in two styles, the aforementioned comments reflect the quality of different artworks tailored to different dealers. This quality is often influenced by the financial prospects of the works. If a dealer is only going to pay \$60 for a painting, this painting is often done in a very rushed way and called 'a quick one'<sup>268</sup>. If an artist is paid reasonably well for a meticulously styled artwork that involved many hours of fine dotting and in the next instance a similar artwork with the same effort is paid much better by a different art dealer, the artist will often find a way of painting for the first art dealer in a more 'efficient' way. This could involve changing from a single stick to using a handful of sticks, which accelerates the painting process. Another approach could be to replace the stick with a brush and create a less refined painting. These are two options for keeping the style but reducing the work involved when producing paintings for which the prospective earnings range is known by the artist.

'Quick ones' or 'rubbish ones' are often painted for buyers whom the artists do not know well, such as private buyers or even art dealers with whom they do not have long established relationships. '*Mwurrah* ones' or 'good ones' are generally reserved for art dealers whom they have known for a long time and with whom they have good relationships. Therefore, the prospective buyer has an indirect influence on the artwork created as is the case in most commission situations.

## 6.6 Artists as agents

I have exemplified how the agency of artists is expressed in their techniques and in their artworks through the choice of certain themes, materials and styles. In the following section I will discuss the way artists become their own agents by negotiating with art

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<sup>267</sup> Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Kngwarray (October 2010).

<sup>268</sup> However, this is not the case for young artists as they are engaged in a long process of training by an older artist and may paint these low-priced artworks under the guidance and instructions of the older artist. Young artists painting under the name of an older artist are not considered fraudulent, but rather as the accepted studying period of the younger artist. This is comparable to Luke Taylor's account of apprenticeships in the arts in Maningrida (1998).

dealers, private buyers and wholesalers. Further, I will elaborate upon the payment of artists in kind and in cash and consider the benefits of each; referring back to the issues of artists' exploitation and victimisation mentioned in the previous chapter.

Artists become their own agents when they actively seek out buyers prior to creating their artworks: They do so by asking people if they would be interested in a painting, by negotiating with art dealers who visit Utopia every now and then, or even seeking the dealers out in Alice Springs and arranging for a painting to be done. This may occur when people are in dire need of money or if there is family pressure to provide money, clothes, cars or other resources. Another circumstance in which artists become agents arises when they create a work without a prospective buyer in mind and then actively seek buyers for it. In this situation they set the price for the work themselves and are not willing to bargain<sup>269</sup>. The previous analysis of work quality and techniques is not easily transferable to this situation; however, an artist would not create his or her finest works for just 'anyone'.

When it comes to payments artists also express agency: cash; in kind payments, such as clothes, food or cars; or sometimes even 'secret' bank accounts are requested<sup>270</sup>. Different art dealers may be asked to pay in different ways, which may open up the doors for exploitation of artists. The wish to buy a car is often uttered by artists prior to painting and they sometimes ask the art dealer to keep the money for them. In this case various forms of 'book-up systems' are used by art dealers: every painting is valued after completion and the financial value added to a list, in which all sums are kept. Once the list tallies a sufficient amount the artist asks the dealer to purchase the car with them. However, not every artist is literate and therefore able to read the books of art dealers, in which they note the amounts owed, handed to artists and retained for them. Further amounts noted in the books may not equate to amounts stated by art dealers or actually needed to purchase a car. Often artists rely on trusting an art dealer, which the dealer may exploit to their own advantage as there is no monitoring or controlling body. To have someone else organise and get all the things desired or needed involves far less work for the artist and avoids demand sharing as well as possible conflict over cash. Yet it also creates a window for art dealers to pay artists much less.

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<sup>269</sup>On one occasion I was asked to drive an artist around the community in order to find a potential private buyer with the desired cash at hand (September 2009). The sum asked for is often defined by how much is needed very urgently at that point in time. However, artists ask more from independent buyers than from an art dealer.

<sup>270</sup>I heard about these 'secret' bank accounts on several occasions from different artists (September 2009, November 2009 and October 2010).



Artists in Utopia are aware of these pitfalls and have mentioned that they prefer to work with particular art dealers, because they 'look after' them. Other art dealers, who are less preferred by artists, are from time to time called 'rubbish' people. When an 'occasional art producer' wants to get into the market, he or she will try out working with anyone. In that process, artists observe how art dealers treat them and whether they pay them fairly. They accumulate experiences and discuss these with others forming their own opinion on each art dealer. The longer an artist is active in the art market, the less he or she tries out working with new art dealers; rather, one painting or sculpture is created in order to maintain, establish a relationship.

Another option is to get cash for the artworks. However, cash given to artists will quickly be asked for by relatives and end up being shared amongst a large group of family members. Often cash is not given in a one-off payment; rather, the artist would occasionally visit the art dealer in Alice Springs and, depending on the relationship, ask for \$50 or for some food.

Cars, clothes and TVs or other goods are shared and will last longer than money, which may be spent on food, petrol or alcohol. Therefore, by choosing to receive in-kind payments rather than cash payments, artists make conscious decisions about how to invest their money; transforming their artwork into a commodity with which one can purchase what they desire or need. Utopia artists have interacted with art dealers over such a long period that they have learnt to distinguish between art dealers, to be aware about the ways they may get exploited and to make their choices accordingly in whether they work with someone or not and if so how. The concept of choice, although limited in most instances, clarifies the complexity of the on-the-ground situation.

## 6.7 Conclusion

Within these two chapters I have shown the complex nature of the relationships between art dealers, artists and art facilities in Utopia. Rather than the biased distinction between 'good' and 'bad' art dealers governing Aboriginal artists, it is the living circumstances of artists themselves that influences their decision-making on a daily basis. In order to negotiate demands by family, as well as those of various art dealers, artists have developed and elaborated techniques, styles and sometimes even reserved themes for certain dealers. Artists have strategized in terms of choosing topics and styles for

different art dealers. Thus the negotiation process is multi-layered and does not occur as a single 'transaction' between seller and buyer. Relationships between artists and dealers play a major role in the 'thinking' and creation of an artwork, as this relationship influences theme, style and technique. Particularly strong are the relationships between artists and fine art market dealers. By maintaining many different kinds of relationships with dealers artists are able to broaden their options in constrained situations, as well as being able to create a great array of artworks. Through this engagement with a wide variety of art dealers, artists from Utopia have been able to develop their *œuvre* dynamically and find different dealers to whom they sell their work. Demands placed upon Utopia artists by art dealers, to produce certain kinds of artworks or depict particular themes, were thus not greatly limiting; instead, these demands were responded to with ingenuity and agency and artists have continued to build and maintain the diversity of their repertoire over time. This diversity of artworks will be discussed in the next part of the thesis.

### **Part III: The Diversity of Artworks**





## Introduction to Part III

The following five chapters focus on the art of Utopia. A close analysis of the body of artworks that I documented throughout my research provides a framework for understanding the range of works produced by these artists over the past four decades. Each of the five chapters approaches the works from a different perspective, showing on the one hand the multitude of approaches possible and on the other the different themes covered by Utopia artists in their works. The two broad categories found in Utopia art are: Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr. The two language groups that form the population of the Utopia lands are quite distinct in their artistic output, which is not only visible in terms of style but also in relation to thematic choice.

Eastern Anmatyerr speakers in comparison with Alyawarr speakers tend to create more abstract works. Their works have become emblematic of the 'Utopia style'. To some extent the works by Alyawarr artists have been neglected by the critics and not considered a part of the Utopia art movement to the same extent. Unlike Eastern Anmatyerr artists' abstract style, Alyawarr artists depict their themes in a figurative, naïve and sometimes narrative style. Their main focus lies in story-telling, such as stories of Captain Cook's arrival or contact stories of massacres, rather than the Dreaming myths. Different motifs become markers for everyday paintings, such as the shelter motif representing a camp scene or the boat referring to Captain Cook's arrival and the invasion of Australia by Europeans. Another group of motifs connected to a genre is the figurative depictions of plants. Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr artists come together in their depiction and representation of male and female ritual.

Three currents exist in Utopia art: the first current is inspired by everyday life in Utopia, the second centres around works related to ritual, men's and women's ritual, and the last current encompasses artworks moving towards abstraction. These currents are not fixed, rather they are permeable and many of the artworks could fit into two or even three of the groups depending on how they are grouped. The currents and sub-currents are defined by themes in the artworks, such as everyday life, ceremony or Dreaming stories.

The modes of expression vary from current to current, however, figuration for example can be found in all three currents. The first current, which deals with the everyday life, uses the modes of expression of naïve, narrative and depictional. In the second current, focusing on ritual or ceremony, depictional, figurative and naïve modes exist. However, artworks in this current can also tend towards abstraction or be abstracted from

figurative motifs. The third and last current, abstraction in Utopia art, encompasses artworks with an abstracted or abstract mode of expression.

Often the content of the artwork predetermines to some extent the style of the artwork: for example, if the painting tells a story about interactions between Eastern Anmatyerr/Alyawarr people and European settlers, the stylistic mode chosen to represent it would be naïve and narrative. However, a painting about a Dreaming story can also be in a narrative mode, yet using traditional iconography to depict the story. Therefore at least two forms of narrative modes exist in Utopia art. The same applies to bushtucker paintings – they can be figurative and naïve or they can be abstracted.

The first three chapters in this part of the thesis discuss the diversity of art from Utopia over the past 35 years. In order to see this diversity I introduce artworks created with a variety of techniques and materials and group them according to mode of representation, style and topic.

The three currents in Utopia art are discussed in the first three chapters of Part 3 of the thesis. These general chapters provide the background for looking at the artworks and artistic career of a particular individual, Emily Kam Kngwarray and the relationships between her works and those of other Alhalker artists. Emily Kngwarray has been widely discussed as one of the most admired Indigenous Australian artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hughes 2007) and is an important figure within the Utopia art movement. In Chapter 10 I place Kngwarray in the context of the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr societies of the Sandover region. I show how her *œuvre* comes out of a particular point in time in the history of the region and the development of art-making in Utopia. I show how Kngwarray and her works and the work of other Utopia artists can be approached in various ways: by using her as a case study and exploring her *œuvre*, her themes and associated representations of these. I argue that it is important to move away from an interpretation of her art from a western perspective towards one that focuses on the form of the works in the context of their production. Employing this method and by using local interpretations of her *œuvre* I will create a deeper understanding of the underlying and connecting themes in her works.

Chapter 11 offers another layer for understanding Kngwarray's role and influence within the community by examining the works of artists who share Alhalker Dreaming with her. Some of them were taught by her and others are contemporaries; however, all of them are linked through ownership of the Alhalker Dreaming. In this chapter, the

works of various Alhalker artists are compared with different works by Kngwarray in order to reflect on her influence on the next generation.

The two chapters give an insight into the topical range of one artist, her versatility in terms of style and techniques. Many of Kngwarray's innovations have been followed by other Alhalker artists drawing on her creativity in different ways. They demonstrate how knowledge is transferred, how painting is learnt, and how diversity and innovation are maintained despite art dealer or kin demands, or the constraints of a particular Dreaming template. The chapters demonstrate the fact that artists from Alhalker create a range of artworks across the currents and sub-currents that I have identified.





### Three currents in Utopia art

This part of the thesis explores the main three currents in Utopia art, the styles and modes of representation connected to them as well as the possibilities of grouping artworks in multiple currents. By this means it will become clear how the artworks are related to each other and that they all depict the social realities of people living in Utopia.

When looking at art from Utopia across all media and over the past four decades, three main currents become distinct: one that is related to ritual, men's and women's ritual, the latter also called *awely*. A second is generally inspired by the everyday life in Utopia; it is two-fold, with one sub-current figurative, depicting motifs and elements in a naturalistic way, and the other narrative, with artworks telling stories about hunting, creating bush medicines or everyday experiences such as football games. A third current, possibly most renowned, I will label 'abstraction in art from Utopia'. This current consists of two sub-currents: Dreaming stories, which comprises artworks from either men or women; and bushtucker stories painted by women

None of the currents are fixed; rather they are permeable, and a number of the artworks could fit into two or even three of the categories. The currents are defined on the one hand by themes in the artworks – such as everyday life or Dreaming stories – but on the other hand they are also determined by modes of expression, for instance abstract, or abstracted and naïve, or narrative painting styles. In many cases the content of the artwork to some extent, predetermines its style. For instance, if the painting tells a story about interactions between Eastern Anmatyerr/Alyawarr people and European settlers, the style chosen to represent it would be naïve and narrative. On the other hand a painting about a Dreaming story might be in a narrative mode or use traditional iconography to depict the story. At least two forms of narrative styles exist in Utopia art: one dealing with pre-contact and the other with post-contact stories. The same applies to bushtucker paintings: they can be figurative and naïve or they can be abstract and allusive.

In the three chapters I will demonstrate that Utopia artists produce a variety of artworks belonging into different categories. They are not confined to one style or one theme, despite the general idea of art from Utopia being abstract. On the contrary, each artist has a set of themes, which he or she depicts in a particular style. In rare cases, an artist will depict one topic in a number of different styles, thus fitting into several of the

currents. The themes are defined on the one hand through their Dreaming and the associated stories with it; on the other hand they can be historical themes or hunting scenes to which everyone has access as they are common, everyday situations.

By analysing all artworks accessible to me over the course of three years I became aware of one great overall difference: the difference between Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr artists. Not only do the topics and styles differ between artists, but on a larger scale there is a difference between the two language groups living in Utopia. In general, Alyawarr artists tell stories about everyday situations and depict them in a naïve style. Only recently have some Eastern Anmatyerr artists, like Josie Petyarr, started to explore this genre as well. On the other hand Eastern Anmatyerr artists tend to represent their Dreaming stories and do this in a rather abstract style. In the case of ritual-related artworks, artists from both language groups engage with a more abstract style to tell the story.

The differences and similarities between Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr artists have not been explored in previous research. However, when looking at a broader picture of the types of artworks being produced by Alyawarr artists — for example in Ampilatwatja or Anmatyerr artists in Yuendumu or Ti Tree — the differences I found in relation to naïve and abstract modes of representation in the Utopia area are even more visible and would provide an interesting starting point for a future comparative analysis of art from the Central and Western Desert.

Another result of the close analysis of the artworks is the recognition of a gender divide in themes and genres. The most significant example is the women's focus on bush foods in their paintings, batiks, drawings, and etchings. In everyday life women are responsible for gathering food and hunting small game. Further, women hold knowledge about the rituals associated with the different foods. On the other hand, men emphasise ancestral stories. Within their artworks they tell the travels of ancestors through country. Men have responsibilities over different parts of the Dreamings from women. Throughout the three subsequent chapters the differences between the genres and themes associated with these will be discussed and the gender-divide reflected in the art will be exemplified.

## Chapter 7: Everyday life in art from Utopia

### 7.1 Introduction

The first current in Utopia art, and probably the one with the least sacred content, falls into the genre of story-telling about everyday life. These stories, mainly depicted by Alyawarr artists, include hunting and gathering stories, those concerned with collecting and looking for bushtucker or bush medicine, as well as camp scenes and football games representing everyday social settings. They form an extensive body of artworks from the Utopia region that I have been able to sight and document throughout my research. Interestingly these artworks have seldom been included in publications about art from Utopia and do not seem to be valued as much as the abstract artworks by a wider art audience<sup>271</sup>. Only in recent years, as there are more and more naïve artworks shown in exhibitions such as *Desert Mob*, has interest in them risen<sup>272</sup>. This thesis therefore uncovers a current of Utopia art that, until now, has been ignored by scholars.

Despite their previous neglect in the overall analysis of Utopia artworks, these artworks are a more or less mundane counterpart to the abstract works that have been emphasized as the signature style of Utopia artists. They are about the everyday moments known to everyone in the community, experienced over and over again and sometimes as part of a routine. The category label of naïve art has its roots in Western art history, for example being applied to the works of Henri Rousseau and other, mainly French, artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Western context the category refers to artists with no formal training in an academy who paint in a ‘childlike’ manner. The formal qualities are understood to be that “the colours are characteristically bright and non-naturalistic”, “the perspective is non-scientific”, and the “vision childlike or literal-minded”<sup>273</sup>. While the designation naïve may be problematic the label has been widely applied to this sub-category of Utopia narrative paintings of Utopia artworks that display these formal properties.

The art world’s emphasis on artworks coming from ritual and spiritual contexts has meant that secular and daily art were not valued to the same degree<sup>274</sup>. The spirituality expressed in artworks has given them more importance and made them ‘authentic’.

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<sup>271</sup>For example no exhibition of Angelina Pwerl’s works at Niagara Galleries included one of her naïve works.

<sup>272</sup>Refer to Morphy (1995:214ff.; 2005:25) for the role of naïve art in the art market.

<sup>273</sup>The Oxford Dictionary of Art, p. 389.

<sup>274</sup>These ethnographic items or artifacts were particularly interesting to collectors and were considered authentic artworks of non-Western societies (see literature on curiosity cabinets about this Impey and Macgregor (1985) and Hodgen (1964), as well as Morphy (2008) on the move of Aboriginal art from museums into galleries.

These artworks are most often part of religious or ritual ceremonies and have a function within these. If they had been used in a ritual, they were considered even more valuable to the art market, even though they would be disposed of after their ritual use in most communities (Morphy 2008). Artworks focussing upon football games, or Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) staff entering the Utopia community, were not as popular<sup>275</sup>, were produced less and for a particular part of the art market<sup>276</sup>. In recent years, artworks about football in particular have become a success and Dinni Kunoth Kemarr has even been awarded prizes for his naïve works<sup>277</sup>.

In Utopia, anyone is allowed to depict everyday situations and those historical events they have heard about. As far as I was able to observe, these are topics without any cultural limitations or constraints attached to them, neither in terms of particular people having rights to painting a certain topic nor in relation to the choice of colour or composition. Thus, in general, anyone could paint a football game, a church mass or a cityscape in response to one of their gallery trips to a town or city. However, not many people paint these events at all nor does everyone seem able to. Teaching of painting is not limited to painting for ceremony or about Dreaming but extends to naïve paintings.

As anyone is allowed to paint naïvely some may want to learn it too. Genevieve Loy Kemarr told me on one occasion that she had tried to learn 'to paint with a brush' from a Sydney-based artist, instead of using a stick or a squeeze-bottle as she usually does. At the time she was visiting the NSW South Coast accompanied by her art dealer<sup>278</sup>. The paintings she was referring to were produced in a European-tradition landscape style. She showed me photos of her efforts and was not particularly pleased with herself. As I will show in Chapter 9, in her works she focuses on the abstract and geometric depiction of the Bush Turkey Dreaming. To paint in a figurative and naïve manner was a great challenge for her and something she would have probably not endeavoured without the promptings of her art dealer<sup>279</sup>.

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<sup>275</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (October 2010).

<sup>276</sup>A great number of naïve art works were created for Rodney Gooch and have been subsequently for Marc Gooch and Janet Pearce. However, in the last decade artists have also created naïve works for other art dealers and wholesalers, which reflects the increasing interest in these works.

<sup>277</sup>For example his football team sculptures won the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2008.

<sup>278</sup>Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr (September 2010).

<sup>279</sup>According to Genevieve Loy Kemarr, Lauraine Diggins suggested to her to learn a new style with a brush and different colours. Kemarr agreed to try it out but does not think that she is able to paint well enough. The topics chosen for these paintings were all the same: her Dreaming site near Mosquito Bore. (Personal communication September 2010).



However, there are examples of artists who are very versatile and able to paint in many different styles. In Utopia, Emily Kam Kngwarray was not only a great innovator in relation to abstraction but she was also able to paint in a naïve and figurative manner<sup>280</sup>. Yulyurlu Lorna Fencer Napurrurla, a Warlpiri artist from Lajamanu, was also able to paint in many different styles (see West 2011). A recent retrospective<sup>281</sup> of her *œuvre* highlights her versatility and the innovation visible in her style. After having examined the three currents in Utopia art and the various modes of expression I will return to this discussion about versatility.

In the first part of this chapter I will look at bushtucker and bush medicine stories. These practices form a vital part of everyday life and are still vibrant despite changes to traditional life. Two major group projects highlight these two broad topics<sup>282</sup>. The first one was *A Summer Project* from 1988/89, in which a majority of artworks depicted bushtucker in a figurative way. As in this project there was no specific topic given, artists could choose their themes. The fact that bushtucker was often selected as a theme reflects on its importance for the artists. The second, quite recent group project is the *Utopia Bush Medicine Project*. This multi-media educational project included a number of different workshops and produced batiks and prints about bush medicine. The focus of this part of the chapter is on the figurative representation of plants and flowers.

The second part of this chapter then concentrates on storytelling: Stories of everyday life, hunting and gathering stories, as well as stories of contact times. These stories form a thematic repertoire for Alyawarr artists and their particularities will be highlighted. The majority of these artworks depict events, moments in time when something happened or where movement is involved. Three groups of paintings will be identified according to their narrative focus: the massacre series, Captain Cook's arrival series and the hunting stories.

The themes are embedded within the every-day and reflect on this in addition to educating a younger generation about the 'olden times'. The choice of topics may to some degree reflect the fact that Alyawarr-speakers experienced a longer and perhaps even more violent contact history in comparison with their closest neighbours.

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<sup>280</sup>In October 2010 I was shown a painting by Kngwarray in Donald Holt's collection. He had asked her to paint a figurative and naïve painting, which she did but neither of them liked it. He kept it solely for future reference.

<sup>281</sup>'Yulyurlu Lorna Fencer Napurrurla' exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University from 10 November until 18 December 2011

<sup>282</sup>Refer to Chapter 3 for more detailed information on the history of these projects.

## 7.2 Bushtucker and bush medicine stories

A large part of women's lives used to be spent on gathering native seeds and fruits and on hunting small animals such as lizards and goannas. Knowledge about bushtucker was crucial in order to be able to survive in the desert, and significant in terms of ritual as well. 'Women look after bushtucker'<sup>283</sup> I was told and that is the reason why they paint it. In this part of the chapter I will give examples of figurative and naturalistic depictions of bushtucker. Bushtucker stories are closely related to Dreaming stories as well as *awely* rituals. They are not only part of the everyday but form a bridge between the everyday or profane with the sacred. As bushtucker is often also represented in an abstract manner I will explore this in Chapter 9: Abstraction in Utopia art.

According to Latz, "a traditional diet would [have] var[ied] considerably from season to season" (1994:27) and no "well-defined group of staple food resources" (Ibid.) would have been available in the desert. Further

[g]athering plant foods was primarily the women's traditional role, and plant products were the most reliable food source. [...] Women would also have often influenced the movements of a group in respect of the presence or absence of plant foods [...]. Unlike men, who once spent most of their life in their traditional country, marriage customs ensured that women moved from area to area. This movement also ensured the dissemination of knowledge gained by the women in respect to useful plants and gathering techniques throughout Central Australia. The advent of cheap flour into Central Australia certainly made life easier for Aboriginal women but, by reducing their role as providers of the reliable component of their diet, it must have diminished their power base (Ibid.).

Even in the 1980s when Devitt conducted her research in the Utopia region, women used to spend, on a daily basis, about 4-5 hours hunting and gathering. Women not only collected plants and seeds but also hunted for small game such as lizards, goannas and snakes (see Devitt 1988). In my experience hunting and gathering was an enjoyable experience rather than a necessity<sup>284</sup>. Women went out to get particular foods, such as

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<sup>283</sup>Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray in a personal conversation (September 2010).

<sup>284</sup>On one occasion some of the women rang Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation services in Alice Springs in order to go on a bush potato trip (September 2010). The corporation came to Ahalper and took a group of women for a couple of days out bush to look for bushtucker. For the women it meant a trip away from the outstations, time together and having access to a car and a driver. They wanted to go on the trip because they like the traditional foods but not because they were in dire need for food as it is in abundance at the shop.

bush potato and yams or sugarbag<sup>285</sup>, and they knew where they would be able to find all of these plants. But their daily food supply was bought at the local shop in Ahalper.

When I asked artists about the content of their images and stories, or in many cases the meaning behind them, the answer was simply: bushtucker or the name of a plant, flower or bush food. One day at a camp in Ahalper I was shown copies of artworks' records from Delmore Downs and a simple sentence about the depiction of bushtucker influenced my further research. The certificate of authenticity given to me showed an artwork by Cowboy Loy Pwerl from the mid-1990s, with a story accompanying the painting that dealt with Pwerl's Bush Turkey dreaming. One sentence mentioned the importance of bushtucker stories for women, and how they 'look after' the food, and that this provides the majority of themes in women's paintings<sup>286</sup>. Looking at the literature of nurturing and the role of women in everyday life, it is all too obvious that women would paint bushtucker stories, which are a part of their responsibilities.

Despite this clear connection, I have not been able to find any discussions about women's bushtucker paintings in the existing literature. Many authors have pointed to the importance of women and their role in traditional society (see Bell 1983, Brock 1989, Gale 1974, Hamilton 1987, and White 1985), which was to a considerable extent underestimated by early researchers (Meggitt 1962, Elkin 1977). However, the actual connection between everyday life and the way women's responsibilities for food gathering are represented in art has been largely ignored to date. The focus in the anthropology of art has been on the representation of Dreaming stories and the responsibilities associated with them. Although food plants and knowledge about them is clearly connected to the Dreaming, the fact that the role of 'bushtucker' in everyday life has been largely omitted has limited discussion and understanding of paintings.

In this thesis, I argue that the interconnections between the everyday and the Dreaming, and the co-existence of both needs to be explored in relation to art. Bushtucker is not only a part of the Dreaming, it is the food that people need in order to survive. And it is depicted in two different styles: figurative and geometric/abstract. I will argue that it is the figurative representation that is most directly refers to food as part of the everyday. I base this claim upon conversations with artists about these paintings, during which their

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<sup>285</sup>Sugarbag is the word used for native honey found in trees. The branch of a tree has to be chopped off in order to access the honey and the full combs are taken back to camp to eat and share.

<sup>286</sup>This situation occurred in September 2010 and when I asked the artists about this everyone agreed that a division in themes exists.



Dreaming was not mentioned and the initial explanation given about the particular foods and plants was in relation to where they grow and what they taste like<sup>287</sup>.

The first group of artworks depicting bushtucker discussed in this chapter are from *A Summer Project 1988/89*<sup>288</sup>. This series of 82 paintings, the first group work on canvas from Utopia, includes a number of examples of figurative depictions of bushtucker (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Daisy Kemarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

For this project the artists, all women in this case, were given four colours to use and paint whatever they wanted. No restrictions were imposed in terms of topics. Restrictions existed through the paint, brushes and canvas size<sup>289</sup>. No explanations or stories were collected for the paintings and only sometimes a title accompanies them<sup>290</sup>. Without speaking to the artists, we can nevertheless identify plant types in a number of cases by comparing paintings with one another across the overall set and using the limited information available.

One recurrent motif is a leaf or a flower (Fig. 2). It includes a central line from which many little lines go to either side. In later batiks (Fig. 3) this is documented to as a honey grevillea. A very similar motif is a curvilinear line with leaf-shaped forms on either side (Fig. 4). This could be a branch with leaves (Fig. 5), possibly some kind of

<sup>287</sup> Ute Eickelkamp experienced similar responses in her research at Ernabella (1999).

<sup>288</sup> For more detailed information about the project refer to Chapter 3.

<sup>289</sup> Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009).

<sup>290</sup> The titles were in general written on the back of the artworks and in some cases the exhibition leaflet had some titles too, which were not on the back of the artworks.



bush medicine, or in fact seed pods (Fig. 6) and therefore a bush food. Some paintings (Fig. 7) show complete bushes or many branches held together. These may well be reference a type of bush medicine or bush food found in the Utopia homelands.



Fig. 2: Joy Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 3:  
Glory Ngal: *Tharrkarri*  
(*Honey grevillea*), 1993, 192 x  
112, batik on silk, QAG  
(Detail), Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt





Fig. 4:  
Lily Kngwarray: *Untitled*,  
1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90  
x 60 cm, HaC, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 5: Barbara Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt





Fig. 6: Elsie, Rosie and Matilda: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Flowers are generally depicted as seen from above with a dot in the middle and many leaves, in the form of lines, spreading into all directions (Fig. 7 and 8). Again this motif recurs in recent batiks (Fig. 10) and has consequently continued to be used over a long period. White and yellow dots cover the background in many paintings (Fig. 8, 9 and 11). These may represent seeds rather than being just 'fillings' for decoration.



Fig. 7: Annie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt





Fig. 8: Julie Kemarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 9: Janie Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt





Fig. 10: Audrey Morton: *Ilyarnayt 2*, 2009, 164 x 111cm, batik on Japanese silk, private collection



Fig. 11: Rosie Kunoth Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

In addition to the actual plants and flowers depicted figuratively in the paintings some material culture objects are represented too. For example the digging stick appears in a number of paintings (Fig. 12 and 13).





Fig. 12: Dora Mpetyan: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 13: Bidy Kemarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

It is used to dig out witchetty grubs or yams or other roots and seeds. A digging stick is an essential tool for gathering, but is also very useful for hunting, and vital for everyday living. The small game that women hunt for food in their daily routine, are also depicted in some paintings: in particular lizards or goannas and snakes are shown (Fig. 15 and 16).





Fig. 14: Pansy Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 15: Mary Ngal: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

These animals may on the one hand represent the food but the motifs can also refer to the ancestral beings in their animal form. Therefore they could be totems for the artists as well as their daily prey. In particular the colourful representations of the lizards (Fig. 15) and the snakes (Fig. 16) emphasize the possibility that they are not solely depictions of the everyday but also a reference to *altyerr*.





Fig. 16:  
Mary Petyarr: *Untitled*,  
1988/89, acrylic on canvas,  
90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

The paintings from *A Summer Project* portraying bushtucker also feature coolamons right next to the seeds or plants (Fig. 16). The use of coolamons traditionally was to “clean seeds and other products” as part of the “yandying process” (Latz 1994:19). Latz describes this process as follows:

This process involves a very intricate and skillful rotating and jiggling movement of an elongated wooden dish (a coolamon) which separates objects of differing density and/or surface characteristics. [...] As the gathered seeds are mixed with a high proportion of twigs, leaves, stones and sand, great skill is needed to separate the edible seed. Not only is yandying able to efficiently separate the unwanted material but it is also able to separate any seeds which, although appearing sound, have their centres eaten out by insects (Ibid.).

The coolamon is deeply connected with the practices of collecting and sorting seeds. First the seeds were put in the coolamon during gathering and then they were sorted using the rotating movement. Together with the digging stick<sup>291</sup>, the coolamon is the main tool for the everyday gathering practices of women. Small coolamons can easily be cut out of the bark of a tree and used as a carrying device (Fig. 17).

<sup>291</sup>The digging stick has been replaced in Utopia by a crow bar, which is much stronger and the hard surface of the ground is more easily dug up with it.





Fig. 17:  
Lena Pwerl holding a  
quickly made coolamon for  
carrying sugar bag (native  
honey). Photo Chrischona  
Schmidt, October 2010



Fig. 18: Margaret Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Many collected foods can be eaten straight away and the remaining supply is taken back to camp. For example some flowers can be sucked to extract the nectar which tastes like sweet juice<sup>292</sup>. Bush plums and bush tomatoes are collected and eaten on the spot. They are sweet and referred to as ‘lolly’ by the older generation. Seeds can be crushed and pounded and mixed into the flour for damper<sup>293</sup>. In *Untitled*, 1988/89 (Fig. 18), for example seeds and plants as well as various flowers are shown. These depictions are combined with two pairs of coolamons on either side of the painting. The half-circles

<sup>292</sup>See Jeannie Pwerl in the film ‘8 Ladies’ by CAAMA Productions, 2010.

<sup>293</sup>Compare with the ‘dump-dump’ paintings by Emily Kam Kngwarray in Chapter 6.



framing the painting along its longer sides could be either representations of painted up breasts for women's ceremony, or the symbol for a person sitting down, or a reference to a shelter<sup>294</sup>.

Hunting and gathering, formerly a necessary part of everyday life, has now turned into a voluntary undertaking. Not everyone goes out any more on a daily basis<sup>295</sup>. To some extent the almost daily visit of the shop has replaced hunting. Nevertheless, on every trip I made with women to country, bushtucker was collected and often eaten straight away. Sometimes large flour tins were filled with seeds and we stopped every two or three hundred meters to get more. In most cases bush foods were preferred to shop foods, hence the knowledge about finding, collecting and preparing bushtucker is widespread<sup>296</sup>. After weeks of heavy rainfall, for example, women regularly go digging for different varieties of yams and much prefer them to potatoes or rice available in the shop<sup>297</sup>. Therefore, although hunting and gathering is not part of a daily routine anymore, it is still highly valued food and the knowledge about it is still handed on<sup>298</sup>. Hence, depicting it has a dual reference: first, to tell stories about the times when it was an everyday routine to go hunting and gathering. The fact that in many cases the figurative representations show people naked, suggests that the paintings in part reference those past times, prior to European colonisation, in which hunting and gathering was the major source of food. And secondly these paintings teach young people about the practices of hunting and gathering, which foods are edible and how to prepare them<sup>299</sup>.

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<sup>294</sup>See below for an elaboration of the shelter motif.

<sup>295</sup>Compare this with Devitt's research in the Utopia in the 1980s when most people went hunting on a daily basis and a great part of the daily food intake was made up of bush foods, including bushtucker, seeds and game.

<sup>296</sup>But Peter Latz claims the detailed knowledge about bushtucker and its use have been lost and forgotten and only very few old people still know about it (1995:xi). Therefore the common plants are likely to be still collected and consumed; however, the less common ones may have been forgotten in Utopia too.

<sup>297</sup>Waltja even sent out a troopy and two social workers to go digging for bush potato and yam when they were so abundant in September 2010.

<sup>298</sup>One exception I noticed was the large amount of bush melons found on the sides of the Sandover Highway. When I asked younger people about them they claimed that one cannot eat these. However, when asking older people they replied that when people were still walking around in the bush they would have eaten them and that they are quite juicy. So not in all cases is knowledge handed on. Watermelons are much loved in the community and some people try to grow them in a little garden.

<sup>299</sup>Similar artistic developments can also be found in Canada for example, where Inuit printers have chosen to depict traditional daily life scenes from the old days, when they lived in igloos and hunted sealions. They do so in part to keep these memories alive and partially because the art market prefers this figuration of an "authentic" indigenous life style (Berlo 1999:178-193).



*Untitled*, 1988/89 (Fig.19) exemplifies the two senses of past and present. We see two upper female bodies – painted up chests and breasts – on the right half of the painting. They are symbols for women who are painted up for ceremony, for *awely*, or for ancestral beings who move across the country. On the left side of the painting a coolamon with fruits or seeds inside is depicted. This coolamon could be a reference to everyday practices nowadays – of gathering bush tucker – and it could be understood in combination with the breast motif as a representation of female ancestral beings and their daily routine. Other elements in the painting could be plants, found on the lower left and upper left corner, and seeds, seen in the dotting across the canvas. The painting shows the viewer on one level a variety of foods collected by ancestral women; on another level it could represent both parts of women's lives: ceremony and the everyday.



Fig. 19: Renee Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

The core element of the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education *Utopia Bush Medicine Project* was teaching people about the collection and preparation of plants in order to create bush medicine. The knowledge about bush medicine is quite strong and widespread in Utopia: how to find it, how to prepare it and how to use it. Nevertheless, there are bush doctors who know more than others about the actual plants and their use. In order to keep the knowledge alive and accessible interviews with artists about their work were recorded so that the particular knowledge about the plants



depicted could be preserved for future generations<sup>300</sup>. The project was run over two years, which allowed for various workshops in Ahalper and in Alice Springs. The topic of bush medicine was approached from different angles by using different means of expression: via printmaking and drawing, by batik- and film making, via storytelling and explanation, and through making trips to country and collecting and preparing the plants.

These approaches focused on different aspects of bush medicine: the printmaking<sup>301</sup> and drawing show mainly the use of the particular bush medicines, the batiks depict the different flowers and plants used as bush medicine, and the stories are about the processes of collection, preparation and use of the plants. Different aches and pains, sores and infections were discussed and recorded as part of the language component of the project<sup>302</sup>. These ailments and their treatments then became the subject of drawings and prints. Animated short films, in which fibre works featured (Fig. 20), brought various aspects together and illustrated the stories told<sup>303</sup>. The intention is to publish a book about bush medicine bringing together the various components of the project<sup>304</sup>.



Fig. 20: Artists from the Utopia region: *Awely Anter*, 2008, desert grasses, raffia, wire, various sizes up to 1200 mm, private collection

The *Utopia Bush Medicine Project* resulted in two interesting creative initiatives which lead Utopia art into new directions: innovative fibre works (Fig. 20) and portraits of people (Fig. 21). These were the first fibre works created in Utopia. They figured in an

<sup>300</sup>See: <https://www.batchelor.edu.au/research/utopia-bush-medicine-project> (last sighted 25/03/2011).

<sup>301</sup>60 mono-print dry-point etchings were created in the workshops (Keller 2010:32).

<sup>302</sup>Ibid.

<sup>303</sup>Refer to the DVD *Intem-antey Anem – “these things will always be” Films from the Utopia Bush Medicine Project 2007-2008*.

<sup>304</sup>Personal communication with Jenny Taylor (September 2008).

animated film about bush medicine<sup>305</sup> and were part of an exhibition of all of the works made during the different workshops at the Araluen Arts Precinct<sup>306</sup>. The fibre works were a collaboration between men and women, and different generations. A story recorded about a bush medicine was put into action as an animated film by using the fibre works.

The etchings created throughout the workshops had a focus on ailments and how to cure certain illnesses. Like the fibre works they were part of the Araluen Arts Precinct exhibition in 2008-2009. The 60 etchings of the project included a number were portraits. These portraits rarely identified particular people rather they depicted particular illnesses, for example sore eyes (Fig. 21). The portrait shows a person face to face with the viewer. The sore eyes are illustrated by the tears on the left side of the eyes and the swollen lower eye lids. The eyes are wide open looking directly at the viewer and the mouth is open as if in pain. The portrait shows the pain the person is in and the urgent need for an ailment. It is one example of many etchings in this series using portraiture as a means of highlighting the location and appearance of an illness.

These etchings greatly expanded the relatively small body of works from Utopia in the portrait genre<sup>307</sup>. Most other artworks, which could be classified as portraits, in fact represent ancestors and spirits<sup>308</sup>.

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<sup>305</sup>For the exhibition at Peta Appleyard Gallery in Alice Springs, June 2010, a little leaflet was put together to give an idea about the different plants in the batiks.

<sup>306</sup>*Interm-antey anem 'these things will always be'* exhibition, Araluen Arts Centre, 29 November 2008 – 8 February 2009.

<sup>307</sup>Portraits form a relatively small body of works from Utopia, however, they can be found in prints, drawings and paintings since at least 1990.

<sup>308</sup>In Chapter 8 I will return to ancestors and spirits, who are depicted in a portrait manner.



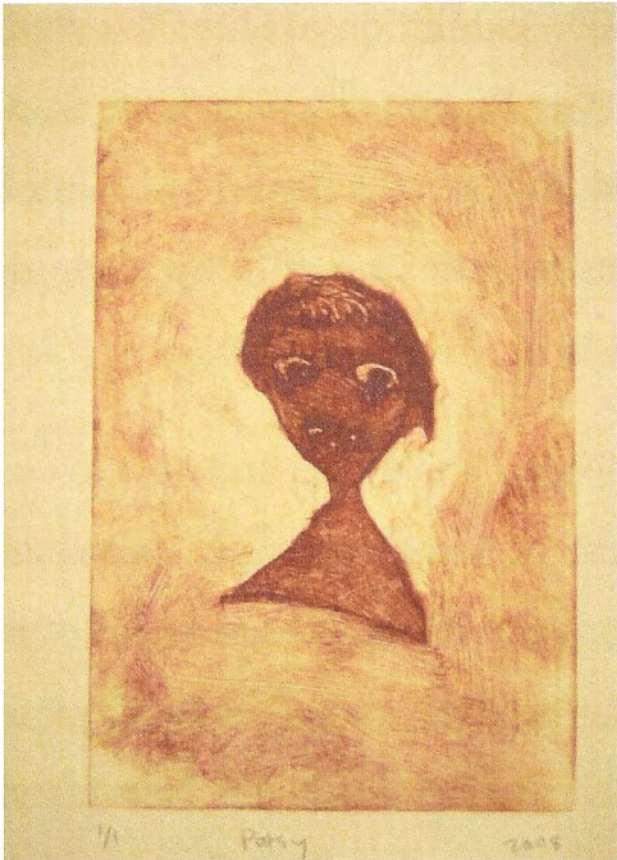


Fig. 21:  
Patsy Long: *Untitled*,  
2008, Drypoint  
[monoprint], edn 1/1, 19 x  
12.5cm [image]; 28 x  
19cm [paper], CDU Art  
Collection

These prints form a counter-example or complement to the Dreaming-influenced ‘portraits’ and representations of ancestral spirits that will be discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 8). Portraits are a genre that fit into both the category of everyday art and that of ritual.

In May 2009, as part of the *Utopia Bush Medicine Project*, a workshop – with a focus on batiks – took place in Ahalper. During these two weeks, the female participants decided to depict the different plants used as bush medicine. The drawings prepared in Alice Springs prior to the workshop showed the ailments as well as ways of collecting, preparing and application of the bush medicine, the batiks complemented this knowledge. Similar to the bushtucker paintings the bush medicine batiks show the plants in a figurative style (Fig. 22).



Fig. 22: Patsy Long Kemarr: *Anyerleng*, 2009, batik on Japanese silk, 51 x 176 cm, private collection

In the batiks the plants are not put into a landscape; rather they float as multiples on the dark background. A myriad of flowers in rows fills the batik (Fig. 23 and 24), only dots, probably depicting seeds or pollen, are interspersed.



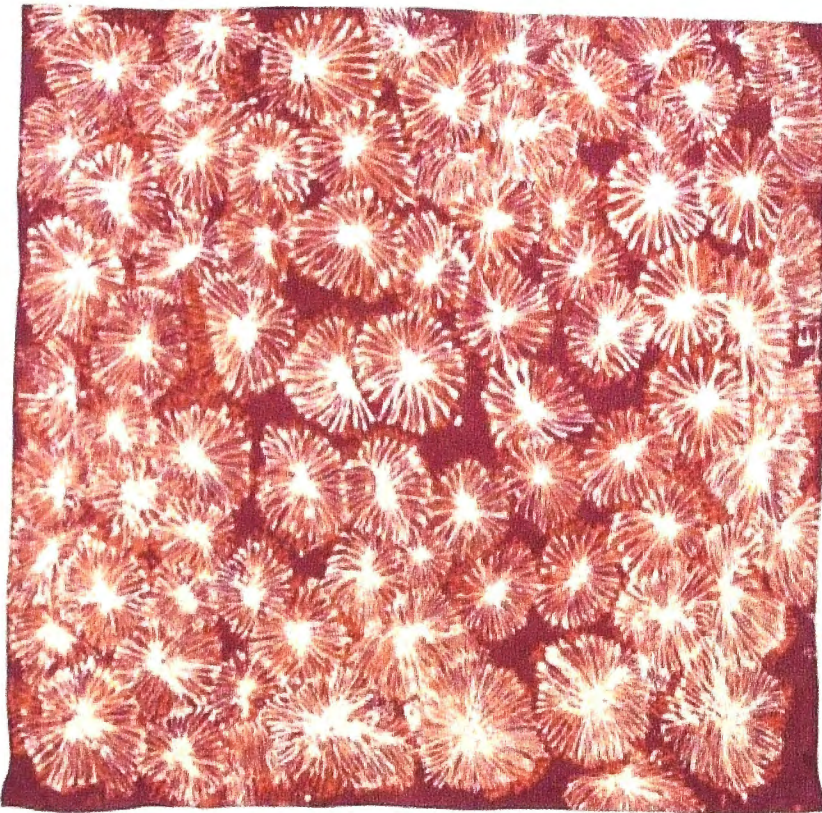


Fig. 23:  
Lena Pwerl: *Anker-  
Anker*, 2009, batik on  
Japanese silk, 97 x  
109cm, private  
collection



Fig. 24:  
Rosie Kngwarray:  
*Arwerl, arntetyek-arelh,  
interlpentayerr, amikw,  
ilpengk*, 2009, batik on  
Japanese silk, 92 x  
111cm, private  
collection

In some cases women chose the same plants, and a variety of depictions of the same plant were produced during the workshop (Fig. 25 and 26).





Fig. 25:  
Dorothy Kunoth:  
*Interlpentayerr*. 2009,  
batik on Japanese silk, 95  
x 110 cm, private  
collection

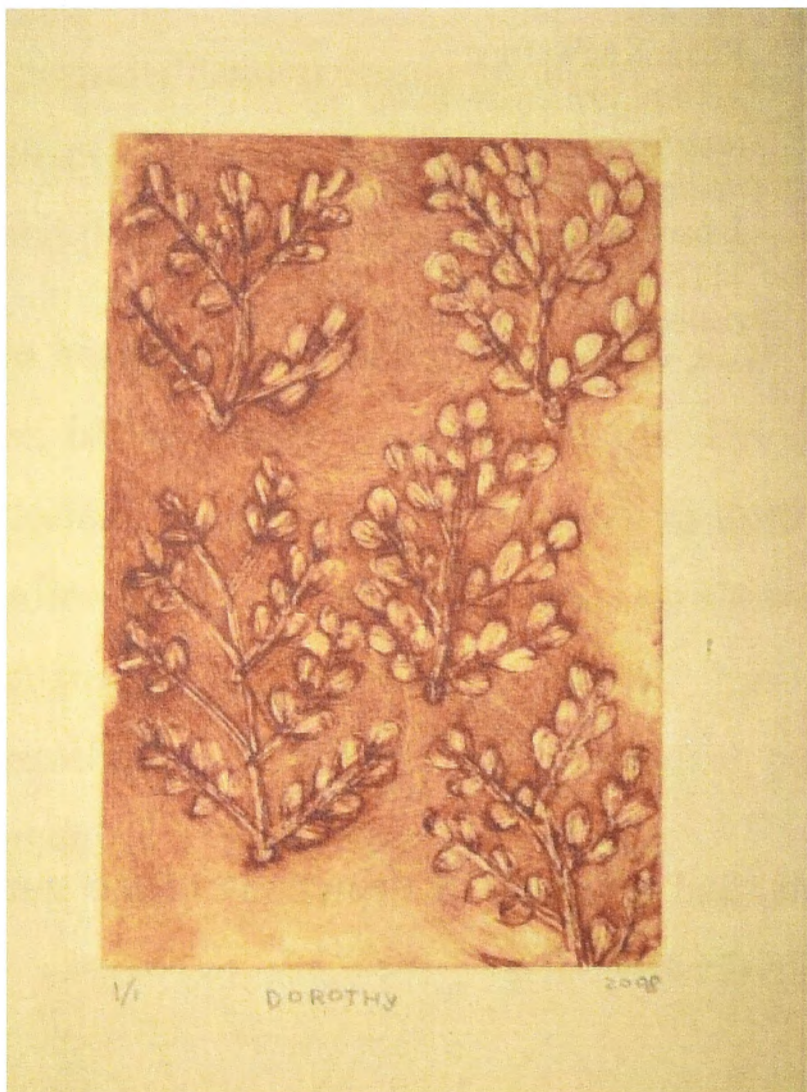


Fig. 26:  
Dorothy Kunoth:  
*Untitled 2008*, Drypoint  
[monoprint], edn 1/1, 18.5  
x 12.5cm [image]; 28.5 x  
19cm [paper], CDU Art  
Collection

Mary Morton says about these works:

*Altyerr anwantherr mpwareyel  
Altyerr ikwer-angkwerr-antey apmer-angkwerr-antey Ingwer-angkwerr  
mpwareyangenh anwantherr mpwareyel  
Apmer renh-antey pwety-areny-anteyarl yanhan arwerl  
Arwerl renh-rnem-antey akwerlp-areny  
Renh-antey mpwareyel akwerlp renh-antey  
Renh-antey mpwareyel akwerlp renh-antey  
Rarl anganewarl-antey  
Altyerr rarl anganew arwerl  
Renh-antey arrerneyneyel arwerl  
Apmwamwam-weny-antey*

*Apmerelearl rtneyel-antey*  
*Apmer ikwerelarl anganewarrel rtneyel arwerl-rnem*  
*Renh-antey anwantherr arrerneyel*

We are making things that come from the Dreaming and from the country  
We don't do anything else, or paint any other places belonging to others  
All of those plants there are from the bush  
They are plants that grow in sandhill country  
That's what is being made in the batik  
That's where the plants originated from in the Dreaming  
The plants originated in the *Altyerr* time  
They are the plants that are used in the batik designs  
They are very important  
They are found growing in the country  
These plants are found growing in the country where they were created in the  
ancestral time  
That's what we paint in the batik  
(Mary Morton Kemarr cited in '*Ingekerr anyent-antey: The language of Batik*'  
exhibition leaflet Peta Appleyard Gallery 2010).

The differences between the batiks and the prints or drawings are considerable. The precision and ease with which the batiks were created are visible in the fine lines (Fig. 27) and the controlled application of the wax. They show evidence of a developed tradition of batik making and painting. On the other hand drawing and print-making are less familiar practices and have not been done by many artists in Utopia<sup>309</sup>. The prints are in the naïve style and function almost as work instructions<sup>310</sup>. In some cases they fit within the narrative genre clearly showing how to collect, prepare and apply the medicine (Fig. 28)<sup>311</sup>.

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<sup>309</sup>As mentioned in the chapter on the history of the art movement some artists have had experience in creating woodblock prints, lino cut, screenprints and etchings. But aside from the Utopia Suite project this did not involve 20-40 people at a time as this Batchelor Institute project did. The other collaborations with printing studios, such as Northern Editions or Basil Hall Editions, were of a much smaller scale involving sometimes only a handful of artists.

<sup>310</sup>The Charles Darwin University Art Collection acquired some of the prints and apparently no information about the project accompanied them. So the ailments shown and the treatments for it were not included in the description of each print (Personal communication Anita Angel, January 2011).

<sup>311</sup>In fact plans for this project are to create a book including the ailments and sores, stories about them and depictions of them. The film *Intey-Intey* is another step in bringing all the different layers of knowledge about bush medicine together.



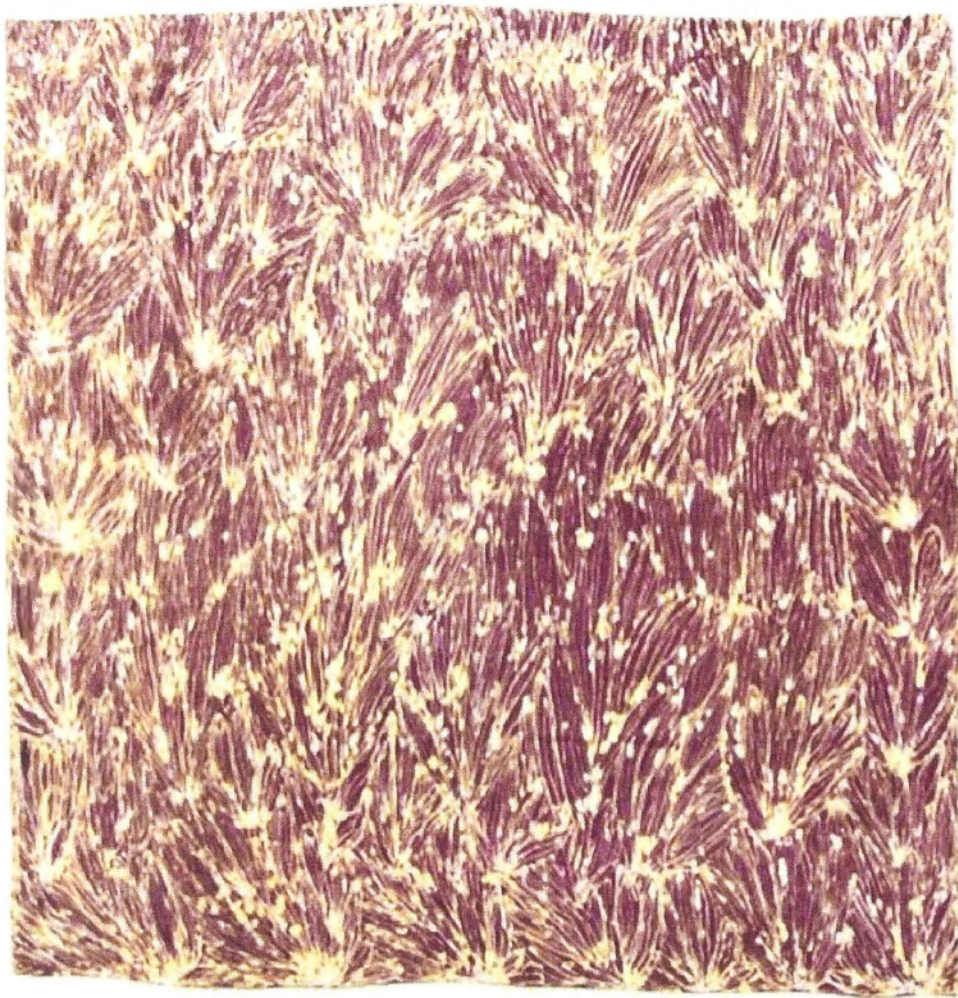


Fig. 27:  
Lily Lion Kngwarray:  
*Ilyarnayt, alhepalh*,  
2009, batik on  
Japanese silk, 103 x  
110 cm. private  
collection



Fig. 28:  
Dorothy Kunoth:  
*Untitled*, 2008,  
Drypoint [monoprint],  
edn 1/1, 19 x 12.5cm  
[image]; 28 x 19cm  
[paper], CDU Art  
Collection

Knowledge about the plants and their use is encoded in the Dreaming and form a part of Dreaming stories but is also an important part of everyday life (see Devitt 1988). The examples considered so far represent different kinds of plants either collected for food or used for medicinal purposes. The stories accompanying these works sometimes include instructions on how and where to find the plants, how to collect the seeds, leaves or fruits, how to grind them or prepare them for further use and finally how to cook them, apply them or eat them. Depicting them in this way by including the various



processes of preparation is an adjunct to oral tradition and teaching methods. Young people learn about foods and medicine through being taken on trips to find them, collect them and prepare them. To paint, draw or etch for example these aspects means to teach about these bush foods and bush medicine. Within the Utopia community these artworks have an educational character reinforced by the collaboration with the Batchelor Institute. They become a teaching tool and were sometimes created as part of an adult education program<sup>312</sup>.

### 7.3 Narrative paintings

The whitefella cleaned them out here. All the Aborigines. Right here. The whitefella from Elkedra. Because he was jealous for this country here. (Mary Morton Kemarr in 'Eight Ladies' 2010).

In discussing the bushtucker and bush medicine paintings we at times crossed over into the category of narrative paintings. Narrative was implicitly present in the material culture objects; other figurative representations that referred to the context of hunting and gathering, and narrative was explicit in a number of the bush medicine works. In this next section I will focus on a number of different narrative themes. One group, connected to the previous theme, shows traditional ways of living. However, in contrast to the works discussed in the previous section, the narrative paintings now considered highlight movement, for example the action of hunting, gathering or collecting, rather than the plants themselves. A second group focuses on the other aspects of contemporary life. A further set is centred on historical moments, in particular encounters between European settlers or soldiers and the local Indigenous population.

