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Tangentyere Artists

Continuity, Contemporaneity and Inconvenient Art Practice

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WITH

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TANGENTYERE ARTISTS

Tangentyere Artists is an Aboriginal owned and directed art centre that represents urban and regional artists from eighteen Alice Springs town camp communities and beyond. Town camps were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the town of Alice Springs, and geographically oriented in the first instance towards the Country of origin of the families who settled in them (for example, Warlpiri camps are 'north west'; Western Arrernte camps 'west' and so forth), although populations are considerably more culturally mixed now. The 'camps' have been resting zones for generations, places where people came to sit down together to share ceremony

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in precolonial times. Each camp therefore represents a little outlier of 'home', and people who live in town camps, whether first, second, third, or even fourth generation, have a deep and abiding attachment to their town-based *ngurra* (Western desert language variant) or *apmere* (central/eastern Arrernte language) as strong and heartfelt as they have for their country *ngurra or apmere* (*ngurra* and *apmere* both mean literally 'camp' but are more like non-Aboriginal concepts of 'home').

Artists painting with Tangentyere come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, from across Central Australia: Eastern, Central and West Arrernte, Alywarr, Anmatyerr, Kaytetye, Warlpiri, Ngalia, Luritja, Pintupi, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. They each hold their *Tjukurrpa* (law), the cultural narratives that animate country and anchor individuals to each other and place, but they also share lives rich with storytelling, about the here and now, time spent with family in activities such as searching for bush tucker, or *mingkulpa* (bush tobacco), swimming in summer, visiting family outstations during school holidays, sitting down during sorry business (mourning for a lost family member), catching up with the extended family during community sports carnivals, and so on.



Image 1: Louise Daniels and Betty Conway in Studio, Tangentyere Artists, Alice Springs, 2012 (image © Tangentyere Artists 2012)

Tangentyere Artists art centre began in 2005, as a part of the social services delivered by Tangentyere Council to the residents of Alice Springs town camps. In 2008 Birrung Gallery in Woolloomooloo, Sydney, which is run by World Vision, invited Tangentyere Artists, among other art centres, to explore the concept of 'home' for an exhibition of the same name. The invitation to artists to paint their homes generated mixed reactions. Some artists painted *Tjukurrpa* associated with their home, but many explored figurative representations of everything from outstations, to places they grew up, to their town camps. Artists met at the art centre on Mondays, and talked endlessly about their weekends, events, happenings and dramas in their worlds. Outrageous tales were told with a great deal of humour and mirth. Out of that first foray into figurative painting, and a desire to explore their lives, some artists began to paint more narratives about their lives, occasionally 'mixing it up'. They might paint 'traditional' *Tjukurrpa* today, bush tucker next week and hunting for goanna with family in figurative form the following week.

The artists talk with each other while they paint. The process is one of exploring events since they last saw each other. A few years ago, their feelings and discussions triggered another shift, towards the addition of text within figurative paintings. Written (painted) alphabetic text is now found embedded within the paintings, sometimes in English, sometimes in vernacular language, sometimes both, in order to enhance the narrative for the audience. These paintings reach out and communicate through painted words as well as through figurative narrative 'stories' about contemporary lived life.

According to Annika Harding:

When Indigenous artists try to engage with culture and art making in ways that are relevant to both their culture and experiences and Western culture and experiences, their work is dismissed and undervalued because it crosses boundaries that are not safe to cross. It is inconvenient art that won't fit easily into established canons and categories, and dredges up challenging issues that white Australians have been trying to wish away for decades, even centuries.¹

It has taken until the last decade for the nineteenth-century Aboriginal artists Mickey of Ulladulla (c.1820–1891), Tommy McRae (c.1835–1901) and William Barak (1824–1903), to become recognised by national public institutions for their crucial aesthetic and historical contributions. The works of these artists do not look like traditional Aboriginal paintings—they are neither ‘bark’ nor acrylic ‘dot’ paintings. Rather, they are narrative-based paintings. They record events taking shape at the time, capturing detailed historical moments, almost photographic documentation like, using figurative representational forms. These three painters made contemporary records of their lives at the time of the occupied colonial world in which they lived, inhabited by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Their works are vital historical records of distinctly Aboriginal experience and perspectives that are not otherwise available in the historic archive or official colonial records from the period.

