

FEARLESS: ABORIGINAL WOMEN AT The FOREFRONT

I acknowledge the traditional owners of Warrang, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. Sovereignty of this land was never ceded: it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I extend my respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present with us today and acknowledge all the women artists whose work looks resplendent on these walls of the S H Ervin Gallery.

In 1989 W. E. H. Stanner wrote that Aboriginal culture possessed 'all the beauty of song, mime, dance and art of which human beings are capable'. The current art of Indigenous Australia is a powerful and mesmerising art form that continues to unfold. This diverse living art form, the last to impress itself on the international stage, has evolved from the world's oldest continuous art tradition. Its genesis has occurred gradually, stimulated initially by Baldwin Spencer's historic commissioning of the first bark paintings for sale from the Gagadju people in 1913, only 110 years ago, but not gathering exponential momentum until the evolution of the Western Desert art movement at Papunya in 1971. The first Papunya artists occasioned a re-perception of the continent, leading to the belated acceptance of Aboriginal art as part of global mainstream visual culture.

On the eve of the Referendum, having experienced both the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements, it is timely to acknowledge the importance of Indigenous visual culture and knowledge which endures from 65,000 years ago to now and long precedes European invasion and colonisation of this continent. We have witnessed the transformation of ephemeral designs made for use in ceremony into new art forms, which have developed in unexpected ways. This daring transformation of tradition – the shock of the ancient made new – is what we see in this contemporary exhibition of innovative paintings, drawings and embroidered soft sculptures by artists working at Utopia Station and at Aboriginal-owned art centres at Alice Springs, Papunya, Kintore and Yirrkala in the NT, at Kiwirrkura, Indulkana, Tjukula, Warmun and Fitzroy Crossing in WA at Indulkana in SA, and Mornington Island in QLD, who happen to be women.

Former NGV Director, Patrick McCaughey stated in his memoirs, 'The new public prominence of Aboriginal art remains the greatest single revolution in the past quarter of a century in Australian art'. Art made by Aboriginal women artists in Australia today belongs to the 'skin of now' and has an undeniable edge and is fearless. Each finished work upon a bare surface or in a new medium is a new beginning for the artist and the viewer. It is unpredictable and involves risk, as Picasso stated: 'Yes, art is dangerous and if it's chaste, it isn't art'.

Rather than being ghettoised into an ethnographic category reserved for the art of minority cultures whose greatest moments occurred in the past, today's Indigenous artists are proudly positioned in the mainstream of contemporary art practice and have transformed the way we see the land and the history of art in this country. Art cannot change the world but the dominance of the Western aesthetic in our culture has been displaced or at very least dislocated and a new truth has emerged to challenge our preconceptions.

It should be remembered that the Aboriginal women whose works form part of FEARLESS were not enabled to paint on canvas or stringybark until late in their lives, long after the sustained incursions of pastoralists, mining companies and missionaries had displaced them from their Country and utterly changed the pattern of their existence. From the late 1980s, long after the origins of the Western Desert art movement at Papunya in 1971–72 transformed the way First People's art was viewed in Australia, Aboriginal women developed as independent artists of spirit and daring in the primary medium of painting. Before this period of upheaval, a White patriarchal belief prevailed, which contended that Aboriginal art was the exclusive jurisdiction of men. In much of the writings of male anthropologists, a binary opposition was posited between what were thought to be the 'secular' or 'profane' pursuits of women as opposed to the 'sacred' rites and designs of men. By inference only men could represent Dreaming law, and subsequently only they were offered canvas and paints.

I have never been one to ignore the importance of Indigenous women artists, particularly as I was schooled by James Mollison to remember that it is the 'old "biddies" who can really paint'. He was basing his 1989 statement on the early paintings of Anmatyerr artist Emily Kam Kngwarray which he was shown by Rodney Gooch of CAAMA.