A group of sisters Audrey, Ruby and Sarah Kngwarray<sup>313</sup> Morton are the most renowned artists working in this naïve style, which they use to tell their stories. However, more broadly other Alyawarr-speaking artists from Utopia, both men and women, have also chosen to depict these kinds of stories in a naïve style. Only in very rare cases were works by Eastern Anmatyerr-speakers painted in this manner, such as Ada Bird Petyarr's watercolours '[*Altyerr*] (Hunting) stories'<sup>314</sup>, which are in the

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<sup>312</sup>As I described in Chapter 3 the Utopia art movement developed out of an adult education program and throughout the history of the movement adult education initiatives play a role in the shaping of the movement.

<sup>313</sup>These are Alyawarr speakers and therefore the spelling of this kinship term is different than in Eastern Anmatyerr, however, they mean the same person.

<sup>314</sup>This is the title given to the series of children stories in the collection. However, *altyerr* means Dreaming in Anmatyerr, therefore these stories may represent hunting stories from the Dreaming.

Flinders University Art Museum Collection (Fig. 29). This naïve style is chosen by Alyawarr artists both for depicting ‘stories’ related to everyday life and for writing of history through painting.

Tracing the background to the creation of these narrative paintings helps in understanding aspects of their significance. Many of these artworks emerged out of particular moments in time when stories were told, such as the massacre stories around the area<sup>315</sup>, when films were seen, such as *Titanic*<sup>316</sup>, or when workshops with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education<sup>317</sup> took place.

This chapter discusses different forms of narrative works by looking at group works and projects. The first groups of works examined, the children’s book series and the hunting series, depict the everyday as it used to be. In a next step I will discuss artworks, which represent Indigenous history and which reflect particular moments in time: the massacre paintings and Captain Cook’s arrival series are two examples for this genre. The fourth series of artworks, in which landscapes play a major role, are camp scenes. The majority are descriptive of a former lifestyle; however, they sometimes represent features of contemporary life and demonstrate a great ability to incorporate new ‘things’ and changing life paths in artistic form. This prefaces the last groups of artworks that will be discussed: the football paintings and sculptures.

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<sup>315</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (October 2009).

<sup>316</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch & Janet Pierce (September 2010).

<sup>317</sup>Personal communication with Jenny Taylor (September 2008).





Fig. 29: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM<sup>318</sup>

### 7.3.1 Children's story books and the *Altyerr* hunting series

The following two types of narratives, children's story books and *altyerr* hunting stories, tell about life before contact and centre on its traditional daily routines. One of the narrative themes developed out of a project instigated by Rodney Gooch is the 'Children's story books'. Painted for children, these story books comprised a series of watercolours and drawings in which artists depicted mainly hunting stories (Fig. 30). In these ancestral hunting stories a variety of domestic scenes are shown: including families (Fig. 31), women and children (Fig. 32), and men alone (Fig. 32) are depicted in the bush with spears, coolamons and game.



Fig. 30: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM

<sup>318</sup> Many of these works have in the records 'synthetic polymer paint on paper', however I noticed that these were watercolours and will identify them as such throughout the thesis.





Fig. 31: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM



Fig. 32: Ada Bird Petyarr: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, watercolour on paper, FUAM



Fig. 33: Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM

The images are set in a time before contact, or at least before Indigenous people were living on stations, for all people are shown naked or wearing



traditional loin skirts. They could simply represent mundane stories of everyday life. However like the bushtucker and bush medicine artworks discussed in the first part of the chapter, these stories may also allude to the Dreaming. They could depict ancestral journeys or activities rather than those of pre-contact time. Equally possible they could have a dual reference to the visible and the invisible world<sup>319</sup>. The title of the second narrative series: *altyerr* hunting stories makes the reference more explicit and clearly places the setting of the hunting stories in the Dreaming.

The range of the illustrations contained in these ‘Children’s story books’ depict not only hunting events or a daily routine, such as cooking game on the fire (Fig. 34); but they also show events such as a fight between two women (Fig. 35) or a woman finding a dead body in the bush (Fig. 36). Finding animals by reading their tracks is a common theme in these stories (Fig. 37).



Fig. 34:  
Ada Bird Petyarr:  
*Children’s story book*,  
n.d., no measurements,  
watercolour on paper,  
FUAM



Fig. 35:  
Unknown: *Children’s  
story book*, n.d., no  
measurements, pencil,  
coloured pencil and  
pen on paper, FUAM

<sup>319</sup>Myers explains this perception of the world as the visible and the invisible. Both are constantly there, therefore, both are represented and alluded to even if only one is painted.





Fig. 36:  
Unknown: *Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, pencil, coloured pencil and pen on paper, FUAM



Fig. 37:  
Julie Purvis:  
*Children's story book*, n.d., no measurements, paint on paper, FUAM

Overall these paintings, watercolours and drawings teach children about how to find animals and read their tracks, how to cook them and probably what the best cuts of the meat would be. Further it teaches them about how people live together, what their responsibilities are. By looking at the landscape in some of the illustrations (Fig. 38) children also learn about in which places one camps and finds food and water (Fig. 39): For example good places for setting up a camp are in the vicinity of fresh water (Fig. 39) on the wind shade of a hill (Fig. 38). Only a few of the illustrations have accompanying texts below them to show what the underlying stories of the paintings are (Fig. 40).





Fig. 38:  
Eileen Kngwarray:  
*Children's story  
book*, n.d., no  
measurements,  
watercolour on  
paper, FUAM



Fig. 39:  
Judith Kngwarray:  
*Children's story  
book*, n.d., no  
measurements, spp  
on paper, FUAM

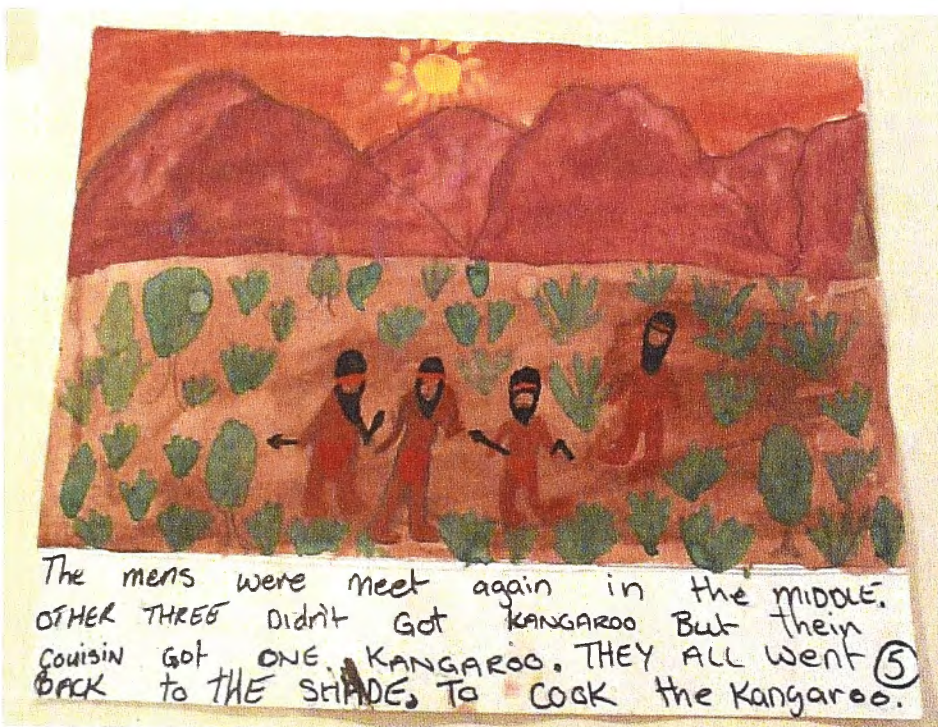


Fig. 40:  
Judith Kngwarray:  
*Children's story  
book*, n.d., no  
measurements,  
paint on paper,  
FUAM

The *Children's story books* are narrative, educational and painted in a naïve style. They emphasize traditional knowledge and ways of living. They may have been an attempt by Rodney Gooch to create something outside of the art market arena and at the same time an early recognition of the way in which art could be used in education. Given Gooch's background working with CAAMA it is likely that he saw the production of art by members of the



community in introduced media as a means of transferring knowledge across the generation. Subsequently children's story books have been created throughout Central Australia through IAD Press<sup>320</sup>. Finally, not only children would be able to learn from these books but also non-Alyawarr or – Anmatyerr speakers.

### 7.3.2 Camp scenes

This genre is connected to the children's story books, in which hunting stories are depicted as well as a variety of traditional life situations, in which the camp was represented. 'Camp scenes' are a genre in itself in Utopia art. They have been depicted since the early stages of the art movement, in batiks (Fig. 41), drawing (Fig. 42), paintings (Fig. 43), prints (Fig. 44) and watercolours (Fig. 45).



Fig. 41: Annie Petyarr: *Camp Scene*, 1988, batik on silk, 110 x 230 cm, HaC

<sup>320</sup>Refer to their webpage for further information: [www.iadpress.com](http://www.iadpress.com).





Fig. 42:  
Unknown:  
*Children's  
story book*,  
n.d., no  
measurements,  
pencil,  
coloured pencil  
and pen on  
paper, FUAM

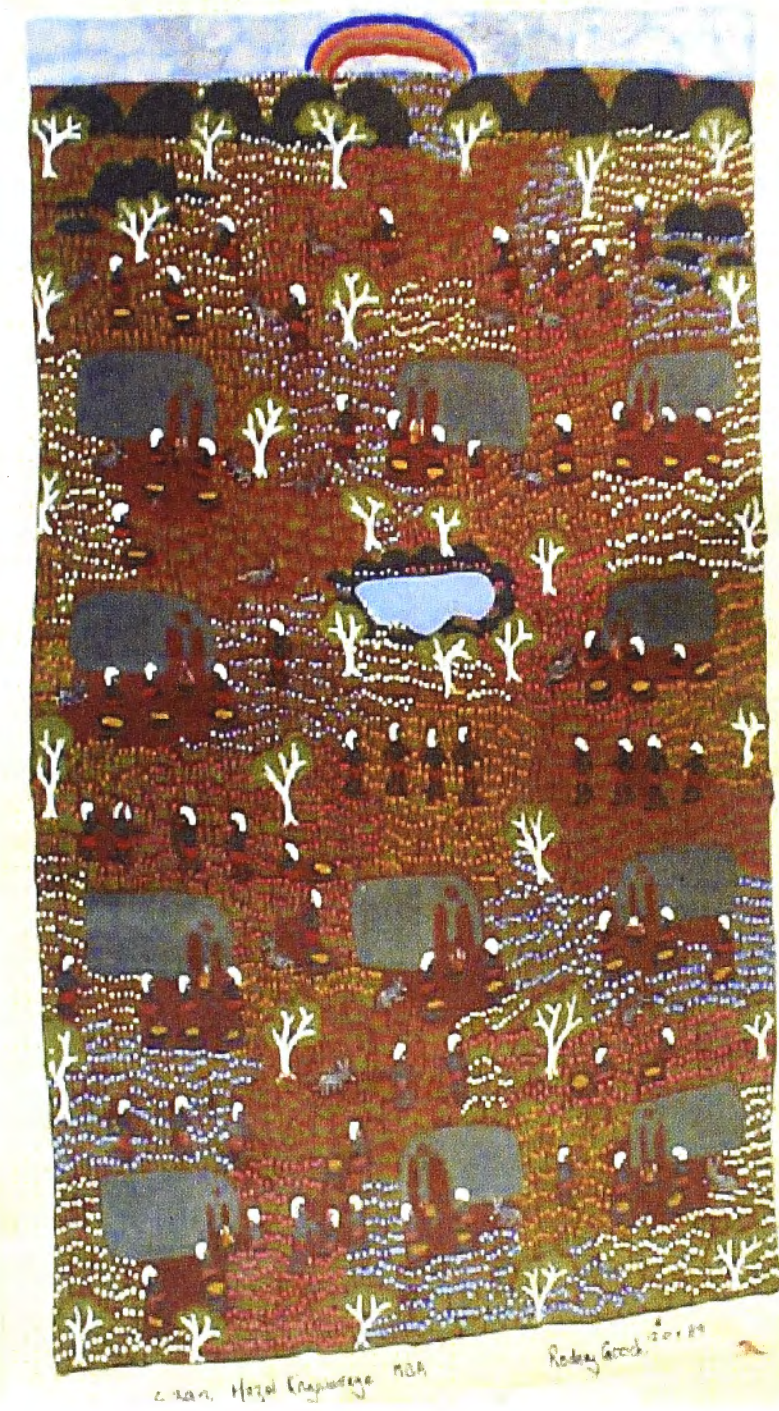


Fig. 43:  
Hazel  
Kngwarray:  
*Untitled*, 1993,  
synthetic  
polymer paint  
on canvas, no  
measurements,  
FUAM





Fig. 44:  
Katie Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, 1990,  
woodcut, 30 x  
44.9 cm image,  
37.6 x 52.2 cm  
sheet, one of 72  
(The Utopia  
Suite), various  
collections

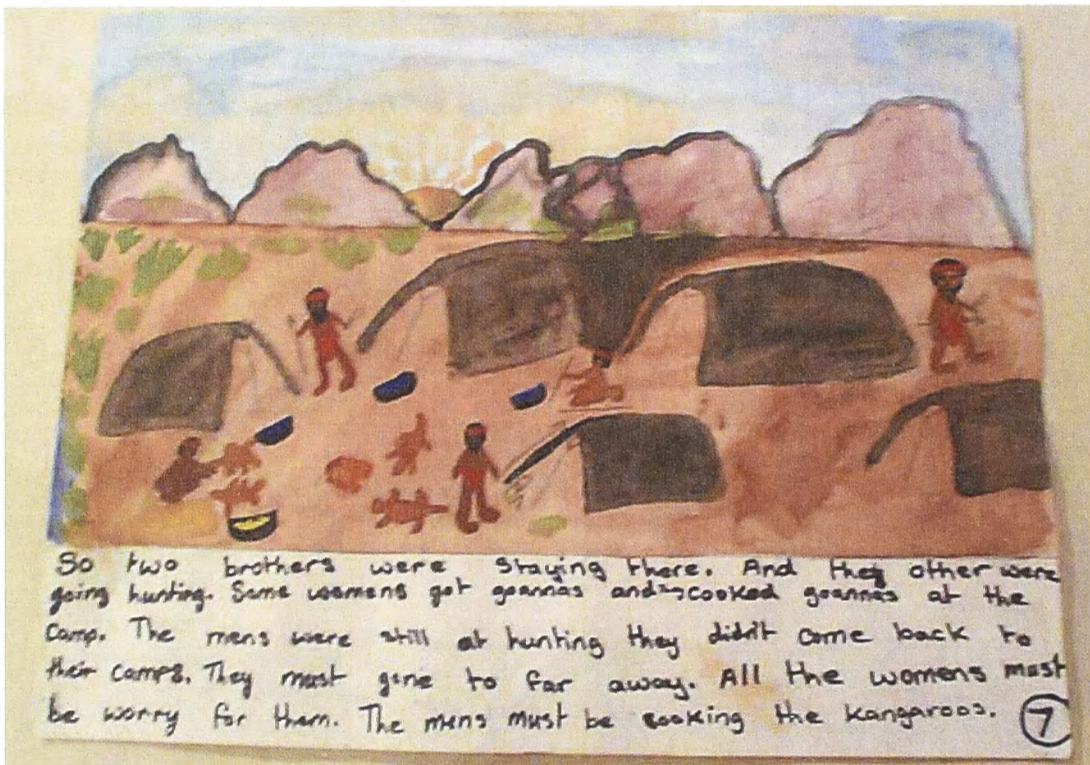


Fig. 45:  
Judith  
Kngwarray:  
*Children's  
story book*,  
n.d., no  
measurements,  
watercolour on  
paper, FUAM

The main element, which has received much discussion with is the wind shelter or so-called 'humpy'<sup>321</sup>. Delineated in an elongated half-circle with a supporting stick in the middle, the shelter (Fig. 46) becomes the signifier for a camp.



Fig. 46:  
Michelle Holmes Pwerl:  
*Untitled*, 1988/89, acrylic on  
canvas, 90 x 60 cm, HaC  
(detail), Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

Every camp is implied by this shelter, in which people sleep one next to the other to keep warm (Musharbash 2009). Each shelter may well refer to

<sup>321</sup>Musharbash (2009) about the *tjilmi*, de Ishtar (2006) about women's camps, and Munn (1973a) about the meaning of the half-circle.



different groups sleeping in different shelters, since there are women shelters, single men shelters and family shelters (Ibid.). Thus, if three shelters are depicted this may refer either to three families or three different kinds of sleeping arrangements (Fig. 47 or even Fig. 35). The shelter and hence the camp are signifiers of domestic life.



Fig. 47:  
Ada Bird Petyarr:  
*Children's story*  
*book*, n.d., no  
measurements,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on paper,  
FUAM

These artworks tell about domestic life around the shelter: with fires in front of them, around which sometimes people are seated (Fig. 48).

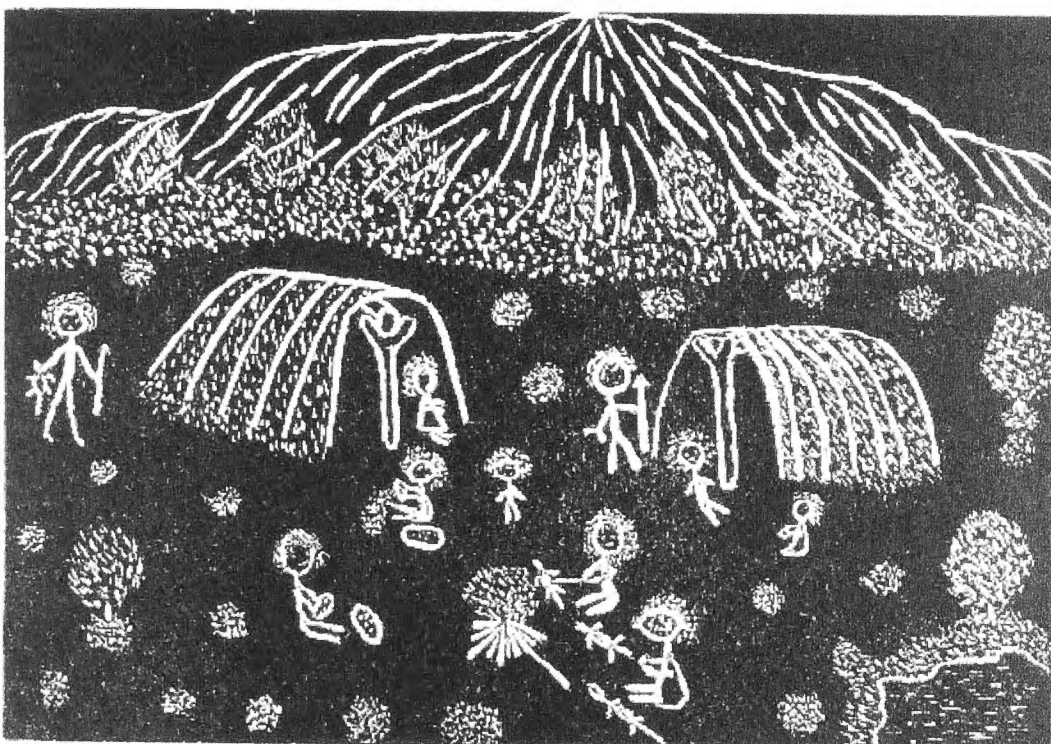


Fig. 48:  
Anna Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, 1990,  
woodcut, 30 x 44.9  
cm image, 37.6 x  
52.2 cm sheet, one  
of 72 (The Utopia  
Suite), various  
collections

Shelters imply home, comfort, security, and family. They invoke a time before people had houses and lived on stations. Nevertheless, some people still build their 'humpies' and live in them today. Just as is the case in the more abstract art, the figurative art contains implicit meanings that can only be seen, interpreted and recovered by analysing the cultural context. The symbol for the shelter (Fig. 46) can possibly be traced back to sand drawing and to the traditional iconography, in which the half-circle represents a person



sitting or a shelter<sup>322</sup>. This example shows that the symbols used in contemporary painting are not just naïve and figurative, but can be traced back to art forms that existed prior to European contact, which would then be the point in time referred to in these paintings.

Thus the categorisation of Aboriginal art according to different styles that reference Western categories oversimplifies the case. In looking at Utopia art history one has to look at the ways in which different representational practices have been combined in different ways over time. Elements from the traditional iconography can easily be fitted into either the category of figurative, or naïve or abstract. These elements continue to be used in contemporary artworks, which I have highlighted in the scheme for house or shelter.

### 7.3.3 Massacre paintings

‘The massacre painting series’ comprises a group of paintings which were all painted around 1996-98<sup>323</sup>. The paintings were created by several artists who were inspired by the stories of Wally Pwerl. The topics were not discussed or negotiated in advance with Rodney Gooch. He acquired the “massacre paintings” as an independent art dealer and distributed them for sale and exhibition across the country<sup>324</sup>. The paintings tell a history that is not very often spoken about in the Sandover Region and they are among the first to document<sup>325</sup> the tragic and violent encounters between the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people of Utopia and the European settlers<sup>326</sup>.

In other regions across Australia Indigenous people have experienced similarly violent encounters with European settlers and soldiers. In Bird Rose’s monograph *Hidden Histories*, the accounts of Aboriginal people who had lived on large cattle stations in the Northern Territory reveal an Indigenous understanding of history and its impact on their lives. These former stockmen and cattle station workers became historians and were able to tell the history from their point of view, filling in gaps in historiography and

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<sup>322</sup> Refer to Munn (1973a) for iconography and its meanings in central Australian painting.

<sup>323</sup> Personal communication with Marc Gooch (April 2011).

<sup>324</sup> Personal communication with Marc Gooch (September 2010).

<sup>325</sup> Other indices about these events are mentioned in Richardson (2001), Johannsen (1993) and Lyon and Parsons (1989).

<sup>326</sup> Rodney Gooch mentioned in an interview with Haigh that 100 massacre paintings had been created until 1998 (Haigh 2008:23).

countering the dominant point of view. Paintings too form part of a re-writing process, and as Rose mentioned in relation to the stories being told, they refer to certain events and underlying structures of inequality but not to 'good' and 'bad' people (1991:17ff). In a number of cases artists have tried to deal with these memories via painting them<sup>327</sup>. By looking at this body of works one could argue that the 'writing' and remembering of contact history through art has become a genre in Indigenous work.

Pwerl's father told him the stories, and around 1996 Wally Pwerl himself started telling these, mainly to family members<sup>328</sup>, all living at the time at the Ngkwerlerlanem outstation in the northern part of Utopia:

A long time ago people walked around, went to Irultja<sup>329</sup> and looked around for bushtucker, they were living in the bush, and they moved from there to another place, collecting the bush food, kangaroo, no spear with boomerang. They were making the spears with the kangaroo string, they eat witchetty grub, bush plum and bush potato. They drink water from them trees, apunga trees, from the roots. No whitefella around, only Aboriginal people walking around. ... So when white people come, they kill Aboriginal people like animals. Shoot them, cold blood... first time they see whitefella, too scared stay in the bush.... people frightened and stayed in the bush ... my father been telling [me] that story. The whole lot they been shoot them. All the old men been telling that story for this mob – father and grandfather. They been riding horses, those white people, they got one uniform, like police, and they follow them track and they look and shoot them, Aboriginal people hide themselves, they been following that track, kids as well, everyone, all that family. Mother and father and the little ones. Long time... everywhere ... my daughter been painting this story. Policemen and army one killed Aboriginal people, they came before stations...many many soldiers...<sup>330</sup>

The telegraph line marked the conquering of the Red Heart of Australia (Richardson 2001). After 1876 the telegraph line was being built from Alice Springs to Darwin. Through the stories of his father, Wally Pwerl remembers this period in Northern Territory history as a 'clearing' of the land. According to him the exploration of the country through Europeans involved armed troops riding through the desert country and shooting Aboriginal people<sup>331</sup>. Pwerl describes in this interview how first contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans in this area is remembered: as violent, destructive and with no rationale to the Aboriginal people.

In *Fighting the Bluecoats*, 1999 by Katy Kemarr (Fig. 49) the masses of soldiers wandering, searching for Aboriginal people through the country, are depicted: The

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<sup>327</sup>Rover Thomas and his works would be one of the very renowned examples of this genre.

<sup>328</sup>Interview with Marc Gooch, Janet Pierce and Narayan Kozeluh, October 2010.

<sup>329</sup>Irultja is one of the outstations of Utopia, outside of the borders of Utopia and serviced nowadays by the Ampilatwatja community.

<sup>330</sup>Personal communication with Wally Pwerl, Helen Kunoth and Don Onion (October 2010).

<sup>331</sup>Personal communication with Wally Pwerl (October 2010).



encounter led to deaths on both sides, as shown by the Aboriginal people and European soldiers lying on the ground and bleeding.

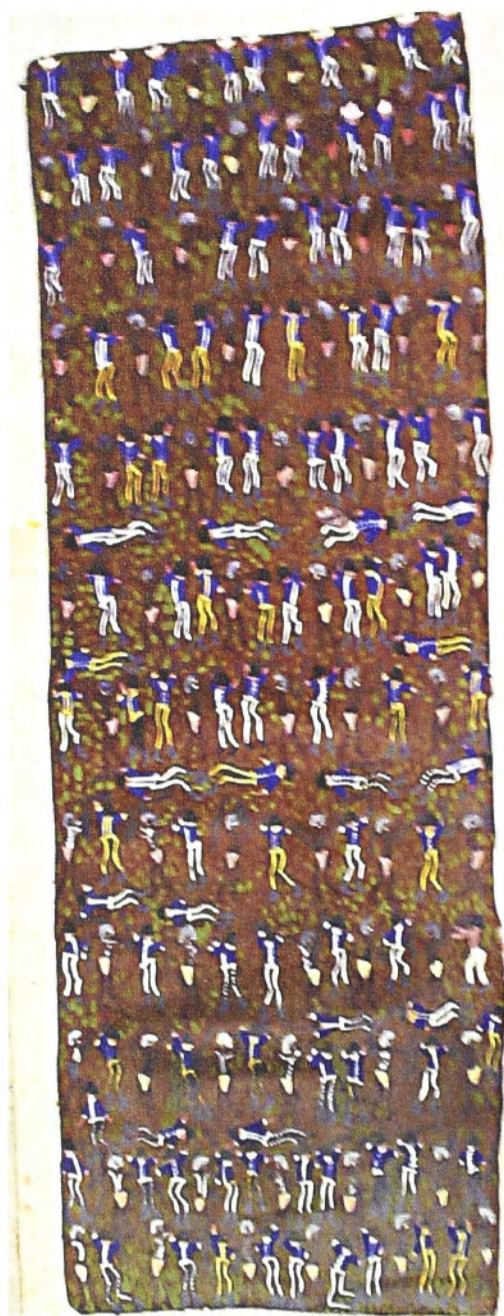


Fig. 49:  
Katy Kemarr: *Fighting  
the Bluecoats*, 1999,  
synthetic polymer paint  
on canvas, 119 x 44.5 cm,  
FUAM

Rows of soldiers in blue coats are depicted entering the country and shooting anybody they find. The troops of soldiers are broken up twice by lines of dead soldiers on the ground. The dominant group in the painting are the blue coats with their rifles. Some of them wear white trousers and the other group yellow. However, at the bottom of the painting are soldiers who have white dots on their trousers. The Aboriginal men are painted with white body painting and shown with spears. The white dots on the uniforms of the soldiers suggest the shiny metal buttons that used to be part of the uniform. To some extent both parties mirror each other: both represent warriors for each side, wearing different kinds of uniforms. The frontier here is portrayed as war.<sup>332</sup>

This painting probably references the earliest encounter between Aboriginal people of the region and European soldiers. When considering Wally Pwerl's memory of his father's stories, the blue uniforms indicate that these were soldiers or police who went through central Australia as part of the 'pacification' approach towards Indigenous

<sup>332</sup>According to Marc Gooch these paintings were inspired by Wally Pwerl's stories. His father had told him about the experiences he had made and Pwerl passed them onto his family members in 1997.



people in the 1880s (see Richardson 2001:65ff.; Lyon and Parsons 1989:9). The other massacre series paintings focus on events on the surrounding stations, partially when settlers had already moved there and some Aboriginal people were working on the stations.

Another attack by soldiers is shown in Hazel Kngwarray's *Military Attack – Ammaroo Station 1903* (Fig. 50), 1999. Aboriginal people are found in their camps by the soldiers and again blood is being shed, with the Indigenous people defending themselves against attack on both sides.

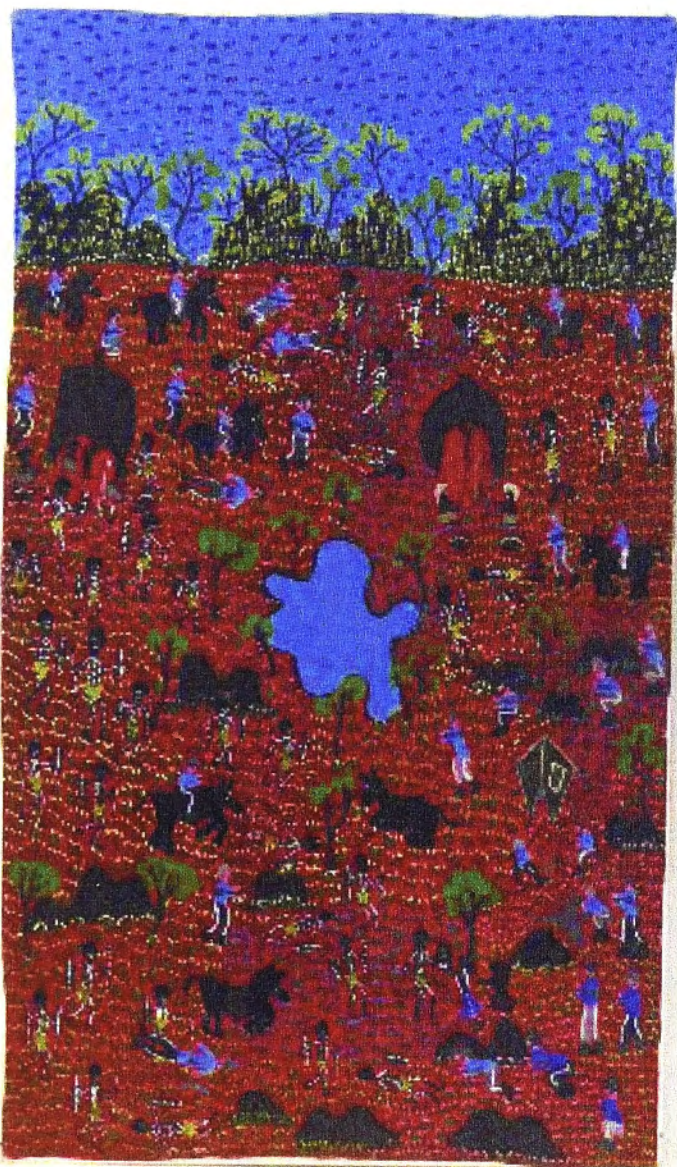


Fig. 50:  
Hazel Kngwarray:  
*Military Attack –  
Ammaroo Station 1903*,  
1998, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, 122 x 73.5 cm,  
RAG

This painting refers to a different event from the previous painting that took place at a later date. On one of the neighbouring stations, Ammaroo, the military attacked the local Indigenous population in their camps. A waterhole or soakage forms the centre of this “massacre painting” in which, as Pwerl recounted, possibly Aboriginal people for the first time encountered European soldiers who were just like policemen.

Scotty Kemarr's *Military Hiding in bush ca. 1903*, 1998 (Fig. 51) perhaps illustrates the same incident as Hazel Kngwarray's painting (Fig. 50). The painting depicts European soldiers clothed in blue and white uniforms hiding in the bush around an Indigenous camp.





Fig. 51: Scotty Kemarr: *Military Hiding in bush ca. 1903, 1998*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM

There are three shelters, where the Aboriginal people are seated are in the left foreground of the painting close to a mountain range or hills. The soldiers approach the camp from the right background, behind the camp, slowly advancing towards it. The events take place at night, which is indicated by the sombre tones of the earth as if darkness surrounds everyone. The dynamic of the painting, making the eye of the viewer move from the left lower corner to the top right corner and back, instils an idea of attack and fear. The quiet and tranquil evening in the camp is disturbed by the menacing soldiers. Rather than showing the battle or its aftermath as the previous paintings did, this one focuses on the very moment prior to the attack and on the tension growing before the attack.

Kylie Kemarr's *Massacre by Military at Ammaroo Station*, 1999 (Fig. 52) and Ada Bird Petyarr's *The day the army shot them all in ceremony*, 1999 (Fig. 53) both tell the stories of attacks by soldiers on their ancestors.



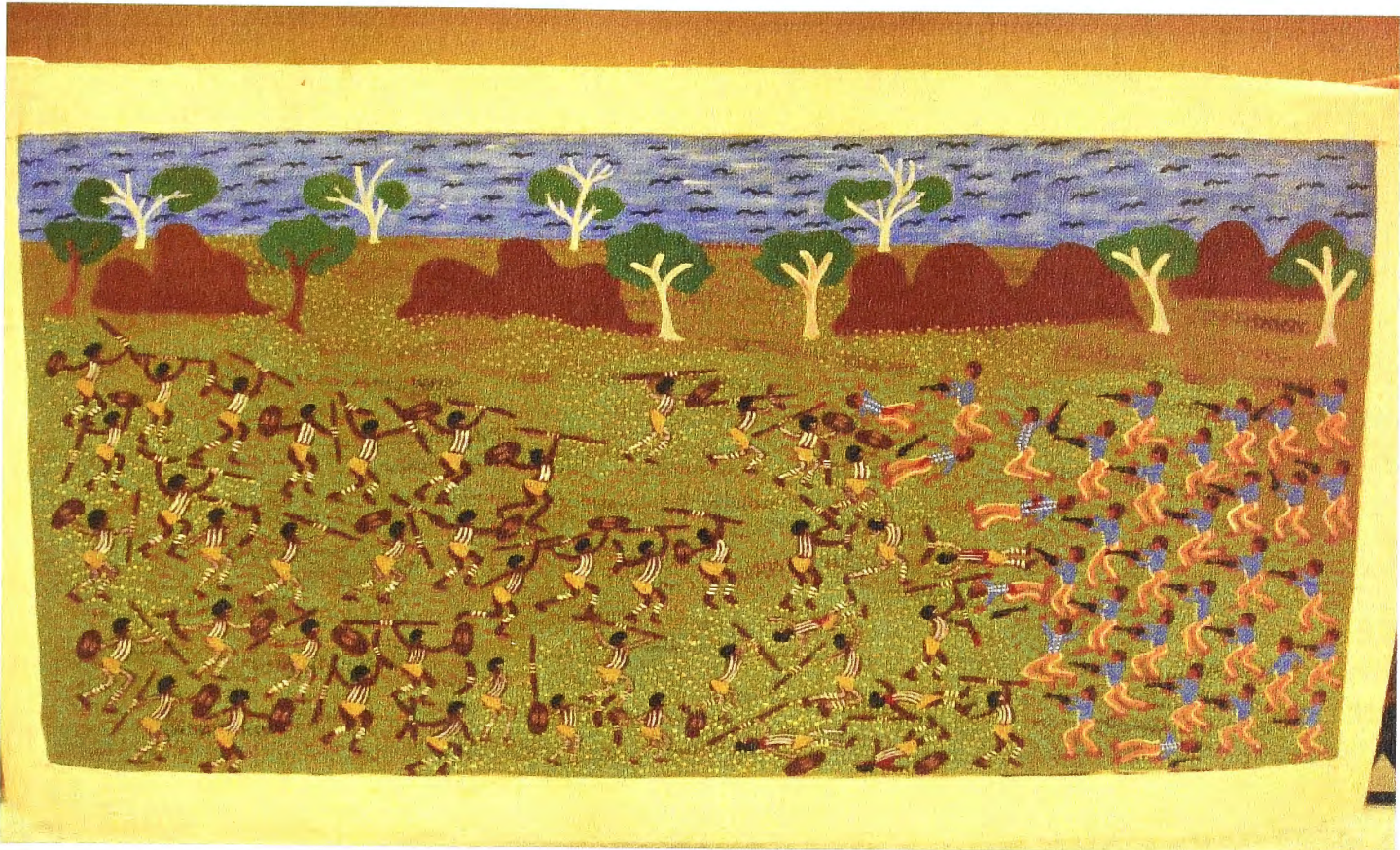


Fig. 52: Kylie Kemarr: *Massacre by Military at Ammaroo Station*, 1999, 118 x 70 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, MAGNT, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 53: Ada Bird Petyarr: *The day the army shot them all in ceremony*, 1999, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, FUAM

These paintings reflect the violent history of first contact in the area and remind people that it was not a peaceful time in contrast to that which it is imagined to have preceded the arrival of the first settlers. The series of violent encounters is shown to continue even after settlers arrived and set up their cattle and sheep stations in the Sandover region. Audrey Kngwarray's *Hanging at Delmore*, 1999 (Fig. 54) and Lucky Kngwarray's *The shooting at Waterhole No.3*, 1997 (Fig. 55) tell of this continuity.



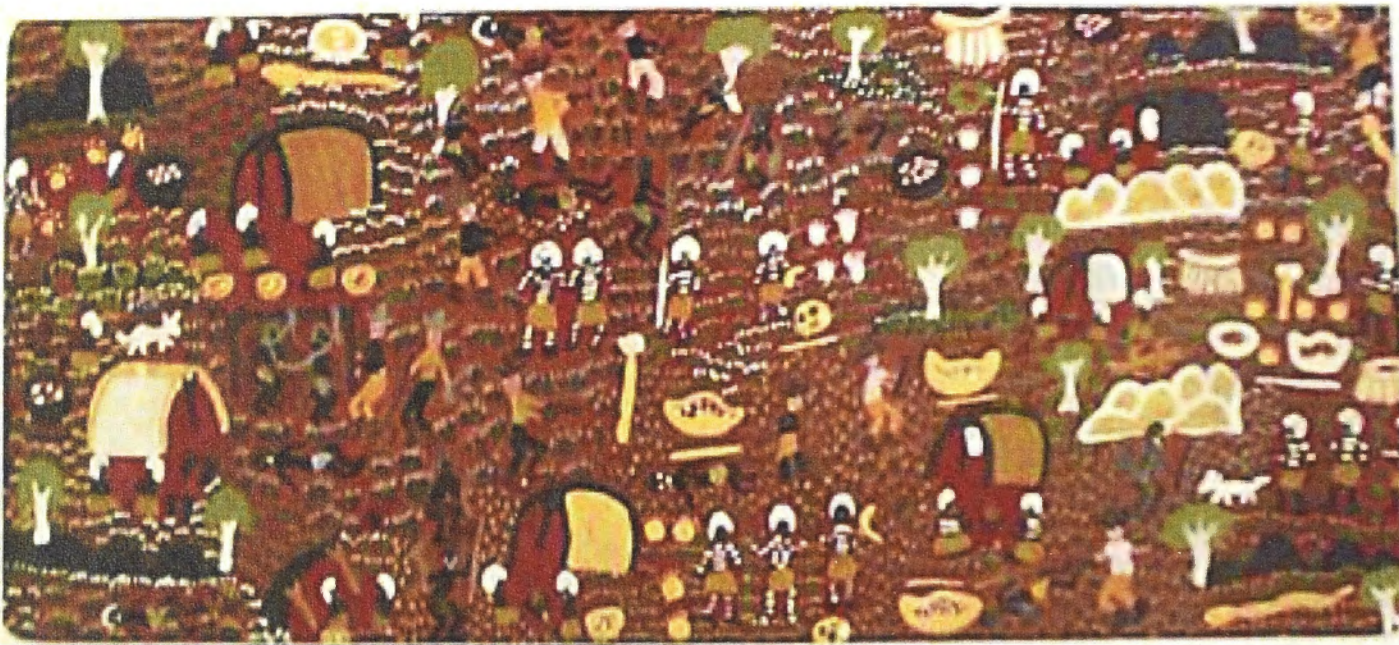


Fig. 54: Audrey Kngwarray: *Hanging at Delmore*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM

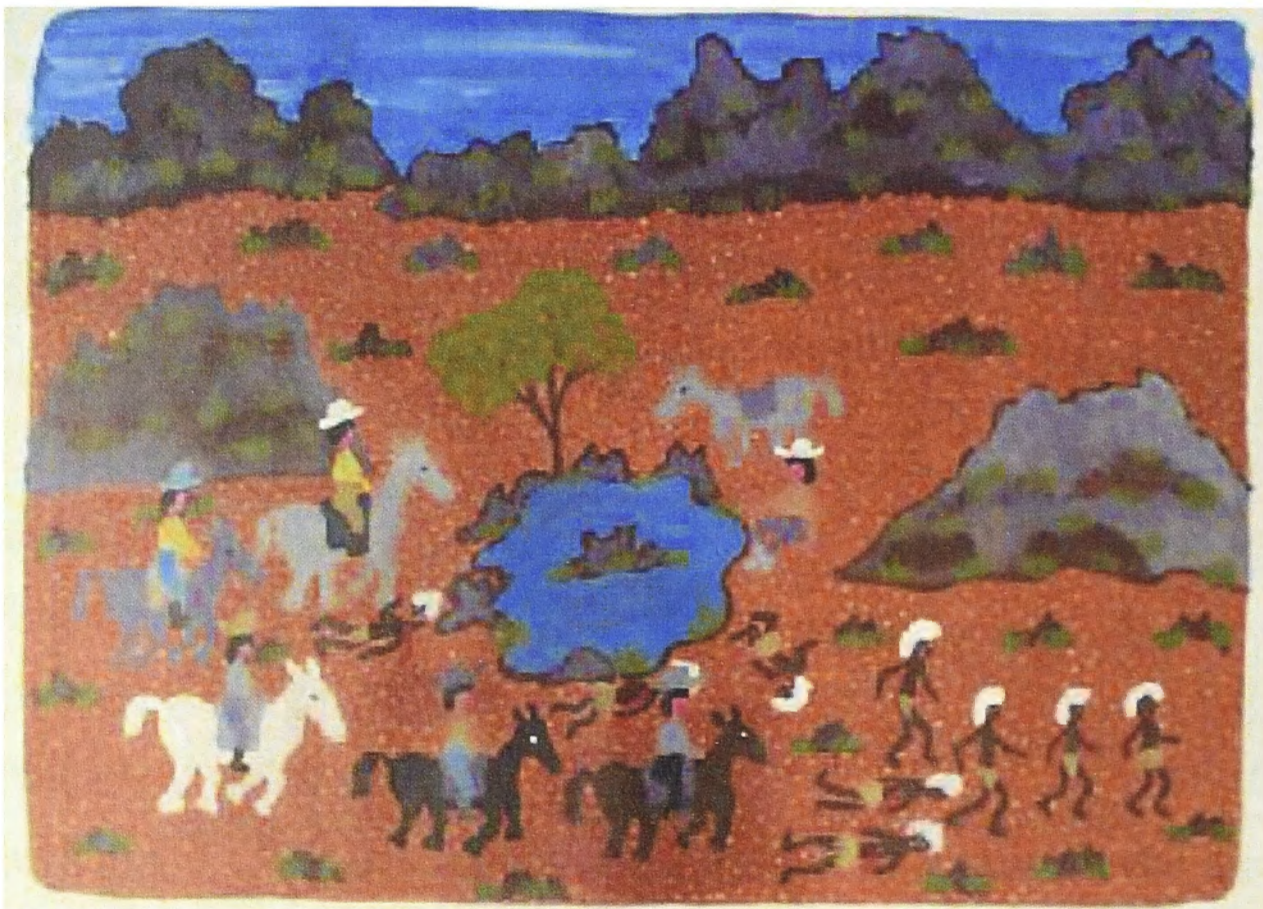


Fig. 55: Lucky Kngwarray: *The shooting at Waterhole No.3*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM

In Chapter 2, I recounted the fact that in the initial stages of contact the local Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people were partially hiding from station owners in the bush. However over time some of them started working on the stations as stockmen and house maids, and others visited the stations to pick up their rations every now and then. For those who worked on the stations there were quite different experiences depending on the station owner. Some of them have fond memories and talk of a time ‘when no one was hungry’<sup>333</sup>. Others remember physical punishments and the bad treatment Aboriginal workers received from station owners<sup>334</sup>. Lashings, beatings and humiliations were often used in order to punish workers for their purported disobedience. ‘Nuggett’ Morton, the former station owner of Ammaroo, was particularly notorious for his cruel

<sup>333</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Cowboy Loy Pwerl (September 2010).

<sup>334</sup>Personal communication with Wally Pwerl, Don Onion and Helen Kunoth Kngwarray (October 2010).



behaviour towards his workers, and he was also involved in the Sandover Massacre<sup>335</sup>. This rarely mentioned massacre is still alive in the memories of Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people and forms an additional background for this ‘Massacre painting series’.

### 7.3.4 Captain Cook series

Like the military attack paintings, the depictions of Captain Cook’s arrival (Fig. 56 and 57) by Kylie Kemarr show European soldiers and Aboriginal people fighting with each other. They tell of the original occupation of Australia by Europeans from an Indigenous point of view.



Fig. 56: Kylie Kemarr: *Arrival of Captain Cook (in the Titanic)*, 1998, 59 x 119 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, MAGNT, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

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<sup>335</sup> Dick Kimber mentions ‘Nuggett’ Morton’s role in the Sandover Massacre in his 18-piece series on the Coniston Massacre, Alice Springs News from October 2003 until February 2004.





Fig. 57: Kylie Kemarr: *Arrival of Captain Cook*, 1999, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 53.5 x 57.5 cm, MAGNT, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

In the *Arrival of Captain Cook (in the Titanic)*, 1998 and *Arrival of Captain Cook*, 1999 Kemarr, inspired by a visit to the cinema where she saw the film *Titanic*<sup>336</sup>, portrays Cook's ship as a steam vessel approaching Australian shores. In both of these paintings the Aboriginal men, armed with spears and shields and painted with body painting, prepared for war with the invaders. One has the impression that in this painting the confrontation was decided for the Aboriginal warriors on shore and not in favour of the Europeans, who are depicted throwing their hands in the air on boat.

Captain Cook is a central theme in Indigenous Australian narratives about the settlement of Australia. In contrast to the dominant, positive, idea of Captain Cook as the discoverer of Australia, for Indigenous Australians he encapsulates the entire process of colonization and becomes a symbol for it. Rather than evoking different people at various stages throughout contact history, Captain Cook is referred to as the symbol of white man's arrival in Australia and the forceful occupation following his arrival<sup>337</sup>.

<sup>336</sup>Personal communication with Diane Mossenson (January 2012).

<sup>337</sup>See Bonyhady (2000) for more detail on Captain Cook as a symbol of European arrival in Australia.



Both of these paintings show a steamboat as Captain Cook's vessel. This relates to the original inspiration for the paintings, the viewing by the artists of the film 'Titanic' (1997) which was followed by the decision to paint Captain Cook's arrival<sup>338</sup>. The steamboat shown in the paintings is the RMS Titanic, which sunk in 1912 on its first voyage. The choice of this particular boat as Captain Cook's vessel reinterprets the history of Australia and one question arises: what if Cook's boat had sunk? Not only are his soldiers killed by fierce Indigenous warriors protecting Australian shores, but if one follows the implicit parallel to the Titanic, soldiers were also killed when the boat sunk. Thus, all attempts to settle the country were unsuccessful. The paintings then become metaphors for a different kind of history or a different development of history, one, in which Captain Cook's arrival had not been the signal for the occupation of Australia by Europeans.

In the previous series about massacres, the blue uniforms were emblems for soldiers and for the frontier pain and battle. In this series the steam boat signals the possibilities of a different history, one completely unlike the one on which the Australian national myth is founded.

### **7.3.5 Football paintings and sculptures**

Works that bridge the everyday and the narrative, and the everyday and the Dreaming, have been created by Dinni Kunoth and his wife Josie Petyarr. Football weekends and Sunday church services are some of the topics in their paintings. The little 'church' in Camel Camp (Fig. 58) for example has been the subject of a number of paintings.

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<sup>338</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (September 2009).





Fig. 58: Church at Camel Camp, photo Chrischona Schmidt, October 2009



Fig. 59: Dinni Kunoth Kemarr: *Camel Camp Church*, n.d., acrylic on linen, 150 x 110 cm, private collection

They both have a syncretistic belief-system encompassing the Dreaming as well as Christianity. The role of Christianity in their lives and one of its physical manifestations, the church, are reflected in Kunoth's and Petyarr's depictions of the little outstation church (Fig. 58)<sup>339</sup>.

<sup>339</sup> Aside from these paintings, which highlight the everyday, Petyarr's has depicted out of the ordinary situations for her. She has painted cityscapes of Melbourne, highlighting her impressions of one of her trips.



A large part of everyday life in Utopia is dominated, however, by football games. Football weekends are important to community life in Central Australia. Almost all weekends throughout the year have become football weekends. They rotate and every weekend a different community hosts the games. The season out bush breaks when the official season breaks too, which means in summer there are no football weekends. Different outstations may have their own football team, rather than there being only one for the whole community. Sometimes teams travel as far as 800 km for a football weekend. Often weekends already begin on a Thursday or Friday morning and last until Tuesday or Wednesday. They turn into a week-long event of socialising. They are a much-loved way of socialising and interacting with people from different areas of the desert. Potential spouses are met here and a random meeting can turn into several over time, eventuating in marriage.

The game played at these football weekends is Australian Football, AFL or "Australian rules." Training for these matches takes place every now and then but the emphasis is put on the weekend and the actual matches. Bands prepare for the weekends too, and perform at night during the evening festivities. A food and beverages bus travels from one football weekend to the next and sells sausages, soft drinks and other light snacks. Sometimes communities additionally run their own tent, which sells food and drinks.

During the match days visitors pull up in their cars around the oval – as depicted in Petyarr's painting (Fig. 60). Most of them stay in their cars and watch the games from within. The cars, grouped according to family, surround the oval completely.



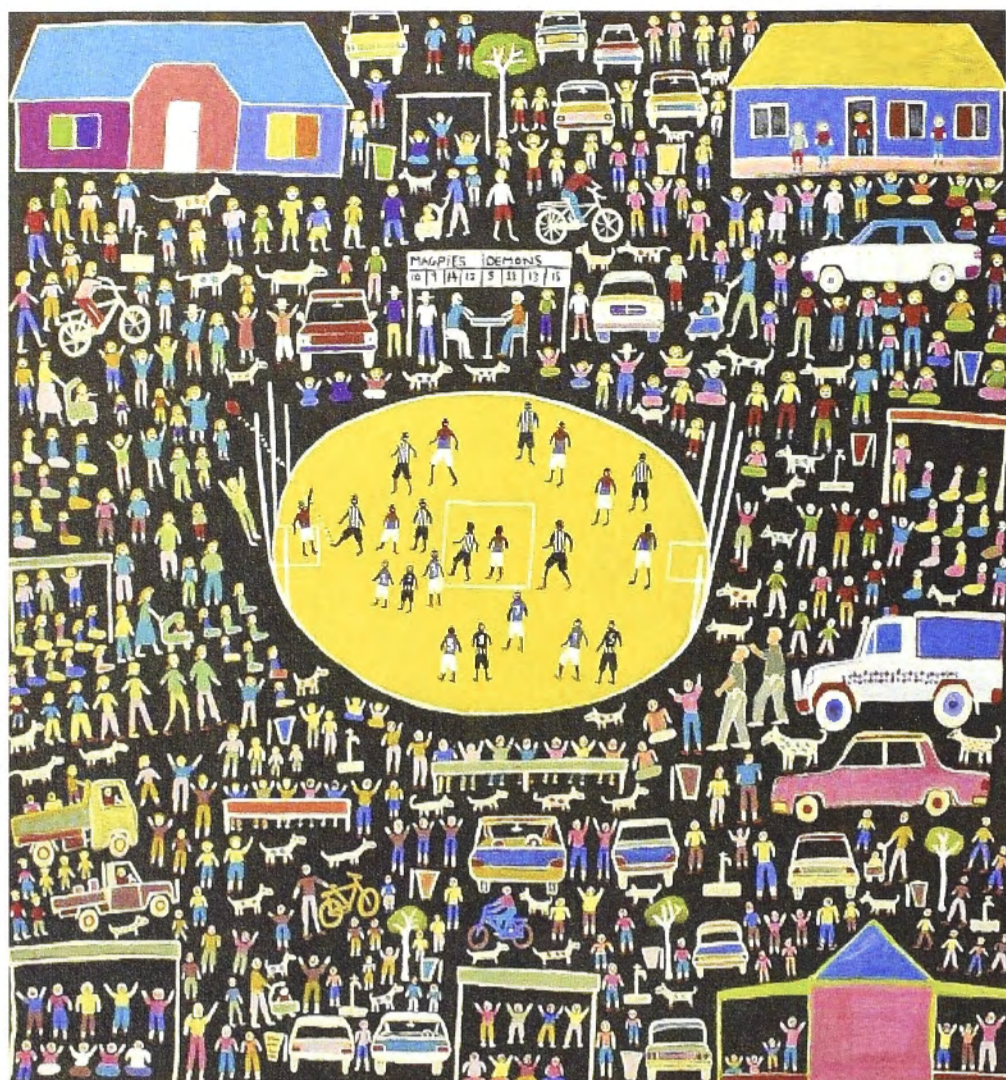


Fig. 60:  
Josie Kunoth Petyarr:  
*Bush Football Carnival*,  
2010, 151 x 151 cm,  
Acrylic on linen, private  
collection

The duration of the football weekend depends on how many teams participate. Fights between different language groups occur on occasion and when I watched, these were settled through traditional<sup>340</sup> fighting at the end of the football weekend.

However, the football weekends are only one part of the role of football in everyday life in the communities. Watching AFL matches and following closely who wins at which match, having a preferred team and in some cases even wearing fan clothing for a team are all part of the connection to football. Local teams are named in relation to the favourite national teams and flags created allude to the flag of their favourite national team.

<sup>340</sup>When I asked what kind of fighting would take place at the end of one of the games I was told 'traditional', which included spearing in the thighs.





Fig. 61:  
Dinni Kunoth Kemarr:  
*Andrew McLeod*  
(*Adelaide Crows*), 2007,  
117 x 16 x 25cm, acrylic  
on bean tree, AGWA

Dinni Kunoth creates sculptures of various football teams (Fig. 61). Individual players are carved out of bean tree wood and portrayed in different actions – for example holding the ball, kicking it or waiting for it. Being in action or in motion is a main feature of these football players. Dinni Kunoth's and Josie Petyarr's artworks are about both the national teams, their favourites, and about the local events, the football weekends. They mirror the interest in football and the importance of it within daily life.

#### 7.4 The everyday in sculptures

Finally, the everyday is represented in carved sculptures of animals that populate the Utopia lands, such as dogs (Fig. 62), birds (Fig. 63), emus, bush turkeys and kangaroos (Fig. 64).