Tangentyere artists are developing an aesthetic practice today not dissimilar to these earlier artists and they face perhaps similar challenges. Their works do not readily fit into established genres. They present Aboriginal perspectives that are complicated, confronting and compelling. While the artists are highly skilled in traditional iconography—classical *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) techniques of dot, circle, and line—Tangentyere artists are also choosing to work with figurative and narrative based forms. Their palette choices are not the ‘authentic’ narrow palette that typifies the Central and Western Desert: red, yellow and white ochres and oxides. Rather, colours are more typically neon green, searing pink, hot yellow, piercing blue. The subject matter is contemporary existence, daily current affairs, lives of complex temporal order and marginalised historical realities. The contemporaneous existence of Tangentyere artists’ experience today is writ large in Central Australia.

Walking down the street in Alice Springs, one can hear every Central Australian language spoken: Arrernte (Eastern, Central and Western), Alyawarr, Anmatyerr, Luritja, Warlpiri, Warramungu, Kaytetye, Pintupi, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra, and Aboriginal Englishes. Bi- and multilingual existence(s) are commonplace. Non-Aboriginal individuals and institutions are a matter of fact. Present, past and ancestral time frames intertwine and defy chronology. Here, Aboriginal people live immersed in day-to-day intercultural worlds that are not well

known or represented elsewhere. Such are the contemporary historical realities for people living in Alice Springs today, represented in the art works of Tangentyere.

—SAME BUT DIFFERENT

The Tangentyere Artists who participated in the 2012 Same But Different forum were Margaret Boko, Louise Daniels, and Sally M. Mulda.

The artists discussed their paintings in a short video made especially to show at the forum, called *Kungka Markurpa Wangkanyi Ara* (Three Women Talking Stories).

Below is a biography of each artist, followed by a short transcript from the video of what the artist had to say about their paintings. One of the artists was too shy to speak, but she was very happy for her work to be included—comments on her paintings are provided by Tangentyere Artists assistant art coordinator Sue O'Connor.

—*Margaret Boko (Luritja)*

Margaret Boko is a grandmother, a senior Luritja woman. She grew up at Jay Creek Reserve and the settlement of Papunya, and has lived her adult life near or in Alice Springs. Margaret had never painted before joining Tangentyere Artists. She heard from her aunt, her niece and her cousins about the art centre, and decided to try painting. Her aunt taught Margaret to paint, and from there she developed her own style. Margaret's life is lived around her family, visiting the family of her husband from Docker River, Mutitjulu, Utju (Areyonga community), and her own family's country at M'Bunghara Outstation on Glen Helen Station, Jay Creek community, or Ukaka Outstation on Tempe Down Station south-west of Alice Springs. Margaret's paintings tell stories; they laugh, they tease; they document and they witness what matters to her today. She painted a series of works about the film *Dead Heart*, which was filmed in part at her former home, Jay Creek (see Image 1). She also paints 'story board' paintings, in which several vignettes or scenes are painted across the one surface, so they may be 'read' by the audience, as if turning pages.



Image 2: Margaret Boko, *Travelling on Bush Bus*, 2010, 120 x 40 cms acrylic on canvas MB10C4206 (photograph: Tangentyere Artists; © the artist and Tangentyere Artists 2010)

‘My name is Margaret Boko. I’m from Little Sisters Town Camp. I always come and paint to make canvas at Tangentyere. I been paint here for five years.’

Travelling on Bush Bus

‘Mutitjulu. Those people wait for the bush bus. They pick up people and they come from [Mt] Ebenezer to Alice Springs, and Imanpa, Docker River. They get off there.’



Image 3: Margaret Boko, *Smoking New Born Baby*, 2010, 60 x 55 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2010)

Smoking New Born Baby

'That fire, smoke coming out—when baby born, you know, they take them and they make fire and they put that baby in that smoke. That's what they always do and that baby not to cry. Sleep really quiet until their mother come back. Uwa [Yes]...'

Dead Heart

'And that lady in that water, that man sitting there ... and after that, they went [giggles] touching all over all, over body ... Mmm? They was touching. Take off clothes. They were really naked.'