The belated acknowledgement of Aboriginal women as artists is partially attributable to the universally acclaimed paintings of Emily Kam Ngwarray, an Anmatyerr woman born at Alhalker, in the Sandover River region of the Central Australian desert. Ngwarray's life irrevocably changed when, in the 1930s, the borders of the Utopia pastoral lease were drawn across the lands and waterways of the Anmatyerr and Alyawarr peoples of the Sandover region. Ngwarray, like other dispossessed people of the Sandover, was forced to work for the new occupiers of her Country, in exchange for rations. In 1976, changes ensued when the Utopia pastoral lease was acquired by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission. With the passing of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, many Anmatyerr and Alyawarr people moved to tiny homeland communities on Utopia Station. In 1977, Ngwarray attended adult education classes conducted by Jenny Green and was introduced to the batik medium, which she practised communally for 11 years with 80 other women, as a prelude to painting in acrylic on canvas.

It is particularly appropriate that this celebration of Indigenous women's art takes place at the S.H. Ervin Gallery because Emily's first canvas *Emu woman*, 1988, was exhibited here in *A summer project* where it stood alone amongst the 81 canvases, each 2 x 3 feet, produced for this CAAMA 1988–89 summer project. Once it had been hung at S. H. Ervin Gallery and published on the cover of *A summer project*, Ngwarray's work was regarded as unique: there was only one EMILY.

Ngwarray was an extraordinary mark maker, possessed of a prodigious work ethic, who produced around 3,000 works during the last seven years of her life (1989–96). She established the basic structural elements of her work, its lines, in ochre body paintings for women's Awely rituals. These linear body designs are transformed into a spontaneous network of living lines that flow through her silk batiks and persist in early paintings such as *State of My Country*, 1990, as an underlayer or foundation. But in such formative canvases, which were painted on the ground, the dots that were subsidiary in her batik come to the surface, cover the background, and are also found inside the lines, causing most of the graphic elements to be partially obscured. Lines and dots converge in a dense field of irregular textured marks, which create a sense of depth. Nothing is left plain or without design. The process of painting is one of incessant but deliberate mark making. Later in Ngwarreye's oeuvre, the linear markings of body painting and batik replace the fields of dots, either as bold parallel stripes or as a mass of tangled lines.

Working alternatively in shifting combinations of dots and lines, tones and colours, Ngwarray affected a revolution in that her work resisted interpretation as encoded map making, sacred design or landscape: it was neither notation nor diagrammatic narrative, but visual music of mass appeal. Importantly, however, Ngwarray's spontaneous freedom of gesture, her textured work with unruly lines, layered uneven dots and blurred marks that form fields of colour, is not a form of Abstract Expressionism unrelated to customary ritual painting. Rather, her seemingly non-figurative paintings are fluent translations onto canvas of ochre *arikeny* (body markings) for women's Awely ceremonies that are performed to hold and look after Country, promoting feelings of happiness, health and wellbeing in the Anmatyerr community. Ngwarreye's abundant layers of dots in *State of My Country*, alluding to yam tubers, are also a hymn to the maintenance and increase of her principal Dreaming, Anwerlarr (pencil yam, *Vigna lanceolata*), associated with her grandfather's Country, Alhalker. The artist was this Country, which she almost invariably painted as a proclamation of her spiritual identity.

I would like to look at the canvases in this exhibition in different ways, as multi-layered and multi-directional conceptual maps. A poem by Jai Sen gives us ways into the work of the senior artists in this exhibition who in exploring new media have each devised different individual styles, innovative techniques and forms of mark making to connect with Country and the true stories it holds:

Maps are pictures.
Maps are self-portraits.
Maps are manifestations of perceptions.
Maps are portraits of the world,
in the manner in which those preparing them would like the world to be understood.
Maps are subjective.
Mapping is... an act of power.

Parallel with Ngwarray's phenomenal achievements as a painter, and the work produced by senior women from the mid 1980s at Warlukurlangu Artists in Yuendumu and Warlayirti Artists, Balgo where

Kukatja artist Eubena Nampitjin created an important body of work, Pintupi women such as Makinti Napanangka and Naata Nungurrayi, were from 1996 onwards given an opportunity to paint for Papunya Tula Artists, revitalising the movement with their spirited conceptions of a sentient landscape perceived from planar perspective. While painting in the diaspora, away from her birth country in the Great Sandy Desert, Eubena translated the striped body markings worn for women's ceremonies into gestural chords of red, yellow and white which express her cultural memory of and longing for Country.