Fig. 62:  
Janice Kngwarray: *Spotted dog*,  
1995, synthetic polymer paint on  
wood, no measurements, FUAM





Fig. 63:  
Lilly Kngwarray, Michelle  
Kngwarray: *Bird family*, 1995, 58  
x 18 x 18 cm, 52 x 15 x 15 cm, 23  
x 9 x 9 cm, synthetic polymer  
paint on carved mulga wood,  
AGSA



Fig. 64:  
Louie Pwerl: *Kangaroo (Wally)*,  
no date, no measurements,  
synthetic polymer paint on wood,  
FUAM, Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

These animals are representations of Dreaming ancestors at the same time as being part of everyday life<sup>341</sup>. The carvings form an independent genre by reflecting the dual character of life – the visible and the invisible. In that regard they tie in with the representations of hunting and camp stories, which may take place at the present time but also may have happened in *altyerr*.

## 7.5 Conclusion

In this Chapter I have focussed on the loose category of the everyday — a category that includes both the contemporary context of Utopia life and contemporary reflections on

<sup>341</sup>In a personal conversation Dinni Kunoth said that a bird he was carving was one that he would see flying around Utopia and that this was his Dreaming (October 2010).



the past. The everyday has been neglected in most analyses of Utopia art because of the over-emphasis on the Dreaming. The everyday paintings tell stories about pre-contact times and traditional lifestyles, as well as about conflict with European soldiers and station owners. They reflect changes in the lives of Aboriginal people, where Toyotas have taken the place of ‘humpies’ in the paintings (Fig. 65 and 66). The focus on the everyday — a category which includes both the contemporary context of Utopia life and contemporary reflections on the past – has enabled me to reveal the diversity of content in Utopia art. In addition, since the paintings I have been considering, are also in many cases associated with figurative forms and what is commonly referred to as the naïve style of imagery this focus has also enabled me to enter into the diversity of representational forms and gain further insights into the contexts of their production.

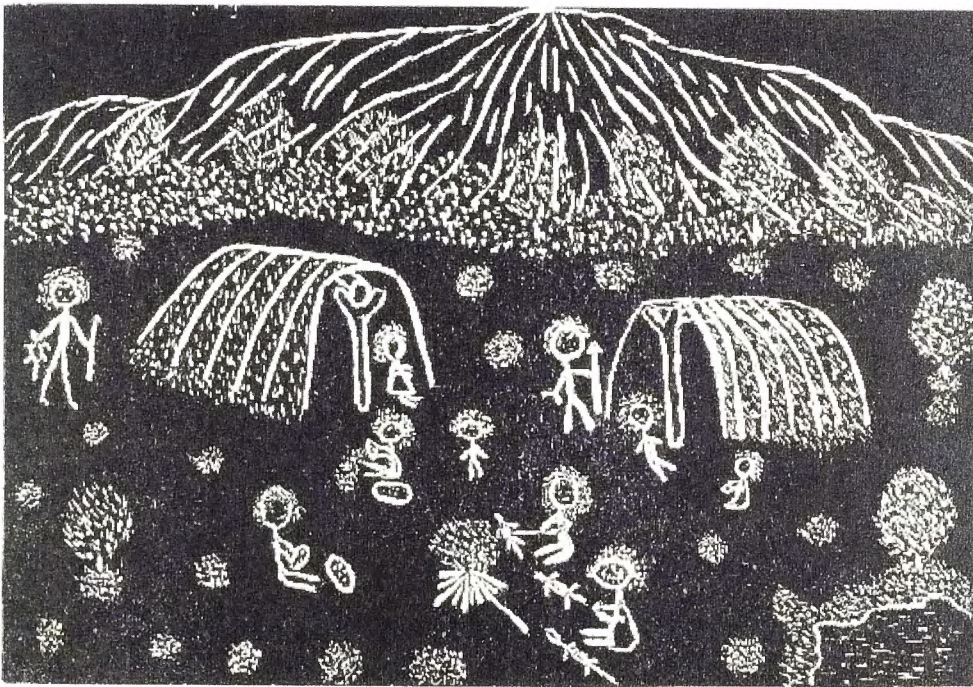


Fig. 65:  
Anna Petyarr: *Untitled*,  
1990, woodcut, 30 x 44.9  
cm image, 37.6 x 52.2 cm  
sheet, one of 72 (The  
Utopia Suite), various  
collections

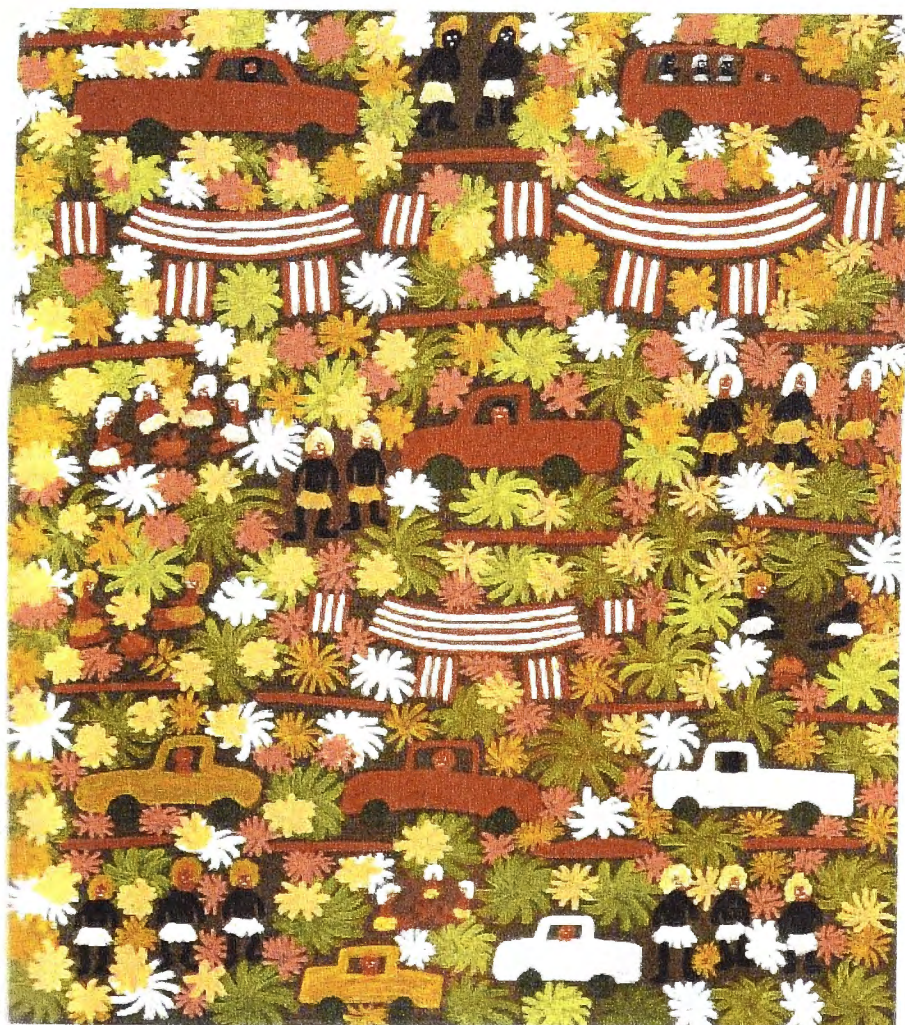


Fig. 66:  
Mary Akemarr and  
family: *Camp Scene and  
Women's Body Designs*,  
1986, acrylic on canvas,  
113 x 90 cm, Gantner  
Myer Collection



The expressive qualities of the naïve style predominantly used for the depiction of these everyday situations and narratives include: bright, unmixed colours, figurative representations of people, animals and 'things', and settings, such as various types of landscapes. A focus of these paintings lies in the recognition of people, objects, and places that are associated with certain events. The point of view taken in the paintings is either from above (Fig. 33), from the front (Fig. 6) or from the front looking towards the back (Fig. 67), which means a creation of depth in the painting through a layering of scenes. This approach to perspective combines the ever-so-present bird's eye view in Aboriginal art<sup>342</sup> with the vanishing point perspective dominant in Western landscape paintings. Thus, the expressive qualities highlight the fact that these artworks are about contact between both cultures and the naïve style expresses the inter-relationship of them.

The imagery of many of the naïve narrative paintings include depictions of landscapes (Fig. 67).



Fig. 67:  
Lucky Morton Kngwarray:  
*Camp Scene*, 1996, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas, 162 x  
125 cm, RAG

The landscapes become signifiers for certain events. Some places become places of pain for people – they hold memories of these events and become places that are hardly visited. When referring to massacres or physical punishment by station owners, the place names turn into codes for these events<sup>343</sup>, becoming synonymous for the pain

<sup>342</sup>For a discussion of the bird's eye view in Utopia art refer to Chapter 9.

<sup>343</sup>One can trace this also by examining the titles of the works.

experienced during early contact times. On the other hand, places of everyday routines and daily life are fondly remembered and significant to people. Visiting them, ensuring that permanent waterholes are still full and telling the stories of living in 'humpies' and rock shelters is important to the older generation who emphasize the knowledge about living 'out bush'. Remembering this former lifestyle and all its aspects is essential when teaching younger generations about the past. Hence, these artworks not only render the dynamic changes lives have experienced over the past 150 years in the Sandover region, but they also teach children and young people about it.

The dynamics of these relationships and of life overall is expressed through the movement in the paintings, be it that of people hunting, tracking animal traces or fighting in a 'war' with soldiers. Movement is a quality of these paintings, encapsulating the importance of mobility for the artists of these works, which again finds its epitome in the Toyota. Movement is also found to some extent in the bushtucker and bush medicine artworks, which to some degree show a surface movement. In Chapter 9 this surface movement and its qualities will be discussed in further detail as one of the main characteristics of Utopia art.

The choice of a naïve style in the depiction of these stories is likely to be connected to the content of the stories: they are about the every-day, routines, traditional life, conflict situations and war-like events, as well as life in post-contact times. They do not tell of the travels of the ancestor beings through country, nor of the importance of certain plants in the Dreaming and the events in the lives of the ancestor beings. However the use of the naïve style also serves to differentiate the two language groups who reside in Utopia from one another.

The artists who have chosen to paint in a naïve style are, aside from a few exceptions, all Alyawarr-speakers. They do not paint in an abstract style, but they picture ritual in various ways as I will show in the following chapter. When travelling further north towards other Alyawarr communities a certain similarity in style between these artists and Utopia artists is noticeable<sup>344</sup>. However, when examining artworks by Alyawarr men closely, one notes that traditional composition and iconography are at the core of these. I have not been able to determine whether Alyawarr women in Utopia do not have the right to paint other stories, prefer to paint these historical and everyday stories,

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<sup>344</sup>For example artists from Ampilatwatja also paint in a naïve style.



or if the longer contact times and living on stations has had some kind of impact on the depiction of stories.

The thematic repertoire of naïve and narrative paintings and sculptures is quite widespread, as indicated through some examples above. The main media and technique chosen to represent stories is painting.

The next chapter focuses on ritual in art from Utopia. Both Alyawarr and Anmatyerr speakers perform rituals on a very regular basis, and a large body of their work is dedicated to this part of their lives. Artists from both language groups engage with a more abstract style to tell the story in ritual-related artworks.

## Chapter 8: Ritual in art from Utopia

### 8.1 Introduction

After having examined artworks, which are inspired by the everyday in Utopia, we now turn to a group of ritual artworks. These works reflect rituals in various ways: depicting the body painting of certain ceremonies, creating sculptures which are decorated with body paintings from rituals and through creating allusions to rituals by means of abstracting particular designs and iconography. This chapter discusses three categories of ritual reflected in artworks: representations of women's rituals, men's rituals and rituals for both sexes. As in the previous chapter distinctions are made between themes but not between materials or techniques.

### 8.2 *Awely* and women's ceremonies

#### 8.2.1 Different approaches to *awely* and women's ceremonies

The majority of works that connect to ritual are by women and are associated with *awely*. *Awely* is the Eastern Anmatyerr word for women's business or women's ritual. In recent decades the research on women in Indigenous societies – their role as well as their rituals, rights and lives – has expanded considerably. Approaches range from feminist perspectives, which counter the previous overly male-oriented research area (de Ishtar 2005; Bell 1983), to ones emphasising the complementarity of men's and women's roles (White, Barwick and Meehan 1985; Dussart 2000).

Dussart's approach towards a complementary role model of men and women is the basis for her article *What an acrylic can mean: The meta-ritualistic resonances of a central desert painting* (1999). In this essay, Dussart focuses on a commissioned collaborative painting, which women and men have created together. Through the close analysis of the painting a multitude of issues around creating artworks are discussed: negotiation processes between painters about which story to depict, the role of owners and managers of a Dreaming story, the role of men and women in public ritual and the politics of painting a commission. Dussart links this back to rituals and the negotiation of ceremonies prior to their performance (1999:211). In her view, the creation of a collaborative painting is similar to the performance of a ritual in terms of content, the roles given to people of manager and owner (1999:208) as well as the negotiating

process accompanying the painting of the artwork (1999:214). The article looks at the form of public ritual where women and men perform together rather than separate from each other.

Christine Watson's *Piercing the Ground* (2003) and Jennifer Biddle's *breasts, bodies, canvas – Central Desert Art as Experience* (2007) are particularly relevant as analyses of women's art in relation to ritual. Watson looked at the significance of women's business in Balgo art by exploring how to read these artworks meaningfully and understand them wholly. She examined the continuity of women's painting on canvas, to those in sand and on the body. The marks left by ancestors on the ground are turned into marks on the body for ritual, or they are drawn in the sand when telling the story. When the marks are transferred onto canvas they not only tell the story of the ancestral beings through country, but they also become traces of ancestral activity on the canvas (2003:111). Singing whilst painting supports this re-invocation of ancestral beings and creates another layer of engagement with the actual Dreaming story. Watson describes the association between touching the ground during sand drawings, touching the skin during body painting and touching the canvas through the brush for acrylic painting:

The surface of the land is seen as the skin of the body of the land. [...] In this system, the skin of the body of the land is marked, as is the skin of the human body in body painting, as well as the skins or surfaces of sacred objects. This process of marking or inscribing the skins of the body of the land and of humans is not just a visual and conceptual one, however, but a multisensual one, where the making of visual marks is accompanied by the inscription of marks which, in the view of local people are sonic, three-dimensional and tactile. (Ibid.pp. 24).

In her detailed analysis, she exemplifies the use of templates<sup>345</sup> in paintings in order to show their links to country, ceremony and body painting (Ibid.pp. 273). The multi-layered understanding of the world expressed through art is at the core of Watson's analysis.

Biddle follows on from Watson's embodied understanding of the 'multisensual' experience of painting. Her research is on art from the Central Desert, again with a focus on women's art (2001, 2003, 2006, 2007). Biddle examines how this multi-layered understanding of the world is transferred onto surfaces and how this in turn may affect the viewer (2006, 2007). Like Watson she notices the link between the surface of the country, the skin and canvas. However, she goes further by looking at the underlying intentions of this mark-making: a writing of history for example (2007:84ff),

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<sup>345</sup> I will expand on templates in Utopia art in the following chapter.



a political statement (Ibid. pp. 43ff), evoking ancestral presence through painting (Ibid. pp. 71ff), and an expression of the ‘colonial legacy of displacement’ (Ibid. pp. 90). Finally she highlights the connection between the bodily skin and the Central Australian term ‘skin’ as in kin relatedness (Ibid. pp.91ff). Biddle demonstrates associatively how different aspects of an Indigenous life experience and understanding of the world are integral to the process of creating art.

To exemplify her analysis Biddle draws on artworks from a variety of artists across the Central Desert, including Utopia (2007). Watson focused in her analysis strictly on Balgo women and their art. Biddle, however, expanded this from her research with Warlpiri women to include Anmatyerr and Alyawarr artists in her analysis. She argues that these artworks derive from *awely* and not only represent movement but instil a sense of movement in the viewer when she or he approaches them sensuously<sup>346</sup>. I will expand on her concept of instilling movement in the next chapter with reference to abstract art.

In this chapter I focus on artworks from Utopia that are inspired by both women’s and men’s ritual. These works range from ones that can appear almost static with a strong emphasis on iconography to ones that evoke a sensation of movement in the viewer.

My conclusions are based upon this formal analysis of the artworks – the content of the artworks, the style in which these topics are expressed – and observations and conclusions are drawn from this analysis. This approach differs from that of Biddle, who in analysing women’s work assumes that all of them are representations of *awely* without always demonstrating this sufficiently.

### **8.2.2 Painting *awely* on bodies and canvas**

Most artworks from Utopia with ritual content transfer women’s body paint applied for *awely* upon breasts and upper arms onto canvas (Fig. 1).

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<sup>346</sup>Comments by Biddle (2011) at the Australian Anthropological Conference in Perth.



Fig. 1:  
Ada Bird Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, 1988/89,  
acrylic on canvas,  
90 x 60 cm, HaC,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

When asked about these paintings a simple gesture indicates what they mean: a movement of the right hand from the left shoulder across the breasts indicating the lines<sup>347</sup> with four fingers and hiding the thumb under the palm of the hand<sup>348</sup>. That is *awely*.

I was told that every Dreaming story consists of two parts: one female, the other male; therefore female and male rituals exist for each Dreaming<sup>349</sup>. They complement each other. Women's business is about fertility, 'making the country green'; it is concerned with the germination of plants and abundance of food (Green 1998:44)<sup>350</sup>. Furthermore, I was told that women inherited rights to *awely* through their mothers and grandmothers, in contrast to Dreaming stories that are inherited through the father's line. Mothers and grandmothers teach young girls and women about *awely*, how to paint the body painting and sing the songs and dance the dances associated with it. Although performing *awely* is restricted to women anyone is allowed to see it being performed.

The depiction of *awely* is important to women. I noticed that the majority of women only started to paint *awely* on canvas when they had reached a certain degree of knowledge about it, which comes with age and experience<sup>351</sup>. Dussart (2000:105) pointed out that women in their middle ages, between 40 and 50 years old, start engaging more and more in rituals and accumulate knowledge around ritual and the Dreaming at this time. They become recognised speakers and important business women. It is in this age frame that Utopia women start painting *awely*. From an early

<sup>347</sup>I will return to these lines in relation to Emily Kam Ngwarray's art, in which they become synonymous with *awely*.

<sup>348</sup>I have received this answer on many occasions when I inquired about artworks.

<sup>349</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Ngwarray, Helen Kunoth Ngwarray, Violet Petyarr, Myrtle Petyarr and Carol Kunoth Ngwarray (September – October 2010).

<sup>350</sup>Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Ngwarray (September 2010).

<sup>351</sup>Compare this with Dussart (2000).



age they learn about it, participate in the ceremonies and are painted up. However, only later in life, possibly when they are of an age to have grandchildren, do they take on a role within this group of ritual leaders.

This learning period runs parallel to the apprenticeship of becoming an artist<sup>352</sup>. For many years young women and men learn how to paint on canvas as well as on bodies for ceremony. The analogy can be drawn out: being proficient and knowledgeable in painting on bodies can mean that one is also a proficient and knowledgeable canvas painter. However, one can paint proficiently for a long time on canvas yet not be knowledgeable about ritual and therefore about all aspects of body painting.

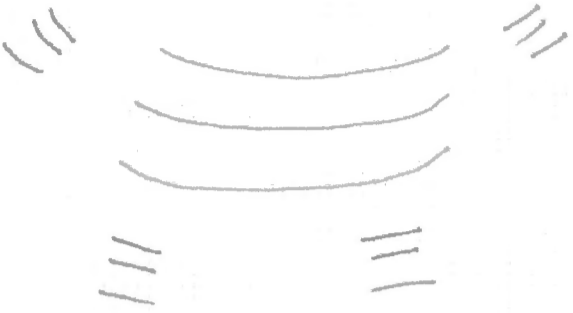
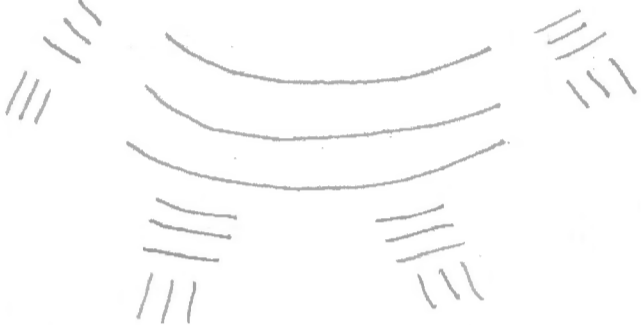
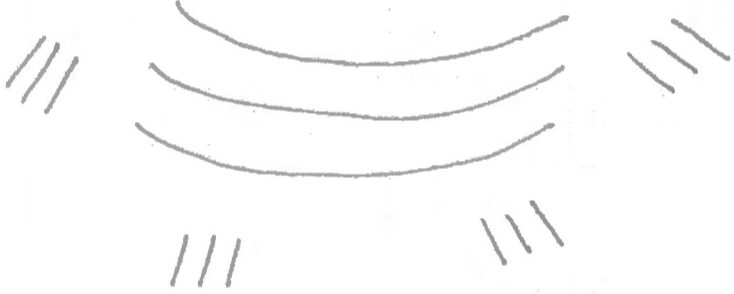
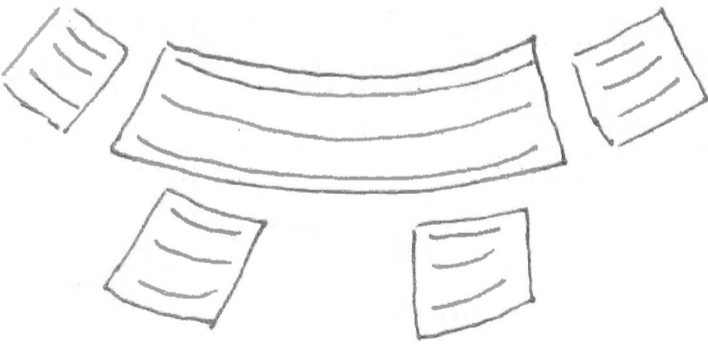

Utopia women depict *awely* in various ways, employing a number of different motifs representing different countries and therefore a different Dreaming stories and *awely*. One part of the motif is the same: lines across the chest. Four different colours may be used for *awely* body painting: black, white, yellow and red. However, these are painted in different colour combinations and colour sequences depending on the particular country and *awely*. Similarities exist in the three designs for Angarra (country) and the Bush Turkey Dreaming, Anuriltja (country) and *atham-areny* – these are spirit beings which I will discuss further in Chapter 8, and Atarketa (country)<sup>353</sup> and Kangaroo Dreaming. They have three lines across the chest, the upper arms and on the breasts and they all use only red and white as colours. Yet the directions of the lines on the upper arms and on the breasts differ. Two other designs have three lines across the chest, upper arms and the breasts: the ones for the countries Alhalker and Antarrengeny. The latter, however, is the only one of all the ones I have seen, which is framed. Finally, the *awely* body painting design for the country Atnangker is quite distinct from the others. The vertical lines across the chest are interrupted: they consist of three sets of three lines, two of which are above the breasts and one set is on the breast bone. These three sets are repeated on the breasts and in between them as well as on the upper arms. The colour scheme of both countries Alhalker and Atnangker differ from the previous four, as they incorporate black and yellow respectively.

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<sup>352</sup> Compare with Taylor (1996b), and personal communication with Howard Morphy and John Carty (April 2011).

<sup>353</sup> These place names cannot be translated and are associated with particular *altyerr* sites.



Body painting design	Country and Dreaming story	Colour combination and sequence
	Anuriltja and <i>atham-areny</i>	Bold red lines with thin white lines between them
	Angarra and Bush Turkey Dreaming	Red and white lines alternating
	Atarketa and Kangaroo Dreaming	Three red lines with two white lines between them
	Antarrengeny	Three red lines with white lines between them and framing them
	Atnangker and Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming	Three sets of lines: red, white and yellow, one set each above and on breasts, and one between them

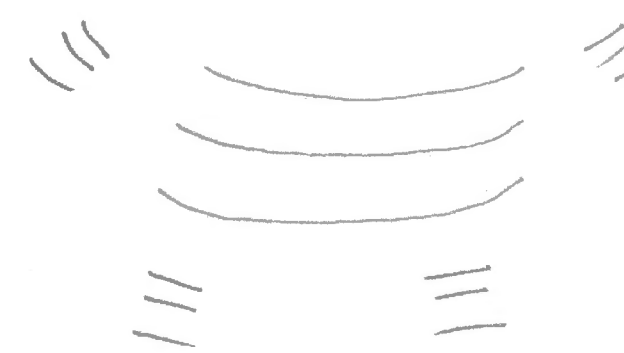
	Alhalker and Emu Dreaming	Three lines: black, white and red
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Table 1: *Awely* body painting designs for six different countries and Dreamings in the Utopia region<sup>354</sup>

Munn presented the reader with an array of body painting designs from Yuendumu as did Biddle in her book. These designs combine circles and lines as well as different colours. In Utopia the dominant element in all designs are the lines.

These lines are the *awely* motif: in the majority of paintings the bodies of the women are removed from the design, all that remains are the parts that are painted, the surface seen from the bird's-eye-perspective; a half-circle representing the chest, two elongated half-circles representing the breasts and two squares to the side of the bigger half-circle depicting the upper arms. All of these parts of the motif are filled with lines (Fig. 2). In some cases the lines on the breasts are vertical (Fig. 3 and 4), in others they are horizontal (Fig. 5 and 6). A close analysis of each painting employing the table above will enable the viewer to understand to which country and Dreaming the painting refers. *Awely*, 1989 (Fig. 4) for example could, according to the table, refer to the Kangaroo Dreaming and *Grass Seed*, 1990 (Fig. 5) and *Body Paint Design*, 1999 (Fig. 6) to the Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming. In these three cases the painters held the knowledge about these respective *awely* and depicted them in other works too<sup>355</sup>. They signify the different countries, Dreaming stories and *awely*.

<sup>354</sup>Information about the different designs was collected in November-December 2011 in preparation for, during and after *awely* performances at the Utopia Music Festival. The table only represents six countries and Dreamings, however, the designs depicted in paintings show more variations.

<sup>355</sup>I will elaborate in Chapter 9 and 10 on Mountain Devil Lizard depictions by Gloria Petyarr and Ada Bird Petyarr, and various *awely* representations by Emily Kam Kngwarray.





Fig. 2:  
Janice Kngwarray:  
*Women's body paint  
design*, 1999, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas,  
no measurements,  
FUAM

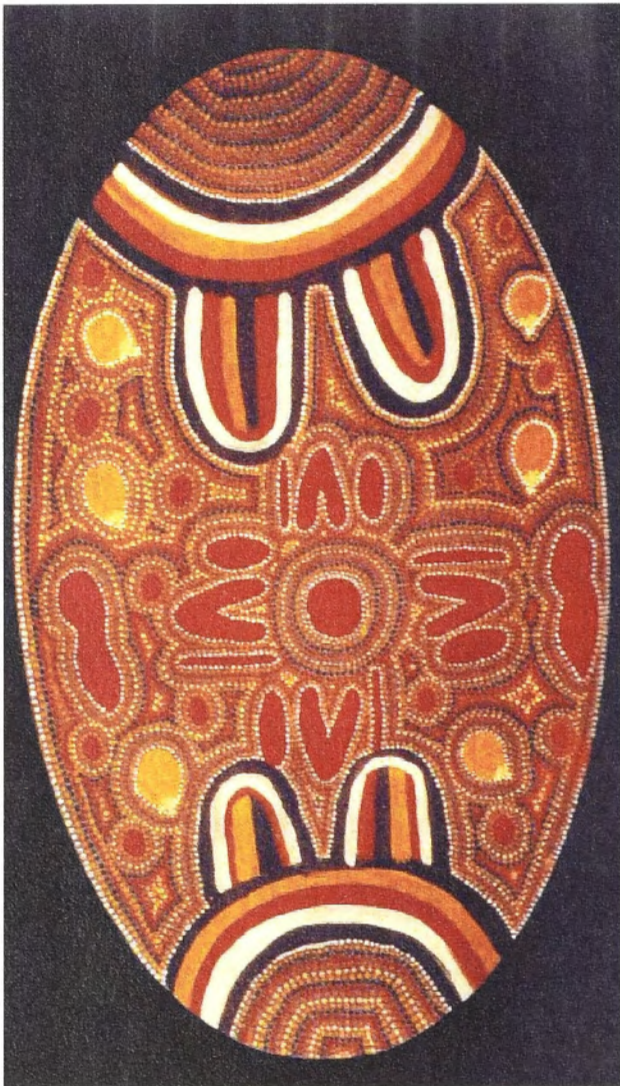


Fig. 3:  
Nora Petyarr: *Bush  
Tomato*, 1990, synthetic  
polymer paint on wood,  
no measurements,  
private collection



Fig. 4:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Awely*, 1989, 151.2 x  
91.1 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
composition board,  
NGV



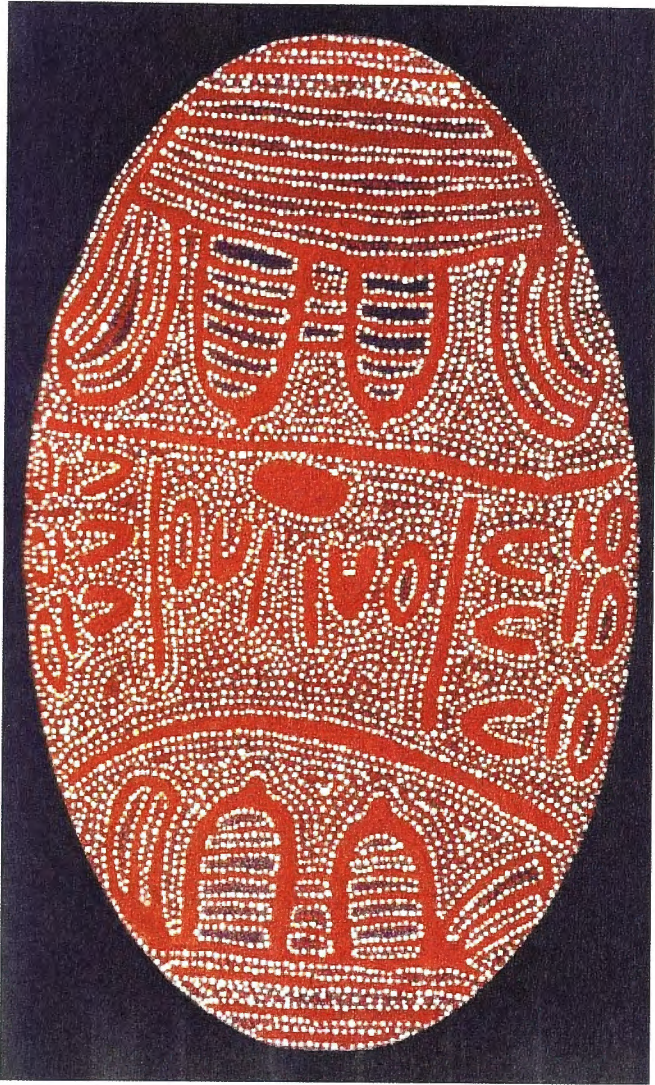


Fig. 5:  
Gloria Petyarr: *Grass Seed*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, no measurements, private collection



Fig. 6:  
Ada Bird Petyarr: *Body Paint Design*, 1999, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, FUAM

According to Green (1998:44) Utopia women only began to depict *awely* in their works in 1980. Historically, this is most likely linked to the Utopia land claim for which the women sang and performed their *awely* stories in front of the judge:

Apmerarl anwantherr antwerrketyerl ra anwekantherrenh country anem. Aleyan anwantherr antwerrkem. Judge-engel anwantherr angkemel inek, awelyl anem anwantherr ingkwernehek, apmer renh rakek. Arreng-kenh apmer anem rakek. Ipmenty urrperl-kenh anem ra aleyan anem, Ankerrapw ra. Akaty-akaty anem anwantherr anetyel apmerel. Land Claim-el anwekantherr inek, one way. Bush-el anem anwantherr anetyel. Awelyl anwantherr inekan yanhez, antwerrkek, kwey akengel-arey war arlkwetzamarl akngat-arey akngat-arey-warl.

The country that we hold onto is our country now, and today we are still holding onto it. **We spoke in front of the judge, and then painted ourselves up with *awely* ceremonial designs, and got the land back.** We got our father's father's country back. Now Utopia belongs to Aboriginal people and we're living happily on the land. The Land Claim got it back for us – one way – and now



we're living in the bush. **We got the land back with our *awely* ceremonies, and held onto it** – us fabulous women astounded them with our performance – **turning from side to side as we danced.**(Lena Pwerl, Sandover River 1995, cited in and translated by Green 1998:38; highlighting by me).

The hearing included for the first time not only the voices of the traditional owners of the land but also those of the managers and local descent groups. Women created batiks for the hearing, which were then used as evidence for their ongoing connection with the land. For the women of this region the rituals associated with *awely* are very important. Women from both language groups paint and perform *awely*. However, from my observation women do not sing whilst painting *awely* on canvas. They do so when they prepare their bodies for ceremony but not when they paint on canvas<sup>356</sup>. This is not to say that they may have done so previously and that this habit has just stopped.

Lines, the painted breasts motif and actual depictions of painted-up women, as well as further abstractions of *awely* to half-circles for example, are all different ways through which various women represent *awely*. Up until the early 1990s women primarily used the *awely* motif to depict women who were painted up for ceremony or women dancing during ceremony or possibly even ancestral beings. Nicholls claims that *awely* works only became prominent in the change of material from batik to canvas (2008:35). However a close analysis of the works will show that women already included *awely* much earlier on in their batiks:

Anwantherr arrernem awely batik-warl story anwekantherrenh, arrernem anwekantherrenh aperleyel akalty-anthek, well anwantherr arrernetyel anem renh story ingkerrek anem, arrengek-kenh arrenemel... Batik-warl arrernetyek awely mwerr, anwenekantherrenh, marl-kenharl yanh, awely arrenem, atey-kenh self again-arl ikwerareyenh atywerreng, rary apek arrernetyek, self again anerlanem. Anwantherr self again awely anwekantherrenh, arelh maparl.

We paint the women's ceremonies on the batik, the stories that our father's mothers taught us. Well now we put all these stories on batik, our grandfathers' stories. It's good to represent our ceremonial designs on batik. That's women's business, that *awely* – men have their own business, atywerreng or sacred objects. They might paint these things themselves – they've got their own business. Us women have our own separate ceremonies. (Kathleen Petyarr, Atneltyey 1988, cited in and translated by Green 1998:44).

The lines are understood as marks, these marks were created by ancestral beings and for ceremony human beings make marks on their body in order to be more connected to the ancestral beings.

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<sup>356</sup>Personal observation in December 2011.



During my research I was brought to two rock art sites, which have significance with reference to *awely* body painting designs and stories. One of them is near Boundary Bore and the inspiration for Emily Kam Kngwarray's paintings (Fig. 7). Her designs derived from the marks in her country created in the Dreaming and referring to Yam Dreaming (Fig. 8)<sup>357</sup>.

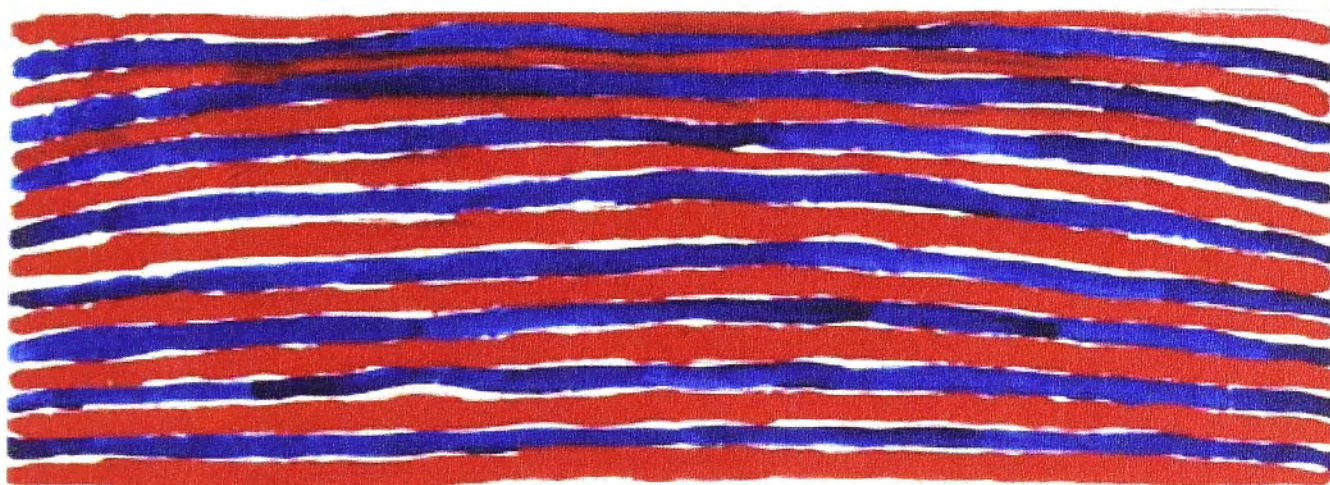


Fig. 7: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM



Fig. 8: Yam Dreaming site near Boundary Bore, September 2010 (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt)

The second site I was brought to with rock paintings connected to *awely* was past Camel Camp. We went to a site of a rock hole with a permanent water supply. I was told that

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<sup>357</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010). I will expand on this particular site and how it influenced Kngwarray's works in Chapter 10.



this used to be a camping site as it gives shelter and access to water. The large rock had many caves to the side of it, some of which had rock paintings inside (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Permanent rockhole near Camel Camp, October 2010 (Photo: Chrischona Schmidt)

In one particular place the *awely* motif was painted on the rock. When I asked about it I was told that this comes from Jesus, not from the Dreaming. It shows the degree to which Christianity<sup>358</sup> has had an influence in the area, despite the intermittent presence of missionaries or preachers in the region. In the two different rock art sites both the motifs previously introduced are visible: the painted breasts and the reduced lines. They show a continuity of imagery used and enable us to see a process of innovation existing in continuity with the past.

During his research with Alyawarr-speakers to the north of Utopia, Richard Moyle reported that the women very much enjoyed *awely* performances. They were part of a routine and performed almost on a weekly basis. Their performance has become less frequent since Moyle's research in the 1970s. However, *awely* is performed for various occasions: the opening of the new school building<sup>359</sup> for example or the opening of *Inkerr anyent-antey: The language of batik* exhibition at Peta Appleyard Gallery, in Alice Springs in June 2010 and for the Utopia Music Festival, at Ahalper High School in December 2011.

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<sup>358</sup>In December 2011 various people have asserted that they are Lutherans and have a strong Christian belief.

<sup>359</sup>The women planned for this performance but decided in the end not to go ahead (September 2009).



Nevertheless, unlike other researchers who emphasise the importance of *awely* for inspiration and in fact claim that it is the main inspiration for women's painting, (Biddle 2007; Nicholls 2008) I argue that these rituals form but one source of inspiration for Utopia women artists. Other sources of inspiration include Dreaming stories and spirit figures.

The most common depiction of *awely* or women's business is by painting the breast motif as we can see in this detail of *Untitled*, 1988/89 (Fig. 10).

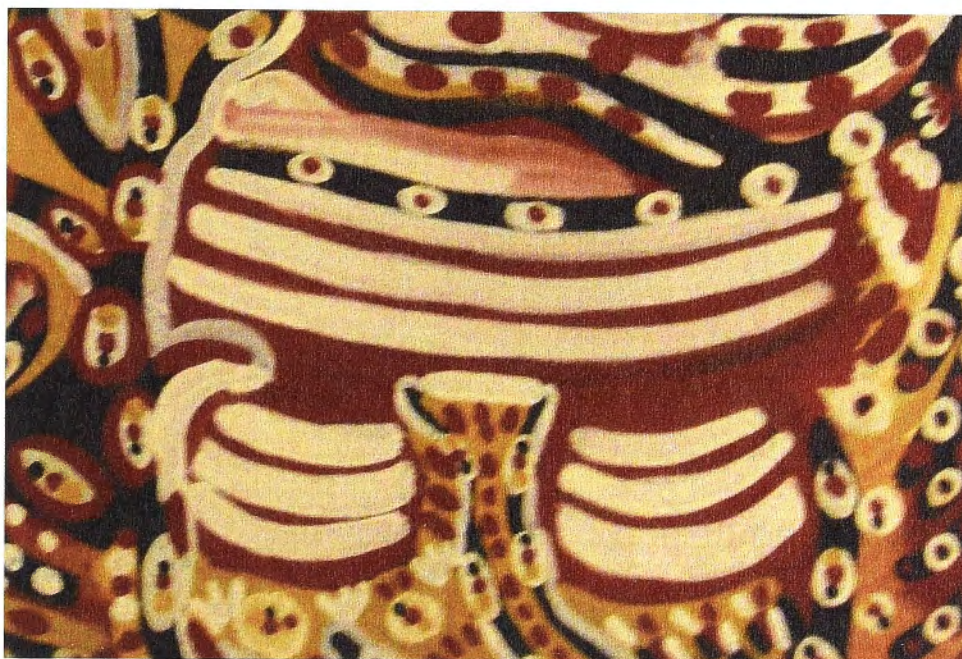


Fig. 10:  
Rene Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1988/89,  
90x60 cm, synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, HaC (detail), Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

These motifs can be shown by themselves as a single woman or representing an ancestral woman travelling through country (Fig. 11). They can also be together in a group and in different sizes (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11:  
Glory Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990,  
woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image,  
37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72  
(The Utopia Suite), various  
collections





Fig. 12:  
Myrtle Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1990,  
woodcut, 30 x 44.9 cm image,  
37.6 x 52.2 cm sheet, one of 72  
(The Utopia Suite), various  
collections



Fig. 13:  
Michelle Holmes Pwerl:  
*Ancestral Scene*, 1988, ca.  
116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm,  
batik on silk, HaC

However, the motifs are often reduplicated and dispersed within the landscape (Fig. 13). In this painting of Michelle Pwerl we can see the breast motif placed within a landscape of wind shelters with trees around them, and the towering mountains behind them. Instead of painting figures with body painting, these artists have already abstracted the motif from the human figure. The motifs become signs of ancestral presence as they represent a connection with the ancestral beings during ritual. The women painted-up with designs in the artworks can be representations of ancestral beings, and the repetition of the motif across the paintings is likely to represent their Dreaming tracks through a particular country.

Another way in which body paintings are incorporated within the overall structure of a painting is in paintings which represent ceremonial performance. In these paintings the designs move almost as if part of ceremonial dance performance. For example they are depicted as the breast motif distributed in landscape or floating amongst flowers (Fig. 14 and 15). Yet the arrangement of the breast motifs, in lines and/or in groups can be understood as an indication for a ceremonial context, in which they are performing *awely*.





Fig. 14:  
Betty Beasley Kemarr:  
*Women's Ceremony*,  
1988, ca. 116.5/119 x  
230.5/248.5 cm, batik on  
silk, HaC



Fig. 15: Katie Kemarr: *Kurrajong Seed Dreaming*, 1988, ca. 116.5/119 x 230.5/248.5 cm,  
batik on silk, HaC

Furthermore, the regular repetition of the breast motif across the batik, as in *Kurrajong Seed Dreaming*, 1988 (Fig. 15) can refer to the representation of movement: a forward movement of either an ancestral being walking through country or a painted-up woman dancing through country. Reference to ceremonial performance can also be found in other artworks, in particular by Ada Bird Petyarr, in which the focus is on two women or two pairs of breasts opposed to each other (Fig. 16).





Fig. 16:  
Ada Bird Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, n. d., 91 x  
92 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, private  
collection, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

They seem to be in a dance, moving back and forward with their painted breasts moving up and down. The movement of the bodies and respectively of the breasts is evoked through the 'vibrating' lines to the sides. The performance of *awely* is represented through this movement backwards and forwards. The viewer looks onto the breasts from a bird's-eye-perspective and observes them moving rhythmically up and down and forwards and backwards.

In addition to paintings that clearly reproduce particular *awely* artists have developed abstract designs that are based on their form. Not only did the rock paintings of lines get transferred onto bodies, canvas and subsequently on paper, but body painting motif was also transformed. Ada Bird Petyarr's paintings are the first indicators of this change (Fig. 16): the half-circles describing the chest of the women become the sole element of some paintings (Fig. 17).





Fig. 17:  
Nancy Kunoth Petyarr:  
*Mountain devil  
dreaming*, 1996, 87 x  
74 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, AGSA

They replace the depiction of the woman and her painted breasts. Instead the half-circles are repeated over the canvas. They evoke the movement of the women whilst performing *awely*, creating an effect of vibration across the surface of the canvas (Fig. 18).

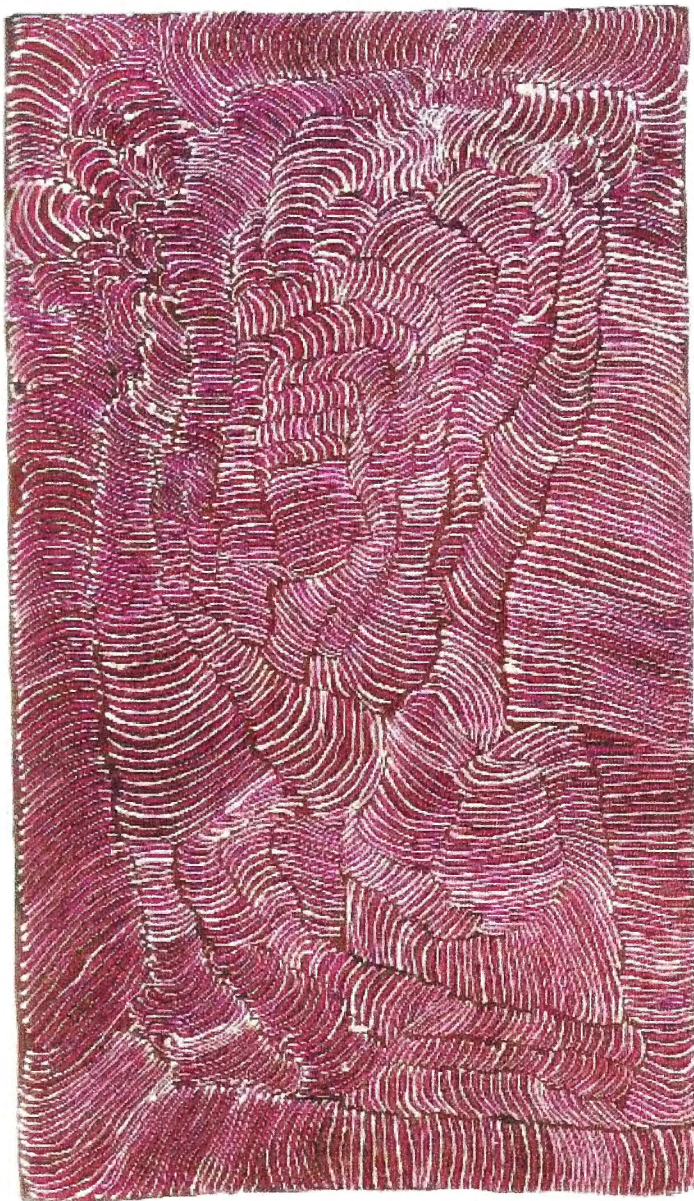


Fig. 18:  
Violet Petyarr: *Arnkerrth  
(Mountain Devil lizard)  
Dreaming*, 1997, 203 x  
115cm, batik on silk, NGV

The seven sisters Petyarr – Nancy, Gloria, Kathleen, Violet, Myrtle, Gina and Ada – have explored this way of representing *awely* for Mountain Devil Lizard for over two decades. They turn *awely* into half-circles (Fig. 19), into triangles (Fig. 20), into snake- or worm-like figures (Fig. 21) and playing on details of the design form (Fig. 22).





Fig. 19: Violet Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1997, 90 x 122 cm each, pair, synthetic polymer paint on two canvases, AGSA, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 20: Gloria Petyarr: *Untitled*, 2002, 92.5x123 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, FUAM





Fig. 21: Violet Petyarr: *Mountain Devil Lizard (Awely)*, 7-part series each 120 x 30 cm (only three of them here), acrylic on linen, Sammlung Essl

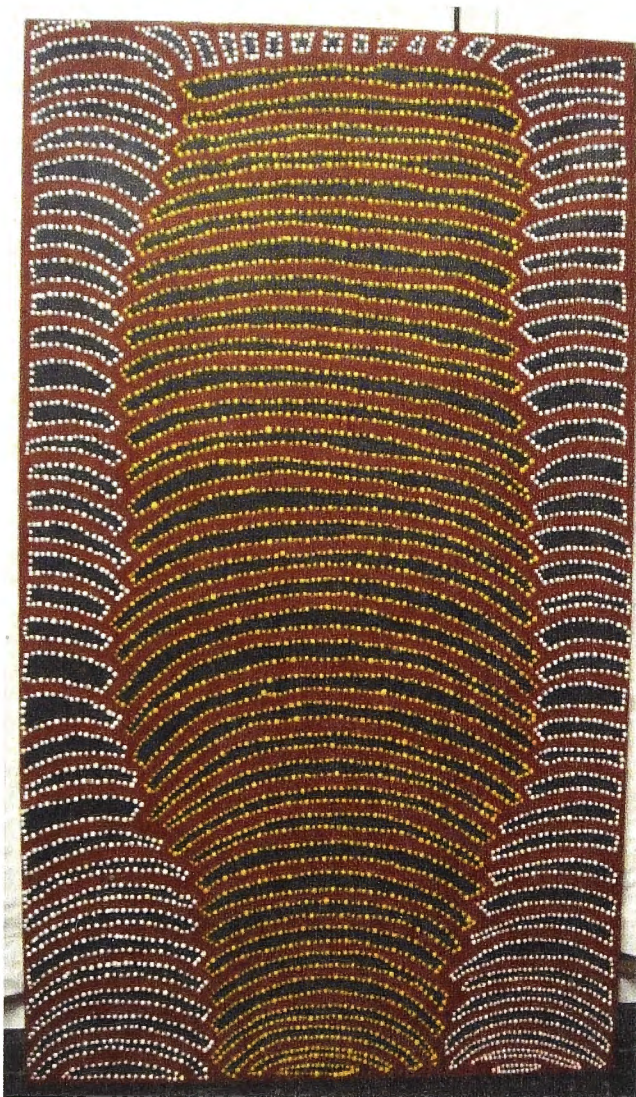


Fig. 22:  
Violet Petyarr: *Awely - Mountain Devil Lizard*, 1995, 121 x 79 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, RAG, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

The sisters have abstracted the body painting design and aspects of the performance for which they are traditionally applied onto the breasts, and turned them into internally vibrating artworks (Fig. 23 and 24). The paintings express the aesthetics of



performances; they move the viewer and create affect in them<sup>360</sup> evoking ancestral presence through their vibrating surfaces<sup>361</sup>.

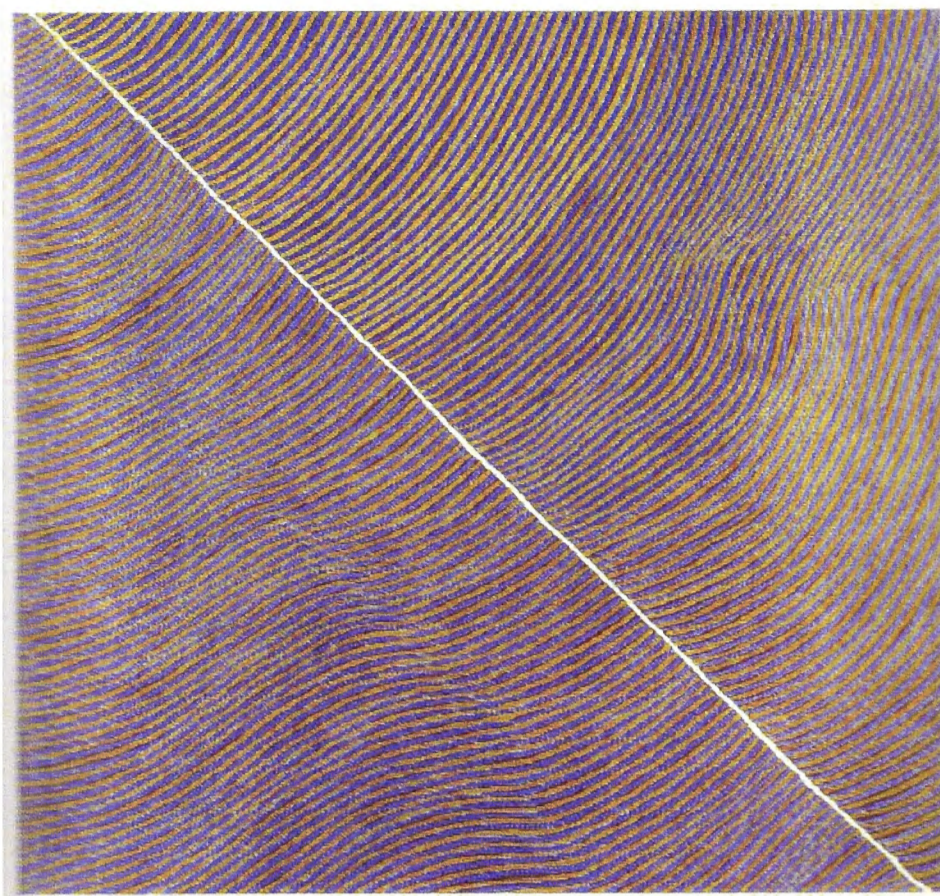


Fig. 23:  
Violet Petyarr: *Body Paint Design*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 205 x 203.5cm, Corrigan Collection of 21st Century Aboriginal Art



Fig. 24:  
Gloria Petyarr: *Awely (for the mountain devil lizard)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 x 152cm, AGSA

The other group of women who have focused very strongly on body painting design in their work are Minnie Pwerl and her sisters Galya, Molly and Emily. These four only started painting in the late 1990s and not one of them was part of the original *Utopia Women's Batik Group* in the 1970s. Consequently their works are not influenced

<sup>360</sup>Compare with Biddle (2007).

<sup>361</sup>Compare with Morphy (1991) and his analysis of the shimmering of surface objects.



directly by batik techniques. Minnie Pwerl was the first one to start painting and in the majority of her works she depicted body painting designs (Fig. 25).



Fig. 25: Minnie Motorcar Pwerl: *Untitled*, n.d., acrylic on canvas, 90 x 150 cm, private collection

In comparison to the previously discussed *awely* paintings these paintings explore colours rather than forms or motifs. The breast motif is outlined and the lines of the *awely* designs are painted parallel onto the breast (see Fig. 25 for instance). If reduced the motif is turned into lines similar to the ones produced in some paintings by Emily Kam Kngwarray<sup>362</sup>. The particularity of these paintings is the great variety of colours as we can see for example in *Awely Atnwengerrp (Women's ceremony from the Atnwengerrp)*, 2000 (Fig. 26). The juxtaposition of complementary colours heightens the impression of colour vibrancy in these artworks.

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<sup>362</sup>I will explore these paintings by Kngwarray in Chapter 10.