Sia Cox (Tangentyere Arts facilitator): And before you were really scared to paint that naked story? Why?

'Yeah? This, you know, this white people, always do that not black people, it's shame!'



Image 4: Margaret Boko, *Dead Heart*, 2012, 120 x 90 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2012)

—*Louise Daniels (Anmatyerr)*

Louise Daniels is a young mother, an Anmatyerr woman who grew up at Laramba community north of Alice Springs. Louise has painted all her life, raised up by her recently deceased and famous grandmother to work in the fine dot tradition. Louise has brought all her aspirations to the practice of figurative painting with textual elements. She paints about what she hopes for her sons, and her extended family: that they spend money wisely, that they remain healthy, that the kids attend school and receive a good education, that they remain connected to language and culture. Central to all of this is that they continue to visit country with family. Louise paints with tenderness and affection, occasionally combining both dots and textual elements to create a narrative.

‘Hello everyone. I would like to introduce myself. My name is Louise Daniels. I’m an artist I work at Tangentyere Art Centre and also a studio art worker, and also help the artists as well too.

I love to paint because that’s really important for me.’

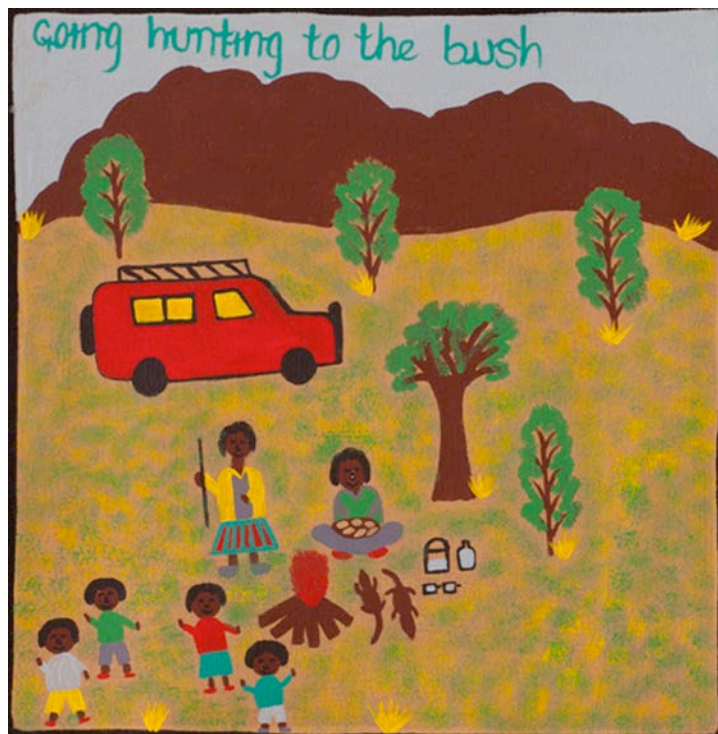


Image 5: Louise Daniels, *Going Hunting*, 2011, 30 x 30 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2011)

Going Hunting

'And this is a painting that I made. It's about going hunting to the bush. Sometimes, when I was a bit young I used to go hunting with my family because cos we love to go hunting. To get bush tucker—goanna and bush fruit.'

A Story About Money

'And this other painting is about a story about money. It's really important. The money that they spend: clothes, furniture, food, because that's the things that you have to spend all your money. No good grog.'