Fig. 26: Minnie Motorcar Pwerl: *Awely Atnwengerrp (Women's ceremony from the Atnwengerrp)*, 2000, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 165.8 x 348 cm, QAG

Another point of difference between the *awely* paintings from the Pwerl sisters and the previously discussed *awely* works is the combination of different motifs representing different Dreaming stories within one painting. For example Pwerl combined her *awely* breast motif of elongated ovals opened at one end and the lines painted onto the breasts with her Bush Melon Dreaming, represented by the little circles, in *Untitled* (Fig. 27).



Fig. 27:  
Minnie Motorcar  
Pwerl: *Untitled*, n.d.,  
91 x 46 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, private  
collection

The fruits depicted as little round circles are interspersed with the painted breasts. The lower rows of breasts seem to move into one direction and the upper in the opposite, creating an effect of women dancing on ground where the bush melons grow or which is the bush melon's country. The painting comprises these two motifs only in combination, no other elements are added to it, thus, reducing the image to the effect of colour and surface movement created through the vibrancy of colour.

In the large body of works by the four sisters, the emphasis has rested on the lines of the body painting designs, which may be painted in a multitude of colours (Fig. 28), and the breast shape, which has been sometimes turned into a triangle (Fig. 29).





Fig. 28:  
Emily Pwerl: *Awely  
Atnwengerrp*, 2008,  
acrylic on canvas,  
100 x 75 cm, private  
collection



Fig. 29:  
Emily Pwerl: *Awely  
Atnwengerrp*, 2008,  
acrylic on canvas,  
120 x 90 cm, private  
collection

I will expand on the notion of movement and vibration of the surfaces in the following chapter on abstraction. However, the examples of the seven sisters Petyarr and the four sisters Pwerl show that they fit into both categories: ritual and abstraction. Thus, these categories are not mutually exclusive, rather they are permeable. Indeed to an extent it is a bi-product of the western categorisation of abstraction as a particular kind of content that implies that they should be seen as discrete categories.

### 8.2.3 *Awely* sculptures

*Awely* designs and ceremonial performance have also been represented in the form of sculptures. These sculptures are human figures decorated with body painting for the different countries. However, the figures could also refer to ancestral beings in human form painted with *awely* designs. The figures are in motion: dancing, singing, and performing *awely*. Like other sculptures, which I will discuss below, both men and women create *awely* sculptures.



An example of the diversity in *awely* sculptures is provided by an extraordinary group project, the *Awely* group, under the auspices of Rodney Gooch. This series comprised eight papier maché sculptures of painted up women (Fig. 30 and 31). Each sculpture shows a different design on its body and thus representing various countries, stories and *awely*.



Fig. 30:  
Katie Kemarr: *Untitled (Awely)*,  
1994, 83 x 47 x 28 cm, papier-  
mâché, synthetic polymer paint,  
wire, wool, feather, RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 31:  
Janice Kngwarray: *Awely*,  
1994, 72.5 x 35 x 29 cm,  
papier-mâché, synthetic  
polymer paint, wire, wool,  
feather, RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt



Each figure is in a different dance position, with the arms to the sides, in front of their bodies or holding a dancing stick; one of the women is accompanied by a camp dog (Fig. 32).



Fig. 32:  
Audrey Kngwarray:  
*Awely (woman with dog)*,  
1994, 66 x 23 x 31 cm,  
papier-mâché, wool,  
wood, wire, feather,  
synthetic polymer paint,  
RAG, Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

They were set up in a circle for the Riddoch Art Gallery exhibition (Fig. 33), which was held to honour the gift of Rodney Gooch's collection in 1998 (Salmon 2008:12).



Fig. 33: Exhibition photo at Riddoch Art Gallery in 1998

This installation gives insight into a performance during ceremony; it evokes the intimacy of the performance and the different roles of the performers. As discussed with reference to the *awely* paintings by Ada Bird Petyarr (Fig. 6 and 16), movement is



created in this performance: the dancers swing their arms, their bodies, move their heads to the side and their legs are bent in the movement backwards and forwards. One woman holds a stick that she swings to the sides during the dance (Fig. 34) and another one has her arms right in the air (Fig. 35).



Fig. 34:  
Lucky Kngwarray:  
*Awely*, 1994, 93 x 35.5  
x 28 cm, papier-mâché,  
synthetic polymer paint,  
wire, wool, feather,  
RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

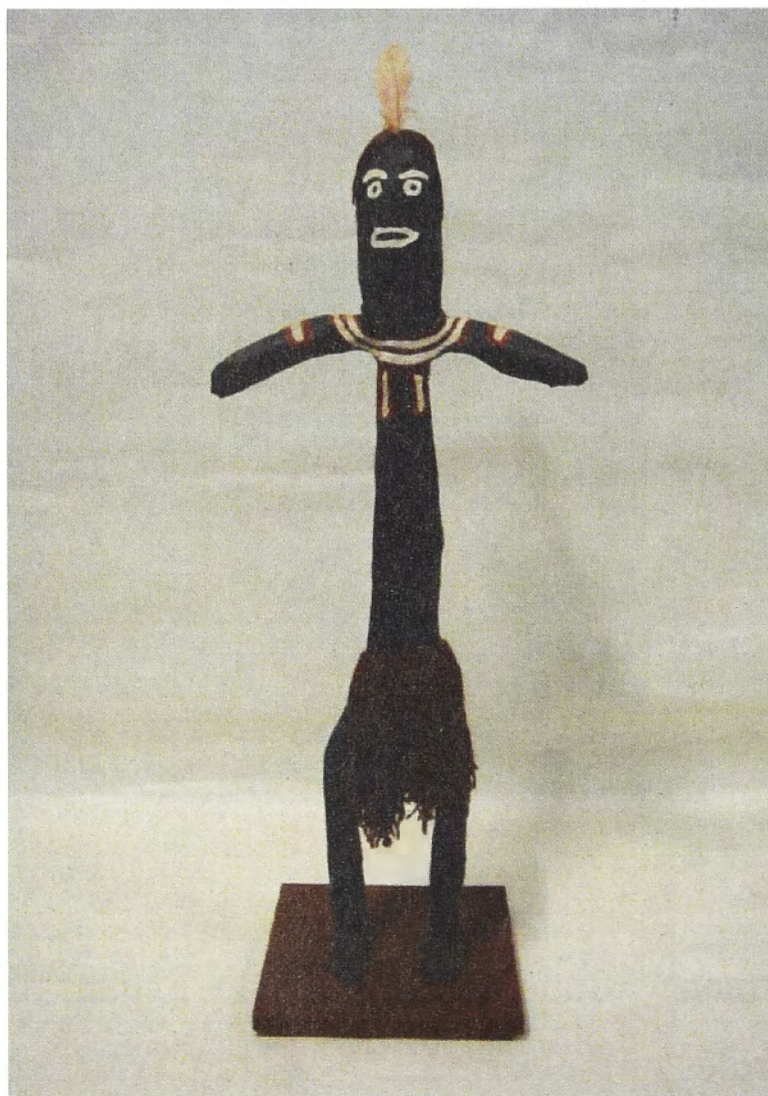


Fig. 35:  
Janice Kngwarray:  
*Awely*, 1994, 90.5 x 38  
x 28 cm, papier-mâché,  
synthetic polymer paint,  
wire, wool, feather,  
RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt



Each of these women enacts movements from a different part of the dance sequence (Fig. 36, 37 and 38), yet all are gathered singing and performing together. If it had been possible to enter the circle it might have enabled the intimacy of this performance to have been better experienced by the viewer!



Fig. 36:  
Hazel Kngwarray: *Awely*,  
1994, 68 x 35 x 27.5 cm,  
papier-mâché, synthetic  
polymer paint, wire, wool,  
feather, RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 37:  
Lucky Kngwarray:  
*Untitled*, 1994, 67 x 33 x  
28 cm, papier-mâché,  
synthetic polymer paint,  
wire, wool, feather, RAG,  
Photo: Chrischona Schmidt





Fig. 38:  
Mary Kemarr: *Awely*,  
1994, 82 x 27.5 x 28.5 cm,  
papier-mâché, synthetic  
polymer paint, wire, wool,  
feather, RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

Many sculptures with *awely* body painting have been created in recent decades, but no other group of performers. The other sculptures, all made from different types of wood found in and around the Utopia homelands, do not as much convey a sense of movement. They leave a much stiffer impression with the viewer (Fig. 39), which is partly due to the material employed. Nevertheless, movement is still present and conveyed to the viewer in various ways.



Fig. 39:  
Lilly Kngwarray: *Irrwelry  
Awely*, 1993, 83 cm  
(height), synthetic polymer  
paint on wood, private  
collection

The particularity of the sculptures and their different characters are highlighted by their various facial expressions: smiling (Fig. 39 and 40), shown with an open mouth, possibly singing (Fig. 41), with a tilted head and a rather questioning look (Fig. 42), a



little bent forward and looking to the side (Fig. 43) – as women sometimes do when dancing in a group – and with wide open eyes and smiling (Fig. 40).



Fig. 40:  
Wendy Mpetyan:  
*Female figure*,  
1998, 49 cm  
(height), synthetic  
polymer paint on  
wood, private  
collection



Fig. 41:  
Launa Purvis:  
*Female figure*,  
1998, 53 cm  
(height), synthetic  
polymer paint on  
wood, private  
collection



Fig. 42:  
Maggie Panunga:  
*Female figure*,  
1998, 52 cm  
(height), synthetic  
polymer paint on  
wood, private  
collection



Fig. 43:  
Unknown: *Female  
figure*, ca 2000,  
48.5 cm (height),  
synthetic polymer  
paint on wood,  
private collection

Different moods and characters are expressed through such subtle changes in the figures. Almost all of the sculptures hold their arms either next to their bodies or the hands slightly in front of the stomach. The *awely* group papier-mâché figures are among the only sculptures which have been dressed up with wool for a skirt and feathers (Fig. 38), aside from Wally Pwerl's representation of a woman performing *awely* (Fig. 44). The wooden sculptures have pants painted on (Fig. 43) and in some cases woollen skirts (Fig. 44). The sculptures with pants also show body painting on the legs (Fig. 40, 41, 42



and 43); it is not possible to determine whether the other sculptures do have the upper thighs painted as well. The faces show no signs of ceremonial or ritual designs on them, only the bodies have *awely* designs painted on. This equates to the way in which women paint themselves up for *awely*.

Fig. 44:  
Wally Pwerl: *Irrweltry*  
*Awely*, 1993, 92 cm  
(height), synthetic  
polymer paint on wood,  
private collection



The *awely* sculptures discussed in this section have in common that they show human or ancestral women with body paintings referring to multiple Dreamings and countries. They are all captured immersed in the *awely* performance having different roles within it. The various characters of the figures are expressed through their faces and bodies, in details of movement and facial expressions. In sum these sculptures demonstrate *awely* ceremonies in everyday life of the Sandover region at the same time as ancestral ceremonies. They represent past and present simultaneously. The evocation of the past and the representation of rituals are also themes in the works by men referring to ritual.

### 8.3 Men's rituals

Much attention has been given to men's rituals and ceremonies in anthropological research throughout Australia<sup>363</sup>. Prior to research on women and their rituals, the idea existed that men's ritual lives were more important for Aboriginal societies and that they asserted men's predominant place within society. These assumptions were

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<sup>363</sup>See for example Elkin (1977) or Strehlow (1978).

challenged by the more recent research into women's ritual lives. Since female anthropologists at Utopia have emphasised women's experience, research into men's ritual lives has been more or less limited to the Central Land Council anthropologist, and Richard Moyle<sup>364</sup>. For my research this has meant that I had limited access to information about men's ritual performances, since they are not available to a wider audience. Further, as a woman I could not attend men's rituals and ceremonies during my research. Nevertheless, a body of artworks by men does engage with their ritual lives. The majority of these are sculptures, which are the focus of this section.

In other Central and Western Desert Aboriginal communities the iconography used in men's acrylic paintings often derives from or is inspired by body painting designs for ceremony, body scars, rock art and ground paintings created for ceremony. Contemporary acrylic painting practices are thus interconnected with ceremonies and rituals. Similar to women's artistry, the men's artistry encodes meaning from the actual ritual or ceremony into the paintings.

Further research may reveal more details of the interconnection between the iconography in the paintings, prints, drawings as well as on the sculptures. It is likely that the iconography used can be traced back to body painting and scars, ceremonial ground paintings, rock art, and sand drawing. As I have described earlier, sand drawing and its iconography still form a part of everyday life<sup>365</sup>. The symbols are said to emerge from *altyerr*, the Dreaming, thus connecting the everyday with the spiritual.

Body painting designs from men's rituals and ceremonies are depicted in prints, paintings and on sculptures. Body painting designs can be incorporated in Dreaming story paintings as colour ranges or geometric forms<sup>366</sup>. When women were engaged in batik-making men first showed no interest in creating any artworks. However, in the mid-1980s, men took up painting as well as creating sculptures. In other communities men were the driving force behind the art movements, but this was not the case in Utopia. Although men have subsequently created many sculptures and paintings, the focus of the art world has been on the women. When asked about the batiks I was told

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<sup>364</sup> Anthropologist Woodrow Denham, who conducted research in the Sandover region in the 1970s, focused more on kinship structures and behavioural patterns in everyday life rather than ceremonies and rituals. Refer to the Alyawarr Ethnographic Archive for more information on his research: <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/alyawarr/index.html> (last sighted 11/02/2012).

<sup>365</sup> Refer to Green (2009b) for more detail on sand drawing in this region.

<sup>366</sup> Compare this with Morphy (1991) and the geometric designs in body painting from Yirrkala.



by men that that was 'women's business'<sup>367</sup>. However, painting and sculpture-making did not fall in the same category.

Nicholls (2008) proposes that men from Utopia take their inspiration from *tingarri* ritual cycles as Western Desert Aborigines. The *tingarri* designs, usually based on sequences of concentric circles or modified to the form of rectangles, are widespread in the Western Desert and refer to very powerful men's ritual cycles. They have been alluded and referred to in a number of paintings, from Papunya (Myers 2004:87ff, 92-106, 109ff.). Just as *awely* may have entered the Utopia region relatively recently<sup>368</sup>, the same may be true for *tingarri*. Apart from Nicholls' comment in relation to some of the artworks (2008:34, 37), I have not been able to find any other information on *tingarri* ceremonies and associated paintings in the Utopia region. This does not mean that they do not exist. However, it is possible that Nicholls' comment may be based on her experience and knowledge about Warlpiri art from Lajamanu, where she lived for a considerable period of time and worked with the community<sup>369</sup>. She may have assumed that the iconography used by men in the Utopia region could be influenced by *tingarri* ceremonies and stories as they would be in Lajamanu.

Moyle, who researched music by Alyawarr-speakers in the Sandover region in the 1970s, found that Alyawarr emphasized localized Dreamings in their songs and rituals. Rather than highlighting the travelling Dreaming stories, a category to which *tingarri* belongs, in his research he found that very specific local Dreamings had great importance to people. In his 1983 article about land ownership amongst the Alyawarr of Ammaroo Station, Moyle pointed out that a hierarchization of Dreamings exists in this area (1983:70). My findings in relation to art production, rather than songs and land ownership, support his argument and highlight the value system of Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr artists. For them, every artwork has particular meaning related to Dreaming stories and sites. These countries are not ranked as such in importance, but the Dreaming stories are. One might have expected that large travelling Dreaming stories, which have crossed great distances across the desert of Central Australia, would be at the top of this hierarchy; however, the local ranking does not depend on the length of the Dreaming track<sup>370</sup>. Local Dreamings, which do not extend beyond the boundaries of Alyawarr or Eastern Anmatyerr country, can be of great importance the community

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<sup>367</sup> Personal communication with Cowboy Loy Pwerl (September 2010).

<sup>368</sup> Personal communication with Nicolas Peterson (April 2011).

<sup>369</sup> Refer to Nicholls (2011) for more information on her time in Lajamanu.

<sup>370</sup> Personal communication with Richard Moyle (April 2011).

but not so outside these boundaries. When looking at the artworks overall both localized Dreaming stories and travelling Dreaming stories, such as Bush Turkey Dreaming or Bush Plum Dreaming, are depicted.

In comparison to women's art, men's artworks in Utopia are more grounded in iconography and therefore to a certain extent can appear to be more static. As I have shown, women developed the lines of *awely* over time and abstracted and reduced them. In their ceremonial works men draw on the iconographic symbols used in body painting, sand drawings and possibly also in ceremonial ground paintings. Over the years their rather conservative approach to depictions and representations of ceremony has changed and men have started to foreground abstraction in their works. As in the *awely* sculptures the body is used as a frame or canvas for body painting.

In the following section I will discuss different sculptures by men with body painting designs. Despite being human sculptures, they are not considered to be representations of people, rather they represent ancestor beings. As I have shown for the *awely* paintings and sculptures, each body painting design is connected with a country, a Dreaming and therefore with a particular ancestral being.

### **8.3.1 Men's body designs and ritual sculptures**

In comparison with the *awely* sculptures by female artists, which are in motion and show facial expressions, the men's sculptures have a more static appearance, which may be due to the hard wood used for creating them. Their arms are hardly ever in motion, their faces do not show any emotion and their entire expression seems rather sombre. Carving ceremonial sculptures has been practised by a number of men often in collaboration with their wives, yet only a few have produced a substantial body of work. Billy Morton Petyarr is amongst those who have created a large body of work in this genre. His sculptures show a great variety in terms of the body painting designs depicted on them. The sculptures differ not only in the actual designs, but also in the colours chosen and the size of the sculptures. They confront the viewer with an array of possibilities in representing ancestral beings. The central motif of his body painting designs is the concentric circle with lines radiating from it into four directions (Fig. 45). The motif is associated with *yerrampa*, the Honey Ant Dreaming.





Fig. 45:  
 Billy Morton Petyarr: *Man figure*, ca 1990,  
 92 x 19 cm, synthetic polymer paint on  
 wood, AGNSW, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

This motif recurs in many of his sculptures, not only male (Fig. 46) but also female figures (Fig. 47).



Fig. 46:  
 Billy Morton  
 Petyarr: *Untitled*,  
 ca 1990, synthetic  
 polymer paint on  
 wood, 76 x 14 x  
 13 cm, RAG,  
 Photo: Chrischona  
 Schmidt



Fig. 47:  
 Billy Morton  
 Petyarr:  
*Yerrampa  
 (Honey Ant  
 Dreaming)*, 72  
 x 16.5 x 16 cm,  
 ca 1990,  
 synthetic  
 polymer paint  
 on wood, RAG,  
 Photo:  
 Chrischona  
 Schmidt

He varies this motif by creating three concentric circles in one sculpture (Fig. 49) in one vertical line, all connected by the radiating lines. In another figure (Fig. 45) the



concentric circles form the outer ends of a triangle, again connected by radiating lines. This *yerrampa* motif (Fig. 45, 46 and 47) recurs in an etching (Fig. 48) from a small group of prints, created in different workshops between 1999 and 2002<sup>371</sup>. The three concentric circles found in the motif of the body painting form almost half of this print. In this etching Paddy Club Petyarr (Fig. 48) takes the larger concentric circle of the motif as a central point and repeats it – endlessly- over the edges of the paper. Billy Morton Petyarr had focused on one section of this motif, which he painted onto the body of the sculpture (Fig. 45). The body of the sculpture functions as a canvas for the *yerrampa* motif, similarly as the women’s sculptures are frames for *awely* designs. In most of these sculptures the body painting appears to float on a background of dots. The torsos of the figures are covered in dots, which could either be a decorative element to fill the ‘empty’ spaces or it could be the direct transfer of the body painting onto the carving.



Fig. 48:  
Paddy Club  
Petyarr: *Honey Ant  
Dreaming*, 1999,  
etching on paper,  
33 x 25 cm, private  
collection

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<sup>371</sup>The etchings and screenprints were created in different workshops run at the Urapuntja Artists art centre in collaboration with Basil Hall and Northern Editions. They form a small insight into the men’s visual and iconographic repertoire.





Fig. 49:  
Billy Morton Petyarr: *Yerramp (Honey Ant Dreaming)*, ca 1990, synthetic polymer paint on wood, 142.5 x 8 x 11 cm, RAG, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

Morton Petyarr has explored this motif in a variety of sculptures and over time developed it, reduced elements of it and altered the motif. All of these artistic strategies are applied by a multitude of Utopia artists when creating abstract(ed) artworks. Therefore these sculptures bridge both categories and could to some extent be placed within either of them.

All of these examples come from the time of Gooch's position as an arts advisor in the community, from around 1990. However, in a more recent work of Morton Petyarr's (Fig. 50) *Untitled* from 1998, the concentric circles have disappeared and the lines have been given priority.

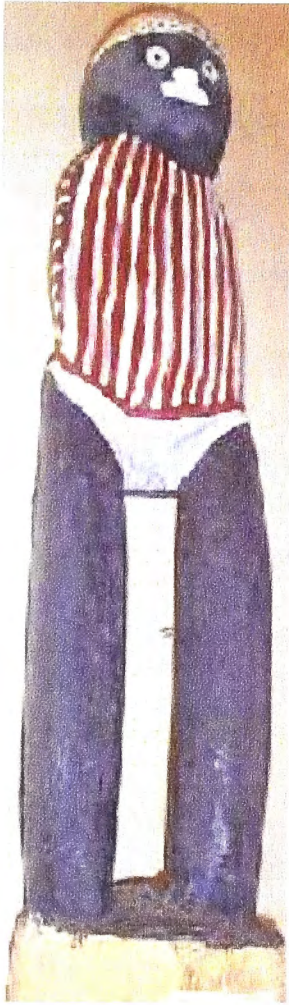


Fig. 50:  
Billy Morton  
Petyarr: *Untitled*,  
1998, no  
measurements,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on wood,  
FUAM

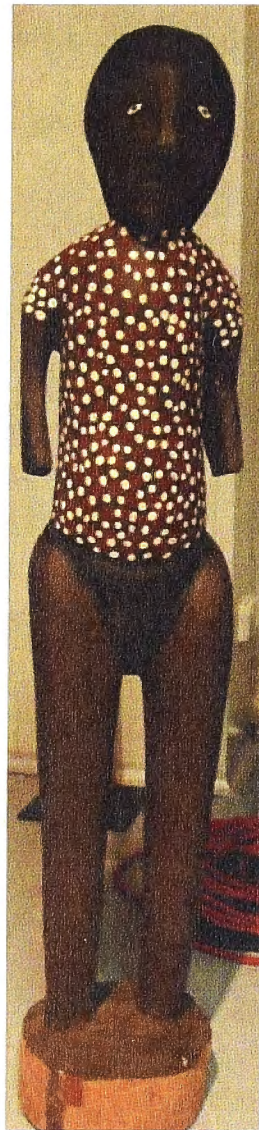


Fig. 51:  
Wally Pwerl and  
Janice Kngwarray:  
*Male Figure*, 1990,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on wood, no  
measurements, HaC,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

It almost seems as if the body painting has been replaced by a striped t-shirt and a beanie. *Yerramp*, 1990 (Fig. 49) might be an earlier version of the later sculpture *Untitled*, 1998 (Fig. 50). In *Yerramp*, 1990 it is clear that the stripes are part of the body painting and that the headband is not a beanie but rather a ceremonial headband, which is decorated with dots. Yet *Untitled*, 1998 (Fig. 50) may not be an ancestral figure at all and actually be a representation of someone close to the artist, of himself or of no particular person at all. Petyarr's sculptures show a variety in body painting designs, which cannot be found in women's body painting designs, as their designs rely mainly on the lines.

A different reduction of a ceremonial motif can be found in the collaborative work of Wally Pwerl and his wife Janice Kngwarray *Male Figure*, 1990 (Fig. 51)<sup>372</sup>. A myriad of white and red dots of different sizes cover the torso of this sculpture. No particular body painting design or motif is painted onto the sculpture. Instead the design or motif is reduced to two types of dots: one smaller and white, and one larger and red. This reduction of iconography and distilling of elements is particularly applied across the Sandover region in two-dimensional works. It is one of the most widespread approaches to abstraction, which I will expand on in the following chapter. This particular sculpture

<sup>372</sup>Pwerl and Kngwarray have created a great number of sculptures collaboratively and continue to do so. Other instances exist when husband and wife create works together, however, they occur more infrequently.



exemplifies then how certain elements, such as the dot, pervade all media, themes and styles.

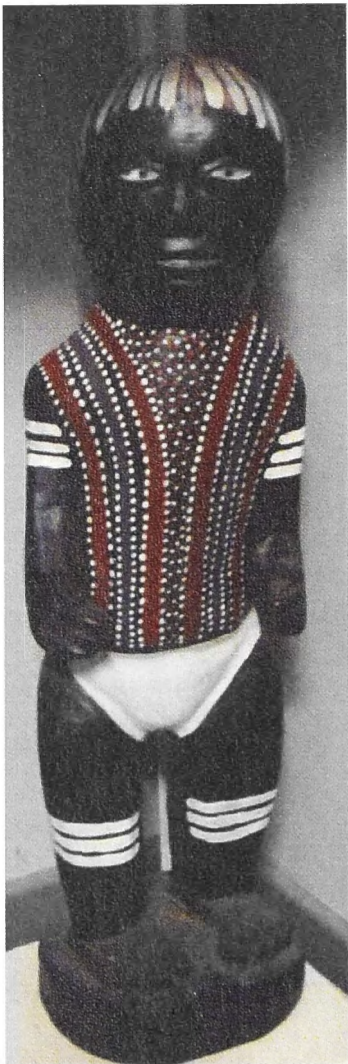


Fig. 52:  
Wally Pwerl:  
*Alkerrylp*  
(*evening star*  
*Dreaming*),  
1991 (repainted  
1998), synthetic  
polymer paint  
on wood, 79.5 x  
20 x 18 cm,  
RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt

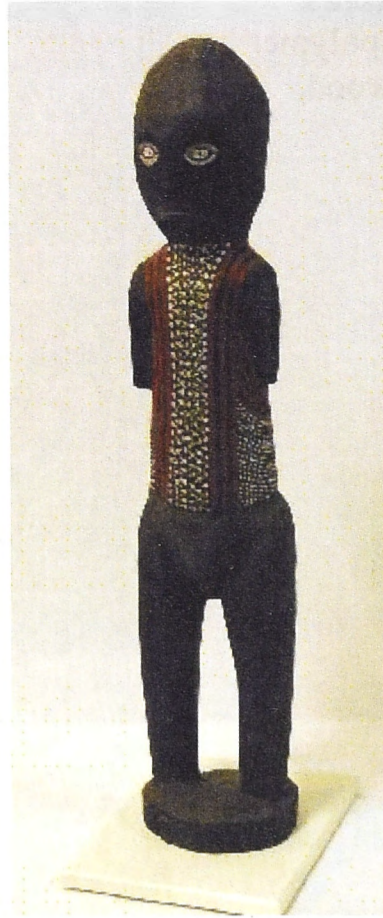


Fig. 53:  
Wally Pwerl:  
*Alkerrylp*  
(*evening star*  
*Dreaming*),  
1991 (repainted  
1998), synthetic  
polymer paint  
on wood, 79.5 x  
20 x 18 cm,  
RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt

A second body painting design found on male ceremonial sculptures by Wally Pwerl is *alkerrylp*, the Evening Star Dreaming (Fig. 51 and 53). The design of both sculptures is similar: on the sides of the torsos lines are painted in a half-circle shape. They create a bi-convex shape in the middle, which is filled with white and red dots. However, the lines are also created by dots. Three lines to each side of the chest run down from the shoulders to the hips. However, they do not join in any place and they are painted in red and grey. *Alkerrylp (evening star Dreaming)*, 1991 also shows body painting on the upper arms and the legs in the form of white horizontal stripes. In *Alkerrylp (evening star Dreaming)*, 1991 (Fig. 53) Pwerl reduces the colours and the lines: red and yellow are the only colours applied onto the black-painted sculpture. As in the previous sculpture three lines are created through dots running down from the shoulders to the hips; however, these lines are not echoed by white dots and they are rather thin. In fact they wind themselves around the armpits. They could represent ceremonial regalia worn in ritual. Rather than filling in dots between the lines as with Pwerl's other Evening Star Dreaming sculpture (Fig. 52), this figure (Fig. 53) shows yellow dots running parallel to the red ones, thus creating a sense of depth and layering of material on the body.

These examples of male ceremonial sculptures have illustrated how men have developed motifs and iconographic designs over time. Dynamic changes can be found



in these representations of human and/or ancestral beings performing rituals or ceremonies. Possibly due to the material used for the sculptures, limitations existed in regards to the expression of movement or motion of a figure during ritual, which we have found was a characteristic in the *awely* sculptures. The movements are simply indicated in some cases by bent arms (Fig. 45, 46, 47, and 52) or a slightly tilted head (Fig. 51 and 52).

Finally I would like to mention two sculptures whose body paintings do not seem to fit into a clear iconographic design but which again are not simply naïve representations of everyday life situations, in which people find themselves. Rather they may be representations of ancestral beings or spirits.

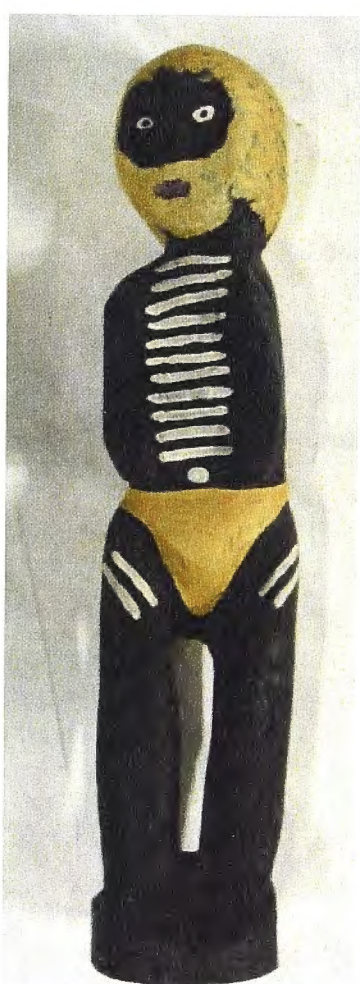


Fig. 54:  
Unknown:  
*Untitled*, n.d., 77 x  
17 x 17 cm,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on wood,  
RAG, Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt



Fig. 55:  
Wally Pwerl:  
*Spirit Man*,  
1989, synthetic  
polymer paint  
on softwood, 88  
x 17.5 x 17 cm,  
NGA, Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt

The first figure (Fig. 54) shows a man with horizontal lines as body painting, rather than vertical ones as seen in the other sculptures. His body is slightly twisted to the right, moving his left arm and side forward, and his right side backwards. He is exceptional in comparison with all the other male sculptures in regards to his movement. He could be in the middle of a dance, during which his upper body initiates the move and his painted legs follow suit.

The other, rather unusual sculpture of this genre is a *Spirit Man* (Fig. 55) by Wally Pwerl: he is in the midst of moving with his arms elevated and his legs slightly bent as



if he is walking. His body is painted in the roughest style of all sculptures discussed in this chapter. Possibly the painting onto the body represents in this case ceremonial clothing, such as a skirt and some sort of top created of feathers. The thick brush used to paint the sculpture implies the looseness of clothing rather than the finely-applied painting of body painting designs.

Both of the figures show certain similarities with all sculptures discussed in this chapter as well as with paintings with ceremonial or ritual content: they show signs of movement. All these different ritual artworks represent the movement within the ceremonies, create a movement of the objects, on the surfaces and instill movement within the viewer. This quality and characteristic of Utopia artworks will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

#### 8.4 *Kwertaty* and *atham-areny* spirit sculptures

In this section I will give examples of sculptures, paintings and prints, which are neither related to body paintings nor to men's or women's ceremonies. *Kwertaty* men and *atham-areny* spirits are associated with danger for people in Utopia and they instil fear within people. Both beings relate to ritual and ceremony: the *kwertaty* men sing people and are knowledgeable about magic, and the *atham-areny* spirits lure people through their singing people and abduct them away from their families.

##### 8.4.1 *Kwertaty* sculptures

In addition to the sculptures inspired by his Dreaming and the rituals associated with it, Wally Pwerl, together with his wife Janice Kngwarray, have created sculptures of *kurdaitcha* men. *Kwertaty*, *kurdaitcha*, or *kurdaitcha* man represents a ritual executioner (Green 2010:391). Known throughout great parts of Indigenous Australia, *kwertaty* man is a powerful person sent to people to punish them. One manner in which they do so is by 'bone pointing', another would be by 'singing' someone, which is a widespread form of magic in central Australia. The *kwertaty* man knows how to do that and thereby has a powerful and feared position within the community.

The *kwertaty* figure can be represented in very different ways, evoking fear through a sombre expression as well as through an almost joyful impression by choice of colours.

Wally Pwerl and Janice Kngwarray's sculpture *Kwertatye Man*, 1989 (Fig. 56) indicates the unforgiving nature of the *kwertaty* through his facial expression: the corners of his mouth are drawn down and show an unhappy face.



Fig. 56:  
Wally Pwerl and  
Janice Kngwarray:  
*Kwertatye Man*,  
1989, 109 x 32 x  
32 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
wood, HaC,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt



Fig. 57:  
Billy Morton  
Petyarr:  
*Kewtaty*, 1988-  
89, 86.4 x 22 x  
16 cm,  
synthetic  
polymer paint  
on beanwood,  
NGV

The eyes framed by large eyebrows which are also drawn down and give him an even more sombre appearance. His whole body is covered in body painting. White horizontal lines contrast the black-painted body. The danger expressed in this figure is accentuated by the monochrome body painting. Billy Morton Petyarr's *kwertaty* (Fig. 57) gives similarly a threatening yet different impression of this ritual executioner. The vibrant colours, his large eyes and the smile on his face, which is not painted but carved into the face, all evoke a menacing nature. Fear is instilled in the viewer through the facial expression in combination with the vibrant colours: his smile is of a knowing nature; he is possibly approaching his 'victim' and anticipating the moment of punishment. The designs on his body capture the vibrancy of spiritual power but are likely to be directed towards vengeance and restitution. Both sculptures show movement through their arms, which are bent upwards, again reflecting this characteristic of Utopia art.



These two sculptures are so different in their expression, yet they both represent the same being. Despite the *kwertaty* being human, and not representing an ancestral being, this figure belongs within this genre of ritual art: for singing someone the *kwertaty* needs to 'sing' magic songs and in some cases has to be painted up for that. Thus, he performs rituals and 'singing' other people is one of them.

#### 8.4.2 *Atham-Areny* spirits

The last group of artworks are spirits *atham-areny*, who like *kwertaty*, can sing people. *Kwertaty* embody the living human side of dangerous forces and *atham-areny* spirits the invisible. However, the *atham-areny* spirits have both a positive and negative dimension to them, they link the spiritual present with the human past, they continue to look after the country.

The *atham-areny* are the guardians for this country. They come from Antarrengeny in Alyawarr country like us. They have always been here looking after the land. They taught us stories about our country. We still live and hunt like in the old days. A long time before motor cars, blankets and crowbars we hunted for bush tucker - echidna, bush potatoes, the whole lot. We would walk, looking for tracks. Just like the *atham-areny*, we would walk the land. The *atham-areny* still watch over this land today. And we still hunt for bush tucker. Just like the old days.

[...]The *atham-areny* are the guardian people for this country. They have always been here, looking after the land. We are the people from Antarrengeny in Alyawarr country. We live together on the land. They taught us dancing. We still dance that way today. When we sing, we remember the [D]reaming. We hold our country strong with all our songs. We live here, walking and hunting the land. (Anita Bailey, narrator in *Eight Ladies* 2010).

*Atham-areny* is an Anmatyerr word, *atham* meaning 'no light' and *-areny* 'inhabitant of' (Green 2010:254), thus meaning 'inhabitants of a dark place'. *Atham-areny* spirits are known by the local Aboriginal population to live almost anywhere. They lure people into the bush, sing to them and make them disappear. They are said to be dangerous sometimes but can also be very positive, as when they lead people lost in the bush back to the main road<sup>373</sup>. Not everyone can see these spirits, but they are everywhere. Furthermore, they seem to be more apparent and dangerous when people leave their country and drive northward<sup>374</sup>. If I drove north, however, there was never a problem as I cannot see these spirits they cannot therefore lure me into the bush and cause an

<sup>373</sup> Personal communication with Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010).

<sup>374</sup> Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Kngwarray (October 2010).

accident<sup>375</sup>. They do not threaten people as much if want to go south, where their country, Anuriltja lies. Yet Anuriltja itself is considered a dangerous place for everyone, which no one should come close to, nor take close-up photos of.

In many respects these spirits seem similar to the *mimih* spirits in Arnhem Land<sup>376</sup>. They populate the area and are invisible; however, they may become visible to certain people. Some locals have the knowledge and ability to see and sing them<sup>377</sup>. However, unlike *mimih* spirits, who are tall and have thin and elongated bodies, *atham-areny* are rather short and small<sup>378</sup>. Yet they are ‘very white’ like *mimih* spirits. *Atham-areny* can be either men, women or babies. I was told that the spirits may exchange human babies with *atham-areny* babies and one would not be able to detect the difference. *Atham-areny* babies, however, cry most of the time, which could be an indicator that they have been swapped. A variety of people during my field trips recollected stories about these spirits and everyone knew someone who had come in contact with them at some point in time. The rituals associated with *atham-areny* differ to the previously discussed male and female rituals. *Atham-areny* rituals are performed by members of both sexes: a group of women sings while two men dance. As is the case with *awely* performances *atham-areny* ritual performances are open to view by anyone<sup>379</sup>.

The *atham-areny* paintings and figures represent a rather small trope in artworks from Utopia and have not been referred to in any publications, except for the recent ‘Central & Eastern Anmatyerr to English Dictionary’ (2010) by Green.

The first depiction of an *atham-areny* spirit is almost certainly a woodcut by Kathleen Petyarr (Fig. 58). The woman shown in this print is completely white. Her mouth is open as if she is singing and she is moving her arms as if dancing. *Atham-areny* have been described to me as ‘very white’ and singing people whilst dancing to their songs slowly back and forward.

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<sup>375</sup>This has purely to do with the fact that I am not Indigenous and everyone around me believed that solely Indigenous people can see these spirits.

<sup>376</sup>See Kleinert and Neale (118ff) for more information on the *mimih* spirits.

<sup>377</sup>Personal communication with Angelina Pwerl (September 2010 and November 2011).

<sup>378</sup>Ibid.

<sup>379</sup>Personal communication with Angelina Pwerl and Katie Kemarr (November 2011).





Fig. 58:  
Kathleen Petyarr:  
*Untitled* 1990, woodcut,  
30 x 44.9 cm image, 37.6  
x 52.2 cm sheet, one of  
72, (The Utopia Suite),  
various collections

Although Petyarr created this initial woodcut of an *atham-areny* spirit she did not produce any further images. Angelina Pwerl, who is one of the custodians for the *atham-areny* stories, has explored this theme in her works and artistically developed it. The differences between this early work and Pwerl's paintings are striking, for example, Petyarr's woman (Fig. 58) is not painted up like the female spirits of Pwerl's paintings (Fig. 59 and 60). Further Pwerl's spirit figures are not white rather they have white body painting. Petyarr's work almost functions as a portrait, whereas in Pwerl's works the spirits are always seen at least in pairs if not in groups. All the women have an open mouth, possibly depicted whilst singing or speaking. Further all of them are shown without legs, just their torso with arms.

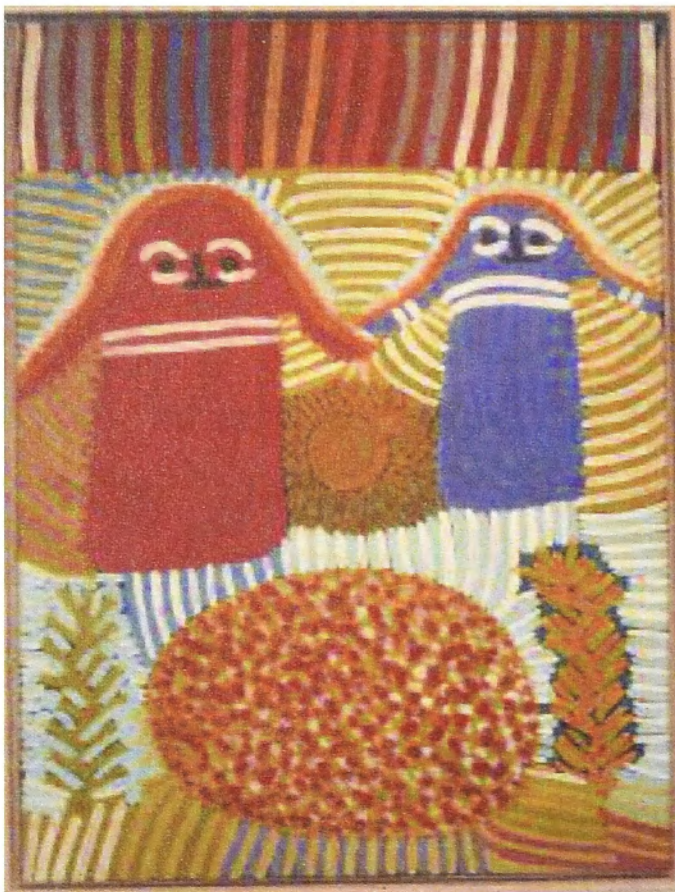


Fig. 59:  
Angelina Pwerl: *Atham-Areny*  
*Story*, acrylic on canvas, 2008, 90 x  
60 cm, private collection





Fig. 60:  
 Angelina Pwerl: *Atham areny  
 Story*, not dated, acrylic on Belgian  
 linen, 120 x 120cm, private  
 collection

More and more of these spirits are depicted in recent paintings and the colours chosen by her are very vivid, almost fluorescent or neon in their tone (Fig. 60). These paintings are painted quickly by Pwerl and with some exceptions tend to be on small canvases. When I asked her about these paintings, she responded that she depicted the spirits singing. Her hands crossed in front of her chest, she would sway side to side and start humming, emphasizing the way the female *atham-areny* would sing. Although Pwerl chooses to depict this topic naïvely, predominantly for the lower end of the art market, the meaning is not lost<sup>380</sup>. It is not encoded in the same way as in her Bush Plum paintings (see Chapter 9) but these paintings show another connection that she has with country and a responsibility she holds. As she knows how to communicate with the spirits, they form part of her life.

## 8.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the artistic current of ritual and ceremonial influences in Utopia art. Artworks with a ritual theme or a reference to ceremony can be found across a variety of media: prints, paintings and sculptures. Despite a focus on *awely* works in the art market, men have created works with ceremonial themes as well. In recent years a third type of ritual has found its way into the art market: communal ceremonies.

Comparisons between men's and women's ritual works reveal a range of differences between them: for example the ways in which women choose to depict these ancestral beings in paintings, ways that sometimes include contextual settings – hunting, gathering, as well as during ritual – men omit, focusing solely on the figure by choosing

<sup>380</sup> Refer to Part 2 for further detail on the distinctions made by Pwerl and how they occur.



the sculpture over a painting or print. Or, when men work with two-dimensional media, they do not work in a figurative or naïve way; rather they filter the symbols and create artworks with these – as we have seen in the ritual sculptures and as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Therefore, a variety of works found in this current could also be placed in the previous current about everyday life as they are naïve artworks a similar mode of expression. Men limit naïve representations to the technique of carving – which I have shown in Chapter 7. However, women create naïve works in a variety of media and with various techniques, for which Pwerl's *atham-areny* spirit paintings are just one example.

In the following chapter I will discuss the last of the three currents found in art from Utopia: towards abstraction. A set of artists and their stylistic developments will be discussed in order to demonstrate another set of themes and associated styles from Utopia. Commonly portrayed as 'the Utopia style', abstract/ed artworks represent another dimension of artistic expression from Utopia, but not the only one. As the previous two currents have shown the artworks reflect agency in many ways: telling the viewer about the history, everyday and the ritual in Utopia; moving and touching the viewer through their artistic expression and finally connecting Utopia and its art with the rest of the world.

## Chapter 9: Abstraction in art from Utopia

### 9.1 Introduction

Abstract art is art that does not depict recognizable scenes or objects, but instead is made up of forms and colours that exist for their own expressive sake. [...]

Three main strands [occur] in abstract art:

(i) the reduction of natural appearances to radically simplified forms[...] (one meaning of the verb 'abstract' is to summarize or concentrate);

(ii) the construction of works of art from non-representational basic forms (often simple geometric shapes)[...]

(iii) spontaneous, 'free' expression [...] <sup>381</sup>

Abstraction sometimes refers to a manipulation or distillation of the appearances of real objects, in other words it has its basis or starting point in the external world: 'the artist selects a form and then simplifies it until the image bears only stylised similarities to the original, or is changed almost entirely beyond recognition. This tendency has been evident in the art of many cultures throughout history... <sup>382</sup>

Abstract art has over the past century become one of the most significant currents in Western art. As exemplified through the definition, it encompasses very different approaches to art as well as artistic expressions. Within the Indigenous Australian art world art from Utopia has become renowned for its abstract qualities. The works of artists such as Jackson Pollock (Fig. 1) and Gerhard Richter (Fig. 2), have been used as points of comparisons for Emily Kam Kngwarray and other Utopia artist's works.

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<sup>381</sup> Oxford Dictionary of Art, 2001 p.2-3

<sup>382</sup> Karen Westmacott 2005: Defining Abstraction, in *abstractions*, Australian National University online exhibition,

<http://www.anu.edu.au/culture/abstractions/whatis/definitions.htm>, last sighted 11/03/2011, and Anna Moszynska, 1990, *Abstract Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, p.7 cited in Westmacott 2005.





Fig. 1:  
Jackson Pollock:  
*No.5*, 1948, Oil  
on fiberboard, 2.4  
m × 1.2 m, private  
collection



Fig. 2:  
Gerhard Richter:  
*Untitled*, 1985,  
23.9 cm x 31.9  
cm, Oil on paper,  
private collection

Works of art from Utopia that fit into the category of abstract art have been emphasized in writing, exhibiting and possibly even in production, while others have been relatively neglected.

Abstract in this context refers to a western categorisation of art in terms of visual properties. With reference to Indigenous Australian art, this category comprises at least two strands or sub-currents of abstraction. Firstly, it is art abstracted from a form and possibly turned into a geometrical design (see Morphy 1991), which would be similar to the work of Piet Mondrian and his paintings, which are abstracted from landscapes (Fig. 3); or, in a second category, it is abstract in the sense of abstract surface forms, which have no direct connections to a motif or referent, for example, a particular plant.

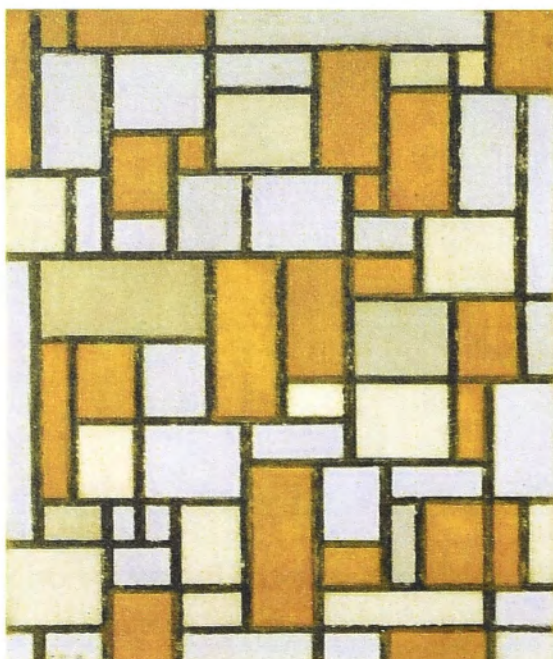


Fig. 3:  
Piet Mondrian: *Composition  
with Gray and Light Brown*,  
1918; Oil on canvas, 80.2 x 49.9  
cm; Museum of Fine Arts,  
Houston, Texas

These abstract paintings may hold meaning for the artist but cannot be decoded easily by looking for a concrete reference within the artwork (compare with Carty 2011). They have underlying meaning, yet the reference is not to one particular place or species, it is rather the Dreaming overall. Thus, through these abstract paintings ancestral presence is evoked<sup>383</sup>. The movement, vibration or vibrancy expressed in moving in and out of the canvas at the same time as across it, points to this ancestral presence. As I will show in the two examples that follow, in both strands or sub-currents of abstract art in Utopia vibration of the surface form – be it through moving inside and out or across – is a major element in abstraction in art from Utopia.

In this chapter, I discuss the different kinds of abstract art found at Utopia and give examples of artists and their *œuvres* from both strands of abstract art. From the beginnings of the Utopia art movement, examples of abstract art can be found across most media and techniques. However, these are largely found in two-dimensional techniques such as painting, batik-making, drawing, etching, and other print media. Further, artists seem to prefer to work in one style or genre or major current. Despite their tendency to focus on expressing themselves in one current, most Utopia artists are flexible, versatile, and well adept at switching styles and techniques – including the ability to finish the works of family members<sup>384</sup>. When tracing the development of one current within an artist's *œuvre*, one will find the artist's engagement with other currents.

When I first started analysing artworks from Utopia, I hypothesized that a change in style – towards a more abstract style – occurred at the same time as a change in medium, in particular from batik to canvas. However, through detailed analysis of artworks created before and after the introduction of the new medium, I discovered that this was not the case. Some batiks, for instance an early batik by Emily Kam Kngwarray (Fig. 4), are examples of the high degree of abstraction in Utopia art. In contrast to my

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<sup>383</sup> Compare this with Morphy (1991) and the ancestral presence expressed through the shimmering in Yolngu art.

<sup>384</sup> I observed this myself in a batik workshop run by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, during which some family members only attended part of the course and rather than leaving the batiks unfinished it was decided who was allowed to finish each work. This decision was sometimes made by the artist and told the person who completed the work and in other instances a family member had been told and brought the message. The person who finished the batik turned out to be one countrywoman, so they shared the Dreaming or story depicted and she therefore had the right to complete the artwork. (May 2009)



early hypothesis, abstraction existed early on in Utopia art and formed one of the major currents from the beginning of the batik production in the 1970s<sup>385</sup>.



Fig. 4: Utopia Batik Group and Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1981, no measurements, batik on cotton, NGA

In analysing abstraction in art from Utopia, I have found that artists work through two of the three strands of abstraction as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Art*: a reduction of figurative form and a construction of forms by using basic shapes. Rather than looking at the occurrence of simple geometric forms or designs, I have analysed the works in relation to templates (Morphy 1991:235-244). “The template as a whole can be viewed as a grid that, when lain across the surface of a painting, marks the relative positions for clusters of meaning items.” (Ibid. pp. 235) However, this conceptual template is not static or pre-composed, rather it is dynamic and helps in the development of every new artwork (Ibid. pp. 236). The template itself can be reduced to simple forms, or reduced designs can be developed into a grid. Templates are mainly used in Utopia art in the depiction of Dreaming stories, whereby the reduction and proliferation of figures results in the emphasis upon a single motif, form or element. I have found this process predominantly in bushtucker story paintings.

Utopia artists, who produce finely executed abstract art, have achieved greater acclaim in the art world, earned higher incomes through their works and been categorised as more collectable and important than artists who paint in other genres. There are some signs however of a recent change in market appreciation. In the last decade or so a shift has been taking place, and naïve depictions have become more sought-after in the art

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<sup>385</sup>I am not able to determine which was the first abstract batik as the early works, mainly shirts and pants were sold at football games and no records were kept of these.

market and state collections are finally taking an interest<sup>386</sup>. Nevertheless, abstract art at present remains the most prominent current in Utopia art, as well as in Indigenous Australian desert art more generally. The art market has favoured this current over the other two, seeing it as both contemporary or modern and as rich with underlying meaning concerning the Dreamtime. As Butler has shown with reference to Emily Kam Kngwarray's works, they become enigmas to the Western audience (2002) and possibly because of that more easily accepted into the fine art realm.

In this chapter, I will explore a number of different issues. I will examine the works of artists who paint in an abstract style. I will consider whether there is a meaning behind the work or whether it is a purely aesthetic form. I will investigate if artists prefer to create abstract paintings and if it is a part of the negotiation process with the art market and its preferences. Finally, in relation to part three of this thesis, I will endeavour to show whether a connection exists between the value of an artwork in the art market and the value the artwork has to members of the community members or other artists. This will illustrate where there are areas of overlap in evaluations of art work between Indigenous artists and art dealers. I have investigated these questions earlier in this thesis; however, as the art world favours abstract artworks over all other types of works, these questions are particularly relevant when looking at the development and changes within abstract art from Utopia. I would argue that the development of artists indicates that the current emphasis put on the influence of the market is possibly overstated. A close analysis of artists' *œuvres* over time indicates that the development of abstraction in Utopia was not predominantly linked to the market, but rather occurred within cultural parameters, and was influenced by factors such as age and knowledge acquisition.

The current of 'Abstraction in art from Utopia' embraces the two themes already discussed in relation to paintings from everyday life: Dreaming and bushtucker stories. In Chapter 7 I have shown that these latter distinctions can in many cases be complementary perspectives on related phenomena as in the case of representations of bushtucker as everyday and Dreaming. I call one group Dreaming stories because they refer to the travels of the ancestral beings through country. The bushtucker paintings are about the foods found in these stories and are focus on one component of the overall concept of country. The second part of this chapter will focus on style differences

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<sup>386</sup> An example for this would be Dinni Kunoth's 'Bush Football' football players which were selected as part of the Western Australian Indigenous Art Award 2008.



between male and female painting, such as the vibrancy or static appearance of the painting, and tonal aspects of the image — ranging from ochre-toned to lush-coloured.

In this chapter, I trace changes and developments of abstraction through the works of several artists who have become renowned for their abstract paintings: in relation to bushtucker stories, I will show developments in Angelina Pwerl's and Gloria Petyarr's work over time, as well as returning to Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray. The Dreaming stories and the changes occurring over time in the depictions of these are exemplified by Lindsay Bird Mpetyan, Cowboy Loy Pwerl and Kathleen Petyarr, and I will include Genevieve Loy Kemarr as an example for a young artist developing an individual style while learning from her father as well as her maternal grandmother. Aside from this young artist, all of the artists are renowned for their work and have found national and partially international acclaim.

## 9.2 Bushtucker stories

The largest body of abstract artworks from Utopia are ones that are inspired by and contain references to plants, bushtucker and animals. These works are abstracted from a motif, element or actual 'thing'. The forms have been reduced and become a signifier of the object. The process of abstraction can proceed to the point visible in Angelina Pwerl's works, in which the bush plum flowers have been reduced to simple dots (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5:  
Angelina Pwerl: *Bush Plum*, 2006,  
119,5 x 94 cm, acrylic on linen,  
private collection

Complete fields of white dots fill her monochrome red, brown or black canvases. Pwerl describes the painting in her own words:

There are seeds there in that painting as well, little ones. Not big ones, all little ones. This painting is about my father's country and about co[n]kerberries. [...] That painting there is of co[n]kerberries. The flowers are there. The little co[n]kerberry flowers. That bush plum is my father's Dreaming. That co[n]kerberry comes from Ahalpere country. The co[n]kerberry has little white flowers then after that there is the fruit. If it doesn't rain the plants are dry, if it rains there is an abundance of co[n]kerberries. The co[n]kerberry flower is small when they have just come out well after that the fruit comes. The fruits are really nice when they are ripe.<sup>387</sup>

Pwerl depicts white flower masses covering the land. She points out that the flowers blossom particularly after a rainy season<sup>388</sup> and her paintings depict just that: an abundance of flowering bush plums, which will turn into fruit. If one views the canvas as if from above, the flowers seem denser in some areas and less so in others, more dispersed and almost isolated in some. But they also show a movement, possibly of the wind, or the direction of the Dreaming track. Diana Young (2001:94) in relation to paintings from Pukatja (Ernabella) discusses another line of interpretation that may be relevant. Drawing on Payne and his elaborations on the bird's eye perspective in Aboriginal art (1989:45f), the image may reflect patches of flowers cutting through the red sand that indicate underground water flows. These paintings then show the ancestral presence: by marking the tracks of the ancestral beings in country, by possibly indicating the underground water and by depicting the actual traces of the ancestral beings in country. All are manifest in the continuing presence of bush plums. In comparison to other Dreaming stories I was told about, bush plum Dreaming travels a long way right across the desert, north towards Tennant Creek and then heading south.

Pwerl, as well as other artists depicting bush plum Dreaming, use a limited range of colours which reflects the characteristics of the plants. The flowers of the bush plum are naturally white, while the seeds of the plants are green, yellow, red and orange, and the fruit is black (Fig. 6)<sup>389</sup>.

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<sup>387</sup> Angelina Pwerl talks at the "Desert Country" exhibition and was filmed by Art Gallery of South Australia, October 2010.

<sup>388</sup> In 2010 the Sandover River was flooded for the first time in 20 years and much of the region was inundated in the February and March rains. So when I returned to the country in the cold time in September flowers had blossomed and a great part of the bushtucker had ripened. The food supply of the country was rich and abundant.

<sup>389</sup> Personal communication with Angelina Pwerl and Gladdy Kemarr (October 2010).





Fig. 6:  
Angelina Pwerl:  
*Bush Plum  
Dreaming*,  
1997, synthetic  
polymer paint  
on canvas 175 x  
177 cm,  
MAGNT,  
Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt

Thus the colour choice references the occurrence of colours throughout the process of germination and fruiting. Transgressions of these colour choices are often discussed by other artists and can lead to friction within the community<sup>390</sup>.

Pwerl did not start to paint the bush plum in this rather reduced style. Her first attempt at painting in the summer of 1988/89 included many figurative elements (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7:  
Angelina Pwerl:  
*Untitled 1988-9*,  
acrylic on canvas,  
60 x 90 cm, HaC,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

This painting shows flowers, plants and dots, which could be seeds. The painting comprises all of these elements captured in a simultaneous moment, almost floating, without the soil in between or on top of them. These elements can seem somewhat transformed in some of Pwerl's recent paintings (Fig. 7) The larger yellow circles, which are echoed through a red circle, could be the fruits of the bush plum. The ever-

<sup>390</sup>Josie Kunoth Petyarr criticized at some stage the use of Kathleen Ngal's colour choice as she used 'pinks', which do not form part of the colour range for bush plum Dreaming (October 2010).



striking movement of her recent works can be seen in her first painting in which the zigzag line that energetically divides the painting into two parts is repeated as a framing element on each of the sides. As a result, two fields are created, one depicting red flowers with white pistils, seeds and plants, and the other showing white flowers, plants, seeds and ripe fruits. The dividing line could again refer to underground water and the traces of the ancestral beings.

Over the following two decades, Pwerl removed the flower motifs, the plant motifs and the fruits, but creates a flow of flowers through the wind by distilling her paintings down to one element already visible in her very first painting: the dot (Fig. 7 and 8).

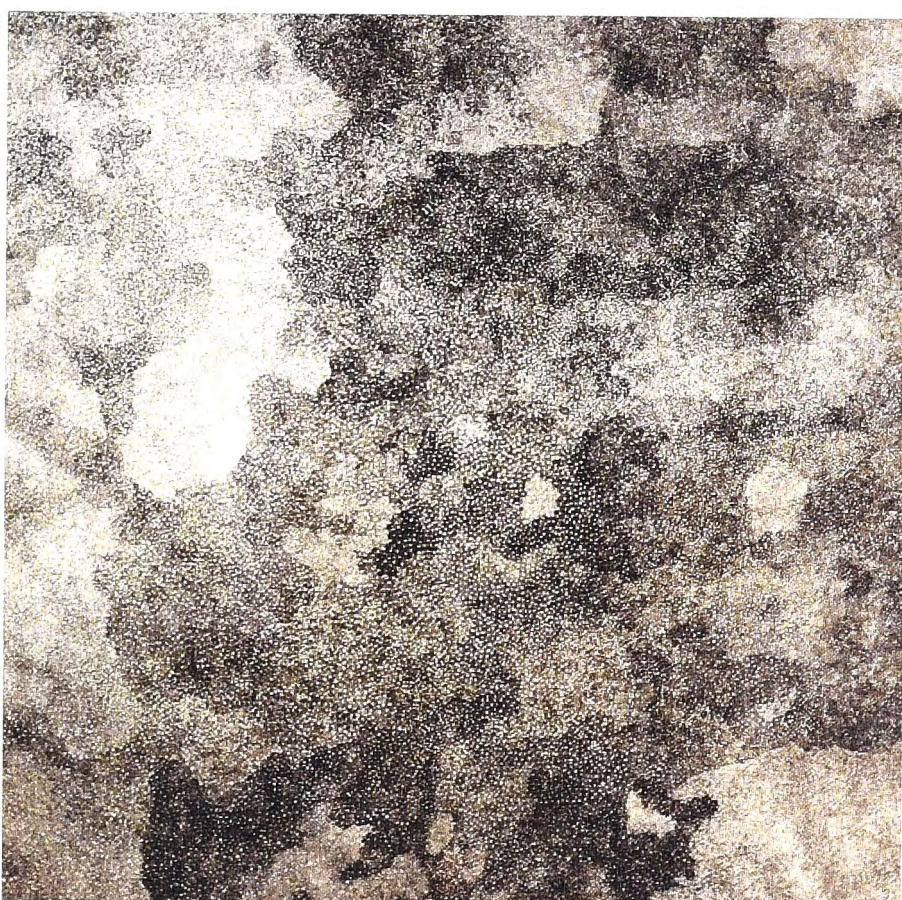


Fig. 8:  
Angelina Pwerl:  
*Bush Plum*  
Country, 2003, 200  
x 200 cm synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, private  
collection

This dot then can be a referent for the fruit, the flower, the seed and the plant. Only by choosing 'white' is it evident that she refers to the flowering stage of the bush plum. Pwerl is not the only artist in Utopia who distils the dot out of all the other elements. Her sisters Polly Ngal (Fig. 10) and Kathleen Ngal (Fig. 11) as well as her close friend and companion Gladdy Kemarr (Fig. 12) do so too.





Fig. 10:  
Polly Ngal: *Emu  
Seed and Bush  
Plum*, 2009,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on linen, 199  
x 111.5 cm, private  
collection

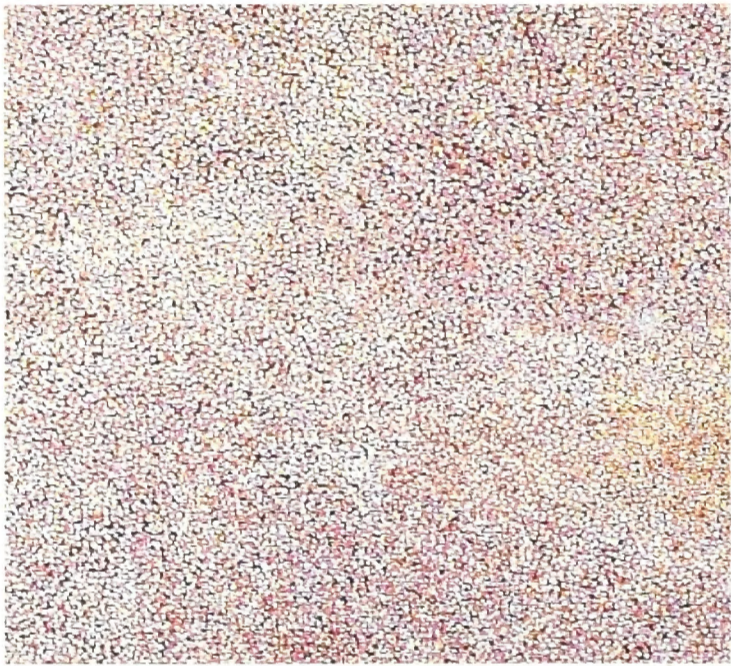


Fig. 11:  
Kathleen Ngal:  
*Bush Plum*, 2008,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on linen, 152  
x 152 cm, private  
collection

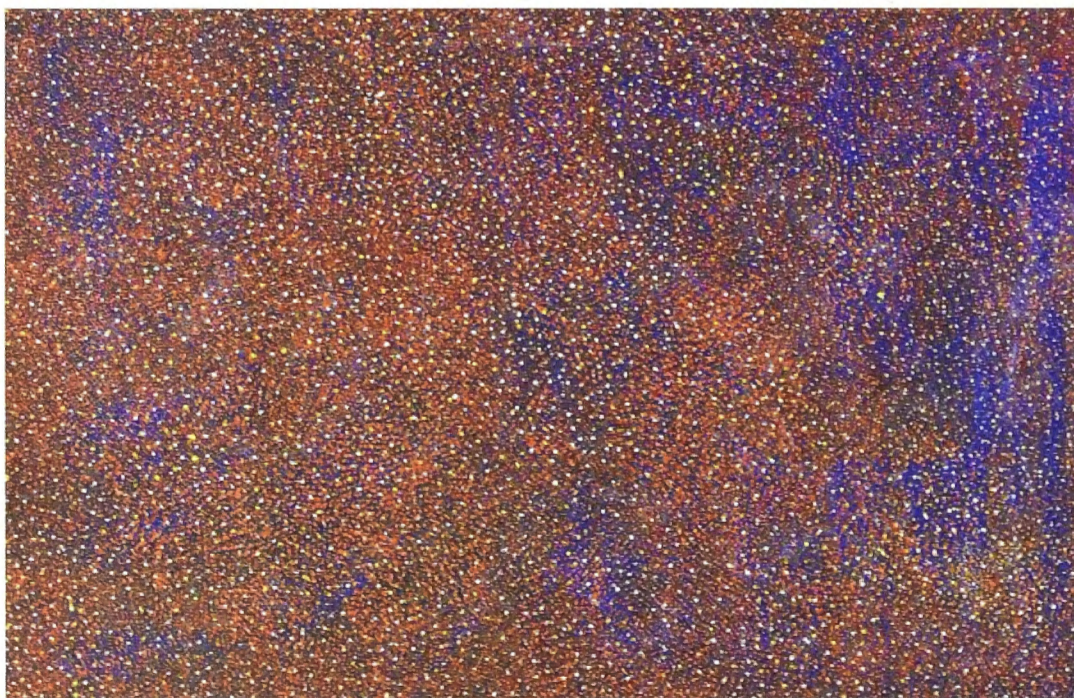


Fig. 12:  
Gladdy Kemarr:  
*Bush Plum*, 2009,  
90 x 60 cm, acrylic  
on Linen, private  
collection

Pwerl remains the only one who foregrounds the monochrome application of the dot. Yet all of these artists' works create a dual effect: one of zooming out of the landscape and one of focusing on a tiny area within a landscape, thus representing the macro-cosmos at the same time as the micro-cosmos (Schmidt forthcoming).



Individuality as well as innovation are the key points for Kemarr's grandmother's sister, Gloria Petyarr<sup>391</sup>. Initially her work was just as much influenced by the iconography of her Dreaming, the Mountain Devil Lizard, *Artherrkethe*, as the works of her six sisters. In fact one of her paintings from 1997 (Fig. 13) could have also been by her older sister Kathleen Petyarr, whose work I discuss below (Fig. 14).



Fig. 13:  
Gloria Tamerr  
Petyarr: *Untitled*  
1997, 91.5 x 60.5  
cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, AGSA,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

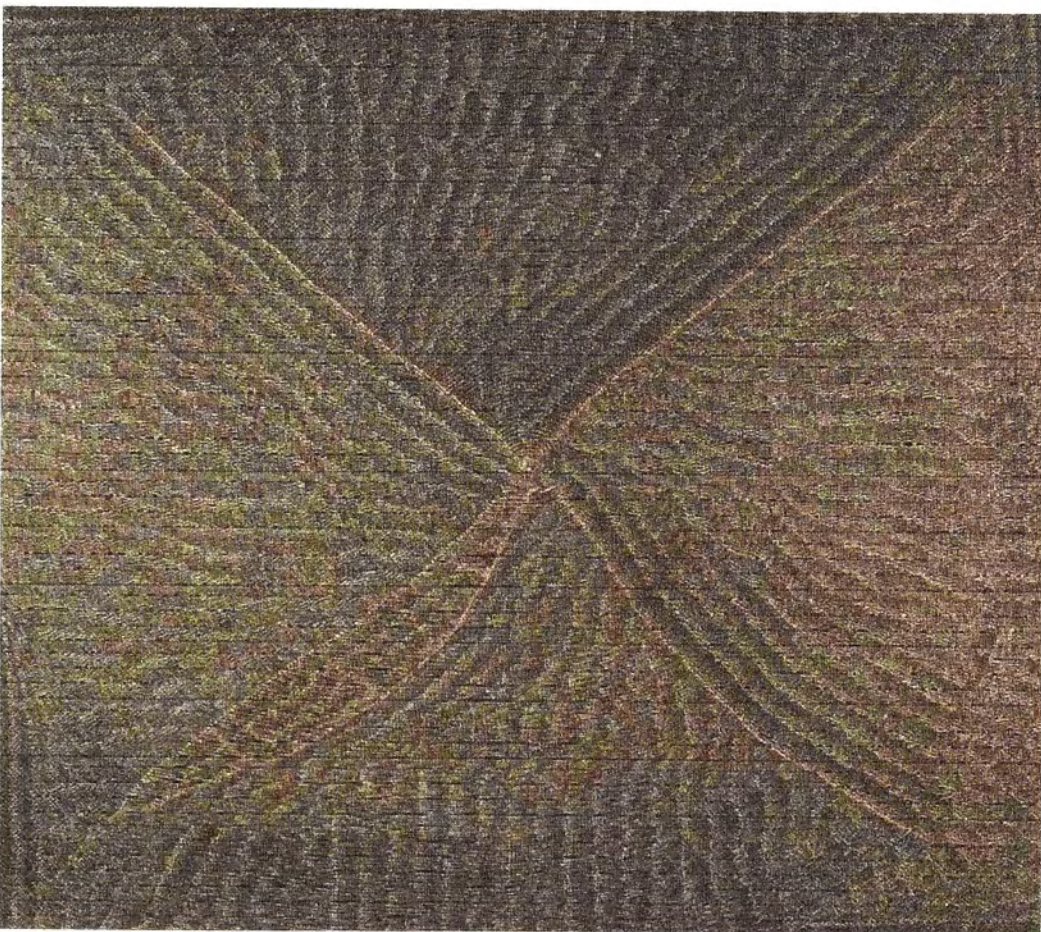


Fig. 14:  
Kathleen Petyarr:  
*Mountain devil  
lizard dreaming  
(with winter  
sandstorm)*, 1996,  
183.5 x 183.5 x 3.5  
cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, AGSA

The abstraction visible in her *awely* paintings (Fig. 15) was touched on by her batik *Emu Dreaming* 1988 (Fig. 16).

<sup>391</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).



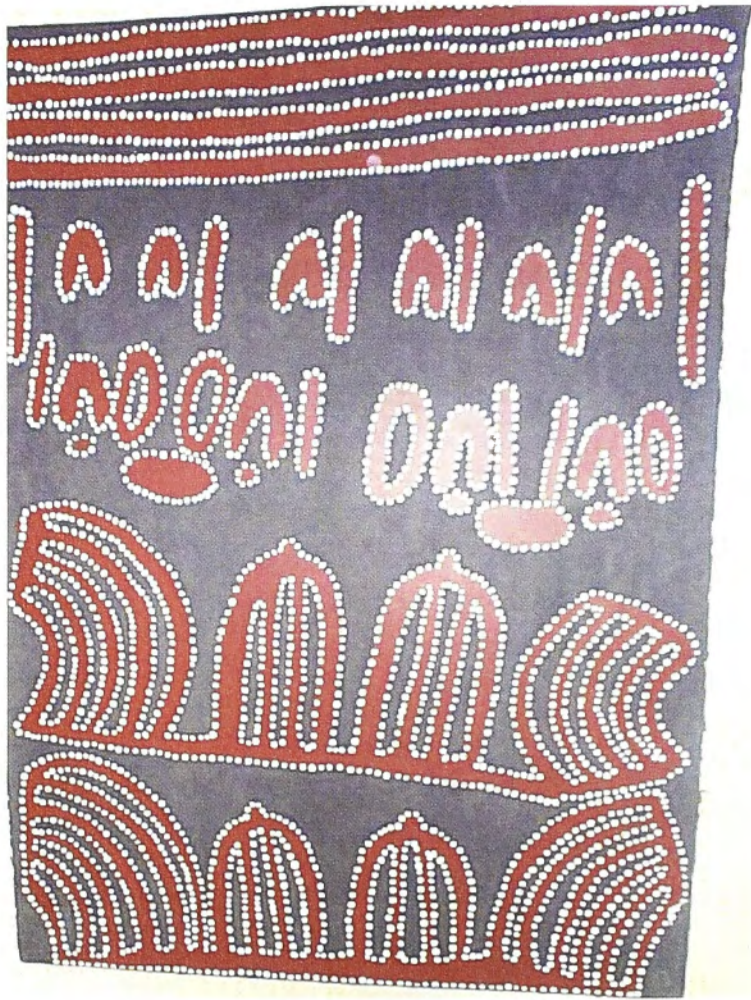


Fig. 15:  
Gloria Tamerr Petyarr:  
*Awely*, 1990, no  
measurements,  
screenprint, FUAM

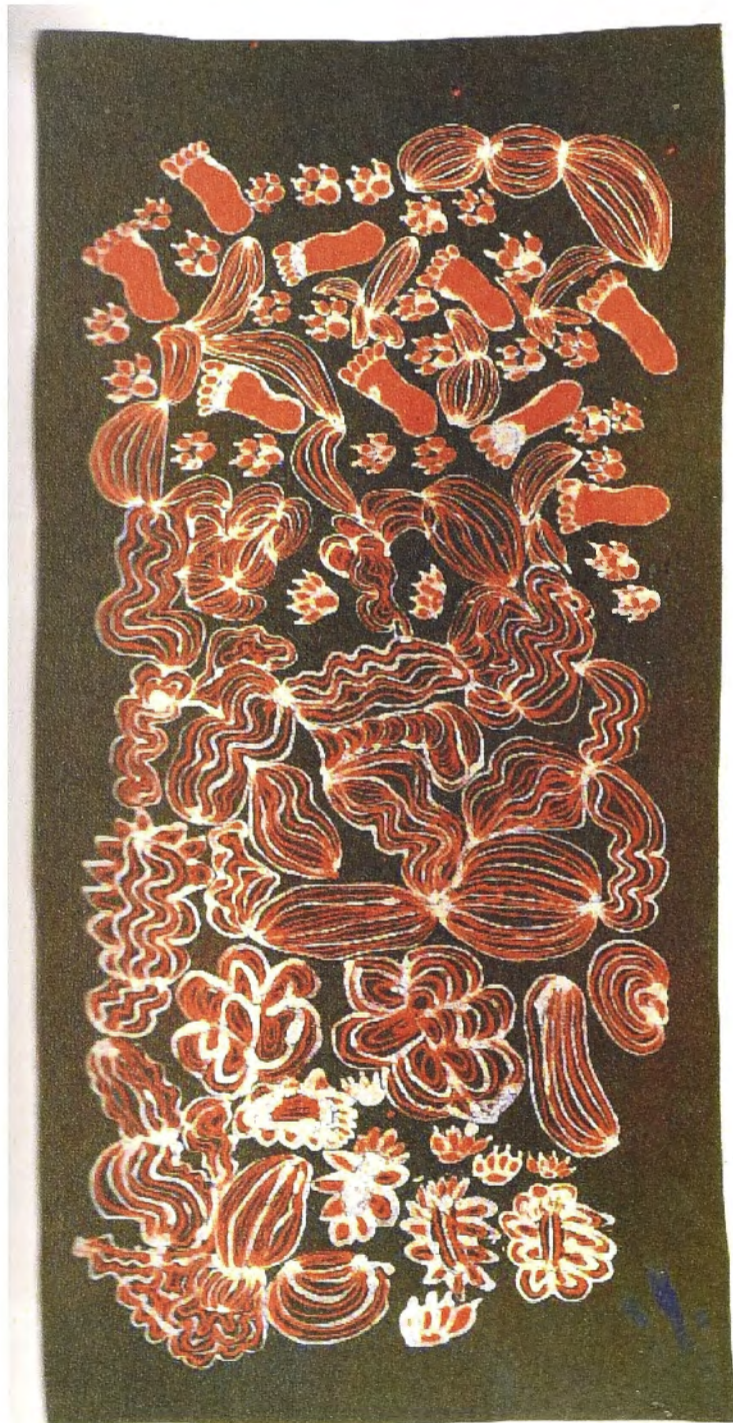


Fig. 16:  
Gloria Tamerr Petyarr:  
*Emu Dreaming*, 1988,  
ca 116.5/119 x  
230.5/248.5 cm, batik  
on silk, HaC



Her explanations for the batik are as follows:

*Ankerre Aknganentye*

*Ingke impatye nhenhele aneme, artist-kenhe, arengke apmerarenye ikwerenhekenhe thene. Ratherre untherlaneme akatyerreke, atnwelarreke, ntange alyatywerrengeke thene. Arelhe akngerre aneme, tyepetye ilerrrelanemele arelhe ikngwerekar eye. Ikngwerekareye urlpele iwerrelaneme arlkenye. Arelhareye kelayntenhakerte, arrkarlpe thene ngatyewelarre thene. Ankerre awelye Atnangkerele aknganeke, kere arnkerrthe thene.*

[and the translation by Jenny Green]

The tracks are those of the artist looking for bush tomatoes, yams and grass seeds with her dog. The clusters of U shapes represent women; some are telling 'stories' accompanied by sketching the story designs in the sand whilst others are painting each other with ochres. The stranded wavy pattern represents the ceremonial hairstring women wear either as a headband (sometimes decorated with feathers), diagonally across their bodies or as a belt. The ceremonial body paint designs are for the Emu and Mountain Devil Lizard Dreamings from Atnangkere country. (Brody 1990:80)

This 'wavy pattern' in two colours re-appears in a variety of her works. She abstracts this bi-coloured 'wavy pattern' into wavy lines (Fig. 17) and geometrical shapes (Fig. 18).



Fig. 17:  
Gloria Tamerr Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, 2002, 92.5 x  
123 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on linen,  
FUAM



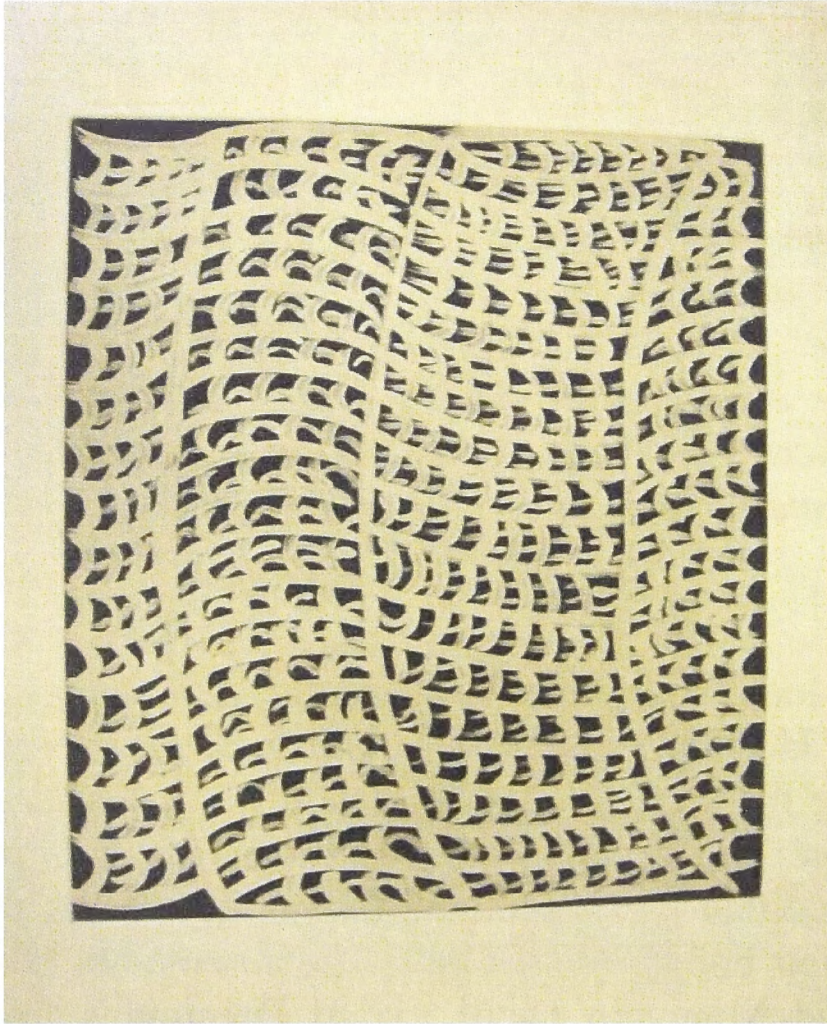


Fig. 18:  
Gloria Petyarr: *Body Design*, 2003, 25 x 30 cm, screenprint, Basil Hall Editions, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

She sometimes refers to these motifs as *awely*, yet she is also possibly drawing on the ceremonial hairstrings worn by women. Other elements of her Dreaming story, such as the dog and the search for bushtucker, are omitted — evoked yet not represented in her works. By singling out this one element of the story, she reduces it, and thus also the artwork, to its essence and evokes ancestral presence in her works. The movement of her works coupled with the significance of the motif chosen not only allude to ancestral power but actually evoke it (compare with Morphy 1991).

The theme and style, which have subsequently become her signature, are the ‘bush medicine leaves’ or ‘leaves’ (Fig. 19, 20 and 21). These images while they convey similar aesthetic effects associated with movement and flow are not explicitly connected to Dreaming stories.





Fig. 19:  
Gloria Tamerr Petyarr:  
*Leaves*, 1995, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas,  
no measurements, FUAM

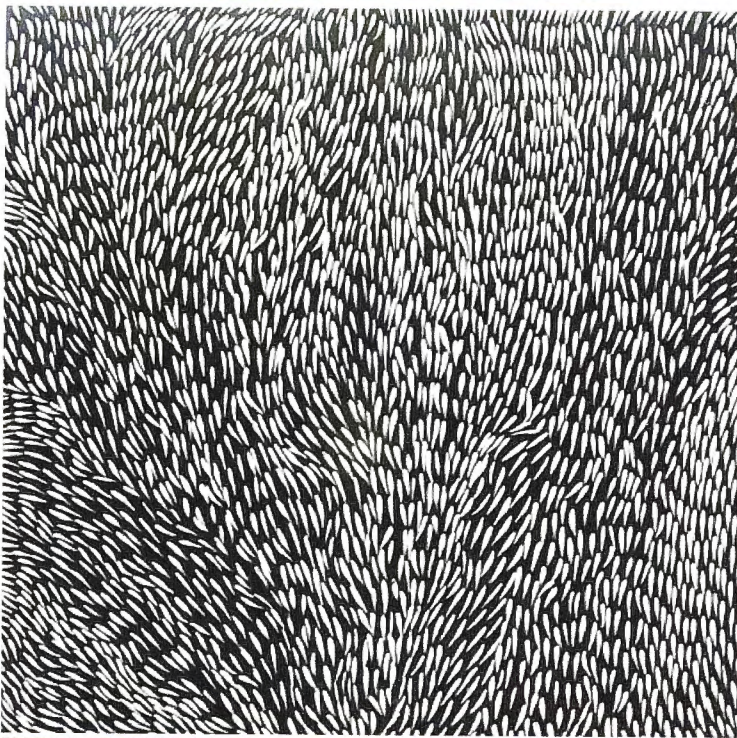


Fig. 20:  
Gloria Tamerr Petyarr:  
*Medicine Leaves Story*,  
acrylic on canvas, 123 x  
123cm, n.d., private  
collection



Fig. 21:  
Gloria Tamerr Petyarr:  
*untitled (leaves)*, 2004,  
acrylic on polyester, 210 x  
180 cm, private collection

These works lie at the border between figurative depictions and abstraction. They depict and represent leaves, every one created by a single brushstroke (Fig. 22).





Fig. 22:  
Elizabeth Kunoth  
Kngwarray: *Bush  
Seeds*, 2007, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
linen, 198 x 120 cm  
(detail), private  
collection

One cannot fail to recognise the leaf-shape; nevertheless the reduction of the form is reminiscent of Angelina Pwerl's reduction (Fig. 23).

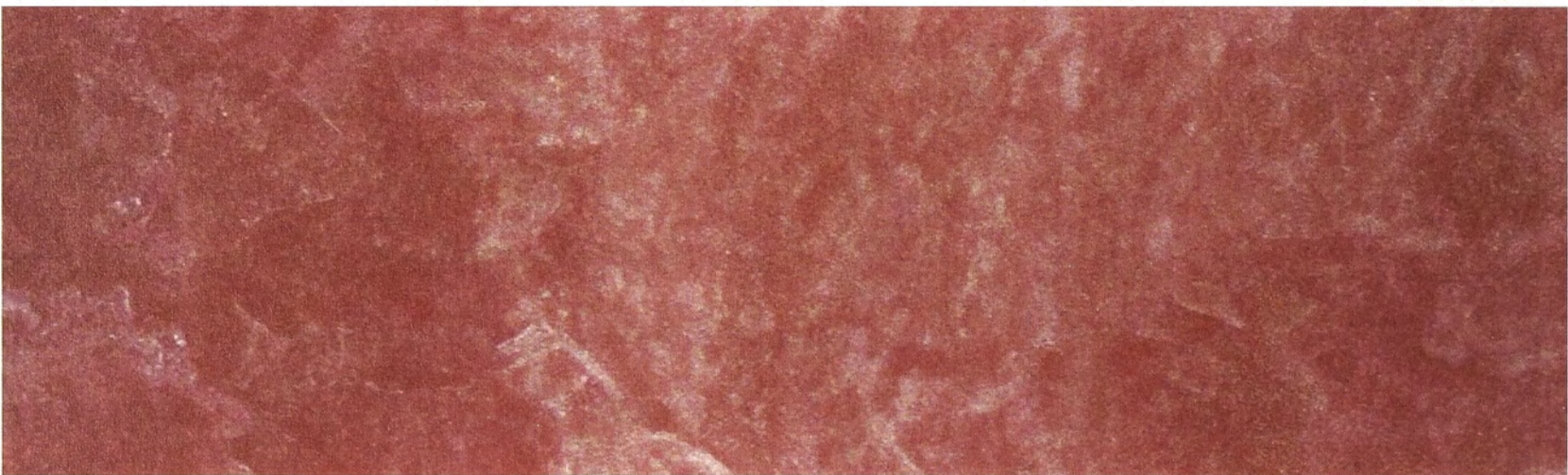


Fig. 23: Angelina Pwerl: *Bush Plum*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 120 x 330 cm, AGSA

A single element is here separated out and becomes the sole form or motif replicated over the canvas. Like Pwerl's flowers, Petyarr's leaves move across the canvas, they give the viewer the impression of leaves being swept over the ground through wind or even a subtle flow of air: "You know wind goes like that. [...] When the grass gets the water it goes like that."<sup>392</sup> These leaves are so unspecific that they could be any bush medicine's leaves; they are not clearly named as the ones from the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education project were<sup>393</sup>. When asked about it, Hodges recounted that Petyarr answered that these leaves were not from the Dreaming but created by her:

[...] the interesting part about the leaves is Gloria actually invented th[em]. See that's not a dreaming story. That's the idea of bush medicines and the leaves making bush medicine. That's her own story from her own head. It's not a traditional...Nobody owns it [...]<sup>394</sup>.

<sup>392</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008) where he speaks of a conversation with Petyarr about the paintings.

<sup>393</sup>See Chapter 7 for a detailed account of this project.

<sup>394</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).



It was her idea and she had thought about it. And so did Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray ‘think about’ her *kam* seeds for her paintings<sup>395</sup>. Just as Gloria Petyarr’s brushstrokes create one leaf at a time, Kngwarray’s application of the paint with a small squeeze bottle and the dragging-out of the dot to the side create each one seed (Fig. 22). A similar shape to that of Petyarr’s leaves is created through this movement, however, in a much smaller scale. Kngwarray refers to the dots of her aunt Emily Kam Kngwarray (Fig. 24) but reinvents them through this technique.



Fig. 24:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *My Country*, November 1994,  
synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas board, FUAM

Like the other examples in this section on bushtucker, her paintings depict one bush food, one seed; they single it out and repeat it, creating a myriad of seeds on canvas. Through uneven dispersal of these seeds (Fig. 25) denser and lighter fields are created, as if the viewer were able to look through the soil and its layers and crystallize the seeds out of it. They float on one plane like Gladdy Kemarr’s bush plum seeds, flowers and fruit (Fig. 26)<sup>396</sup>.

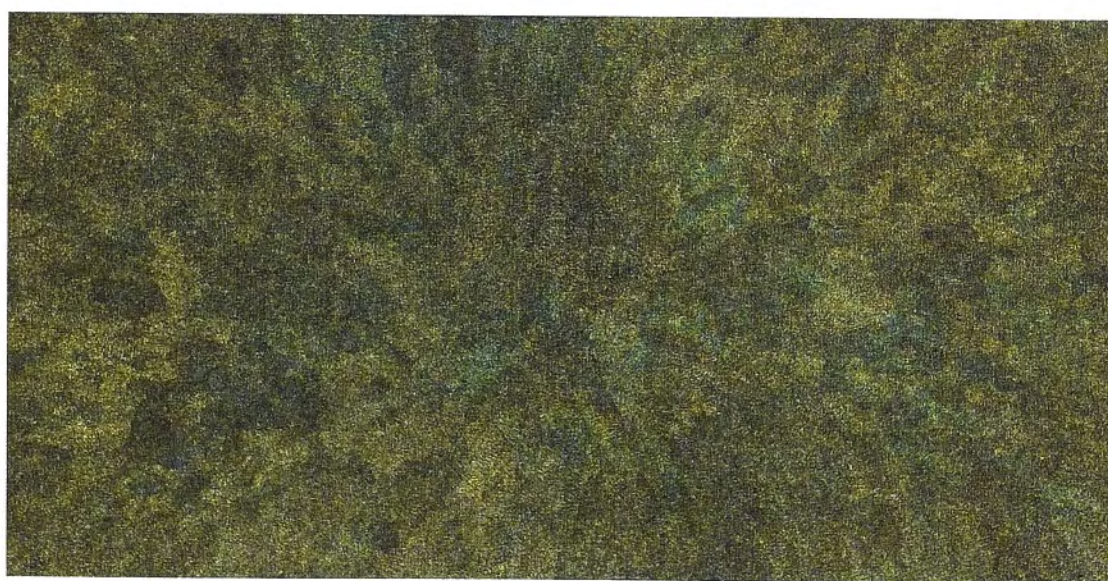


Fig. 25:  
Elizabeth Kunoth  
Kngwarray: *Bush Yam*, 2007,  
synthetic  
polymer on linen,  
220 x 117 cm,  
private collection

<sup>395</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (October 2010).

<sup>396</sup>Personal communication with Gladdy Kemarr (October 2010).





Fig. 26:  
Gladdy Kemarr:  
*Anwekety (Bush Plum)*, 2010, 61  
x 91 cm, acrylic  
on linen, private  
collection

In his monograph 'Ancestral Connections' (1991), Morphy describes how artworks can represent the presence of ancestral power. This ancestral presence is for once perceived in the surface of the painting with its shimmering effect. The ancestral presence can also be found in the actual meaning of the works expressed through the geometric designs in the painting.

Only a few Utopia women's works are structured on the basis of geometric designs. Exceptions to this include paintings by Gloria Petyarr and her sister Kathleen Petyarr, who creates geometric templates. Geometric designs are more common in men's works and reflect the existence of an iconography similar to Western Desert painting (compare with Munn 1973a and Myers 2002). Geometric designs are one way of creating abstraction; another path towards abstraction can be found in the use of colour and in particular the creation of 'colour fields' (Fig. 27).



Fig. 27:  
Kudjitji Kngwarray: *My Country*,  
2004, synthetic polymer paint on  
linen, 200 x 200 cm, Araluen  
Collection



These fields of colours are references to the colours imminent in the Dreaming stories. They then become signifiers of particular Dreaming stories and evoke ancestral presence through the allusion to the Dreaming. Several artists create 'colour fields', including as Angelina Pwerl and her sisters as well as Kudditji Kngwarray. These 'colour fields' are highly reduced forms of referring to country and the Dreaming<sup>397</sup>. They move entirely away from the form or depiction of figuration and only emphasize the colour. In the next section the point of reference is country, the ancestral travels through it and particular points in the travels which are associated with certain events.

### 9.3 Dreaming stories

Dreaming stories form the repertoire of men's paintings. These depict the stories of an ancestral being and their travels through country. Many examples of this type of paintings are known from Papunya, and there too they were originally created by men. The Dreaming stories' paintings from Utopia employ traditional iconography, such as circles, lines and other geometrical shapes. Munn (1973a) reports the use and meanings of these icons in Yuendumu. Green (2010) recently exemplified the current use of icons in sand drawings amongst Anmatyerr and Arrernte women. Although men chiefly apply this iconography in painting, from Green's research it is clear that women know about it too, and about the meanings encoded in the icons. During my research, I only observed sand drawing when longer stories were narrated. The formal elements used in sand drawing were the same for men and women.

As we have seen, most artists from Utopia are women. However, there is also a group of men, mainly older men, who have been creating artworks since the mid-1980s. Traditional iconography is present in the men's paintings more than in the women's paintings. Over time this iconography has been developed in different ways by different men. Some of them have followed a trajectory that makes their work more closely parallel changes that have occurred in the women's art. In the following I will give two examples for men and their work: one whose work follows more the traditional iconography and another who develops his art more parallel to the women. One of the most prominent is Lindsay Bird Mpetyan, who also participated as the only man in the project *Utopia: A Picture Story* in 1988 (Fig. 28).

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<sup>397</sup> Compare with Diana Young and her discussions of the use of colour and Indigenous perceptions of colour (2001).





Fig. 28:  
Lindsay Bird Mpetyan:  
*Flock Pigeon Dreaming*,  
1988, ca 116.5/119 x  
230.5/248.5 cm, batik on  
silk, HaC

He created many batiks, to be found in various collections across Australia. Mpetyan's works differ from the artworks of his contemporary female artists. He depicts his stories by applying traditional iconographic elements, such as circles and lines (Fig. 29).



Fig. 29:  
Lindsay Bird Mpetyan:  
*Angula Country men's  
business number 3*,  
1995-96, batik on silk,  
267 x 113.5 cm,  
AGSA, (detail), Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

The Dreaming stories told in these batiks, as well as in his paintings, are encoded and only fully comprehensible to the initiated. He does not usually give explanations about his works; in a rare explanation he discusses his 1988 batik (Fig. 28):

### *Arwekarre Akganentye*

*Thipe arwekarre akngerrele ingke ingkerneke ampere Ahertekenhe ngentyeke. Ikwerele aytnakerre aknganeke, ampere Ilkawernele. Arlkenye arlkenye arlwe ikngwere Akaye ngentye. Nhenhetheye arwekarrerneme alkerewarle alperliweke. Apmere kelye ikwerele aytnakerre altyweneke. Arlwe kelye mperlkere arwekarrekenhe kwarte nyente.*

### Flock Pigeon Dreaming

The myriad bird tracks represent flock pigeons congregating around their creation site at Ahertekenhe Soakage (central roundel) in Ilkawerne country. The other roundel represents Akaye Soakage where the pigeons flew up into the sky. The curvilinear bands depict the place where the pigeons slept and the small, whitish circle is a pigeon egg. (Brody 1990:72, original italics)

In this batik Mpetyan depicts the birds through their tracks. The waterholes are shown in circles and the resting place in curved lines, which remind one of traditional wind shelters. Of all works discussed in this chapter, Mpetyan's are closest to traditional sand drawings (compare with Green 2010). His application of traditional iconography shows similarities with Papunya works described by Myers (2002) as well as Yuendumu iconography exemplified by Munn (1973a) and Dussart (1999).

In another batik *Angula Country men's business number 3, 1995-96* (Fig. 29) by Mpetyan, the template he developed over time is clearly visible: a sequence of circles with four lines, one to each direction – an even cross. In this version, he added half circles to the linking lines between the circles; however, these half circles disappear in his recent works. Mpetyan stays within an earth-toned palette, unlike most artists from Utopia, who have sought bright and vibrant colours. Again this shows similarity with men's paintings from Papunya, which – in my observation – also show a rather ochre- or earth-toned palette compared to women's paintings. Another point of difference between Mpetyan's work and that of the female artists in addition to the more geometric composition is the relatively static impression of these works. As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, Mpetyan is only one of many male artists who create templates, by using geometrical designs or compositions; however, what differentiates him from the female artists in particular is the limited nature of movement and vibrancy within his works. He has tried to overcome this by creating curved lines (Fig. 30 and 31) and by layering grids of sequences of his template (Fig. 32).





Fig. 30:  
Lindsay Bird Mpetyan: *Bush Plum*, 1999, etching, 32 x 49 cm, CDU Art Collection



Fig. 31:  
Lindsay Bird Mpetyan:  
*Untitled*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 58 x 110 cm, RAG

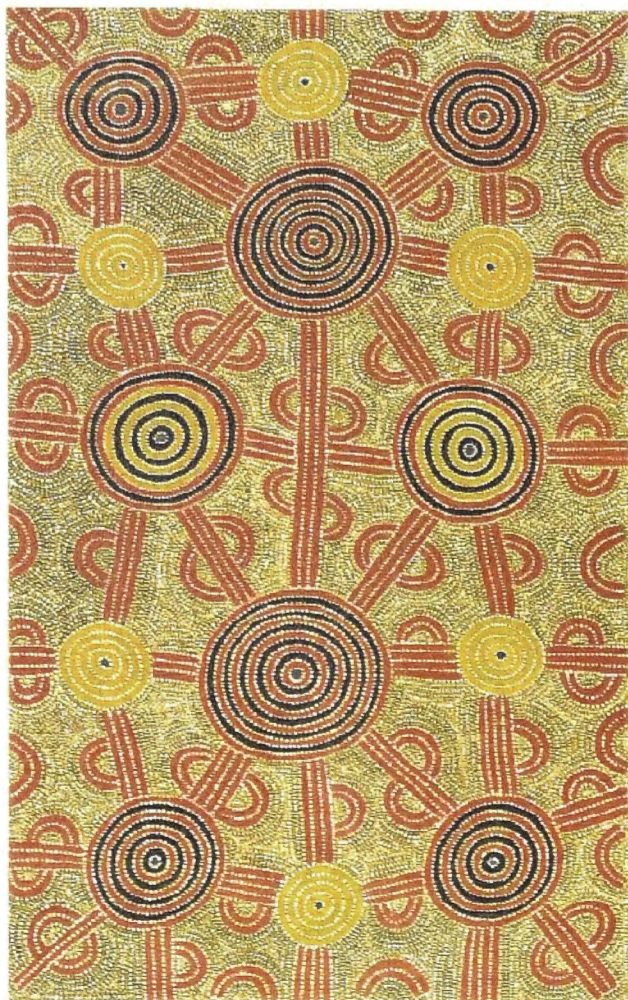


Fig. 32:  
Lindsay Bird Mpetyan:  
*Ilkatjera and Atapila at Arimala Soak*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 90 cm, Gantner Myer Collection



Mpetyan has not followed the same path of abstraction as the women painters whom I will discuss in this chapter. Movement is still present in his paintings which evoke ancestral presence. However, surface vibrancy is not the major focus and hence, relative to the work of the women, the images can appear to be more static. Mpetyan's works belong in the category of more traditional approaches to art-making in Utopia. This applying of traditional iconography is mainly pursued by men, who depict the Dreaming stories of their ancestors.

However this is not a general rule that separates male from female artists, but rather an overall tendency. Dreaming stories depicted by male Utopia artist Cowboy Loy Pwerl<sup>398</sup>, *Bush Turkey Dreaming* (Fig. 33) for example, show a similar process of abstraction operating as is the case with many of the women artists.

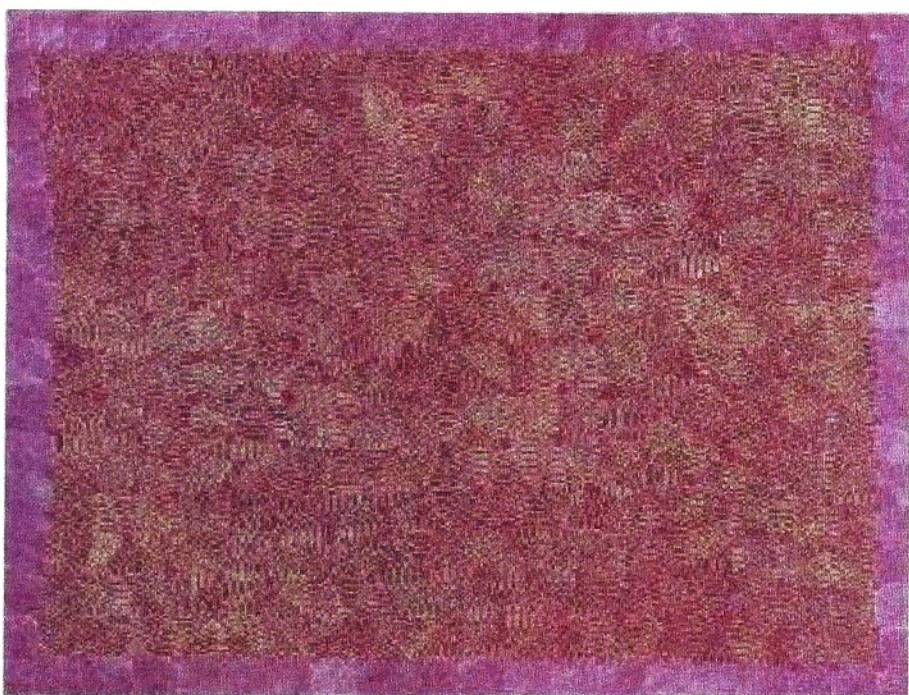


Fig. 33:  
Cowboy Loy Pwerl: *Bush Turkey Dreaming*, 2007,  
199 x 237, synthetic  
polymer paint on linen,  
AGSA

On a hot pink background triangles are interconnected with circles, out of which more triangles emerge at various angles. No symmetry is visible in this large artwork. Fine dotting creates the circles, triangles and rectangles at the periphery. Every 'line' is dotted in a different colour and no line is continuous or directly connecting with another line. The movement is contained within the canvas, held back through the rectangles at the edges. However, the triangles move into the canvas and out of it, almost pulsating. The artist remarks about his paintings:

This is my Dreaming... Bush Turkey Dreaming. Bush Turkey goes everywhere, looking for tucker. It only eats little seeds and some flowers: red seeds, yellow flowers – the sweet ones - , and they are also the colours I use, little bit red, yellow, white, green, orange, like the seeds.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>398</sup>He used to be called Cowboy Louie Pwerl but after the death of his older brother Louie Pwerl (1996) he changed his name to Cowboy Loy Pwerl.

<sup>399</sup>Personal communication with Cowboy Loy Pwerl (September 2009).



He explained further that it not only shows the different kinds of food that the bush turkey eats, but also the movement of the bush turkey, how its wings open while turning around, and describing almost a half-circle as it moves. The dotting represents the seeds and flowers on the one hand and on the other it depicts the pattern of the bush turkey feathers<sup>400</sup>. In this manner the bush turkey travels across vast distances and right through the Western area of Utopia. So Pwerl's painting not only alludes to country, in fact it depicts the travels through country by his Dreaming Bush Turkey. Yet he abstracts these travels and the different layers of them.

His earlier paintings were much more iconographic. In his untitled painting from 1993 (Fig. 34), Pwerl combines the footprints of the bush turkey with the x shape and circles.

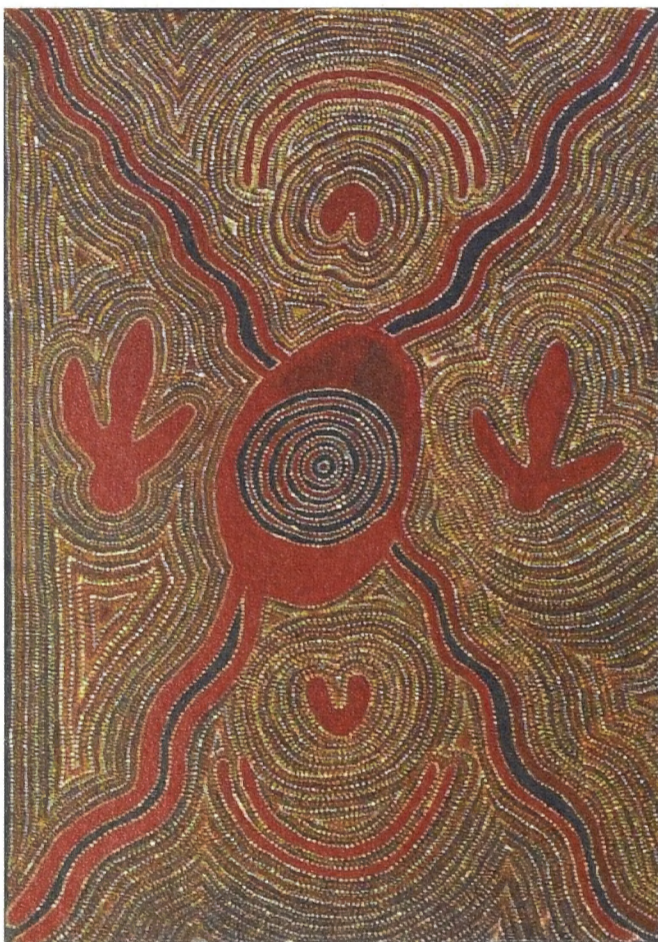


Fig. 34:  
Cowboy Loy Pwerl:  
*Untitled*, 1993, acrylic  
on canvas, 60 x 90 cm,  
Delmore Downs  
Collection

He shows the bush turkey at one of the crossings depicted in his later paintings as circles. He moves around looking for food and water. This painting focuses on one particular moment within the travels of the bush turkey, whereas the first painting depicts almost an infinity of the travels. As with Angelina Pwerl's (Fig. 23) paintings, Cowboy Loy Pwerl presents both the micro- and the macro-cosmos<sup>401</sup> of his stories, the different layers to them and the different moments in time. Over time it can be argued that Pwerl moved away from his micro-cosmos pictures onto the macro-cosmos representations, as did his fellow artists. Pwerl created a template of a triangle at the pointy end of which the circle is situated and which is segmented by lines. He has applied this template in a variety of his paintings over the past few years. A later

<sup>400</sup> Personal communication with Cowboy Loy Pwerl (October 2009).

<sup>401</sup> Munn (1962) and Morphy (2005) both write about the spatial dynamics depicted respectively in Walpiri and Yolngu art.



development of his template can be found in *Bush Turkey Dreaming*, 2007 (Fig. 35), which is the diagonal cross created through half circles. His daughter, Genevieve Loy Kemarr, learned this template and modified it.

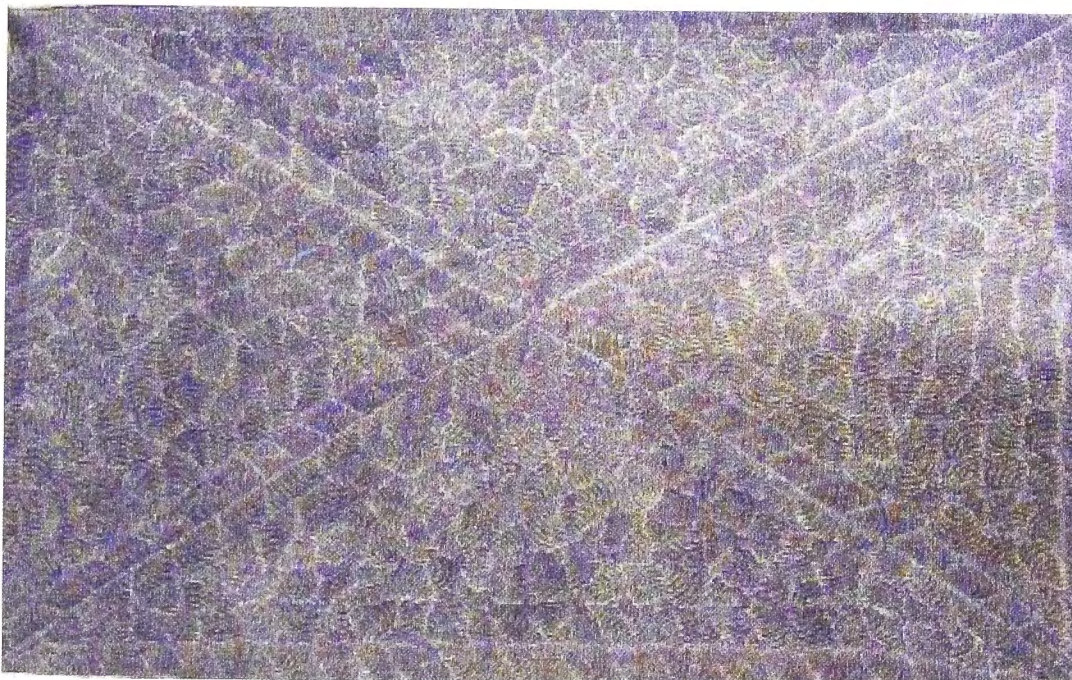


Fig. 35:  
Cowboy Loy Pwerl:  
*Bush Turkey Story*,  
120 x 200 cm,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on linen, not  
dated, private  
collection

Kemarr's Dreaming is that of her father's: Bush Turkey Dreaming. Not far from the outstation Iylenty is a significant site for this Dreaming (Fig. 36) where the bush turkey left its marks.