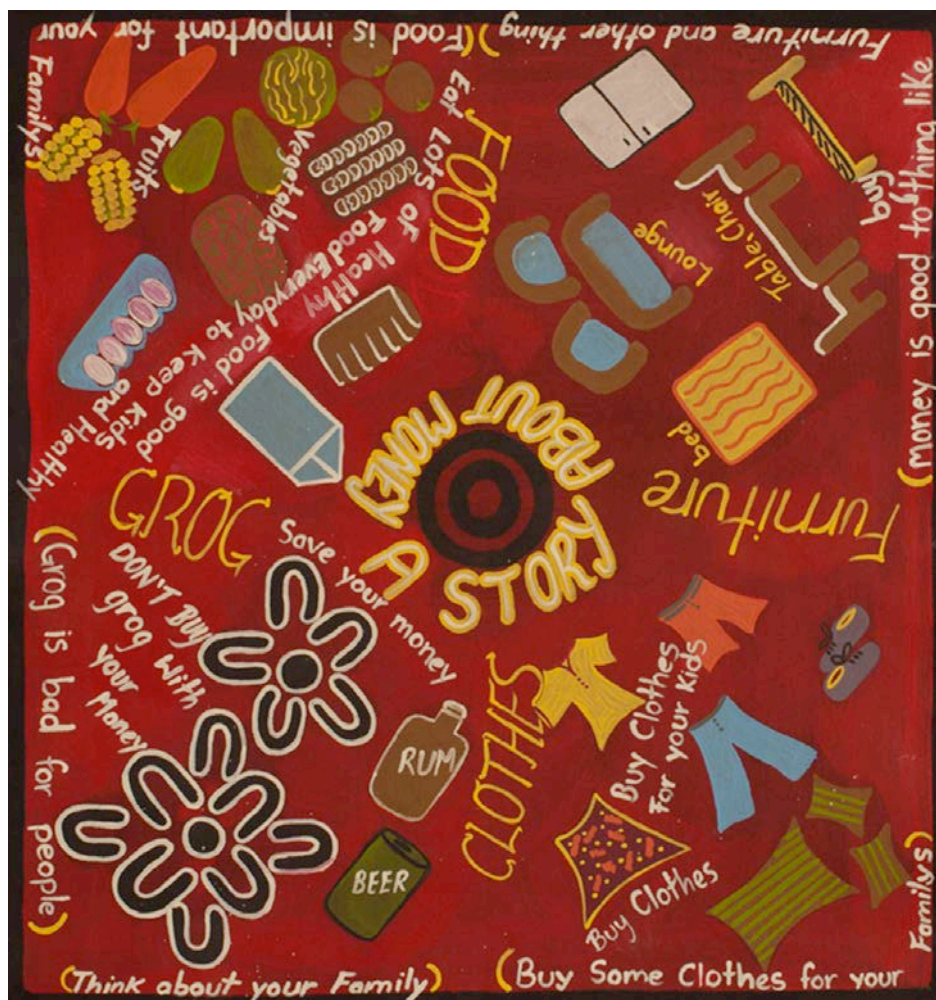


Image 6: Louise Daniels, *A Story About Money*, 2011, 60 x 55 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2011)



Image 7: Louise Daniels, *All the Kids Going Bush Trip*, 2011, 90 x 30 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2011)

All The Kids Going Bush Trip

‘And this one here is about bush trip. Sometimes when I used to live at Laramba, we used to take kids for bush trip for picnic. That’s when I used to work at child care.’

—*Sally M. Mulda (Yankunytjatjara/Luritja)*

Sally M. Mulda, related to Margaret Boko through marriage, has only painted since 2008. She joined the Tangentyere Artists as they began to paint about home. She painted her home, her extended family sitting around on old bed frames out in the yard, the kids playing with balls, or with dogs. Sally’s paintings have documented the subtle variations in colouring at different times of day, the various seasons, and then, as ‘the Intervention’ led to refurbishment in town camps, her paintings included construction teams, yellow dozers, fleets of four wheel drives, and men wearing hard hats. Life changed quite dramatically for Sally when she moved to another town camp across the road from the Todd River, and found herself recording different kinds of events that were a direct consequence of ‘the Intervention’. Increasingly, Sally’s narratives included the police visiting camp asking if people were drinking, or rounding up drinkers in the riverbed, or stopping cars headed out of town, to check for grog. Her paintings are social documentaries and record many aspects of daily life lived as a consequence of enhanced state policing of people’s lives.



Image 8: Sally M. Mulda, *Life in Todd River*, 2011, 120 x 40 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2011)

Life in Todd River

Sue O'Connor (assistant coordinator, Tangentyere Artists): In *Life in Todd River* Sally has four women sitting by the fire on a cold day. And contrasted against that image she has people sleeping at the river with policemen looking around at night.