Fig. 36:  
Dreaming site near  
Iylenty, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt  
(September 2010)



Fig. 37:  
Genevieve Loy  
Kemarr: *Bush Turkey  
Dreaming*, 2009,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on linen, ca. 150  
x 230 cm, private  
collection, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt



Kemarr describes the story of one of her paintings (Fig. 37):

This painting about bush turkey... and that's bush turkey track and he's looking around for getting some bush tomato... the red dots are the bush tomato. And this one, the yellow one and that is the fruit, bush tomato fruit. And lots of bush food seeds... he goes everywhere, that's turkey track. That's his drinking place... my country.<sup>402</sup>

All of her paintings have a central point from which the bush turkey starts his travels. He wanders around and looks for bushtucker as well as water along his travels. His tracks are the lines made up of the half circles, the different-coloured dots represent the various flowers and foods he looks for and the circles are the waterholes. Nevertheless the bush turkey remains invisible in her paintings; no figurative representations of him are made and the only sense of his travels is created through his tracks. The search for food is the crucial element of Kemarr's depictions, the different seeds and plants the bush turkey can and will eat. Kemarr paints the various bush foods over which she has responsibility as an owner of this Dreaming. Just as her aunt Pwerl depicts her responsibility and knowledge about bush plum, the food and the Dreaming story, Kemarr does so in relation to the bush turkey Dreaming and the foods associated with it. Her paintings not only depict the bush foods but also the travels of the bush turkey, his tracks and traces. In these 'template paintings' Kemarr remains in the area of depicting the whole story. However, only recently, in late 2010, Kemarr started painting single flowers (Fig. 38 and 39), which the bush turkey consumes on his travels. Thus she began singling out one element of the story and focused on it in a close-up moment.



Fig. 38:  
Genevieve Loy Kemarr:  
*Bush Turkey Story*,  
synthetic polymer on  
linen, 96 x 96 cm, n.d.,  
private collection

<sup>402</sup>Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr (September 2010).





Fig. 39:  
Genevieve Loy Kemarr:  
*Bush Turkey Story*,  
synthetic polymer on  
linen, 121 x 92 cm, n.d.,  
private collection

Kemarr only started painting on her own around 2002. Prior to that, she learnt from her father, Cowboy Loy Pwerl, and her maternal grandmother, Nancy Petyarr<sup>403</sup>. In her works she combines her father's (Fig. 35) and her grandmother's (Fig. 41) styles.

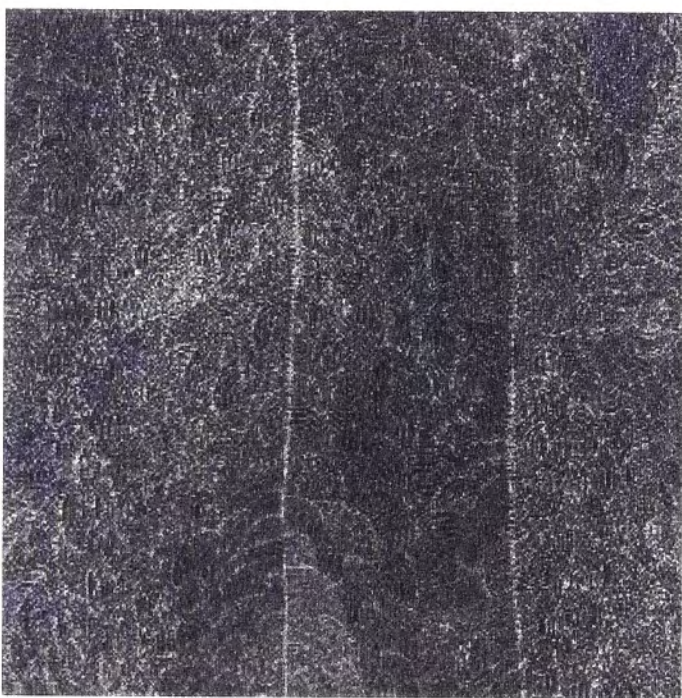


Fig. 41:  
Nancy Petyarr: *Mountain  
Devil Dreaming*, 1997,  
123 x 120 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas,  
AGSA

Like her aunt, Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, whose work I discussed in relation to Alhalker paintings, Kemarr took on the influences of different family members and created her individual style. Petyarr's "half circles show women dancing during *awely*", explains Kngwarray, who learnt to paint in the same manner from her mother Petyarr (Fig. 42)<sup>404</sup>.

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<sup>403</sup>Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr (September 2010).

<sup>404</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010).





Fig. 42:  
Elizabeth Kunoth  
Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 2010,  
90 x 60 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on linen,  
private collection, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

Kemarr was taught by her grandmother over many years how to paint, and her father told her which story she could paint<sup>405</sup>. The granting of permission was accompanied by clear instructions about which colours to use for the representation of the bush turkey's travels. Kemarr is part of a new generation of young artists who explore further the styles developed in relation to certain themes established by the older generation.

The half circles of the women dancing *awely* in her grandmother's and aunt's paintings are, in her paintings, the movement of the bush turkey whilst looking for food. His wings are spread and move up and down sideways when he travels through country. She takes this stylistic element and applies it to her Dreaming story. Her bush turkey travel paintings have the geometrical composition of men's paintings or prints from Utopia (Fig. 43). The bush turkey tracks in her paintings evoke his movement across country. In the evocation of the bush turkey and abstraction of his movement her works show similarities with women's paintings (Fig. 42). In *Untitled* (Fig. 43) one can see the process of abstraction at work that connects the iconography of the ancestral design in its geometric form to the expression of movement on the ground.

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<sup>405</sup>Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr (September 2010).



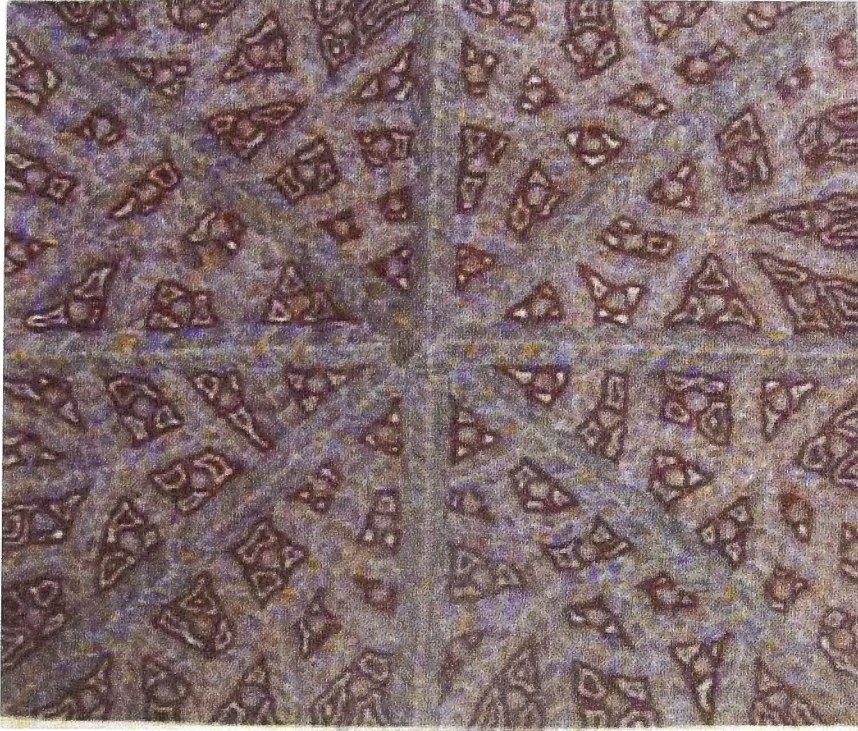


Fig. 43:  
Genevieve Loy  
Kemarr: *Untitled*,  
synthetic polymer  
on linen, 125 x 113  
cm, n.d., private  
collection

Kemarr's approach to representing this story is innovative through the combination of men's and women's elements of painting. Her other topic as is the case of many women from Utopia is painting of bush flowers. In her case the flowers are an element of the Bush Turkey Dreaming, showing the food that the bush turkey eats during his travels across Australia<sup>406</sup>.

Kemarr decided when she was quite young that she would like to become an artist and do painting like her father and grandmother. In many conversations, she mentioned how that had been her dream. She finds inspiration in her country and in her Dreaming site. She points out that she "thinks of the painting herself". Although she had to learn from others for a long time, the paintings she creates now are her own. Kemarr was the only young woman I encountered in Utopia painting in this way: combining traditional iconography with the movement or vibrating quality of so many women's artworks. In comparison to many other artists creating works with different contents, topics and stories, her works have been almost exclusively sold to the high end of the fine art market. Whilst they are representations of Dreaming stories they are at the same time highly abstracted with their meaning encoded in the reduced forms.

Just as the shimmering effect created by Yolngu artists evokes ancestral presence, as Morphy has observed (1991), Genevieve Loy Kemarr lets this ancestral presence become manifest in her paintings. The content of the paintings refers to the ancestral presence in country that surrounds her and everyone in Utopia. The movement of the bush turkey depicted in the white-dotted half circles creates a vibrating visual effect

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<sup>406</sup>Bush Turkey Dreaming is a very strong Dreaming that travels through vast areas of the desert and at least until Uluru (as I was told by Cowboy Loy Pwerl in September 2010).



within the painting. So the surface of the painting moves as the bush turkey did and does.

As a final example of the Dreaming stories depicted in Utopia, I will discuss Kathleen Petyarr and her paintings of the *Mountain Devil Lizard*, Atnangker (Fig. 44).

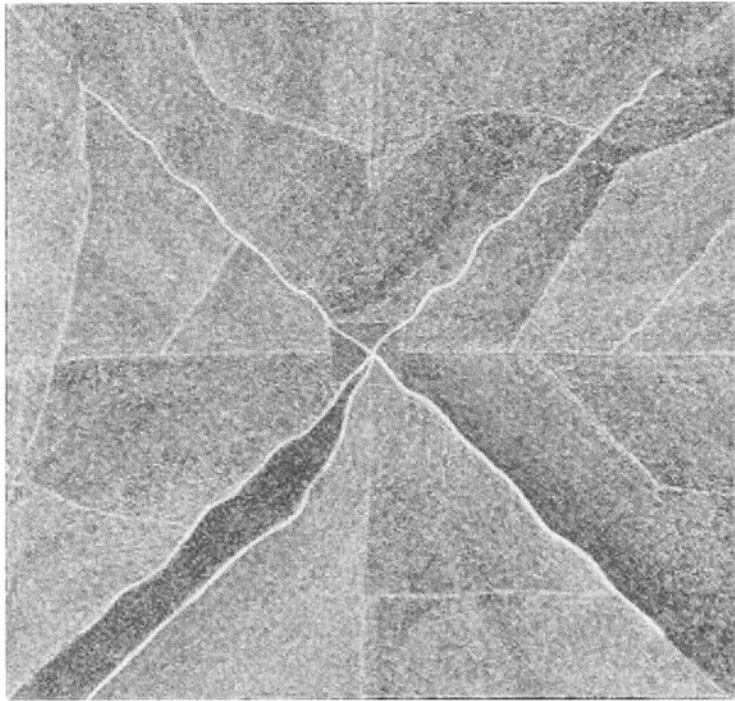


Fig. 44:  
Kathleen Petyarr:  
*Mountain Devil Lizard*  
*Dreaming*, 2007, 122 x  
122 cm, private  
collection

Petyarr is one of the seven Petyarr sisters. Gloria and Nancy Petyarr's works have been referred to earlier in this chapter. All of the sisters have the same father and therefore the same Dreaming. Every one of them, nevertheless, focuses in her art on different aspects of this Dreaming. Kathleen Petyarr describes her Dreaming in her own words:

That Arnkerrth is one Old Lady, my Dreaming Ancestor, who was travelling all the time to a big mountain... called in English Mt Bullocky, called in my language Apmakweng, big apwert [hill]. That old Arnkerrth girl she bin dancing there, she was dancing for herself, a ceremony just for herself, one lady alone, one lady dancing all alone. When that day she came back from Apmakweng, to big mountain Alhalkere, in the afternoon [she was] a little bit late, and she saw everybody else had gone, other mob had disappeared. That Arnkerrth woman saw that all the family, brothers and sisters, man mob, woman mob, had gone away, had gone travelling, they hadn't waited for her. She said, 'Aahhh, that mob all gone!' ... She was a sulky one! Really sulky one! That old Arnkerrth woman said, 'Oh – you fellas bin leave me!' and she sat down and sulked and then she thought up a plan: she decided to catch all the young girls. She wanted to catch them and show them who was the boss! (Petyarr cited in Nicholls 2001:10-11)

Her paintings depict the travels of *Arnkerrth*, but that is not the only element she recounts. The cross shape within her paintings, which is the underlying template for most of her paintings, refers to travels of different beings within this story: women, men, a group of emus going north and a single emu travelling south. This template is comparable to a map of an ancestral country and a guide to the waterhole, to which *Arnkerrth* travels.



Her first painting, *Untitled* 1988-89 (Fig. 45), depicts these travels as well.



Fig. 45:  
Kathleen Petyarr: *Untitled*  
1988-89, acrylic on canvas,  
90 x 60 cm, HaC, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

Instead of focusing on the ceremonial ground as the only circle, as in her recent paintings, *Untitled* 1988-89 (Fig. 45), shows three circles, three waterholes or meeting points. They are mentioned in interpretations of her recent paintings as well (Nicholls 2001:15), although that work does not depict them in the form of circles. Different tracks in multiple directions are depicted as well as branches of a certain plant. The background is filled with fine dots in the four colours provided to her for this painting: black, red, white and yellow or ochre. The tracks of the emus and the ants that *Arnkerrth* eats float on this dotted background. Over time Petyarr removes the figurative elements from her paintings: the tracks and traces of the different ancestral beings turn into the cross shape, the dots imitate the sand dune country and create a movement on the surface, and the area most important to Petyarr's story is highlighted through a denser dotting and different pattern of dots.

Despite choosing an ancestral journey rather than a bush food as part of this ancestral journey, as would have been the case for many women, Petyarr reduces her paintings to one element: the dot. However, the dot does not have the same meaning as in Angelina Pwerl's paintings, a seed for example. This dot applied on the template evokes the travels of the ancestral being *Arnkerrth*. It describes the movement by creating movement on the surface: the surface form moves into and out of the painting, almost pulsating, vibrating. Over time Petyarr's paintings have reached a simplicity in composition which again reinforces the optical effect. The movement of the surface form, in particular the moving in and out could be understood in relation to analyses of Walpiri (Munn 1973b:209) and Yolngu (Morphy 2005:139ff) art. The 'going in – coming out' movement is interpreted with reference to the origin stories of the ancestral beings, who came out of the ground and went back into it. It represents the emergence



of the ancestral being — it is becoming a visible presence. Although the optical effect of movement is created in different ways in artworks from all three communities the underlying concepts appear similar to those of Utopia artists. These concepts are to depict the movement of ancestral beings whilst entering the ground and emerging from it. This means that they are becoming visible and turning invisible. The particular process of abstraction although it creates multiple layers of meaning and referents is none the less more general and there has been a movement away from the specificity of paintings associated with place to more generic evocations of ancestral presence.

#### 9.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that aesthetic effects can be relatively autonomous of particular meanings even though they may evoke similar sensations. Just as a western audience connects to the sense of movement in Utopia art without necessarily locating it in the Dreaming, so too can Utopia artists as in the case of Petyarr's leaves (Fig. 21) separate the effect from the Dreaming and locate it in the mundane — in the scatter of leaves on the ground and the currents blown by the wind<sup>407</sup>.

However, although the referent can be conceptually separated, the aesthetic impact on the body, the way it is felt and sensed, is likely to carry over from one image to the other. The experience of the aesthetics of artistic forms and natural forms can be carried over to religious experience and even become religious experience in certain contexts. This clearly also operates cross-culturally so that depending on people's beliefs and motivations Aboriginal art can be a means of apprehending Aboriginal spirituality or appreciating the works for their beauty alone<sup>408</sup>.

These optical effects and aesthetics can be placed into the wider aesthetics of desert art across Central Australia. Movement of the surface form, vibrancy of colours and designs are key characteristics in Central and Western Desert painting. In other areas men have dominated in the exploration of optical effects. In Utopia, men and women have created works of great vibrancy; however, overall women's works are ever so slightly more vibrant and evoke movement.

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<sup>407</sup>Personal communication with Howard Morphy (January 2012).

<sup>408</sup>Ibid.

In the last two chapters of this thesis, I will introduce the reader to the *œuvre* of Emily Kam Kngwarray, her role within the Utopia community, in the Utopia art movement, and her legacy tangible in the generation of ‘one countrywomen’ whom she taught to paint. I will highlight prevailing interpretations and readings of her work as well as her life. Subsequently I will give a different approach to it. In a first step, I will analyse the biographical texts and sources, and question the underlying reasons for silencing her perspective. In a next step I will examine her visual repertoire by means of including voices of ‘one countrywomen’ of hers. In doing so, Kngwarray’s main topics become visible to the reader and identifiable in her works. The meanings of her works are uncovered and they can no longer be regarded as abstract in the sense of being the product of free expression without referential meaning.

In the last chapter of this thesis I will look at Kngwarray’s legacy and influence on the generations of ‘one countrywomen/-men’ from Ahalker since her death in 1996. She inspired and taught these generations. I will show through a close analysis of their works, after having examined Kngwarray’s *œuvre* in chapter 10, how stylistic connections and developments within the art of this community exist. Due to links to country, there has also been the possibility and reconnection of links with people and place that gives a sense of continuity to people and the art. This trajectory of recursive processes in Utopia art can be found in this group again: Artists have worked closely with others and drawn from past practices but have also taken the art in new directions. Ahalker artists make autonomous choices in regard to incorporating influences thereby creating their own innovative signature styles. Close analysis of their works reveals that, regardless of Kngwarray’s influence, their agency can still be found in their unique artistic innovations.





## Chapter 10: Life, art, career and visual repertoire of Emily Kam Kngwarray<sup>409</sup>

### 10.1 Introduction

Emily Kam Kngwarray is one of the main figures of the Utopia art movement. In this chapter I will discuss Kngwarray as a phenomenon of the art world, including her rise to fame and two solo retrospectives at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1998 and at the National Museum in Canberra in 2008. After having looked at the critiques and their appraisal of her artistic talent and development, I analyse the actual biographical information about her life, found either through interviews with community members and art dealers or found in reviews, monographs and catalogue essays. As late as 2008 Kngwarray was categorized as a ‘genius’, and again compared to modern European painters such as Paul Klee (Fig. 1) and Claude Monet (Fig. 2)<sup>410</sup>.

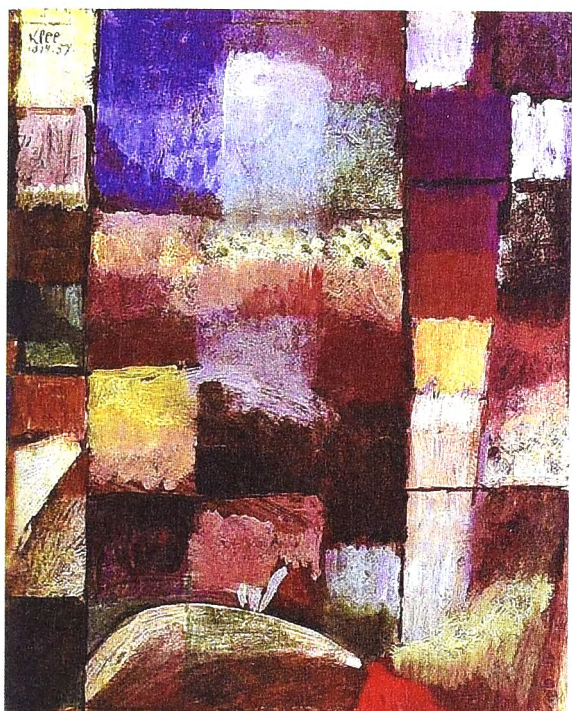


Fig. 1:  
Paul Klee: *On a Motif from Hamamet*, 1914, tempera on board, 27 x 22.5 cm, Kunsthalle Basel

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<sup>409</sup> As Kngwarray is a kinship term in Eastern Anmatyerr and has recently been standardized by Green (2010:743), I will follow this in my spelling throughout my thesis. However, to the wider public Emily is known as Emily Kame Kngwarreye (which is the Western Arrernte spelling of the name). Her artworks are sold under that name and most articles, auction records as well as name tags in exhibitions refer to her as Kngwarray. Prior to Green’s publication there was no dictionary for Eastern Anmatyerr and the spelling of names changed a few times throughout the last decades. Most artists write their name in the way they learnt it at that particular point in time when they went to school. Emily Kam Kngwarray never signed her artworks with her full name but only with her first name. Quite a few scholars have therefore referred to her as Emily rather than Kngwarray. I choose to refer to her by her kin name, which on the one hand is considered her last name in Western circumstances, and on the other people refer to each other by their skin name rather than their first name in Utopia.

<sup>410</sup> These comparisons were mainly found in wall texts of the *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye exhibition*, they were trying to help the visitors to the exhibition understand the artworks better. Different catalogue essays used the term ‘genius’ as well and framed Kngwarray in that way (Neale 2008a and 2008b).



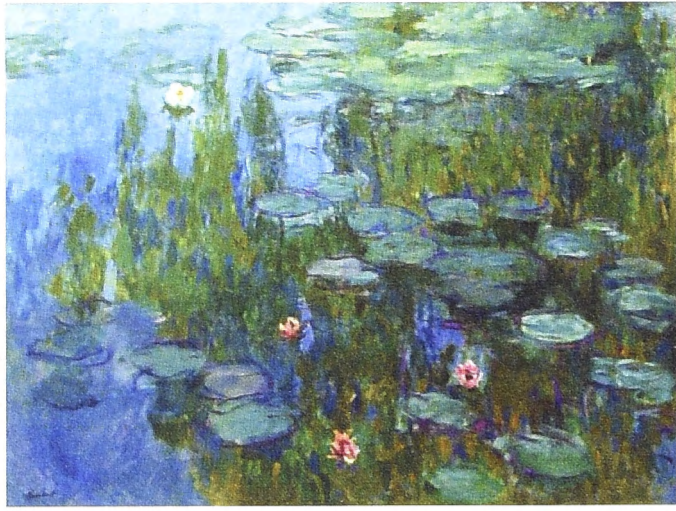


Fig. 2:  
Claude Monet: *Nymphéas*, ca  
1915 (no date), oil on linen, no  
measurements, Neue Pinakothek,  
Munich

By juxtaposing the actual life data with the discourse in the art world around Kngwarray, this thesis argues that the myth making that surrounds her life can act as a mask for understanding her art. Through the oversimplification of her art, by way of applying the myth, her work is to a certain degree devalued. The "myth" can be summarised as the story that she was an elderly Indigenous woman, who had never left her community, had no prior training before starting to paint, was miraculously able to paint in most Western styles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was therefore a genius. The very limited information written and available about her life stands in stark contrast to the amount of literature about her art.

Most art dealers I spoke to remembered some anecdotal story about Kngwarray, yet few of them knew any particulars of her life. The anecdotes of art dealers, curators and collectors who spent time with her or watched her paint at some stage take the place of evidence about her life and her painting, her practices and her creative processes. Everyone has a story to tell about her, about having met her and about her personality, even if they only spent a very short time with her. These anecdotes are turned into biographical stories and are replicated over and over again without interrogating them, for example, by asking her family members<sup>411</sup>. Given the limited information one has about Kngwarray's life, it therefore seems part of the myth around Kngwarray is based on the simple fact that there is little known about her personality, her life story outside the art world or before becoming a 'star' (compare with Perkins 2010:151).

The creation of the myth around Kngwarray as an elderly Indigenous lady with little knowledge about the Western world, yet with a stylistic repertoire that encompasses the whole development of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western art history, takes even the last bit of her agency away. The works become 'enigmatic objects' (Butler 2002) for the viewer and

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<sup>411</sup>A recent incident of this replication of 'knowledge' about Kngwarray and her life was the short biography in the catalogue to the exhibition *Remembering Forward* (2011).

reading them in the cultural setting they were created in seemingly is reductive and ‘racist’ (Thomas 1998:2).

In fact, Kngwarray is mute. Only very rarely is she heard, and then only through excerpts of interviews that Brody (1997) and Green have published (for example 2005, 2010). Her agency has been taken away from her through art dealers and curators, who claim either that her works transcend cultural barriers or that Kngwarray gave them permission to speak for her, since they knew all relevant details.

By highlighting these differences I argue that in fact the inspiration for her art has rarely been discussed, nor have the themes or topics in her artworks been carefully examined, nor the ways in which she depicted ‘whole lot’ in every one of her artworks. In order to understand and engage with her art more deeply, I approached some of her fellow countrywomen and spoke with them about these works. These conversations form the emic voice in this chapter and are in lieu of Kngwarray’s own voice about her art. Furthermore, they prepare for the following chapter, in which Emily Kam Kngwarray’s legacy and influence are traced through the artworks of her fellow countrymen and – women from *Alhalker*.

## 10.2 Who was Emily Kam Kngwarray?

Emily Kam Kngwarray was born around 1910-1912 on the Eastern Anmatyerr lands around Utopia (Green 2005:185ff.). At the time, only a few settlers were living along what has become the Sandover Highway running parallel to the Sandover River. The first troops were sent to explore the region in the 1880s<sup>412</sup>; however, most stations were not settled until the 1920s. This means that many of the older Aboriginal people in the area grew up in the bush or in the traditional way. The same applies to Kngwarray, who recollects her first encounter with a white man in a conversation with Anne Marie Brody. Brody summarizes her interview with Kngwarray:

Emily was in the vicinity of her family’s camp when she first saw a white man. On this day she and a friend were digging for yams when they saw a man on horseback ‘sneaking up’. They both bolted, ducking and running down the hill, thinking it was the devil come to kill them. The man, most probably a policeman, would have been following the dry creek line looking for sources of clothes and chains, including iron collar. The whitefella had a whip and his horse

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<sup>412</sup>Personal communication with Wally Pwerl (October 2010) and Central Land Council Olaf Geerken (October 2010).



was white and Emily had never seen a horse before either. The men didn't speak and she and her friend ran for the hills where the people camped. They were just young girls, about to become women, when they had this encounter. (Brody 1997:76)

Little is known about the course Kngwarray's life, only that she moved between stations working, here and there following her promised husband, whom she married at quite a late age. According to Brody she later married again a much younger man and stayed with him after having left her first husband, who wanted to take a second wife (Ibid.). We do know that she never had any children and that in her later years she became a very important law woman, holding great knowledge about ceremonies linked to *Alhalker*. Although she did not have her own children, she raised Barbara Weir, the daughter of Minnie Pwerl and Jack Weir<sup>413</sup>, and looked after her until she was taken away by the police to a boarding school for mixed descent children (Ibid. pp.76-77). When Weir returned to Utopia many years later, as a mature woman in her 20s, Kngwarray was quick to re-establish tight bonds with her. This was not the case with the young woman's biological mother Minnie Pwerl, who remained at a slight distance from Weir<sup>414</sup>.

The first official appearance of Kngwarray, in which her significance is already visible, is in the documentary film *Women of Utopia*. Made in 1984, this film provides an entry into the batik movement in Utopia, which started with Jenny Green coming to Utopia in 1976 and introducing batik to the women the year after (Green 1998:39). Julia Murray joined in and became the first art coordinator, staying in the community for five years in that position<sup>415</sup>. Kngwarray learnt how to make batiks along with many other women of the community in the late 1970s: In the beginning they created tie-dye and woodblock batiks<sup>416</sup>. Suzanne Bryce<sup>417</sup>, who was working for the Institute of Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs at the time, and who conducted batik workshops at various communities, held a workshop in Utopia. She was joined in this endeavour with Yipati Kunytjiti Brown, an accomplished batik artist from Fregon who had learnt batik at the Ernabella Arts Centre. Afterwards batiks were created with *cantings* and brushes (Green 1998:40)<sup>418</sup>. The women made batiks<sup>419</sup>, first on cotton, later on silk for sale.

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<sup>413</sup>Jack Weir was a station man and Minnie Pwerl an Alyawarr woman from Irultja.

<sup>414</sup>Video accompanying Barbara Weir's solo exhibition at the Holmes à Court Gallery in Perth, February 2009.

<sup>415</sup>Personal communication with Jenny Green, January 2010.

<sup>416</sup>Personal communication with Lena Pwerl (October 2010).

<sup>417</sup>Personal communication with Diana James (October 2011).

<sup>418</sup>Personal communication with Diana James (October 2011).

Kngwarray was often laughed at for her 'poor accuracy' in drawing on the fabric and her batiks were considered by other Utopia artists as almost 'sloppy'<sup>420</sup>. To create a batik takes time and it sometimes seems, when looking closely at her batiks, that she may have wanted to finish more quickly in order to do another one. Her batiks are dense, representing the full array of her motifs and representative of her topics, layering them and most of the time not singling one out.



Fig. 3:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Pencil Yam (Anwerlarr)*, 1980  
batik on silk, 270.5 x 84.2 cm, NGV



Fig. 4: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Lizard*, n. d., no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on wood, HaC, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

<sup>419</sup>See *Women of Utopia* film (1984).

<sup>420</sup>Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009) and refer to Murray (2008:119).





Fig. 5:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Ininti seed necklace*, ca 1983, ininti seeds, wool, 98 cm long, RAG, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt



Fig. 6:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (car door)*, 1993, 100 x 91 x 12 cm, synthetic polymer paint on metal and glass, RAG



Fig. 7:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (watering can)*, 1993, 35 x 52 x 22 cm, synthetic polymer paint on metal, RAG





Fig. 8:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1996,  
61 cm x 46 cm, synthetic polymer paint  
on canvas and wooden frame, private  
collection

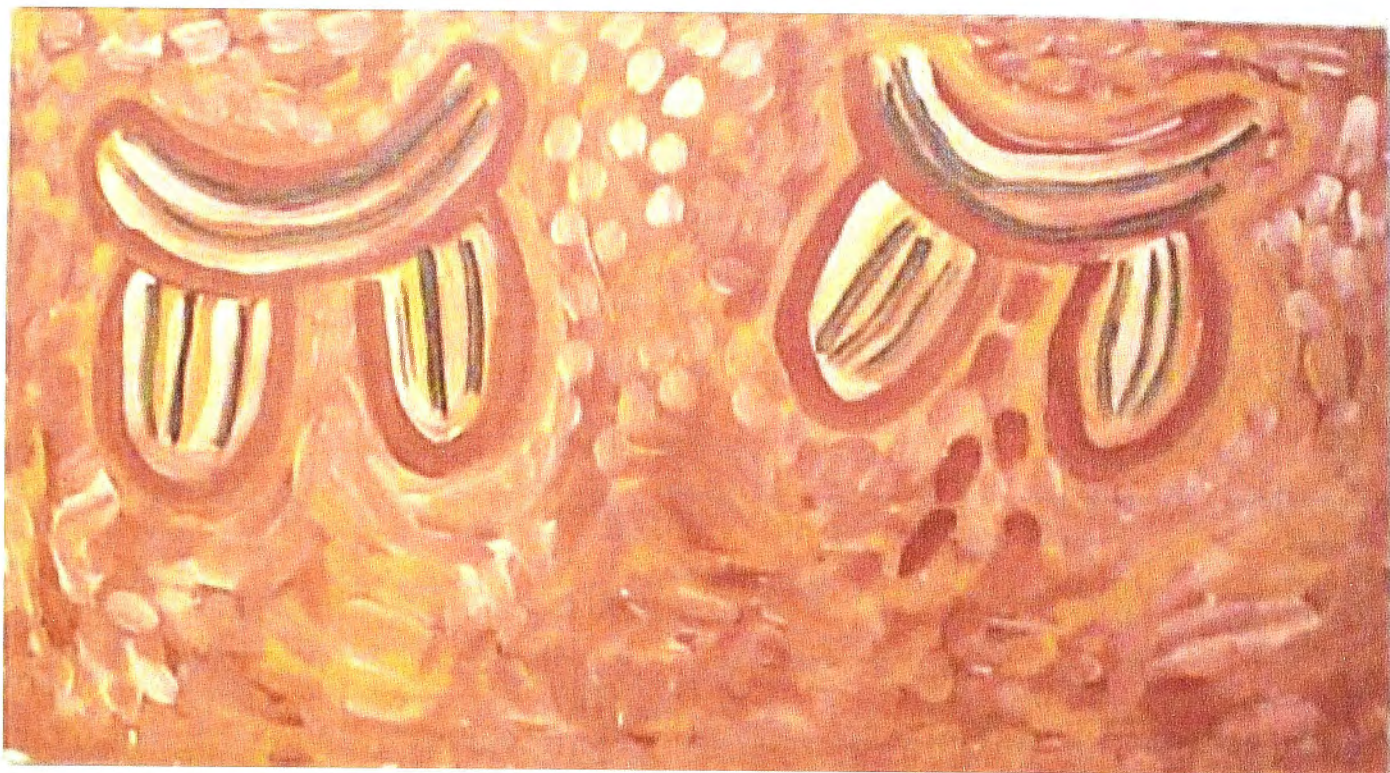


Fig. 9: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Body paint)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, no measurements, FUAM

Kngwarray created works in many different media including batiks (Fig. 3), sculpture (Fig. 4) and jewellery (Fig. 5). She painted on canvas and linen but also on *objets trouvés*, such as car doors (Fig. 6) and watering cans (Fig. 7), frames (Fig. 8) and of course on bodies (Fig. 9) as well as in the sand. The latter two were her ‘canvases’ on which she painted for most of her life. The *objets trouvés* were partly chosen by her, partly given to her by art dealers as ‘canvases’. In comparison to batik-making, which requires fine technical control and a great deal of skill, painting can be gestural and expressive rather than ‘sloppy’. Therefore this medium may be more suited to Kngwarray’s mode of art practice. The brush could be considered the extension of her finger or hand applying paint onto bodies, surfaces, and canvases, therefore possibly performing in every painting process.

After a few years of painting on canvas at the time of being awarded the Australian Artists Creative Fellowship in 1992, Kngwarray wanted to stop painting (Perkins



2010:153)<sup>421</sup>. She felt the pressures of the art market as well as the obligations to share her earnings to a large extent with her family<sup>422</sup>. As Brody notes, “a senior ‘artist like Emily Kam Kngwarray should have been able to delegate the work of painting. But the art market is primarily interested in the originator, less so in the studio or the school” (Brody 1997:79). However, she did not stop painting and travelled to exhibition openings throughout Australia. Art dealers frequently made their way into Utopia to ask her to paint something for them<sup>423</sup>. If cash was needed, family members asked her to do some paintings in order to buy consumer goods such as a new car. I even heard that some art dealers came in private planes and tried to get her away from the community so that she could paint for a week or longer in a workshop under their control<sup>424</sup>. She is estimated to have painted about 3,000 works (Neale 2008b:217). As the pressure to produce more paintings was tremendous, there is some evidence that she did later on create a kind of studio, overseeing artworks done by family members. I will explore the issues regarding her *œuvre* below.

At the end of her life, Kngwarray became quite sick and preferred staying at Delmore Downs with Janet and Donald Holt, for whom she continued to paint. By staying at Delmore Downs, art dealers were kept at distance, ensuring that she would have silence and time and avoid being ‘humbled’ by people<sup>425</sup>. Kngwarray was the biggest star in the art world from the Utopia community. Despite others trying to follow in her footsteps, no one has so far risen to the same fame as she did. Even though there were other artists, and quite successful artists, active in the community, Kngwarray herself seems to have provided for a large group of community members.

### 10.3 The discourse of the art world around Kngwarray’s art

Emily Kam Kngwarray’s artistic achievements have been the focus of two major retrospective exhibitions, one curated by Margo Neale and the other co-curated by

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<sup>421</sup>Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009).

<sup>422</sup>Only recently in the TV series *Art + Soul* did Green mention this event. A few days later Donald Holt commented to me on it by saying that Kngwarray never wanted to stop and that she was happy to continue painting. (Personal communication with Donald Holt, October 2010). So the experiences in regards to this event do not conform.

<sup>423</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (September 2009 and September 2010, October 2010).

<sup>424</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (October 2010).

<sup>425</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (October 2010). The term humbug is widely used in central Australia to refer to being hassled.

Margo Neale and Akira Tatehata<sup>426</sup> in 1998 and 2008. The first exhibition was initiated when Kngwarray was still alive, and some artworks were commissioned for it by the Queensland Art Gallery (Fig. 10).

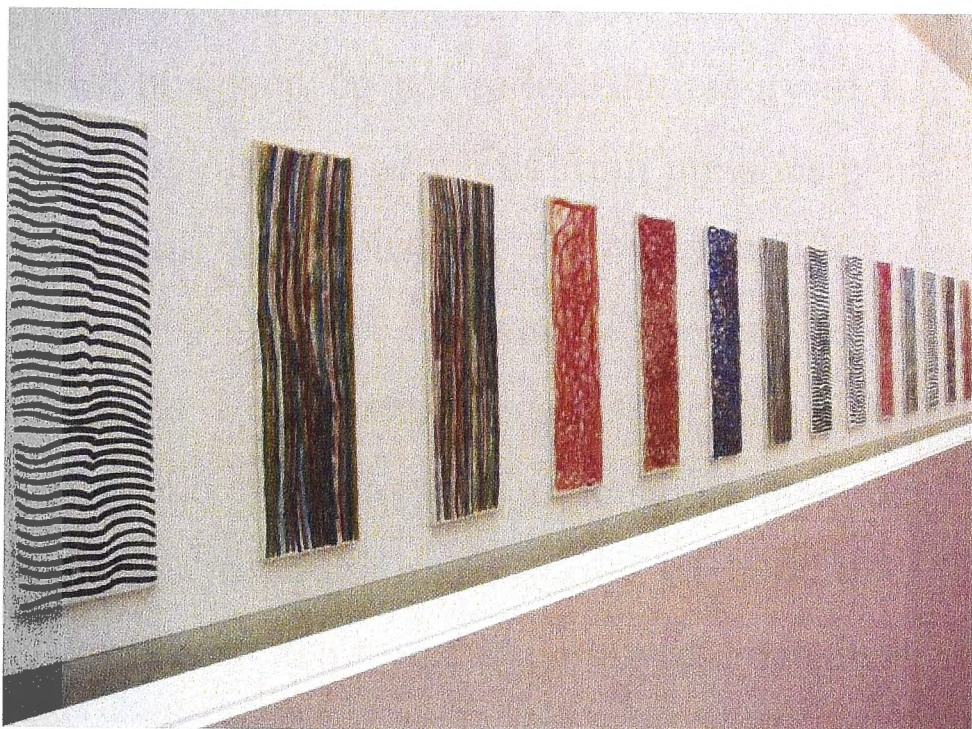


Fig. 10:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Utopia Panels*, 1996,  
262.8 x 84.7 cm each, 22  
panels, synthetic polymer  
paint on linen, QAG,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

The latter show was originally supposed to be hung only in Japan, Tokyo and Osaka, but was later also brought to the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Both of the exhibitions are quite similar in their choice of artworks and in the claims in the catalogue texts and wall texts about Kngwarray and her artistic career. However, the first show put greater emphasis on her work as a batik artist, whereas the second exhibition highlighted her painting career, even by means of hanging the batiks in a manner similar to the paintings<sup>427</sup> (Fig. 11).

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<sup>426</sup>Margo Neale is Principal Advisor to the Director and Senior Curator (Indigenous) at the National Museum of Australia and co-curated the exhibition with Professor Tatehata from Japan, who also initiated having an exhibition of Kngwarray's work in Japan (see film *'Emily in Japan'*, Ronin Films 2009).

<sup>427</sup>Only one batik was hanging floating from the top of a wall and moved through the visitors' movements. All other batiks were hung within frames creating an effect of paintings and not showing clearly the translucency of these artworks.





Fig. 11:  
Photo of 'Utopia: The  
Genius of Emily Kame  
Kngwarreye' exhibition at  
the NMA, Canberra,  
August 2008

The fact that Kngwarray created batiks for twelve years before taking up painting, which she only pursued for some eight years, is generally neglected in discussions about her art, or it is understood as a preparatory stage of her career.

Both exhibitions gave priority to Kngwarray's abstract painting style (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Kam*, 1991, 137.8 x 303.1  
cm, synthetic polymer  
paint on canvas, NGV



The themes and inspiration for her artworks are only mentioned in passing, although they are considered to a greater extent in the first show than in the second. The main focus of both was on her innovative style and its development over time. The 2008 show identified some eight styles, one for each year that Kngwarray painted<sup>428</sup>. These styles, however, do not reflect the reality of Kngwarray's artistic output. They create phases by omitting artworks from previous phases that do not fit the sequence, and by doing so, they construct an oversimplified evolutionary stylistic development of Kngwarray's *œuvre*. Kngwarray's repertoire, as I will show below, was already set in her batiks. Her artistic strength lay in her ability to both combine the different motifs, themes and styles, as well as to single them out and multiply them. The exhibition in Canberra, in addition, compared each of the "eight periods" with eight periods in modern Western art: including Impressionism, Pointillism, and Abstraction<sup>429</sup>.

Out of the three venues chosen for the travelling exhibition in 2008, the Tokyo version had the most space, for both the building and the exhibition space are quite large. At the National Museum of Australia, a part of the show had to be taken out due to the limited space. Only around 100 artworks of the 120 shown in Japan were exhibited there<sup>430</sup>. The other interesting difference was that in Japan the show was in a white cube and in Canberra it was in a black box<sup>431</sup>.

As this exhibition put such a great emphasis on the similarities between Kngwarray's painting style and the styles of modern European artists, such as Paul Klee (Fig. 1) and Claude Monet (Fig. 2), I interviewed visitors to the exhibition about their opinions on Kngwarray's art and the comparisons being made. Most of the interviewees could see a similarity of styles if that was pointed out; however, they found that the artworks spoke for themselves and were not in need of comparisons with Western art. Most of the visitors interviewed found that key problem of the exhibition was the fact that Kngwarray was placed in a Western art history canon, and not at all contextualised within the development of the Indigenous art movement across Australia. Many felt that the information given should have been about the artist and her life, similar to the way

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<sup>428</sup>Christopher Hodges identified these eight styles as well during the symposium accompanying the 2008 exhibition in Canberra. He even claimed that stylistic recurrences should not be emphasized as these were works on demand and not ones conceived by the artist. Therefore he argued they do not reflect the state of the artist's mind and development rather they reflect the market interests.

<sup>429</sup>Again the wall texts highlighted this comparison.

<sup>430</sup>Personal communication with Margo Neale (August 2008).

<sup>431</sup>The white cube refers to an exhibition technique developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which emphasizes the artwork through showing them in completely white rooms. The black box in contrast is widespread in moving image exhibitions. The rooms are black and sound-proof, the only light comes from the images.



that the Utopia room of the exhibition was presented, in that it aimed to provide additional information about the community. In addition, many believed that there could have been more information about the Utopia art movement and its position within the wider art history of Australia. They saw the overall framing as diminishing her artistic achievements, since it placed her work within a Western framework rather than an Indigenous one<sup>432</sup>. One person even mentioned that she had stopped reading the accompanying wall texts after the first one, as it did not seem relevant to her<sup>433</sup>. These reactions reflect two facts about the exhibition's audience. Firstly, they were knowledgeable, as most of them knew about Kngwarray or had intentionally come to see her work. Secondly these comments point to the fact that the audience did not need to read these paintings in comparison with Western artworks in order to see the value in them; Western art was not privileged and Kngwarray's work and indigenous art in general did not need to be raised up to any level of this privilege in order to be understood and valued in their own right. I would argue that, in fact, the Australian audience was in 2008 already prepared for a different kind of exhibition: an exhibition that would shift the focus of the discourse away from the receptive point of view towards the emic perspective of an Indigenous art history. This shift could have included for example a space for members of the Utopia community to say something at the exhibition opening<sup>434</sup>, for which they were present, or they could have been interviewed for the wall texts.

These two pivotal exhibitions were preceded by many commercial and non-commercial exhibitions, in which Kngwarray was either the sole artist on show or exhibited together with other Utopia artists or with various other Indigenous artists. As part of the *Utopia Women's Batik Group*, Kngwarray sparked no great or outstanding interest in the art world. Only when Gooch introduced painting on canvas in the summer of 1988/89 did Kngwarray's work stand out (Fig. 13)<sup>435</sup>.

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<sup>432</sup>Exhibition interview with a visitor (August 2008).

<sup>433</sup>Exhibition interview with a visitor (August 2008).

<sup>434</sup>During the opening of the exhibition several members of the Utopia community were present, however, none of them were asked to comment on the show, their relationship to her or the like. In fact all of them just sat quietly on the side. (Personal observation, August 2008).

<sup>435</sup>Refer to Chapter 3 for a more detailed account of these events.





Fig. 13:  
Emily Kam Ngwarray:  
*Emu Woman*, 1988-89,  
synthetic polymer paint  
on canvas, 90 x 60 cm,  
HaC, Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

Her painting *Emu Woman 1988-89* shows a layering of colours and a composition of elements and motifs not comparable to any other artwork in the set of 88 group works from this project<sup>436</sup>. Ngwarray's style seemed to be rather painterly already in her batiks, which earned her the reputation amongst her group of artists as being 'inaccurate'. In the first works on canvas, the other artists' paintings seem to more directly transfer the batik style to canvas (Fig. 14 and 15). Ngwarray's adaptation to the potential of the new medium seems to have been more immediate in comparison to the other artists. This was certainly Rodney Gooch's perception.



Fig. 14:  
Ruby Ngwarray: *Blue  
Tongue Lizard Awely*, 1988-  
89, 92 x 61 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas,  
HaC, Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

<sup>436</sup>I was able to visit the Janet Holmes à Court Collection in February 2009 and see the complete set together. The set has not been exhibited as a whole since 1989 when it was first shown in Perth.





Fig.15:  
Annie Petyarr: *Untitled*,  
1988-89, 92 x 61 cm,  
synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas, HaC, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

Anne Brody accompanied Gooch on his visit to the community when he purchased this particular painting. Gooch at that time treated each artist on a basis of equality not over-emphasizing individual identity. But it was quite clear to Brody that he made an exception to Kngwarray's artwork which he responded to very positively<sup>437</sup>.

At the time of the batik production, no art dealers had made their way into the community, and the artists sold their cloths only to Rodney Gooch or his predecessors in the position of art coordinators. However, as soon as Gooch brought the primed canvases in, some 12 of the 100 handed out went missing, as I mentioned in Chapter 3. Out of the remaining 88, Kngwarray's painting was chosen to be on the cover for *A Summer Project* catalogue and became widely known<sup>438</sup>. Not long after this first painting project, Kngwarray as well as other artists from Utopia, started painting for art dealers and not exclusively for Rodney Gooch and CAAMA<sup>439</sup>. This posed difficulties for Gooch, but on the other hand opened a financial avenue for the artists from Utopia who, up until then, had not seen a great interest from the fine art world in their works. In fact the *Utopia Women's Batik Group* had struggled financially for a long time – prior to Rodney Gooch starting to work for them – for the batiks did not yield the anticipated profits (Richardson 2001:161ff.)<sup>440</sup>.

As the painting movement developed, Kngwarray was quickly singled out and her artistic talent praised. She became a leader in terms of artistic innovation in the community. By innovation, I refer to her great ability to change her styles and create new representations of her themes. Observing Kngwarray's rise to fame, the community

<sup>437</sup>Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009). And refer to Chapter 3 for more detail on *A Summer Project*.

<sup>438</sup>Personal communication with Anne Marie Brody (February 2009).

<sup>439</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (September 2008).

<sup>440</sup>See also Chapter 3 for more information on this.

members began to learn how to paint or paint in her style from her<sup>441</sup>. In the art world, this type of ‘learning’ can be framed simply as copying; however, in Indigenous societies, artists often learn from their teachers or mentors by first copying their style. Then, once they are able to imitate it perfectly and have acquired the knowledge about the stories behind the paintings, they are able to develop their own variations (see Taylor 1996b:132). Since the art world understood artworks created under Kngwarray’s instruction as copies or fakes, frauds, or at best imitations, Kngwarray was not officially able to ‘employ’ her students or ‘one countrywomen’. This rejection runs counter to accepted practice with regard to studios in the history of Western art. Here there are examples of studio work, as for example Rubens, who over the course of his career employed dozens of apprentices who painted under his guidance and assisted him in finishing master pieces. We also have contemporary artists, such as Damian Hirst or Ai Weiwei, whose projects are created by many collaborators. Although this is accepted in Western art, for Indigenous artists, assistants are seen to distort a work, and only an artwork completed by the artist him- or herself is considered authentic and not a copy.

This issue was highlighted by a show held at *Alcaston Gallery* in 1991. For this show a group of artists from Utopia all painted an ‘Emily’ – a look-alike work in a particular dotting style of Emily Kam Kngwarray, as Beverly Knight recalled in an interview<sup>442</sup>. Because of this, all the artists created works from one of Kngwarray’s styles, although not across all of her topics and styles. This show pointed out that a group of artists were able to create artworks like Kngwarray, possibly even because they had learnt from her. A similar collection of ‘look-alikes’ are in the Holmes à Court Collection (Fig. 16, Fig. 17 and Fig. 18). For a viewer unfamiliar with Kngwarray’s works, and even for a viewer very familiar with her style and themes, these artworks by other artists, mimicking her style, appear almost indistinguishable from her work. The brushstroke, the choice of colours, her signature style element of layering dots and lines; all are very similar in these works by other artists.

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<sup>441</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Josie Petyarr (September 2010).

<sup>442</sup>Personal communication with Beverly Knight (January 2010).



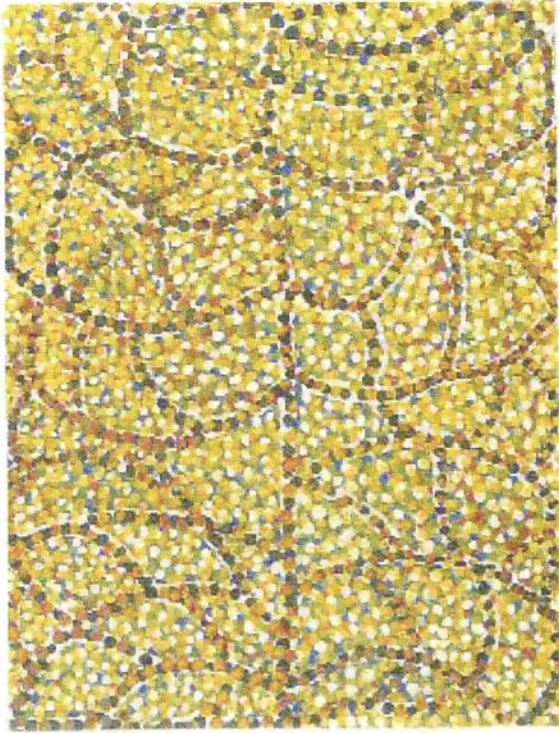


Fig. 16:  
Gina Petyarr: *One Dreaming (Yam Story)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, HaC

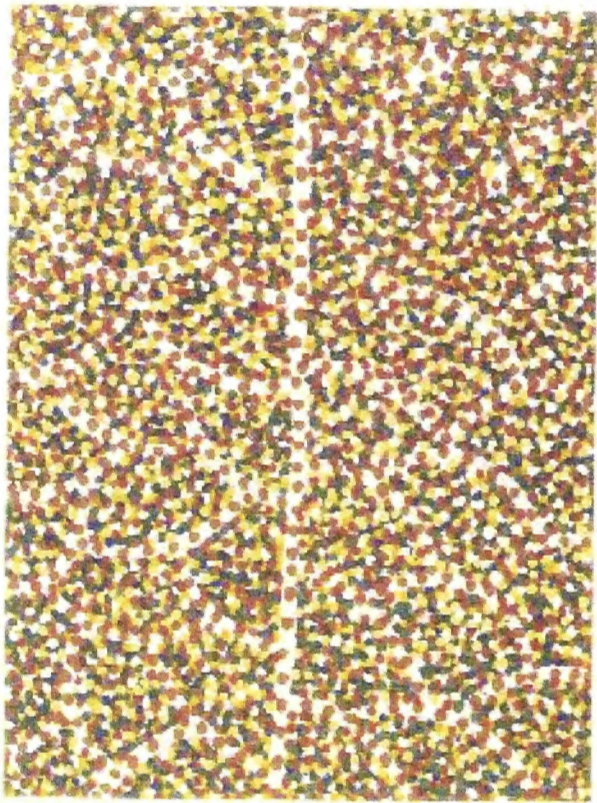


Fig. 17:  
Marcia Pwerl: *One Dreaming (Yam Story)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, HaC

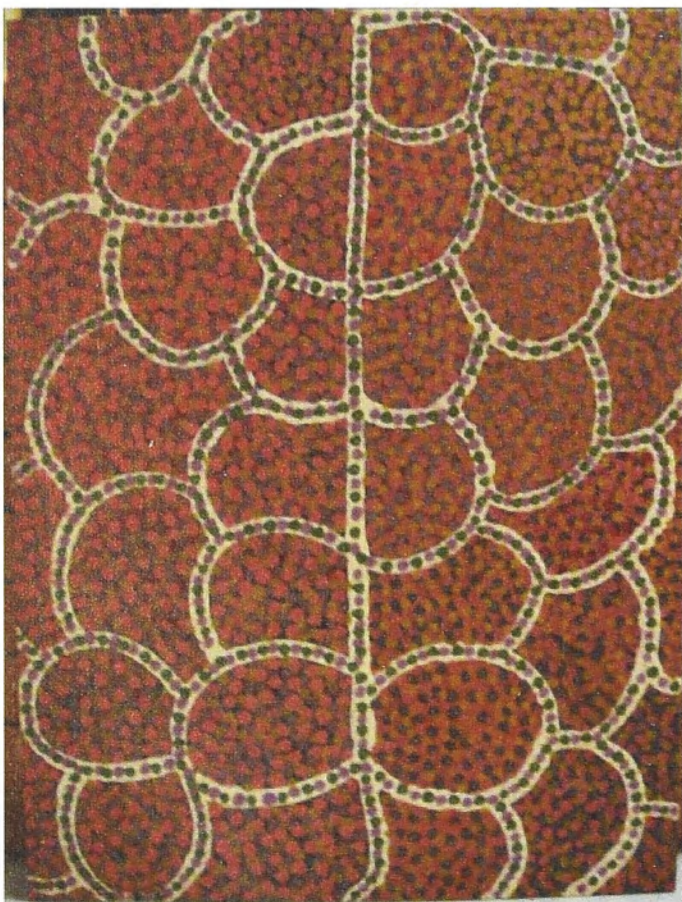


Fig. 18:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *One Dreaming (Yam Story)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, HaC

In 1990 Kngwarray, together with Louie Pwerl, was awarded a joint artist-in-residence position in Western Australia, at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Both of these



highly regarded elders went to Perth in order to spend a year creating artworks without constant demands being made by either family members or art dealers<sup>443</sup>. Already at this point the frequency with which art dealers visited the community had increased. By the time she was awarded the Australian Artist's Creative Fellowship in 1992, demands upon her had reached a peak. It was at this moment that, as I have noted, she responded to this by saying that she wanted to stop painting<sup>444</sup>. Yet this did not prove to be an option for her, since she had become the chief breadwinner for her family, whose demands upon her had increased tremendously.

Kngwarray's artistic career was closely connected on the one hand, with the social events in her own community, most importantly family matters, on the other hand, she had become bound up with the art market. As I have discussed in an earlier chapter, the art market has shaped the Utopia art movement since 1989 – if not since the beginning of the late 1970s. T-shirts, trousers, silk length batiks as well as jewellery, carvings and paintings have all been created for the Western tourist art market. In order to yield better prices, artists – particularly in art centre environments – began to work with a variety of media; the practice was to see which pieces sold best and were most often requested, in order to produce more objects in the same style. One can see this almost as art-on-demand production or as a commissioning of artworks. Kngwarray experienced such a situation even more directly, since she dealt with the art dealers herself, without the art centre personnel mediating. Dealers would show her photos of particular paintings of hers and ask her to 'do one like that'<sup>445</sup>. This meant on the one hand that she received immediate feedback from the art dealers with whom she worked most closely, such as Rodney Gooch and Janet and Donald Holt. But on the other hand she received delayed feedback from those art dealers and collectors who came to Utopia on an irregular basis. These could have been art dealers who mainly operated through wholesalers. They forwarded the responses to the works via the wholesalers to Kngwarray.