Image 9: Sally M. Mulda, *Husband and Wife Drunk*, 2012, 90 x 60 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2012)

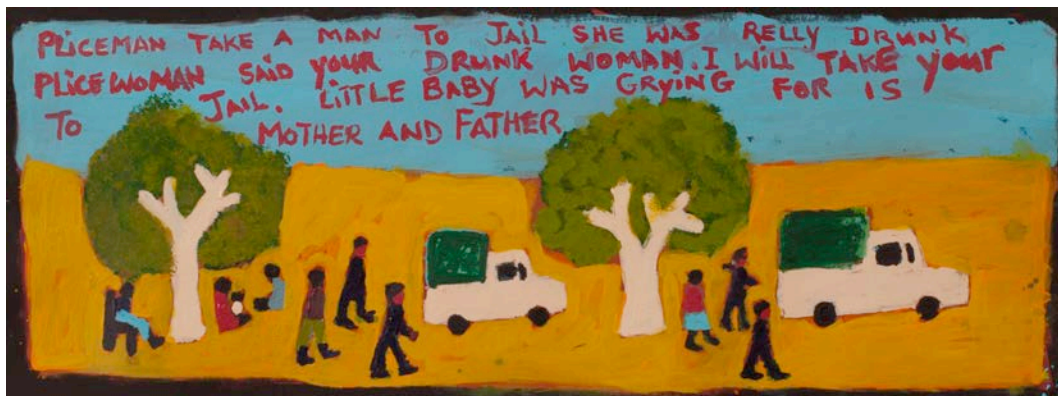


Image 10: Sally M Mulda, *Mother and Father*, 2012, 90 x 30 cm, acrylic on canvas (image © Tangentyere Artists 2012)

Husband and Wife Drunk

Sue O'Connor: In *Husband and Wife Drunk*, Mulda records events she's witnessed again. She doesn't demonstrate any kind of judgement of the subjects or any kind of bias. She simply notes what happens: people sitting down drinking, the police arriving, deciding people are drunk, and taking them away.

Policeman: Mother and Father Drunk

Sue O'Connor: The lack of judgement and bias is even clearer in *Mother and Father*, a painting that documents a couple who are taken away drunk by the police, leaving their baby crying with other family or friends.

—CONCLUSION

Town camp artists are a diverse group of individuals from a range of Central Australian cultural and linguistic traditions. They each hold their *Tjukurrpa* [law], country and kin close, while navigating through the urban cultural landscape of Alice Springs. They draw on rich Aboriginal cultural traditions of storytelling, and the Western figurative and textual styles to share with their audience the intimate and sometimes confronting reality of their intercultural experience. Tangentyere Artists' art may be 'inconvenient', but this body of work is also an invaluable and intimate record of individual Aboriginal perspectives of continuity and contemporaneity in Central Australia.

Margaret Boko Nampitjinpa has Arrernte-Luritja, Warlpiri-Pintupi roots, but is fluent in Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. Her storytelling style extends deep into her rich narrative paintings, which she has exhibited widely since 2007. A 2011 Telstra NATSIAA and Togart Contemporary Art Award finalist, Boko is represented in both private and public Australian collections.

Louise Daniels Napaltjarri, raised a painter by renowned first wave Papunya artists, has proven creatively inquisitive and adventurous, while respecting her Anmatyerr grandparents' traditions. Exhibiting with Tangentyere Artists for five years, Daniels has already been commissioned, was a 2013 Telstra NATSIAA Finalist and has been acquired by Australian institutions and collectors.

Sally M. Mulda Nungala has Arrernte, Luritja, Yankunytjatjara cultural connections. She brings fluidity, vivid layered colour, and simplicity to her documentary style of painting. Mulda's work has toured extensively since 2008 and has been acquired nationally and internationally in private and public collections. She was a 2012 Telstra NATSIAA finalist and the 2011 'Rights on Show' Disability Rights Award winner.

Sue O'Connor is a design anthropologist. Since 2008 she has brought a wealth of experience in cross-cultural and curatorial practice, teaching and learning, and culturally appropriate project design to Tangentyere Artists. O'Connor's own art practice supports her appreciation of the complexity that informs identity, relationships and art practice amongst the artists with whom she works.

—NOTES

¹ Annika Harding, 19 December 2010, 'Aboriginal Art Wars'
<<http://thewriteart.wordpress.com/2010/12/19/aboriginal-art-wars/>>.