Because of the close contact between the art dealers and their clientele, the dealers were able to react directly to market needs and wants, and commissioned these of Kngwarray. By providing specific colours for her to use and priming the canvases in particular

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<sup>443</sup>Janet Holmes à Court at the public program to the exhibition *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Canberra, August 2008.

<sup>444</sup>Jenny Green in conversation with Hetti Perkins in the ABC television miniseries 'Art + Soul', October 2010

<sup>445</sup>Christopher Hodges gave this account at the 'Utopia: The genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye' exhibition symposium in Canberra, August 2008.



colours, as well as determining the size and quality of the canvas, they influenced her art in multiple ways<sup>446</sup>. Further, through the art dealers' knowledge of the art market, they were able to bring their awareness back into the community and show both Kngwarray and her fellow artists what was in demand and what was considered fine art quality. Another form of influence, on a more unconscious level, may well have been her visual exposure to Western art.

Claims have been made that Kngwarray had no idea about Western art and that her art comes solely from herself (Neale 2008; Tatehata 2008). This positions her within a vacuum, thus ignoring her social roots as well as her history as an Eastern Anmatyerr<sup>447</sup> woman living most of her life in vicinity of cattle stations. Although Kngwarray lived in remote Australia, after her recognition as an artist, she on many an occasion visited capital cities, art galleries and art collections. Visiting these galleries and collections, and having ties to art dealers such as Gooch<sup>448</sup>, she was shown artworks from artists from around the world. Further, Kngwarray was aware of what other artists in Utopia were creating and how the art world reacted to their works in terms of the financial returns to the artists. Despite living in a remote Central Australian community, Kngwarray experienced a certain degree of exposure to contemporary and non-Indigenous art, as well as art from her fellow community members in Utopia. Reports have highlighted that she rarely or never expressed her opinions about the artworks which she saw on gallery visits interstate, and she preferred to talk about subjects of personal importance such as missing her camp dogs<sup>449</sup>. However, she did see these artworks, and she would have realised that they were shown to her as important examples of art. Possibly she interpreted the works as bearing similarity to her own work, or possibly as examples of great Western artworks. We have no evidence that they did or did not influence her work. Thus, it is impossible to determine the effect of seeing the Western artworks had on her. The influence of these artworks on her art may not have been direct nor an explicit appropriation of other styles, yet they may have become an unconscious and unmeasurable influence on her visual repertoire.

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<sup>446</sup>I have heard of instances in which Kngwarray was asked to paint something and she would agree to it, however, in the end the artwork was something completely different, something that she wanted to paint. So the extent of the influence on her works cannot be determined yet it cannot be denied either and must be taken into account.

<sup>447</sup>Note, however, that her sole quote, which I discuss below, is in Alyawarr and not Eastern Anmatyerr.

<sup>448</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (October 2009).

<sup>449</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (August 2008).

Aside from Brody's text, only few personal accounts of situations or moments in Kngwarray life have been written. The other accounts include Donald Holt's experiences (Holt 1998) and those of Hodges (1991) and Green<sup>450</sup>. One of the main reasons always given when referring to the lack of information about Kngwarray is the fact that her English language skills were quite limited. However, the linguist Jenny Green has been living intermittently out in Utopia since 1976 and has mastered both languages of the area, Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr, to such an extent as being able to write the dictionaries for them (Green 1992, 2010). Green worked with Kngwarray in an adult education program, taught her how to drive a car and recorded many hours of interviews with her<sup>451</sup>. Thus, if the art world had been truly interested in the person Emily Kam Kngwarray, at least one point of entry was available. Yet Green has never been commissioned to undertake this task.

Such lack of interest in the actual artist seems a common phenomenon of the art world, for which only certain moments in lives of artists are singled out and used to create a myth about the artist. Kngwarray becomes a remote-living, isolated and elderly genius, who, without any knowledge about the Western art world, creates paintings surpassing all Western art history and arriving straight away in the now (Neale 2008, Tatehata 2008). A parallel aspect of this myth lies in the claim that, as her career developed, she mastered Western styles without having learnt at an academy of fine art, proving that it is the pure product of her own genius (Ibid.). By comparing her to Western artists the art world is able to include her *œuvre* into the canon quite easily, whilst at the same time excluding fellow Indigenous artists as too ethnographic or too distant from contemporary art practice. However, this comparison does not lead to a deeper understanding of her work, nor of the place of her work in Australian art history or within her community. In fact, the comparison is merely based on the reception of the work by a Western audience (see Butler 1998).

Only at a point when Western artists had already paved the way for abstraction in the Western art world was it possible for the art world to integrate Indigenous abstraction and in fact call abstraction an International art movement (see McLean 2008)<sup>452</sup>.

Kngwarray's artworks were moved away from the ethnographic categories of Aboriginal art; they were seen to seemingly transcend the need to understand

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<sup>450</sup>Green in conversation with Perkins in *Art + Soul*, October 2010.

<sup>451</sup>Personal communication with Jenny Green (January 2010).

<sup>452</sup>1990 Catalogue of Utopia Art Sydney: The first International art movement



underlying Dreaming stories. It appealed to a ‘universal’ audience (Ibid. pp. 29), which meant the privileged audiences of the West, and touched people without forcing them to see beyond the surface (see Butler, S 2002). Since her switch to painting, most of her artworks have been exhibited in the white cube<sup>453</sup>, with little explanation and in many cases simply named ‘untitled’. This minimalist approach to exhibiting her art fits into the fine art world rather than into the anthropological or museum approach, in which contextualization of artworks plays a greater role. Therefore, the engagement with her art has been on a level similar to that accorded to Western art in recent decades. This has meant a focus on the reception of the artworks (Butler, S 2002), with reference to their corporeality (Manning 2009), and to visualization of body movement through the artworks (Lovegrove 2002). Again, there is an emphasis on the perceived stylistic similarities between her works and those of non-Indigenous artists (Smith 2008). In sum, the modernist framework enabled a reception of Kngwarray’s works as if they were western artworks on the basis of formal similarity.

In 2008, McLean argued for a different approach to Kngwarray’s works: irrespective of their formal similarities, these works are contemporary Indigenous artworks and they should be accepted on that basis. If they do reflect elements of modernism, it is an Indigenous modernism that comes out of its own relatively autonomous trajectory and particular socio-cultural context. Albeit that this modernism nowadays intersects with and is in dialogue with the broader Australian art world and art market:

Central Australian acrylic paintings are the direct result of modernity in the artists’ lives and exhibit many of the classic characteristics of modernism – such as heightened formalism, aesthetic innovation, freedom from the demands of religious function and successful participation in the art world. (McLean 2008b:78)

Rather than beginning the history of Aboriginal art with Bardon’s arrival in Papunya, he includes the contact history of central Australia in his analysis of an Aboriginal modernism. By doing so, he moves the works out of the vacuum in which they have been placed by curators and art dealers, and into a colonial and postcolonial setting, in which people have “layered identit[ies]” (Pearson 2006 quoted in McLean 2008b:80). The lived experiences – such as the contact history in central Australia exemplified by

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<sup>453</sup>In 2010 Ron Radford commented at the opening of the new wing National Gallery of Australia: “The galleries are rooms consciously and unapologetically designed for the permanent collection of Indigenous art, not for anthropology or for the usual space for changing displays of Indigenous art.” (30/09/2010) See: <http://www.breakfastpolitics.com/index/director-ron-radfords-remarks-at-the-opening-of-nga-extension-stage-one.html> (last sighted 23/11/2011).

the building of the Telegraph Line – become part of the reading of Indigenous modernity. In this reading, the silencing of Kngwarray is part of a modern Western paradigm (2008b:74ff.), as is the creation of the myth surrounding her (Ibid. pp.80). I will show in this chapter that what McLean found in Namatjira's works – “a classical Platonic mimesis in which inside knowledge is given outside form” (Ibid. pp.92) – is also true of Kngwarray's works; yet her expressions of country go beyond that by creating an entire world (Smith 2006). Her understanding and sense of belonging to Alhalker and the Dreamings associated with it find their expressions in her works and form her artistic repertoire. Finally her participation in the art world is another reason for her role in the history of modernity in Australian art<sup>454</sup>.

#### 10.4 Themes, form, and innovation

Before going into detail about Kngwarray's work, her topics and her innovations, I would like to outline some of the difficulties associated with determining ‘authentic’ works by her. No *catalogue raisonné* has ever been produced of Kngwarray's *œuvre* and at this point, it will be very difficult to do so. First of all, as I outlined above, a plethora of art dealers and collectors made their way into Utopia in the 1990s in order to get Kngwarray paint for them. There was no person or institution that recorded all these artworks, keeping the sort of a catalogue that an art centre would. Secondly, many of these works that have appeared on auction platforms and have moved to new owners are extremely difficult to locate. Thirdly, family members, such as Fred Torres and Barbara Weir, who established *Dreaming Art Centre of Utopia* (DACOU), also had Kngwarray paint for them, and they appear to have a considerable quantity of stock that has never been exposed to the market. This latter point probably rings true for a group of other art dealers, who commissioned Kngwarray to do works but never exhibited them or sold them. Finally, there is a sense of doubt in the art world about the authenticity of artworks by Kngwarray if these were not sourced either through Rodney Gooch or the Holt family.

By repute, Rodney Gooch was very strict with Kngwarray in her attempts to sell paintings under her name to him, which in fact were done by family members. On one occasion, recalled to me by Christopher Hodges, Gooch and Kngwarray were both

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<sup>454</sup> According to McLean (2008b) Aboriginal art is a modern phenomenon and part of the wider narrative of Australian art rather than a separate category of modern Aboriginal art.



outside Gooch's house in Alice Springs, she on the street side of the fence, he in the garden. She showed the paintings to him, handed them over the fence and he threw them back, calling them rubbish and obviously not her works. To which her response was laughter<sup>455</sup>. A few people in the art world believe they can distinguish between Kngwarray's own works and the ones done under her instruction, or the ones done without her instruction. Community members also claim that they are able to see the difference and know which ones have been created by 'old auntie' herself<sup>456</sup>. Part of this discussion within the community may be influenced by jealousy amongst artists and the fear of missing out on income. At the same time, this debate involves rights to Dreaming stories and the particular motifs, colours and styles associated with them. Therefore creating a *catalogue raisonné* of Kngwarray's *œuvre*, as I had envisaged at some stage throughout my research, seems not only far too large for the scope of this thesis but may also prove to be an irresolvable problem<sup>457</sup>.

The majority of works considered for my research come from public, state and private collections to which I had access during the period of my doctoral candidature. Most of these works are accompanied by documentation of provenance, showing clearly how the works were sourced and by whom. I recorded these as outlined in the introduction within a database, including any provenance details to which I had access. The following analysis of Kngwarray's *œuvre* is consequently based on these works and not all works by Kngwarray, whether contested or not.

### 10.5 Subject matter, themes, and topics

The phrase 'whole lot' (Hodges 1998:33) is the response Kngwarray produced when asked 'what are your paintings about?' and is repeatedly quoted to describe her paintings. But what is a whole lot? 'Whole lot' encompasses all of the stories associated with *Alhalker*:

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<sup>455</sup>Personal communication with Christopher Hodges (September 2008).

<sup>456</sup>This is an ongoing debate within the community, which flared up irregularly whilst I was out there. Allegations that other community members were 'stealing' Kngwarray's Dreaming were made. I was told that paintings sold under Kngwarray's name were still being created in some outstations and that these paintings fetched great sums overseas.

<sup>457</sup>Nevertheless Donald Holt has embarked on creating a *catalogue raisonné* of Kngwarray's works collected, commissioned or sold through him and his wife Janet Holt. (Personal communication October 2010).

...Whole lot, that's whole lot, [Awely] (my Dreaming), [Arlatyey] (pencil yam), [Arkerrth] (mountain devil lizard), Ntange (grass seed), Tingu (a Dream-time pub<sup>458</sup>), [Ankerr] (emu), [Intekw] (a favourite food of emus, a small plant), [Atnwerl] (green bean), and Kam (yam seed). That's what I paint: whole lot... (cited in Hodges 1998:33).

These are the different Dreamings connected to *Alhalker*, which form in various expressions her artistic and visual repertoire<sup>459</sup>. They comprise nine themes: one is *awely* which means women's ritual as explained in Chapter 8; a second one is *arlatyey* of which the botanical name is *vigna lanceolata* and refers to the pencil yam (Latz 1995:296); a third theme are *ntang*, Mulga seeds, for which the botanical name is *acacia aneura* (Green 2010:450; Latz 1995:88). Another topic are *intekw* plants, whose botanical name is *scaevola parvifolia*. These are small fan flowers which grow between Spinifex grass (Latz 1995:263). A fifth and dominant theme in Kngwarray's work is *atnwerl*, or *tinospora smilacina*, a snake vine which is used for medicinal purposes (Ibid. pp.287). The sixth and final plant-specific topic is *kam* which are the seeds of *arlatyey* and *atnwerl* (Green 2010:365). Three of her topics are ancestral beings<sup>460</sup> and their stories: *arkerrth*, the mountain devil lizard ancestral being; *tingu*, the Dog Dreaming; and *ankerr*, Emu Dreaming. I will look at the artworks in detail to identify the themes within them by referring to everything that is linked to *Alhalker*, as the inspiration for her artworks derives from *Alhalker*.

*Alhalker* for Kngwarray was not only a small piece of land on the adjacent station. *Alhalker* was her Dreaming, her country through which she is connected to the rest of her society in one way or another, a spiritual place through which she travelled when she was a young woman<sup>461</sup>. All these aspects combined express 'whole lot'. Therefore, when looking at Kngwarray's artworks, we see different parts of her vision of her country. Much emphasis has been given to her career as a painter; however, her full repertoire of motifs and themes was already visible in her batiks. Painting became

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<sup>458</sup> Tingu is an ancestral being from *Altyerr*.

<sup>459</sup> Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (September and October 2010).

<sup>460</sup> Personal communication with Violet Petyarr, Myrtle Petyarr, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (September and October 2010).

<sup>461</sup> Many trips to country during my research were about showing the ways people used to live in the olden days out bush and how they experienced country back then. This close connection one builds up to country by living in it the traditional way has been very important for people in Utopia. (Trips to country with Cowboy Loy Pwerl. Carol Kunoth Kngwarray, Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Helen Kunoth Kngwarray in September and October 2010).



another medium to express herself in a less laborious way than batik<sup>462</sup>. Across her *œuvre* Kngwarray used different forms as canvases to which she fitted the design, such as *objets trouvés* and sculptures.

Throughout my research, I have looked at the continuities of works from Utopia artists. In this section I focus on motifs and themes of Kngwarray's work, which recurred throughout her career as an artist from the late 1970s until 1996. As her earlier work was mainly ephemeral and either painted on bodies for ritual and destroyed during or after the ritual, or drawn in the ground during conversations, I cannot draw on them as a mode of comparison (Green 2009:2). Nevertheless, I have discovered that neighbouring stations had bought artefacts, boomerangs, coolamons and spears since the station owners settled there<sup>463</sup>. Therefore, it may be possible that one of Kngwarray's coolamons for instance is amongst them; however, there are no records for each artefact to substantiate this. Hence I will not include these<sup>464</sup>. By focussing on themes rather than styles, as the 2008 travelling exhibition did, I am able to trace a more detailed development of Kngwarray's art since 1977. Further continuities and changes over time in the depiction or representation of her topics become visible and demonstrate her move towards abstraction.

One of the earliest pieces of Kngwarray's signature, that I was able to find, is a batik in the National Gallery of Australia collection (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19: Utopia Batik Group and Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1981 batik on cotton, no measurements, NGA

<sup>462</sup>Many artists have 'complained' about how hard batik making is. Personal communication with Kathleen Petyarr (October 2008), Violet Petyarr (September 2009).

<sup>463</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (September 2010) about his parents collecting various artifacts from the local Aboriginal people.

<sup>464</sup>The body of artworks created by Emily Kam Kngwarray extends by far what I have been able to access, however, from my comparisons with exhibition catalogues for example I could conclude that my records show a variety of examples of her works.



This batik shows a degree of abstraction, which will be again as poignant in her later works, towards the end of her life (Fig. 20).

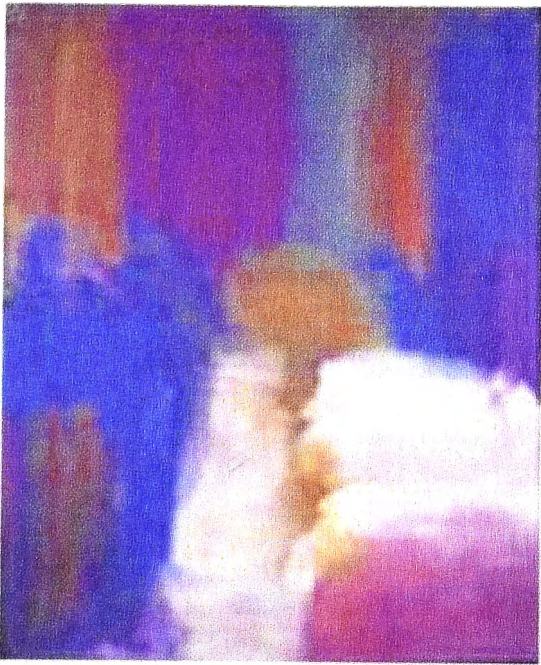


Fig. 20:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Last series*, 1996,  
synthetic polymer paint  
on canvas, 128 x 82 cm,  
private collection

In a middle period, Kngwarray includes figurative elements in her works, which predicts a development in her work, not as tangible in her other batiks from the early 1980s. The grid visible in these batiks could be an overlay of many different flowers as we see in *Pencil Yam (Anwerlarr)* 1980 (Fig. 21), or in this batik shirt from 1979 (Fig. 22), or it could be, what I think is more convincing, a first abstracted version of the root networks she creates in 1995-1996, as can be found for example in *Arlatyite Dreaming 1995* (Fig. 23).





Fig. 21:  
Emily Kam  
Kngwarray:  
*Pencil Yam*  
(*Anwerlarr*),  
1980, batik  
on silk,  
270.5 x 84.2  
cm, NGV



Fig. 22:  
Emily Kam  
Kngwarray:  
*Shirt*, 1979,  
68.3cm  
(centre  
back), 55.5  
cm (sleeve  
length), batik  
on cotton,  
NGV



Fig. 23:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:*Arlatyite*  
*Dreaming*, 1995, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas, 125 x  
221cm, AGWA, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

The inspiration for these works by Kngwarray is likely to have been: *arlatyey*, the pencil yam. Latz describes the pencil yam as an important traditional food for Indigenous desert communities in Central Australia:



A trailing herb or creeper, sometimes covering large areas, with bright green leaves and yellow flowers. [...] [It] is usually found near watercourses or at the base of granite hills. It is encouraged by fire and grows after rain at any time of the year.

The edible swollen roots of this plant are an important food throughout its range. These juicy, starchy storage organs have a rather bland taste; they are eaten raw or, more frequently, after being cooked in hot sand and ashes. The above-ground portion of this plant usually dies off a month or so after the rain, and it is after this time that the yams are usually collected. [...] [it] plays an important role in the traditional economy.

This species often has buried pods, like small white peanuts, and these are probably eaten if available. (Latz 1995:296).

The *arlatyey* roots and its networks extend underground over a vast area and they cross over, and grow on top of each other. In paintings such as *Alagura*, 1990 (Fig. 24) and *Big Yam Dreaming*, 1995 (Fig. 25), the roots are represented as if the soil between them has been removed and they have been placed flat on the ground. Lovegrove elaborates on the pencil yam's shape in the ground: "The root is a single thin tap root that grows vertically down from the vine. It is attached to the root by a very fine root thread which then swells into a tuber about half a cm thick, before tapering again." (2002:38).

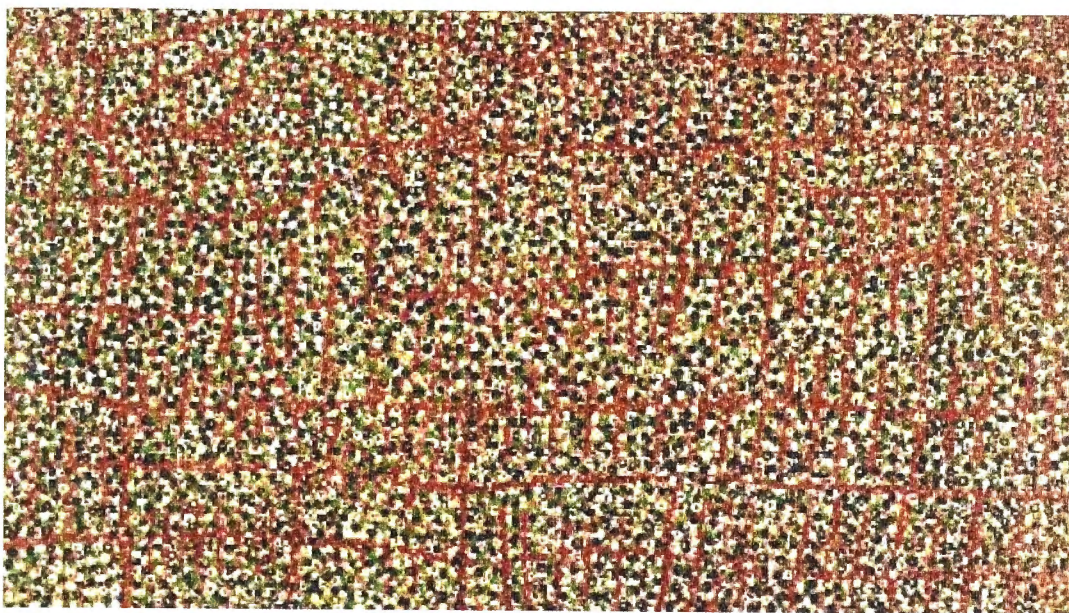


Fig. 24:  
Emily Kam  
Kngwarray:  
*Alagura (my  
country)*, 1990,  
synthetic polymer  
paint on canvas,  
130 x 200.9 cm,  
AGSA, Photo:  
Chrischona  
Schmidt

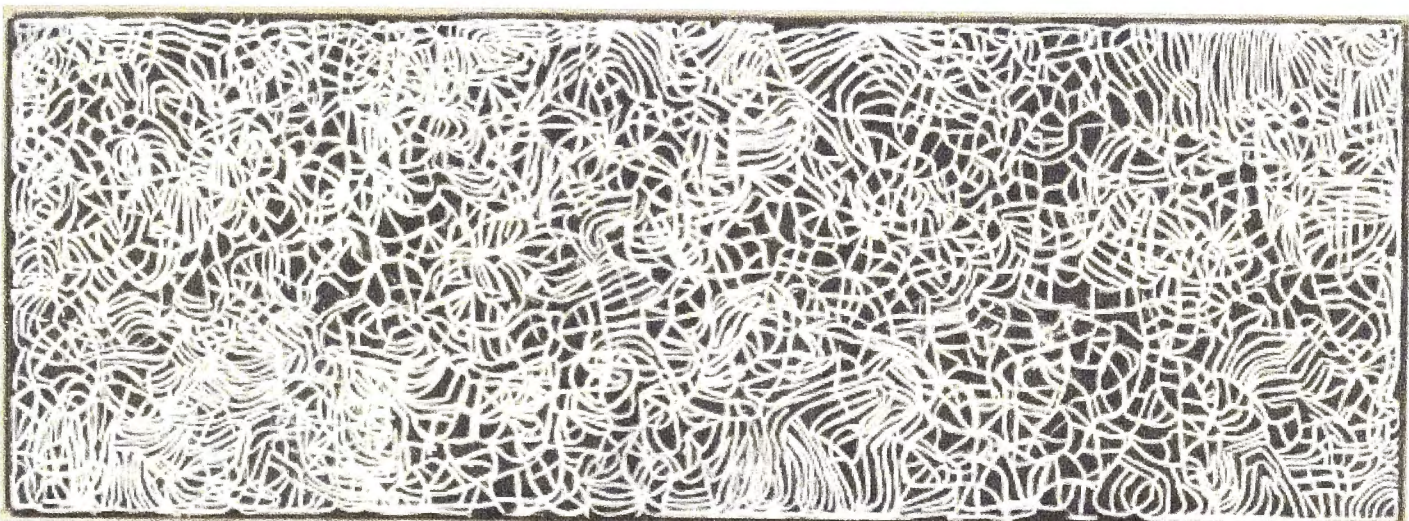


Fig. 25: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awelarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995,  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291 x 801.8 cm, NGV



Therefore one could interpret the early batik (Fig.19) as a microscopic detail of the landscape, as a view on the landscape from very far away, or a bird's-eye perspective<sup>465</sup>. Within this batik we see one of the signature elements of her repertoire: the grid representing the pencil yam network.

Returning again to *Pencil Yam (awerlarr)*, 1980 (Fig. 21) we can see more of the main visual elements and motifs in her *œuvre*: for example her dots prominent in *Untitled (Alhalker)*, 1992 (Fig. 26), the tracks of the emu and the 'flower motif'<sup>466</sup>, which can also be found in the early shirt from 1979 (Fig. 22) and may have lead through layering to the grid. The grid differs from the root network as it is more symmetrical and geometrical.

The dot can be found in a plethora of Kngwarray's works, with *Untitled (Alhalker)*, 1992 (Fig. 26) representing just one of many examples for the extraction of an element and the endless repetition of it.



Fig. 26: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled(Alhalker)*, 1992, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 165 x 480 cm, AGNSW

Sometimes her predominantly dotted paintings are referred to by titles as flowers, seeds, and sometimes as artworks simply 'Untitled'. Conversations with *Alhalker* countrywomen today provide their insights that the dot represents mostly *kam* of *atnwerl*<sup>467</sup>. *Atnwerl*, or *tinospora smilacina*, the snake vine is "[a] woody twiner, climbing up trees and shrubs as high as 4-5 m, its flowers are greenish-yellow and the mature fruits are red. [...] The fruits are *not* eaten." (Latz 1995:287) This medicinal plant is common throughout central Australia and its sap is used for healing wounds (Ibid.).

<sup>465</sup>This was part of a discussion with Claus Volkenandt (February 2011).

<sup>466</sup>The flower motif could be the representation of *intekw, scaevola parvifolia*: "A clonal under-shrub about 30 cm high with rigid, hairy and practically leafless branches. The small flowers, in the shape of a fan, are usually dark blue and they produce small, barrel-shaped, hairy fruits which are juicy and pale orange in colour when ripe." (Latz 1995:263)

<sup>467</sup>Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Kngwarray (September and October 2010).



However *kam* are also *arlatyey* seeds and again part of Kngwarray's Dreaming or better part of *Alhalker*. The dots of *atnwerl* can represent the seed as a whole or after it has been pounded. The dots in the 'dump-dump' paintings<sup>468</sup>, which can also include 'double-dotting', are not flowers, despite possibly appearing like that to a non-Anmatyerr eye. These dots of paint (Fig. 27), which flared out in response to the impact of its application, and in which different colours are mixed, visible in the edges, are said to represent the seeds, which have just been pounded with a rock<sup>469</sup>.

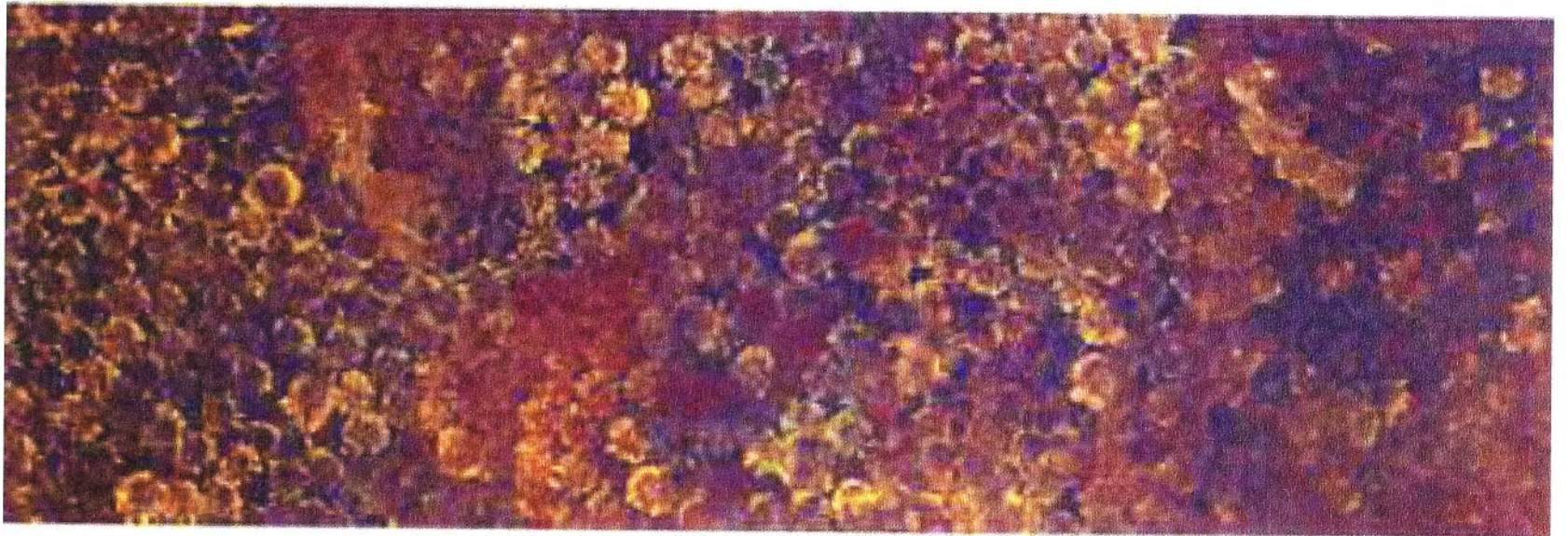


Fig. 27: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 233.5 cm x 79.5 cm x 4 cm, private collection

Every depiction of a plant can have several colours depending on the stage of germination. These colours derive from the natural development of the plant and therefore determine the colours one can choose for painting this plant<sup>470</sup>. It is possible to choose green as a colour, as this is colour of the stem and leaves of the plant. On the other hand, the dot could also be the flower of *atnwerl*, which is generally greenish-yellow (Ibid. pp. 287). This reveals that although there is a set of themes and colours every dot can be interpreted in quite different ways.

The next theme, for which Kngwarray became quite famous in terms of her abstraction, are her linear constructions as depicted in *Untitled (Awely)*, 1994 (Fig. 28)<sup>471</sup>.

<sup>468</sup>In a personal communication with Margo Neale she uses this expression of 'dump-dump' paintings, which they are also called in the film 'Emily in Japan – The making of an exhibition' (2009).

<sup>469</sup>Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Kngwarray, Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010).

<sup>470</sup>Personal communication with Helen Kunoth Kngwarray, Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September and October 2010).

<sup>471</sup>In regards to this series, one must bear in mind that they may well have been painted in one day; however, I doubt that Kngwarray envisaged them to be hung together. The hanging of them as a group emphasizes the claim to modernity so often found in exhibitions with Kngwarray's works.





Fig. 28: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Awely)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 6 pieces, each 190 x 56.7cm, private collection

When asked about these, she referred to them as ‘*awely*’ or body paint for ‘*awely*’<sup>472</sup>. This dominant topic in art from Utopia, as I have discussed in Chapter 8, can also be found in Kngwarray’s *œuvre*. She uses a variety of colours for *awely* paintings, however, always juxtaposing lighter with darker colours.

During my field trip to Utopia in 2010, some *Alhalker* artists watched the episode *Art + Soul* on TV at night while I was present. Hetti Perkins referred in the show to these lines as a great example for Kngwarray’s minimalist style<sup>473</sup>. The show sparked a debate among the artists and led to their desire to take me to the Dreaming place that influenced body paintings and the ‘stripe’ paintings: *Lurlpula*. This place is a rock site near Boundary Bore, in *Alhalker* country which I illustrated in chapter 8. As exemplified in the image, the rock shows a pattern of lines in a dark and a light tone (Fig. 29).

<sup>472</sup>Christopher Hodges at ‘Why do these fellas paint like me?’ Symposium at the National Museum of Australia, August 2008.

<sup>473</sup>Hetti Perkins in ‘Art + Soul’ on ABC (October 2010).





Fig. 29:  
Yam Dreaming site  
near Boundary Bore in  
Utopia (September  
2010), Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

These are not painted onto the rock, rather they appear to have been carved into it; yet I was told that they are from the Dreaming and represent the *awely* body paint design for yam<sup>474</sup>.

In her early works and in her batiks these lines are part of a motif that references women's breasts (Fig. 18). This figurative motif of two pairs of painted or a single pair of breasts, sometimes combined with the painted upper arms, only later is reduced to the mere lines. Some of the 'line paintings' even seem as if they could have been painted with a finger rather than a brush, in a similar fashion as the body painting was done. In all of Kngwarray's works, the predominant body painting design found is the one in this painting<sup>475</sup> (Fig. 30). This is the *awely* design for Kangaroo Dreaming, which shows that she depicts Kangaroo in two ways in her works: through her body painting as well as through the footprints mentioned above.

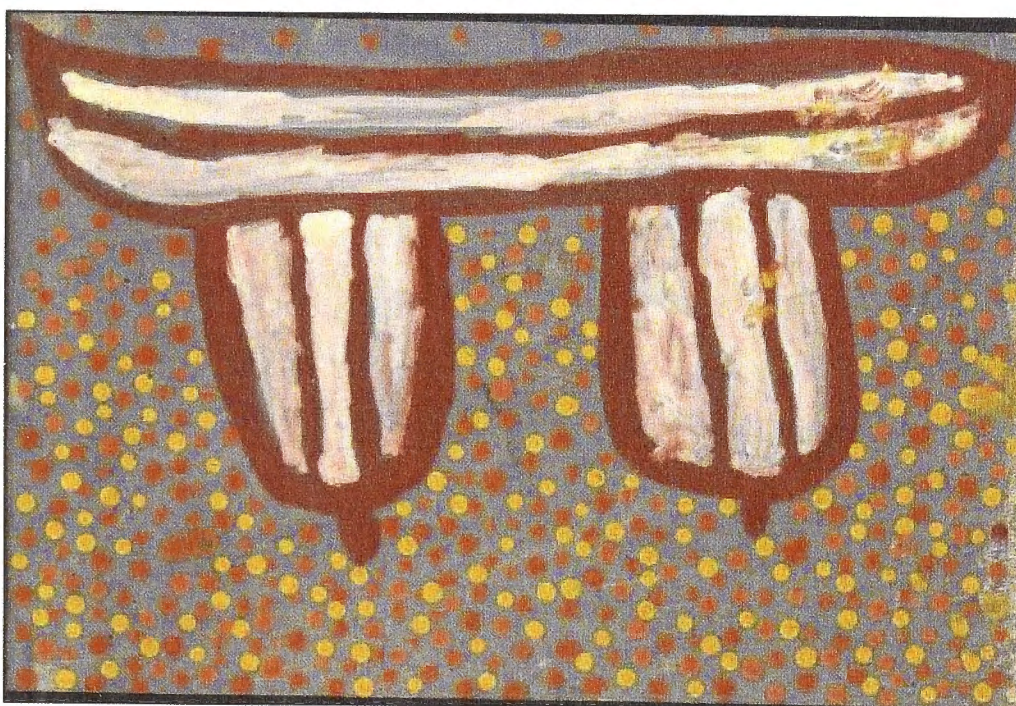


Fig. 30:  
Emily Kam  
Kngwarray: *Awely*,  
1989, 30.1 x 45.0 cm,  
synthetic polymer paint  
on composition board,  
NGV

<sup>474</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September 2010).

<sup>475</sup>Refer to Table 1 in Chapter 8 for a list and illustrations of a series of body painting designs from the Utopia region.



Biddle, who worked with Warlpiri women in Lajamanu, understands these lines by Kngwarray as a form of Indigenous writing, in fact 'as becoming-writing' (Biddle 2007:43). Furthermore, Biddle claims that 'it [the Utopia panels] 'says' nothing ultimately. It cannot be read – at least by those it appears to address most. It does not and cannot translate' (Biddle 2007:51) (Fig. 3). Yet Biddle tries to 'read' Kngwarray's lines, lines that she understands as a form of writing and a claim to country. She makes a general claim that marks are signs, thus writing. Therefore, following such a claim, any mark-making can be "read" as writing, even if its calligraphic meaning, as mnemonic form, is untranslatable<sup>476</sup>. This approach to the Kngwarray's line paintings can be the first point of reference (Fig. 31). However, a deeper understanding of the works is given through the comparison with the rock site: the clear connection between Kngwarray's visual repertoire and Alhalker becomes visible through this example. Her stripe paintings are claims to country on several levels, of which mark-making as "writing" is only one of many possible modes of interpretation.

Another point of reference for gaining a deeper understanding is the preparation for and the performance of *awely* ceremonies: A large group of women gathers in a circle and chooses a painter as well as the sequence in which women are painted. One by one the painter applies the different ochres to the women's bodies accompanied by continuous singing. Every design refers to a different story, another Dreaming and a different country<sup>477</sup>. Once the painting of bodies is completed, *awely* can be performed. The painted-up part of the group are the dancers, the others sit in a half circle and start singing. During the performance, one singer directs and instructs the dancers. Every country is represented by at least two dancers.



Fig. 31: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, August 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 71 x 169 cm, FUAM

<sup>476</sup>Personal communication with Nigel Lendon (November 2011).

<sup>477</sup>Personal observation in December 2011.



Kngwarray was part of a group of Utopia women involved in the Land Council hearings in 1979 (Murray 2008:120), during which they were consulted about their relationships to country. They performed *awely* for the judge:

Faced with this situation, women chose to perform [*awely*] for the Court in addition to giving formal evidence. By displaying some of their body paintings, ritual objects and dances, which belong to particular clan countries, they were showing in visual terms their ownership of these countries. (Ms Rowell quoted in Toohey 1980:36)<sup>478</sup>

Together these were considered sufficient evidence for the women to claim their connection to country and to demonstrate how they have maintained it over the years of settlement by Europeans<sup>479</sup>.

Another motif – or better, trace – visible in Kngwarray’s works is the Emu footprint (Fig. 32) referring to the travels of the ancestral being.



Fig. 32:  
Photo of emu footprint sand  
drawing by Genevieve Loy  
Kemarr, Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt (October 2009)

In all her carvings she did not create a single Emu, but some of her paintings show the footprints of an emu wandering (Fig. 33).

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<sup>478</sup>Ms Rowell, Notes: Exhibit 40, Comments page 1', in Justice John Toohey (Aboriginal Land Commissioner) 1980: *Anmatjirra and Alyawarra land claim to Utopia pastoral lease*, p. 36, [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/annualreports/aboriginal\\_land\\_comm\\_reports/anmatjirra/Documents/06.PDF](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/annualreports/aboriginal_land_comm_reports/anmatjirra/Documents/06.PDF) (last sighted 25/10/2011).

<sup>479</sup>Detailed information about as well as photos from the land claim hearings can be accessed at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra.





Fig. 33:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Emu Story*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150.6 x 121.8 cm, NGV

The underlying lines are, as mentioned above, the pencil yam tube system. Emu Dreaming also travels through *Alhalker*; however, with many important elders recently deceased, it has been difficult for me to elicit further information about the Emu Dreaming stories. Additionally, knowledge about these Dreaming stories is often restricted to men. Despite men holding the knowledge about Emu Dreaming, Kngwarray had rights to it as well, because she would not have been allowed to depict it without having had rights to it. This points to the fact that often old women of a community have similar knowledge about Dreaming stories as men<sup>480</sup>.

Kngwarray lived for a long time around Atheley, an outstation in the north of Utopia where *anaty*, bush potato or yam, is one of the major Dreamings. She might have earned rights to paint this story because of her close association with the country (Fig. 34).



Fig. 34:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Anaty (wild potato)*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 151.2 x 91.1 cm, NGV

In addition, her second husband was from the area<sup>481</sup> and might have had rights to *anaty*. However, the only evidence that she had the right to produce the design comes

<sup>480</sup>Refer to Dussart (2000) for women's role in ritual and ceremonies.

<sup>481</sup>Personal communication with Donald Holt (October 2010).



from the titles recorded for the paintings. When speaking to one ‘countrywomen’<sup>482</sup>, it was claimed that these motifs were *arlatyey* rather than *anaty*. The distinctions between these two plants are not made everywhere in the desert, but certainly are in Utopia<sup>483</sup>. Therefore it may be either that the paintings are correctly titled and that she was holding rights to the *anaty* design or that there was a mistake in recording the title. These are cases for future research into Kngwarray’s *œuvre*. Kngwarray mentioned her concerns about errors occurring in regards to her titles to Anne Marie Brody in an interview in 1994 (1997:79):

She [Kngwarray] was angered that some of her paintings had been given titles (and stories) that were wrong. Important issues of authorisation and Law were involved and outsiders’ errors, however they came about, placed her on difficult ground.(Ibid.).

Another everyday life influence in her works can be found in the *objets trouvés* she has painted and converted into artworks. One example of this would be her watering can for Janet Holmes à Court (Fig. 7). As outlined above, Gooch instigated group projects during his time as an art coordinator, and one of them was to paint car doors as well as bonnets. Kngwarray responded to the shape of the object and used these as ‘canvases’ by covering them in dots, possibly depicting yam flowers or seeds (Fig. 35).



Fig. 35:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Untitled*, 1992, 110 x 84  
irregular shape, synthetic  
polymer paint on metal (car  
door), glass, AGSA

<sup>482</sup>I am using this term according to Myers (1991:90f.).

<sup>483</sup>See Latz (1995) for further explanations on both plants. Compare also to Lovegrove (2002): she distinguishes with the help of Utopia women between the two plants and even digs them up.



She treated them as surfaces to be painted rather than three-dimensional objects. Even her sculptures are covered in dots reminding of the connection between the ancestral beings and *Alhalker*, as we see in *Man* (Fig. 36).



Fig. 36:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Man*, synthetic  
polymer paint on wood, n. d., no  
measurements, HaC, Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

Most artworks from Emily Kam Kngwarray, which I have been able to access and analyse, depict either one or more of the nine topics outlined above. On the basis of my analysis of her *œuvre*, I argue that some of these themes are stronger in her *œuvre* in comparison to others, which seem almost peripheral. For example the themes of *arlatyey*, its roots and its seeds – *kam* – are omnipresent in her *œuvre*. Other dominant topics are *atnwerl* and *intekw*. Further *awely*, the body paint designs for women's ceremony, is also very important and recurs over time. In comparison, Mountain Devil Lizard and *tingu*, the Dreamtime dog, hardly appear in her works. In her paintings, one can find footprints of dogs that walked over the paintings whilst the paint was still wet<sup>484</sup>. Why did Kngwarray not touch these footprints up and create a 'clean' canvas? I suggest that this choice may have been influenced by her Dreaming *tingu*, the ancestral dog<sup>485</sup>. Thus it could have been a deliberate choice to leave them in the painting as a representation of her Dreaming topics or that it simply was part and parcel of painting in the outdoors. As *ntang* (mulga seed) are depicted as dots they could be seen in many of her art works and no definite answer about their appearance has been given to me by *Alhalker* artists. In her early artworks, a multiplicity of these themes occur together as

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<sup>484</sup>Unfortunately, the dog footprints are not visible in the reproductions. However, in front of some of her paintings they are clearly definable.

<sup>485</sup>On the other hand it may have been the everyday life experience of living in camps surrounded by dogs.

we can see in *Emu Dreaming* 1988 (Fig. 37): which depicts *awelye*, dots, fan flowers, and various animals and plants.



Fig. 37:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Emu Dreaming*, 1988, 236  
x 117,5 cm, batik on silk,  
HaC

Over time she isolated these themes and motifs and started to paint them independently, singling them out and multiplying them over the canvas. This development can be traced for example with this flower motif in *Wild Orange Dreaming*, 1989 (Fig. 38), which she extracted and repeated infinitely over the canvas in *Untitled (Awelye)*, 1994 (Fig. 39).



Fig. 38:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Wild  
Orange Dreaming*, 1989, 120 x  
89.7 cm, synthetic polymer paint  
on linen, HaC (detail)



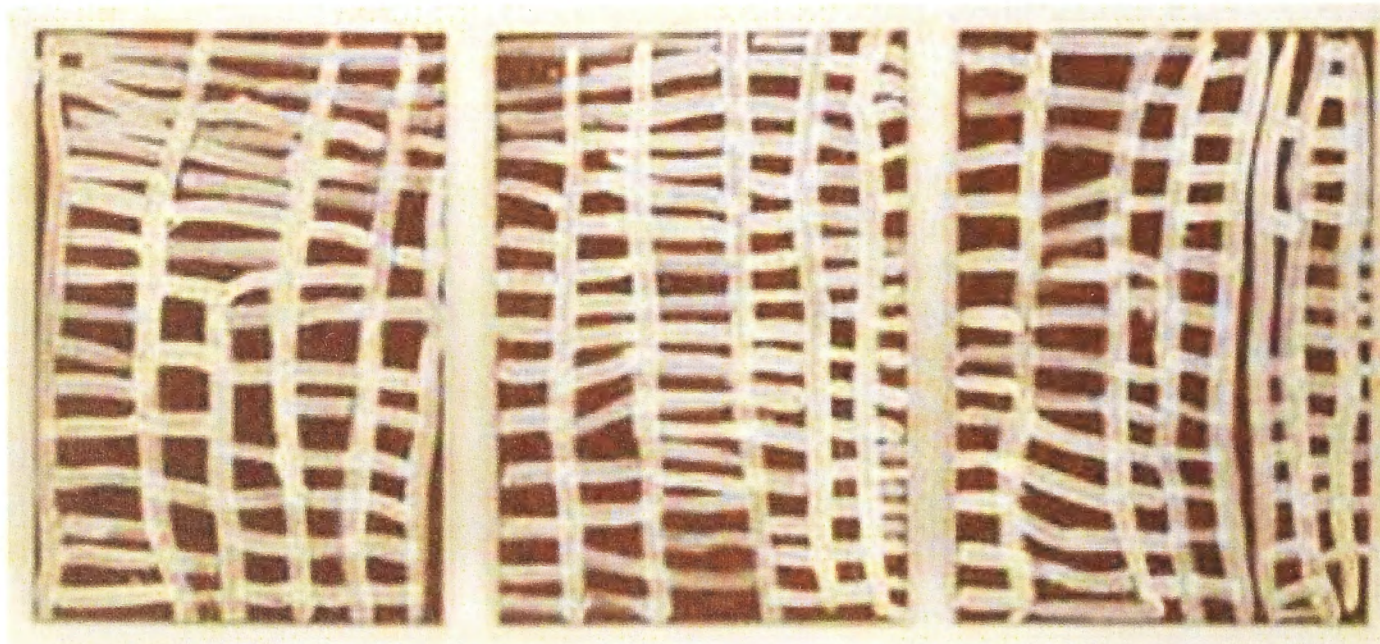


Fig. 39: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled (Awelye)*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on paper laminated to canvas, 100.7 cm x 213.0 cm (total size of 3 panels), AGNSW

Her highly layered batiks and paintings were taken apart layer by layer and turned into individual artworks, each one of them representing one facet of *Alhalker*. *Untitled*, 1981 (Fig. 19) and *My Country*, November 1994 (Fig. 40), created at the beginning and toward the end respectively of her career as a commercial artist, reflect her artistic development and innovation<sup>486</sup>. I have shown how these paintings express *Alhalker* and therefore her connection with it.

## 10.6 Conclusion

Through painting her country, Kngwarray paints her world, she not only creates a mimesis but she differentiates, reinvents and deconstructs a world<sup>487</sup>. By including the interpretations and comments of her 'one countrywomen', I examined Kngwarray's visual and thematic repertoire. I showed the connections between Kngwarray's works, rituals, stories, country and the everyday, which are all ever so present in her *œuvre*.

In order to create the mythical evolution of her works, the connections and continuities within her *œuvre* have been dismissed. Art curators have put her works into categories and comparisons that are part of the pre-existing Western art canon. By reducing the meaning of her works to a mere allusion to spirituality and connection to country, it was possible to include her in the history of Aboriginal art without changing the master narrative. The portrayal of her development as an evolution through styles of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western art movements, finally is a form of 'projective picturing' (Smith 2006).

<sup>486</sup>In a conversation with Howard Morphy, he argued that is a common path to abstraction (April 2011).

<sup>487</sup>Refer to Smith and his elaborations on 'world-picturing' (2006).



This means that the viewer understands, categorises and analyses images in relation to his or her previous exposure to artworks. Therefore he or she is only able to accommodate these artworks within the framework of Western art as this is the one known to the viewer<sup>488</sup>.



Fig. 40:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *My Country*, November 1994, no measurements, synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, FUAM

One apparent discrepancy remains after having looked at her life, art, career and her inspiration through *Alhalker*: the fact that her fellow artists considered her initially a ‘sloppy’ batik artist, but followed her lead quite quickly after noticing the art market's interest in her paintings. Her mode of expression was possibly from the beginning more adapted to the medium painting than batik. With painting, she turned rapidly into an innovative and creative artist, inspiring not only *Alhalker* countrywomen and countrymen but many artists in the Utopia region and possibly even throughout Australia<sup>489</sup>. In the next chapter, I explore *Alhalker* artists, their *œuvre*, and the ways that these works relate to that of Kngwarray in light of the fact that they were partially taught to paint by her.

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<sup>488</sup>Wollheim (1973) looks into how the mind perceives artworks.

<sup>489</sup>One example of that would be Immant Tillers and his works that integrate Kngwarray's works.





## Chapter 11: Emily Kam Kngwarray and the artists of Alhalker

### 11.1 Introduction

The last chapter highlighted Emily Kam Kngwarray's life, career and her *œuvre*. Her role within the Utopia community was, however, barely touched upon. This chapter discusses Kngwarray's influence on 'one countrymen/-women' of hers. It examines differences and similarities in topics, styles and innovations from various Alhalker artists. Finally this chapter situates Kngwarray and her works within a social environment, in which her legacy can be traced through the artworks of men and women taught or influenced by her. At the same time these artists have developed their own signature styles and innovations, which marks their autonomy from Kngwarray.

### 11.2 Emily Kam Kngwarray's painting school?

In his monograph on Kunwinjku art, Luke Taylor suggested an apprenticeship system between junior and senior artists based on family bonds and clan membership (1998). He explained how young artists sought to work over a long period of time with different senior artists in order to expand their repertoire and skill base. Further, by analysing the different types of crosshatching, the animals painted, their infill and the designs chosen, Taylor showed how to distinguish between the different schools in the Maningrida region. The key for this apprenticeship system - which can in some ways be compared to the Western notion of art schools or masters and students, such as Donatello or Rembrandt and his students who worked for them in their workshops - is relatedness.

Similarly, relatedness plays a major role in the transfer of knowledge of painting in Utopia. However, as family ties are not based on clan membership and such affiliations cannot be painted, a different concept and connectedness forms the basis of relatedness.

In his 'Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self' (1986), Fred Myers examined relatedness between Western Desert Aborigines in Yayayi, an outstation of Papunya. Myers proposes a system of relatedness based on the concept of being 'one countryman'. This concept is tied to two notions in Pintupi social life: the people with whom one shares ownership of a country (Ibid. pp. 91), and the people with whom one camps or travels (Ibid. p. 90ff). "The classification of people as "from one *ngurra*" can refer either to ritual groups or to ego-centered social networks" (Ibid. pp. 91). Thus throughout their lives people



constantly create these relationships and can call upon their one 'countrymen' and 'countrywomen' for resources (Ibid.).

Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr speakers of the Sandover region have an Arandic kinship system unlike the Pintubi. However, the concept of being 'one countrymen/-women' on the basis of shared experience and relationships applies equally well to the Alyawarr and as Eastern Anmatyerr people. The focus of the category 'one countrymen' is on the shared ritual ownership of or relationship to country. Each person has rights and obligations to country, which they develop throughout their lives. Part of learning about 'country' is learning the stories and Dreamings associated with it. Dreamings are inherited throughout Utopia via the father's side. A woman, however, learns about the Dreaming less through her father himself than through female relatives. Her father's sisters, aunties, and other 'one countrywomen' are particularly important in this teaching process<sup>490</sup>.

Emily Kam Kngwarray was a ritual elder and one of the owners of her country, Alhalker. She was known as a significant holder of knowledge about Alhalker and the Dreamings and rituals associated with it. Kngwarray's influence on the Utopia art movement necessitates an examination of her role within the community as a ritual leader and teacher. Teaching painting in Utopia as well as in other Indigenous communities across Australia is related to teaching rituals, stories and the Dreaming as the topics of her paintings all derive from *Altyerr*, the Dreaming. Kngwarray not only taught young women about *Altyerr* and ceremonies related to Alhalker, but also about painting<sup>491</sup>. Women learnt from her the stories, the dances and the body painting designs of Alhalker. When Kngwarray started to paint on canvas many young Alhalker women followed her around in order to help her when possible, but also to learn from her<sup>492</sup>.

Kngwarray's role as a teacher of young women about Alhalker, the Dreaming and painting is an example of how the system of relatedness of 'one countrymen/-women' shapes the kind of apprenticeship or student-master relationship existing in Utopia. It is not only consanguineal kin who teach one how to paint, but the wider group of 'one countrymen/-women' including classificatory and cognatic kin, who do so throughout

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<sup>490</sup> Personal communication with Josie Kunoth Petyarr and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (October 2010).

<sup>491</sup> Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray (September and October 2010).

<sup>492</sup> Even in the movie 'Women of Utopia' (1984) was Kngwarray filmed bossing women around.

one's life. As an 'apprentice', one learns from a variety of people<sup>493</sup>. Nevertheless certain people can take on a special role for the learning artist, such as the grandmother or aunt for a young female artist.

The learning period can stretch for years, even more than a decade<sup>494</sup>. During this period different teachers can be influential<sup>495</sup>, helping the artist to acquire a wealth of knowledge about his/her country and the stories and rituals associated with it, as well as its related colours, designs or templates. To become an innovative, creative and versatile artist is therefore inextricably linked to being knowledgeable about country, rituals and the Dreaming.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Kngwarray's repertoire was quite varied; having, over time developed each of these topics in increasing detail. Did women, whom she taught, just copy her? Or did they create their own signature? Is her influence visible in the artworks of the successive generation, or are the parameters of the Dreaming stories the driving influence in representational similarities? In order to discuss these questions, I will analyse the works of three female Alhalker artists as well as two male artists from Alhalker and their works, examining similarities to and differences from Kngwarray's *œuvre*.

### 11.3 Alhalker artists

A number of Utopia artists who live in different outstations across the community learnt how to paint from 'old Aunty Emily'<sup>496</sup>. Josie Kunoth Petyarr and Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray explained to me that it was Kngwarray who had taught them, as young women, how and what to paint. Those who learnt from her include Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and her sister Helen, Josie Kunoth Petyarr, and Emily Kam Kngwarray's brother Kudditji Kngwarray and nephew Greenie Purvis Petyarr.

Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray not only learned from Emily Kam Kngwarray the stories and rituals of Alhalker and was painted up by her for ritual, but also learnt how to paint them. In transferring Alhalker stories onto canvas, Kunoth Kngwarray's choice of topics is influenced by her Dreaming and her country, and so too are the colours she uses. She

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<sup>493</sup>Compared to Myers' (1986) descriptions of how people set up their relationship networks and establish their rights to various countries, this process of 'learning' from various people is similar.

<sup>494</sup>Personal communication with Genevieve Loy Kemarr about her 'student time' (September 2010).

<sup>495</sup>Compare this with the Maningrida case in Taylor's study (1998).

<sup>496</sup>Personal communication with Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray and Josie Kunoth Petyarr (October 2010).



paints the pencil yam: its seeds, flowers and roots, which are shaped like tubes (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Kunoth Kngwarray's paintings also represent yam seeds and leaves, which are moving through the wind over the ground (Fig. 3 and 4); and *awely*, women's business from her mother's country, Atnangker (Fig. 5). Emily Kam Kngwarray's characteristic pencil yam tube grids (Fig. 6) do not occur in Kunoth Kngwarray's paintings, and Kunoth Kngwarray's paintings are a fusion of different influences in addition to her own innovations.



Fig. 1:  
Photo of Pencil Yam (in Lovegrove  
2002: 56)



Fig. 2:  
Photo of the pencil yam flower and  
plant (in Lovegrove 2002: 57)



Fig. 3:  
Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush  
Seeds*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint  
on linen, 198 x 120 cm (detail),  
private collection



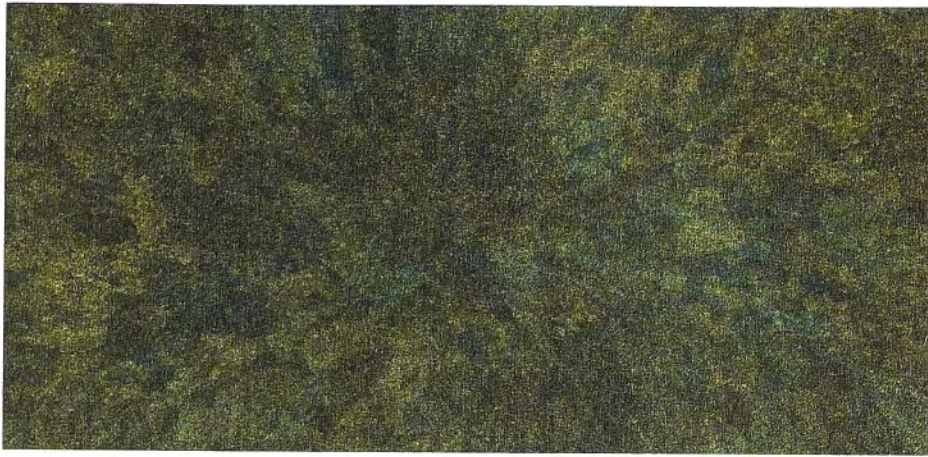


Fig. 4:  
Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Bush Yam*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 220 x 117 cm, private collection



Fig. 5:  
Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray:  
*Untitled*, 2010, 90 x60 cm, synthetic polymer paint on linen, private collection, Photo: Chrischona Schmidt

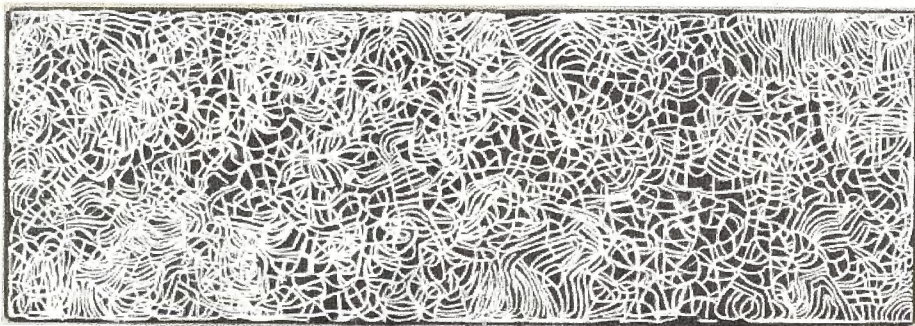


Fig. 6:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Awelarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291 x 801.8 cm, NGV

She learnt not only from ‘old auntie Emily’ but also from her mother, Nancy Petyarr<sup>497</sup> (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7:  
Nancy Petyarr: *Mountain Devil Dreaming*, 1997, 123 x 120 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, AGSA

Petyarr was one of the most important ritual leaders for Atnangker *awely*, the women’s rituals associated with the Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming; knowledge of which she passed on to her daughters. Petyarr, along with Emily Kam Kngwarray, were amongst

<sup>497</sup>Nancy Petyarr passed away in 2009 and shortly after her sister Ada Bird Petyarr passed away too.



the first batik-makers in Utopia and she developed her topics over time alongside her six sisters.

Another influence on Kunoth Kngwarray's works has been her husband and his paintings. Cowboy Loy Pwerl was one of the first men to start painting in Utopia and has developed the representation of his Bush Turkey Dreaming from a close-up view into an abstract bird's-eye-perspective (Fig. 8), as I have previously discussed in Chapter 9.



Fig. 8:  
Cowboy Loy Pwerl: *Bush Turkey Dreaming*, 2007, 199 x 237,  
synthetic polymer paint on linen,  
AGSA

Nevertheless Petyarr's and Kngwarray's influences are the most visible in Kunoth Kngwarray's works. The dots swirling or floating (Fig. 9) over the background are reminiscent of Kngwarray's 'dump-dump' paintings (Fig. 10), which allude to the grinding movement of a stone on a grind stone.

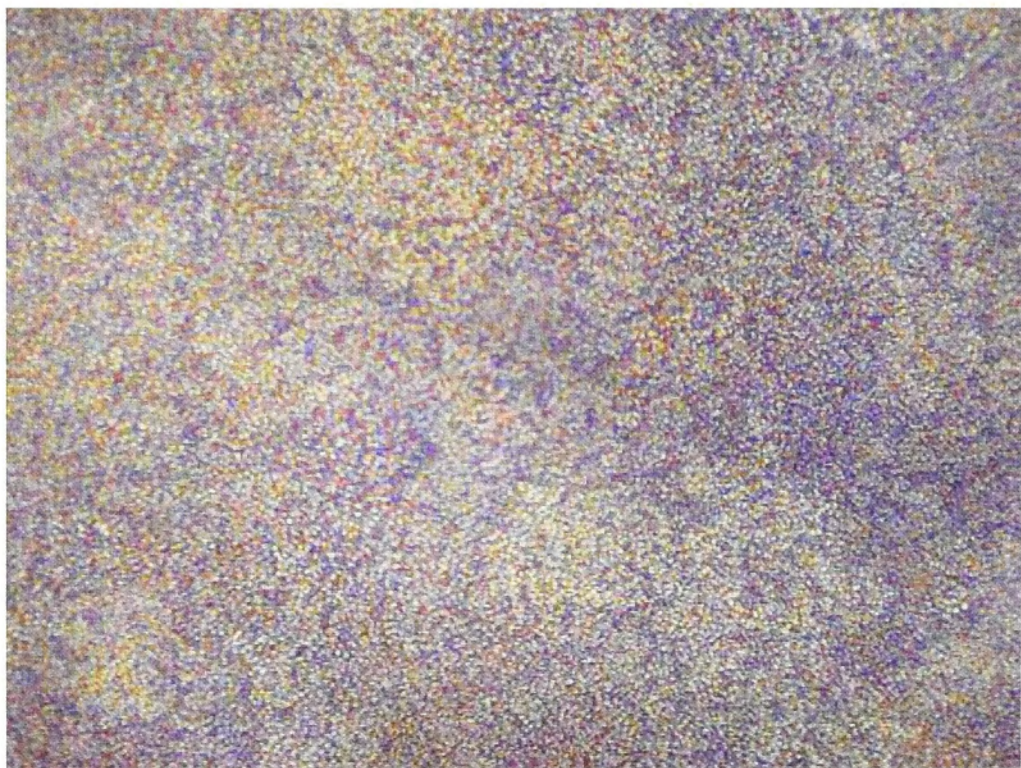


Fig. 9:  
Elizabeth Kunoth  
Kngwarray: *Bush Yam  
Seeds and Flowers*  
(detail), synthetic  
polymer on linen, 178 cm  
x 180 cm, n.d., private  
collection



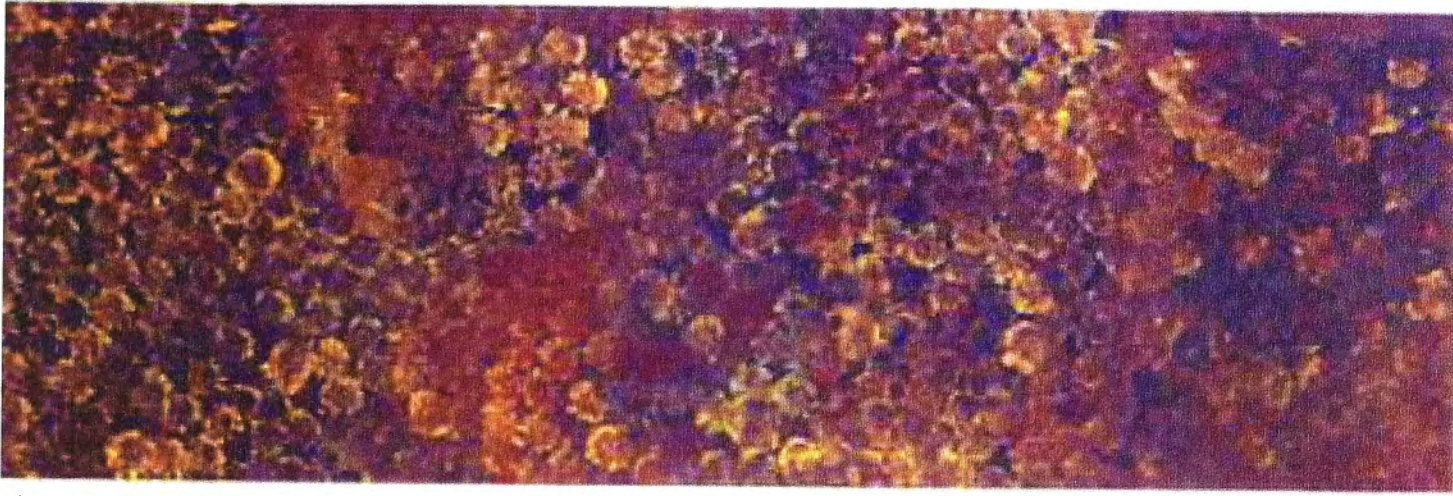


Fig. 10: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Untitled*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 233.5 cm x 79.5 cm x 4.0 cm , private collection

In comparison to the dots of Kam Kngwarray, which are the seeds, Kunoth Kngwarray's dots are not the ground seed, but rather the seeds in the soil. She demonstrates that they have not yet been pounded and ground by extending them slightly, dragging the nozzle of her squeeze bottle out and creating a little tail to the seed (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11:  
Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray: *Yam Seeds*  
(detail), n.d., synthetic polymer on linen,  
117 x 94.5 cm, private collection

Her canvas of finely dispersed seed acquires a unique character through their elongated shape. This evokes the work of her other aunt, Gloria Petyarr; particularly Petyarr's bush medicine leaves (Fig. 12).





Fig. 12:  
Gloria Petyarr: *Untitled (leaves)*,  
2004, acrylic on polyester, 210 x  
180cm, private collection

On the other hand, the depiction of half-circles to represent *awely* evoke Kunoth Kngwarray's mother's, Nancy Petyarr (Fig. 13), and her aunt, Violet Petyarr's, works (Fig. 14) of women's ritual.

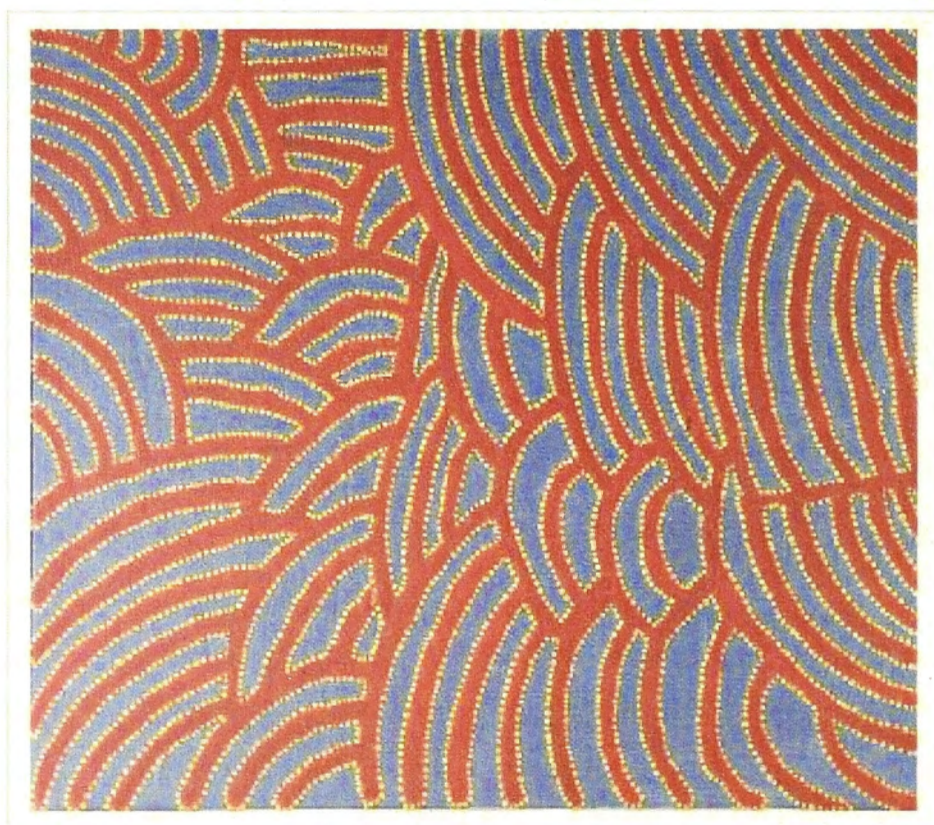


Fig. 13:  
Nancy Kunoth Petyarr:  
*Mountain devil dreaming*,  
1996, 87 x 74 cm, synthetic  
polymer paint on canvas,  
AGSA



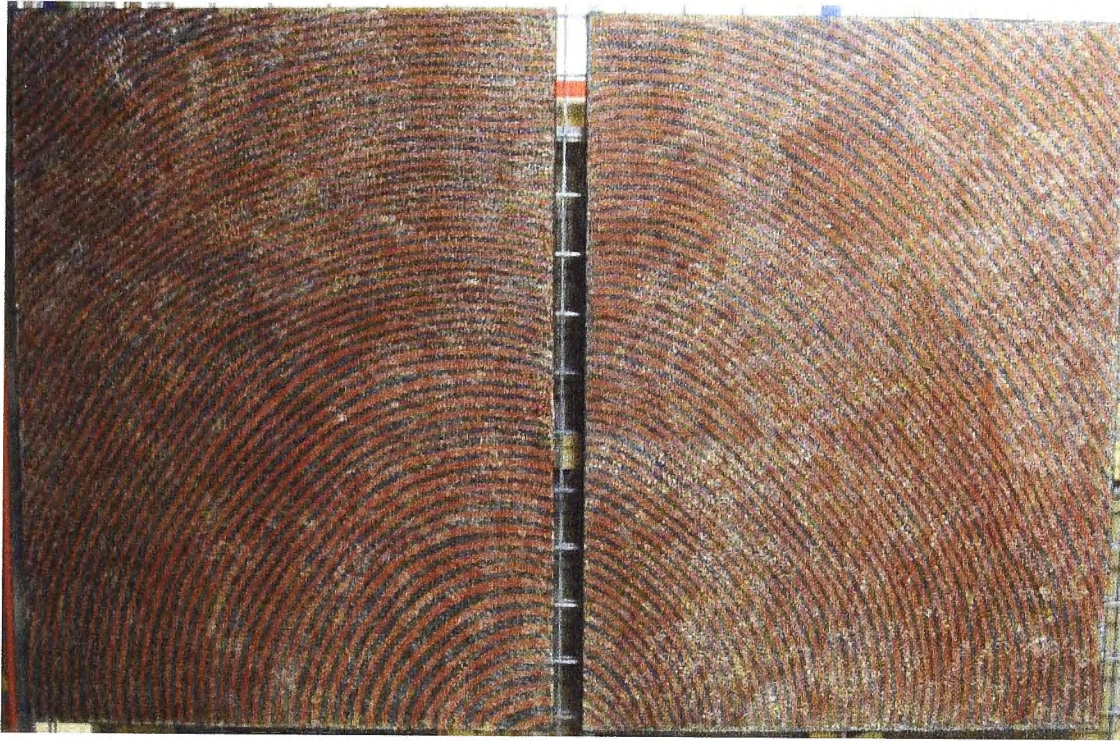


Fig. 14:  
Violet Petyarr: *Untitled*, 1997,  
90 x 122 cm each, pair,  
synthetic polymer paint on two  
canvases, AGSA, Photo:  
Chrischona Schmidt

Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray's younger sister, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray<sup>498</sup>, only paints occasionally. Her country is also Alhalker and she too watched Emily Kam Kngwarray painting. However, due to her age at the time, Helen had less opportunity to learn from Kngwarray than did her older sisters Elizabeth, Lucy and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray<sup>499</sup>. Helen's works focus on the seed pods of the pencil yam (Fig. 15) where the network of roots interconnects and spreads out like a rhizome. She depicts the seed, the flowers and the roots as well as the large seed pod of the pencil yam.



Fig. 15:  
Helen Kunoth  
Kngwarray:  
*Atnwerrlarr* (detail),  
2009, synthetic  
polymer paint on  
canvas, 54.5 x 91 cm,  
private collection,  
Photo: Chrischona  
Schmidt

Her paintings appear as if one of her old Auntie Emily's paintings had been enlarged in one section and that this detail had become the whole painting (Fig. 16).

<sup>498</sup>As in the following text I am referring to all the different sisters I will use their first names rather than their last names.

<sup>499</sup>Carol Kunoth Kngwarray has also created a number of artworks, which I was able to locate in several collections. However, she does not consider herself an artist and paints very rarely nowadays. Lucy Kunoth Kngwarray used to paint as well, but stopped after falling ill and almost losing her hearing.





Fig. 16: Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Anaty (wild potato)*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 151.2 x 91.1 cm, NGV

The colours chosen for her representations of *atnwerlarr* are vibrant, creating a movement of the surface form despite its relatively static composition. Thus she creates a tension between the colours and the composition, which becomes her signature in the representation of the pencil yam.

The influence of Emily Kam Kngwarray is visible in different aspects of the Kunoth Kngwarray sisters' paintings: in Helen's work it is the microscopic detail of the pencil yam she depicts that shows resemblance (Fig. 15); for Elizabeth it is the topic of the yam seeds. Yet Helen has created her own version of the yam and does not 'copy' her aunt. Both sisters combine their mother's half-circle designs with their own interpretation of the pencil yam and are able to create something 'new' and innovative, giving it their signature, yet still remaining within the parameters of the stories associated with Alhalker.

Josie Kunoth Petyarr, another female artist from Alhalker and an important knowledge holder for this country<sup>500</sup>, has chosen a completely different path in her painting. In her works she switches between abstract and naïve modes of expression. The style she uses depends on the topic depicted: everyday situations are represented in a naïve manner by her; however, her Dreaming stories are painted in an abstract mode. When she first created batiks, she focussed on Dreaming stories; yet over time she ceased painting these, and the experiences of everyday life became the centre of her art. This shift is in part a statement of her and her husband's Christianity. However in the last year, Kunoth

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<sup>500</sup>For my research on Alhalker and its artists, Josie Kunoth Petyarr was mentioned as an important person with whom to liaise on a number of occasions.



Petyarr started to paint Dreaming topics again, this time choosing a different story – sugar bag. This dynamic development in her artistic output reflects her life’s trajectory and experiences.

In the last decade, most of Kunoth Petyarr’s works have focussed on contemporary topics: for example, everyday life in Utopia – such as football games (Fig. 17) – a trip to Melbourne (Fig. 18), or the birds (Fig. 19) and dogs (Fig. 20) found around the outstations and camps. Her choice of focus and naïve manner of painting is deliberate. This style enables her to paint her stories, to tell them to her audience and to reveal aspects of her life including her Christianity.



Fig. 17:  
Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Utopia Bush Football*, n.d., 90 x 117 cm, acrylic on canvas, private collection



Fig. 18:  
Josie Kunoth Petyarr:  
*Federation Square*, n.d.,  
synthetic polymer paint on  
linen, 151 x 111 cm, private  
collection





Fig. 19:  
Dinni Kunoth Kemarr & Josie  
Kunoth Petyarr: *Big Eagle*,  
n.d., 68 cm, acrylic on Bean  
Tree Wood (*Erythrina*  
*Vespertilio*), n.d., private  
collection



Fig. 20:  
Dinni Kunoth Kemarr: *Dinni's*  
*Dream Team*, 2009, height 60  
cm, width variable, acrylic on  
wood, private collection

Over the past years, Josie Kunoth Petyarr's husband, Dinni Kunoth Kemarr, has created a myriad of sculptures: football players (Fig. 20), birds (Fig. 19) and dogs are just some of his topics. Similar to his wife, Dinni Kunoth Kemarr is inspired by what surrounds him on a daily basis. Josie Kunoth Petyarr's depiction of everyday stories in her paintings and sculptures, as opposed to applying her knowledge about ritual and country, shows an eye for detail and great attention to her environment; something which is clearly evident in the work arising from her trip to Melbourne (Fig. 21 and 22).





Fig. 21:  
 Josie Kunoth Petyarr:  
*Melbourne at night*,  
 2008, acrylic on  
 canvas, 121 x 121 cm,  
 private collection



Fig. 22:  
 Josie Kunoth Petyarr  
 and Dinni Kunoth  
 Kemarr: *Melbourne  
 Story*, 2007, acrylic on  
 linen, no  
 measurements, private  
 collection

Kunoth Petyarr and her husband Kunoth Kemarr differ from the Kngwarray sisters in that they attend church every Sunday whenever possible and consider themselves to be Christians. Being part of the church and attending it on a regular basis is an integral part of their lives. Thus, Petyarr, as a confessing Christian, lives in a different situation than some of her fellow ‘one countrywomen’ who seldom attend church. This part of everyday life finds expression in her works too<sup>501</sup>. She made a deliberate decision to

<sup>501</sup>See Chapter 7 for details on the depiction of everyday life in Utopia.



paint everyday life stories in a naïve manner despite being taught by Emily Kam Kngwarray and the fact that her mother Polly Ngal, painting her *Dreaming – Bush Plum* (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23:  
Poly Ngal: *Bush Plum  
Country*, 2003, synthetic  
polymer on linen, 122 x 90  
cm, private collection

Petyarr is a prime example of the artist's agency; but this does not diminish the importance of the teachers she may have had. Although Petyarr has learnt from a variety of people who paint their country and the Dreaming stories related to it, she, together with her husband, chooses to paint another side of life in Utopia. She creates her very own stories in her works. However, recently, she has returned to depicting Dreaming stories. Her painting *Sugar Bag* from 2010 (Fig. 24) is an example for this re-focus in her *œuvre*. Petyarr is an unusual example of a Utopia artist painting naïvely as well as in the abstract mode. In this development, she again creates a new path for Alhalker artists: combining the work of her 'one countrywoman' Jeannie Petyarr (Fig. 25) with her, Josie Kunoth Petyarr's, own signature style. *Sugar Bag*, 2010 (Fig. 24) exemplifies this development of combining various approaches. It can be found in the brushstroke, which appears similar to the leaves of Petyarr's painting (Fig. 25). Additionally, one can trace it in the juxtaposition of a dark colour with white. In between every two brushstrokes in the middle for example a white one is visible too (Fig. 24). In *Bush Yam Dreaming* (Fig. 25), each leaf has a white highlight at the edge, which creates a similar effect to the juxtaposition of Kunoth Petyarr's painting. On the other hand, one can see the influences of her mother, Poly Ngal (Fig. 23), in Kunoth Petyarr's painting too (Fig. 24). She creates fields of colour, which do not merge as much as her mother's, yet they evoke an equally dense effect.





Fig. 24:  
Josie Kunoth Petyarr: *Sugar Bag*, 2010, 91 x 121 cm, acrylic on canvas, private collection

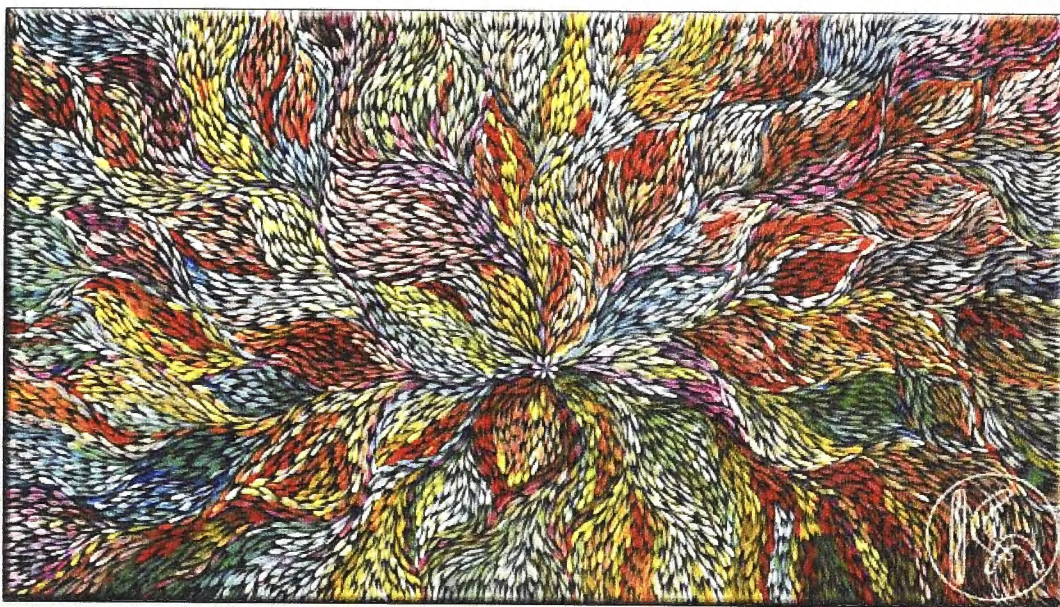


Fig. 25:  
Jeannie Petyarr: *Bush Yam Dreaming*, n.d., acrylic on canvas, 146 x 85 cm, private collection

Other Alhalker artists Emily Kam Kngwarray is likely to have influenced, but not taught directly, are her younger brother Kudditji Kngwarray and her nephew Greenie Purvis Petyarr. The latter passed away only recently in 2010, which has left for the moment a void in terms of ritual knowledge about Alhalker. Petyarr was amongst the first group of Utopia men to be interested in carved sculptures and painting. He began working as an artist at the time Utopia women were still creating batiks. Purvis Petyarr's paintings represent the stories of Alhalker. He paints pencil yam, just like his aunt. His works show a similar level of abstraction visible in Kngwarray's *œuvre*. He paints lines – men's body painting designs (Fig. 26) – and dots – alluding to the seed of yam (Fig. 27); yet he also paints rectangles (Fig. 28), which move in and out of the surface, as well as concentric circles above horizontal lines (Fig. 29).





Fig. 26: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Untitled*, n.d., 90x30 cm, acrylic on linen, private collection



Fig. 27: Greenie Purvis Petyarr: *Of My Country, Aneltyeye*, 2002, synthetic polymer on linen, 213 x 120 cm, private collection



Fig. 28:  
Greenie Purvis Petyarr:  
*Untitled*, n.d., acrylic on  
linen, 180 x 120 cm,  
private collection





Fig. 29:  
Greenie Purvis Petyarr:  
*Yam Dreaming*, 1998,  
acrylic on linen, 120 x 90  
cm, private collection

Instead of Kngwarray's grids, Purvis Petyarr uses another motif or template of the rectangle. Like other artists from Utopia, he evokes a sense of vibration on the canvas and alludes to an ancestral presence<sup>502</sup>.

Kngwarray's brother, Kudditji Kngwarray, connects with her *œuvre* at a different point from Purvis Petyarr. Kudditji Kngwarray's recent paintings show a boldness in colours and brush strokes (Fig. 30). Creating a sense of colour fields, where different colour 'blocks' are set next to each other, whereby they create depth on the surface and subtly vibrate (Fig. 31). Kudditji Kngwarray appears to have continued in his works where his sister left off in her Last Series (Fig. 32).

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<sup>502</sup>Refer to Chapter 9 for a discussion about vibrancy and vibration in artworks from Utopia.





Fig. 30:  
Kudditji Kngwarray: *My Country*, 2004, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 200 cm, Araluen Collection



Fig. 31:  
Kudditji Kngwarray: *My Country*, n.d., acrylic on Belgian linen, 175 x 146 cm, private collection



Fig. 32:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray: *Last Series*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 65cm, Nangara Collection

The palette chosen by each is similar as well as is the form of abstraction. *The Last Series* is amongst the smallest in format by Emily Kam Kngwarray, in contrast to the



large brushes which she used to paint them. She may have asked for large brushes due to her infirmity and increased age which made it difficult for her to paint. In Kudjitji Kngwarray's paintings the canvas size has increased dramatically in comparison with the last series by his sister. The surface movement in his works is not as bold as Greenie Purvis Petyarr's rectangles (Fig. 33) or Emily Kam Kngwarray's grids (Fig. 34).



Fig. 33:  
Greenie Purvis Petyarr:  
*Yam Seed Dreaming*,  
2006, 204 x 187, acrylic  
on canvas, private  
collection

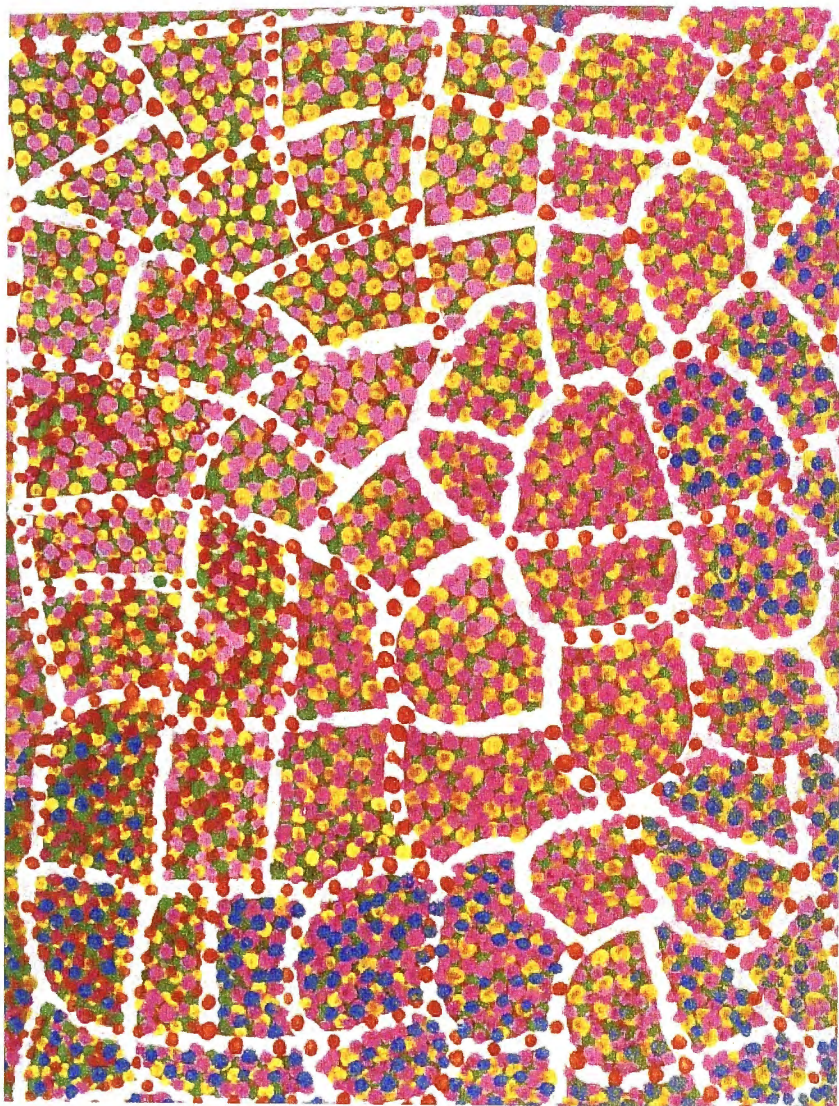


Fig. 34:  
Emily Kam Kngwarray:  
*Awely*, 1989, 152.2 x 121.8  
cm, synthetic polymer  
paint on canvas, Collection  
of Simon and Julie Ford

Yet the subtle vibration of his innovative approach to abstract representations of Alhalker have become his signature and stand in great contrast with his earlier works of *Emu Dreaming* (Fig. 35).



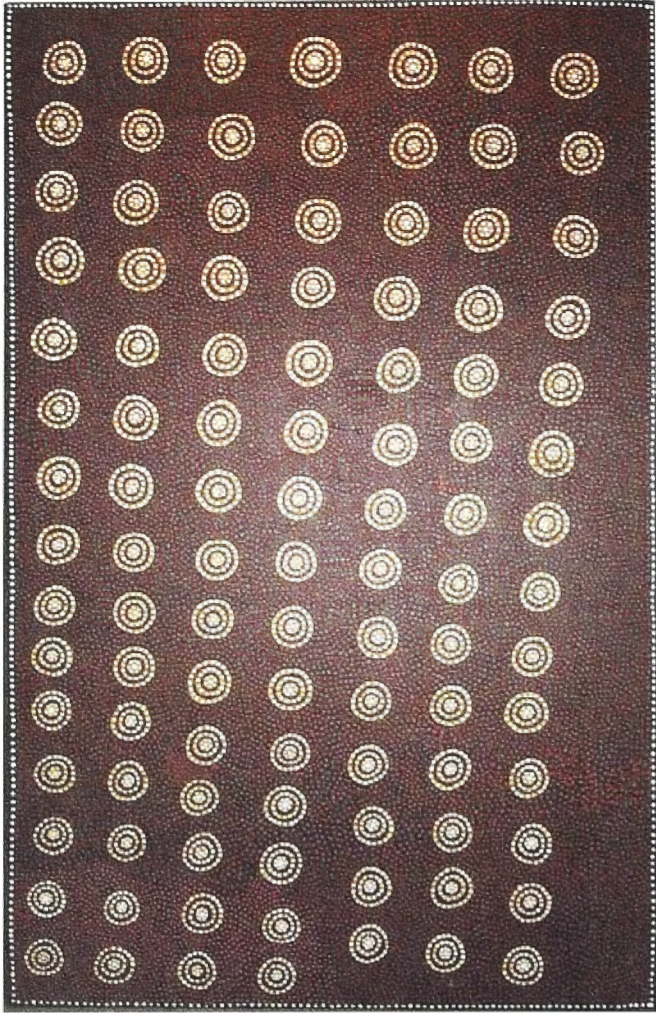


Fig. 35:  
Kudditji Kngwarray: *Emu  
Dreaming*, 1995, 80 x 124cm  
acrylic on canvas, private  
collection

When considering the *œuvres* of the Alhalker artists discussed in this chapter, it is apparent that the range of Emily Kam Kngwarray works was greater than that of any of the other artist. She is the only one to have painted all of the topics associated with Alhalker<sup>503</sup>: the pencil yam, its roots, seeds, and flowers; *awely*; and Emu Dreaming. Elizabeth and Helen Kunoth Kngwarray depict the pencil yam, its roots and seeds as well as its flowers; Greenie Purvis Petyarr painted yam seeds and men's body paintings; and Kudditji Kngwarray started off painting Emu Dreaming but has now developed an abstract style, similar to Emily Kam Kngwarray's last works. I suggest that in comparison to the other artists mentioned, Emily Kam Kngwarray had acquired such great knowledge about Alhalker in her lifetime that she was able to depict all of the above facets. Having become such an important ritual elder she not only held knowledge of the stories, songs and dances, but also had the rights to paint all of these. Hence, in her artworks one can see the 'whole lot'<sup>504</sup> of stories related to Alhalker; which, otherwise, can only be discovered by looking at many people's artworks together. On the other hand, each Alhalker artist discussed in this chapter has developed their own unique style. None of them just 'copy' Emily Kam Kngwarray; every single artist has developed their own style and created their own signature, often combining various influences with each other.

<sup>503</sup> For an analysis of the topics of Kngwarray's work refer to the previous chapter.

<sup>504</sup> See Chapter 8 for explanation of the term.

#### 11.4 Emily Kam Kngwarray's legacy

Emily Kam Kngwarray's legacy is manifold: she leaves behind an *œuvre* that displays her connection with her country, but that also reveals the Dreaming stories belonging to this country. Her stylistic legacy exists in the signature of other Alhalker artists as well as throughout Utopia. She developed a signature most visibly in a tendency towards abstraction and a removal of layers, thereby reducing the motifs and themes used whilst at the same time emphasizing these by multiplying them on a single layer. This has been taken up by Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, among others, who learnt about Alhalker, as did many young women, from her old Auntie Emily. This influence is also traceable in the work of artists such as Kudditji Kngwarray's who have not been taught directly by Emily. Her legacy prevails in her reputation as a 'genius', 'superstar' and 'unique'. However, when speaking to some of the second generation artists about their rise to fame, they insisted that the key to Kngwarray's recognition lies in the power of Alhalker. Having painted the 'whole lot' of Alhalker – its Dreaming and related stories – her paintings couldn't help but to be powerful and great, as they resonated and communicated the power of the country<sup>505</sup>.

#### 11.5 Conclusion

By looking at Kngwarray's influence on Alhalker artists – during her lifetime as well as after her death – several characteristics of the Utopia art movement become tangible. Amongst these are the significance of one 'countrywomen and –men' in teaching Dreaming stories as well as painting these. Another characteristic is the importance of the Dreaming stories be they localized or travelling. These Dreaming stories set parameters with reference to the visual repertoire of each artist. Artists can only use designs or references to Dreamings to which they have rights. However, these parameters appear more to influence the direction of innovation rather than acting as a constraint on their capacity to innovate. The final characteristic is then the constant striving for innovation, a signature style and diversity of each artist despite the parameters of the Dreaming stories. This ambition to create something unique, which only this one particular artist can do and which is hard to imitate, exemplifies their agency as artists within their social environment.

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<sup>505</sup>Personal communication Elizabeth Kunoth Kngwarray, Helen Kunoth Kngwarray and Carol Kunoth Kngwarray (September and October 2010).





### Conclusion to Part III

Influences in Utopia art are manifold: through family, through having the same Dreaming, through cohabitation, through commissions by dealers, through the seasons and their changes and finally through the artists' own innovations. With this formal analysis, I have shown that there is not one 'Utopia style'. It is not the 'bold gestural style' (Ryan 1998; Green 2008) that defines works from Utopia. Rather it comprises a variety of themes and styles, which have existed more or less since the beginning of batik-making, and continue on. Affiliation is not expressed through uniformity but can be found through similarity in the depiction of the same Dreaming and through variation of styles when applying them to another Dreaming. Thus, similarities in terms of style are mainly found in relation to being one countrymen or –women. The other common factor influencing style comes from artists living within vicinity of each other. However, in Utopia, families generally live on their homelands, in proximity to or within their country. Therefore, family living arrangements are coupled with one countrymen and –women membership, and subsequently similarities in style often arise.

Differences in artworks exist between the two language groups and this is reflected in the range of works that individual artists produce and their stylistic focus. The main overarching difference is that Alyawarr artists create works in a more naïve and figurative manner and Eastern Anmatyerr artists tend to be more abstract. Alyawarr artists tend to tell stories of daily situations, which can still have their roots in Dreaming stories, as well as stories about contact times. Eastern Anmatyerr artists from Utopia focus in their works on the connections between Dreaming stories, country, bush foods and ancestral beings. The area in which artists from both language groups are most similar in their depictions, innovations and representations, is ritual. Ritual is the bridge between the everyday and the ancestors of the Dreaming. Thus, it binds both groups together as they complement each other, being managers and owners for different Dreamings, whilst at the same time revealing this bond in their art.

The main similarity in the development of the works over time can be found through a close formal analysis, as offered in this chapter: a move from a multiplicity of figurative elements, motifs, geometric designs as well as traditional iconography towards the singling out of one element. As I have shown, this element may be the dot, the leaf, the elongated dot, or different kinds of templates incorporating geometric designs. Morphy and Carty have revealed similar processes of abstraction in Yirrkala amongst Yolngu



artists (1991, 2008) and Balgo amongst Kukatja artists respectively (2012). I will discuss the importance of knowledge about country and the Dreaming in relation to the ability to abstract in the following chapter about Emily Kam Kngwarray. However, this chapter gives further evidence that in-depth knowledge about ritual, country and the Dreaming are important factors in becoming an abstract artist. It is clear that one has to acquire a wealth of knowledge in order to single out and focus on one element of the story.

The development of abstract art in Utopia was supported by the interest of art dealers. As mentioned in relation to naïve art, figurative paintings were not as favourable received by the art market in the 1990s, and the prevailing 'taste' was for abstract art. Here we see the predominance of the Western art developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Emily Kam Kngwarray's success was part of this heightened interest in abstraction on the part of the art market. Despite the emphasis on abstraction and the general idea of Utopia being 'the place' for abstract Indigenous Australian art, this thesis has established that other currents, themes and styles were created throughout the past four decades. The artworks, the discourses around them and their saleability are expressions of the values held by the art world. These might change at any time and are unpredictable; tangible evidence of this is present in the growing appreciation for naïve art over the past decade.

Throughout this research, it was impossible to trace every art dealer and the works they acquired. This was partly due to the fact that art dealers were not willing to disclose this information. Therefore, this thesis does not deal with the question of whether some art dealers more than others attempted to thrust certain styles or currents to the fore. In some cases, it was very clear that art dealers had a preference for a particular style or themes; however, this varied, and insufficient examples from art dealers across the board could be collected in order to prove this.

In general, abstraction has been the direction associated with Utopia art. This is linked to the myth of Emily Kam Kngwarray, as well as the *œuvres* of Kathleen Petyarr and her sister Gloria Petyarr. This thesis, however, argues through its analysis of artworks that previous scholars have not recognized the variety of Utopia art. Despite current perceptions that a general 'Utopia style' exists, in fact there is a great dynamic in its development, which has evolved through the versatility of Utopia artists in terms of the variety of the themes and styles in their works.







## Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued for a local art history of the Utopia art movement. I examined the history and locality of the place and situated the art movement within it. The history and development of the art movement has been approached from a number of different perspectives: through the eyes of the artists, the wholesalers, the art dealers, curators, collectors, art coordinators, art critics and visitors to exhibitions. Complementing this, I have undertaken a close analysis of the form of the work produced by a number of different artists over time in order to analyse the process of artistic developments over time. I have established the different currents and sub-currents in Utopia art by focusing on genres, themes and styles. By combining these different methods and perspectives, a multi-layered local art history has emerged.

The discipline of art history needs a rethinking and reframing of Indigenous Australian art history. This rethinking must address the problematic categorising of Indigenous art on an analogical basis with Western styles, categories and developments. I have shown in the case of the 'Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye' exhibition in 2008 how the terminology applied by Neale fitted Kngwarray's art into Western categories. It could be argued that by framing an artwork 'abstract' or 'naïve' I may have – to some extent – followed in her shoes and therefore in the shoes of Western art history. I acknowledge the danger but have tried to define those terms with reference to processes and distinction that derive from my analysis of Utopia art rather than on the basis of formal analogy with Western art movements. I have shown within the artistic currents how certain motifs, elements and styles are connected to Indigenous traditions, ideas and concepts. I have argued for categories and classifications, which derive from the works and are immanent in them, thus for an art history written from and by the works rather than written through the experiences of the viewer and that will contribute to the making of an art history that is written from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

The imposition of a linear art history that follows the recent trajectory of western art towards abstraction has resulted in a failure to account for the diversity of Utopia art styles. In particular there has been a failure to include the figurative, naïve and narrative style in most writing about Utopia art. Indeed it can be argued that recently there has been a movement from a rather abstract style to a more figurative, naïve and narrative style. It describes the reverse of the history and development of artistic styles in



Western art<sup>506</sup>. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a clear move from realistic and naturalistic depictions to more and more abstract works took place, which resulted, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in abstraction becoming one of the main directions or currents in Western art. As I have emphasized throughout the thesis in Utopia art many different styles co-existed over the four decades, with the focus on them varying over time. At times an abstract direction prevailed and at other times, such as currently, it has shifted towards figurative representations of the everyday. This highlights the diversity of Utopia art rather than arguing for a linear development from one theme or style to another, which is suggested in some writings of Western art history although a diversity of styles dominates here as well.

The tendency to over-generalize can be seen in much of the writing about Utopia art, a tendency which has failed to recognize the multiple motivations of individual artists. A different history of the art movement must be written that takes into account the Indigenous artists' intentions, motivations and experiences, as well as limitations and constraints placed upon them. By including the artist's voice, the role of the artist in the process creation and negotiation can be uncovered.

Another way of rethinking the writing of Indigenous art history lies in Ian McLean's argument for a more inclusive Australian art history rather than maintaining a dichotomy between an Indigenous art history and an Australian art history (2008b). He considers the connections between both art histories as long reaching as contact history: both are, shaped by, and created through the relationships between Aboriginal people and European settlers. Australian art history as a whole is a product of the dynamics of contact between both cultures (Ibid.). As this is an inter- or cross-cultural art history, an understanding of its development requires the adoption of multiple perspectives.

McLean is arguing for a greater narrative that takes all artistic developments in Australia into account. Yet, in order to determine where and how every local art movement fits into this greater narrative, the particularities of each local art history have to be examined. Comparisons between developments of styles, techniques, topic range and even genres can only be successfully made if sufficient data about every local art movement is available. Therefore the necessity for more in-depth research on local art histories emerges.

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<sup>506</sup>Personal communication with Ilana Goldstein Seltzer (October 2011).

Some particularities of the Utopia art movement and the works created by Utopia artists are striking: the dynamism and diversity in the artworks, the emphasis on movement and motion throughout all currents, the aesthetic effect of reduction in the abstract works, the ability to respond to market demands through developing new styles and contents, and the access to and relationships with a variety of art markets. These show that a Utopia art world with its own local art history exists. Further they demonstrate that this art movement is not unified by one style rather it is defined by its locality and kin relations than stylistic similarity.

The focus of my study is the current situation of the Utopia art movement, in the context of the past. My account examines how current art practice has been influenced and shaped by previous developments. However, the future of the Utopia art movement has been barely touched upon. Over the past years, Utopia artists have been discussing the possibilities of setting up a cultural village. Rather than an art centre which focuses solely upon the production of works, a cultural village is conceived to also be a centre to conserve cultural knowledge as well as accommodating a little museum and a space for tourists to come and visit artists at work<sup>507</sup>. This would shift the focus back to the community and away from the individual, at least to some extent.

The Mulga Bore community has been able to receive money and funding for an art centre building through the Pine Hill Land Handover<sup>508</sup>, which has been built in the outstation. Unfortunately, so far no funding has been acquired for an art coordinator salary. These developments show that the artists are interested in having a functioning art centre, but on their terms. They have recognised that the classical art centre model does not work in their community, which is most likely partly due to the lay-out of the community as well as the agency that artists have exerted over the past decades.

An art facility would also have the potential to create a space in which a new generation of artists could be taught. In recent years, very few young people have become involved in the Utopia art movement. The majority of artists began in the 1970s and few joined in the subsequent decades. However, those who have joined are mainly elderly community members. For a new generation of artists to emerge several changes have to occur, and

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<sup>507</sup>Talk about setting up a cultural village was ongoing over the time of my research and it eventuated in a feasibility study of the Jack Thompson Foundation, with which the community had set up a program for constructing houses (for more information refer to: [http://www.jackthompsonfoundation.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=52&Itemid=63](http://www.jackthompsonfoundation.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52&Itemid=63) (last sighted 20/11/2011).

<sup>508</sup>Personal communication with Marc Gooch and Janet Pierce (September 2010).



amongst these is not necessarily the setting up of an art centre. Fewer and fewer young people are interested in learning about the Dreaming, rituals associated with it and the various stories about country and the ancestral beings. However, this forms the basis and repertoire of most art from the Sandover region. As the young people's interest in the world of their parents and grandparents declines, so does the social control exerted by the older generations and the teaching about being an Aboriginal person. The younger generation lives in a different world from that of their forebears. TV, radio, football and trips to town define the everyday of these young people. In order for a new young generation of artists to emerge – in the understanding of fathers and grandfathers as well as mothers and grandmothers – these young people have to be willing to learn, recognise and feel proud about their country and Dreaming, they have to participate in Aboriginal society. However, the life experiences of these young people differ greatly from those of the older generations and social control through older generations is waning.

This research was informed by art history and anthropology: one discipline informed the other, which means that without one the research would not have been possible. In order to learn about the artworks and their meanings, I interviewed artists, closely observed their art practice and did many trips to country. In order to understand the intertwined and complex history of the art movement, I investigated the participation of a multitude of players in the art world. Finally, in order to determine forms of agency, I examined the art practice, negotiation processes with art dealers and the value criteria of Utopia artists.

The Utopia art movement spans over four decades. In this time dynamic changes have occurred, which I examined by focusing on the role of the artist. Through the analysis of the literature engaging with Utopia art, a dominant theme has become apparent: the silencing of artists. This occurs through a range of art historical practices: omitting the voices of artists, focussing on the reception of the works, including the works into the Western art canon, a tendency to over-generalize about Utopia art, and a reduction of the works to *l'art pour l'art*. Thus, approaches to Utopia art either essentialize it in aesthetic terms or simply look at the iniquities of the art market and in doing so inevitably oversimplify the realities in which artists live. By including the artist's voice and focusing on their capacity to build relationships that serve different purposes, a more complex picture emerges in which the artists cannot simply be portrayed as victims.

Some of these relationships have their roots in the history of the region rather than in the history of the art movement. They reflect the fact that Aboriginal people's lives have been intricately connected with the lives of European settlers in the region for over a century. The history of the region is one of mutuality, inter-dependency and inter-relationship. These mutual influences, occurring on a daily basis, have been key factors in the history of the art movement. The development of the Utopia art movement highlighted the importance of relationships in the dynamic shaping of a local art movement. Up until 1989, relationships with art coordinators and art centre managers were crucial for the development of the Utopia art movement; after 1989 relationships with various art dealers and wholesalers became increasingly important for the Utopia art movement. The continuous negotiation of these relationships was a key strategy for Utopia artists to exercise agency.

Agency refers to conscious action on the part of an active subject who is aware of at least some of the constraints within which his/her capacity to act is constrained. Agency is not just a matter of 'free will', but it also entails an informed decision to act. This is not equivalent to 'choice' because agency may refer to a decision to act even when 'choice' is made almost irrelevant by the very limited situation of being able to do X or nothing.

This thesis is not only an account of the Utopia art movement via a detailed analysis of an extensive corpus of artworks; it also shows how artists exercise agency in the development and shaping of this movement. Through analysing the relationships between artists and the 'inner' and 'outer' art worlds of Utopia by closely observing and examining art practices, the manifestations of artists' agency become traceable in their artworks. I have shown that artists' agency is visible and traceable from the very beginning: in negotiation processes with art dealers, in the choice of colours, technique, topics and styles as well as in the choices about influences of other artists. I have also shown that artists in Utopia are aware of a range of options to modify artworks for different markets and thus exercise agency in the creation and negotiation process. These options can function as resources in times of constraints and open up access to other options and resources. Thus they can be limiting at the same time as liberating.

The very conditions in which people live mean that areas of exploitation exist in the art market. These contextual factors include a lack of infrastructure and poor service provision. Art-making becomes a way of surviving in remote communities where little



options for earning income exist. It creates options for people and provides government-independent income.

Qualitative interviews with artists and participant observations revealed the meanings of the artworks within Alyawarr and Eastern Anmatyerr societies, the intentions of the artists in creating the works and their connections between the works and creative processes. By highlighting these moments of artists' agency in the current local Utopia art world, this thesis has enabled the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the history and development of the Utopia art movement over the past four decades. This thesis is both art history and anthropology; for it draws on the tools of other disciplines in order to understand what it means when an artist from Utopia says 'I paint for everyone': agency and action. By considering all these aspects a new understanding of the development of the Utopia art movement is gained: one which exemplifies world-making through art at the same time as art world making through relationships.

## Appendix

### Collections visited from March 2008 until December 2011

- National Gallery of Australia,
- Art Gallery of Western Australia,
- Art Gallery of South Australia,
- Art Gallery of New South Wales,
- Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art,
- Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Darwin,
- Riddoch Art Gallery in Mt Gambier,
- Flinders University Art Museum,
- Kerry Stokes Collection Perth,
- Australian Museum Sydney,
- Araluen Arts Centre Alice Springs,
- Western Australian Museum,
- Berndt Museum Perth,
- Australian National University Art Collection,
- Janet Holmes à Court Collection Perth,
- Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in Alice Springs,
- Charles Darwin University Art Collection
- Northern Editions Art Collection
- Newcastle Regional Art Gallery,
- National Gallery of Victoria,
- Powerhouse Museum Sydney,
- Niagara Galleries in Melbourne,
- Utopia Art Sydney,
- Alcaston Galleries in Melbourne,
- Indigenart in Subiaco, Perth,
- Fireworks Gallery Brisbane,
- Gallerie Australis Adelaide,
- Gallery Gondwana in Alice Springs,
- Mbantua Galleries in Alice Springs,
- The Hank Ebes Collection in Melbourne,



- Aboriginal Dreamings Gallery in Canberra

As well as a great number of private art collections whose collectors would like to remain anonymous.

## Fieldwork highlights

- July – August 2008 part of the curatorial team for “Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye” at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.
- September – October 2008 field trip to Alice Springs, Adelaide and Melbourne, collection visits and art dealer interviews.
- February – April 2009 field trip to Perth, Adelaide, Mt Gambier and Melbourne, visit to collections (state, private and corporate) and interviews with art dealers and curators.
- May 2009 trip to Ahalper with Batchelor Institute for Tertiary Education (batik workshop)
- September – October 2009 five-week fieldwork trip to Utopia
- March 2010 trip to Sydney, collection visits and art dealer interviews
- June 2010 collection visits in Brisbane and art dealer interviews
- September – October 2010 four-week fieldwork in Utopia
- October 2010 trip to Adelaide for “Desert Country” exhibition opening, interviews with artists, art dealers and curators
- November 2010 collection visits to the National Gallery of Australia
- January 2011 trip to Darwin, collection visits and interviews
- May- June 2011 trip to Alice Springs, collection visits, NT archive visit and interviews with art dealers
- November – December 2011 field trip to Utopia





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