Makinti who won First Prize in the 25th Telstra Art Award of 2008 was born in c. 1920 at Lupulnga rock hole south of Walungurru (Kintore). Like other Pintupi women, Napanangka was not empowered to paint, except in ritual contexts, until the Minyma Tjukurrpa Kintore/Haasts Bluff Canvas Project in 1994. Her work changed over time, until in her late career evidenced by this masterwork, where the impact of the artist's work is haptic, concerned with touching and sensing with fingers, rather than seeing. The repetition of colour chords and textured striations, which closely echo each other, has a rhapsodic effect akin to many bodies in dance and reveals the inner or spiritual power, the essence, of Napanangka's country and cultural identity. The energetic lines invoke body paint for women's business and more particularly represent spun hair-string, which is used to make belts worn by women during ceremonies associated with the rock-hole site of Lupulnga, a Peewee Dreaming place. Napanangka distills body-painting designs to their quintessential forms, which are abundant and looping in rhythm and seem to stretch beyond the frame.

Naata Nungurrayi, who is a sister of George Tjungurrayi, was born a Kumil in the Pollock Hills. Naata often depicted designs associated with the rockhole site of Marrapinti, to the west of Pollock Hills in Western Australia. A large group of senior women came from Yunala, further west, and camped at this rockhole making the nose-bones, which are worn through a hole in the nose-web, and significantly a rock formation at the site is pierced by a hole. These nose-bones were originally worn by both men and women but are now only worn by the older generation on ceremonial occasions. In her colourist canvases which constantly varied, Naata often worked in layers of mixed colours in textural dots over a linear grid which blocked in a tract of country traversed by ancestral women whose hairstring belts are discernible in the linear striations. In witnessing Naata painting at Walungurru she habitually worked with tiny pots of all available colours. Significantly, Marrapinti is also the focus of works by younger Pintupi artists, Doreen Reid Nakamarra who won the general painting prize at the 25th Telstra Art Award and Mantua Nangala whose exquisite abstract and conceptual distillations of place envision the sandhill topography of this women's site.

I first encountered Doreen's paintings in the Pintupi exhibition of October 2005 at Papunya Tula Artists. Doreen's ridges of *tali* (sand hills) articulated as beautifully drawn zigzags seemingly stretched into infinity and appeared to stand up on the canvas surface, as if carved out. The super-fine herringbone striations dotted with subtle modulations of cream and beige on sepia wavered and gyrated to create an illusion of the third dimension. Doreen's penchant for diaphanous detail is also seen in her compositions of tiny dots joined into horizontal and vertical lines of differing intensity. Doreen's distinctive linear iconography accords with the trajectory of the Papunya Tula movement. The artist has forged a singular form of visual music borne of delicious detail sustained over monumental surfaces that invokes country of rocky outcrops, vast sand hills and Spinifex plains, underpinned by hidden creeks, rock holes and soaks.

In Doreen's paintings of uninterrupted parallel zigzags dotted with a brush trimmed to a fine point or quivering linear striations within a grid nothing is allowed to intervene, divert or decorate. Similarly in Mantua's optical linear manifestations painting is reduced to its simplest elements — modulations of tones and lines — resembling repetition of a single phrase in a Philip Glass minimalist composition. Images are concealed as shadows in a prism of light: creating pure visual sensation comparable with Arvo Pärt's sublime composition *spiegel im spiegel*, mirror in mirror.

Similarly, Pintupi artist Yukultji Napangati, the winner of the Wynne Prize in 2012 creates shimmering conceptual maps of sites near Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay). Unlike Mantua and Doreen Reid, Yukultji and her immediate family had no contact with Europeans until 1984 when she was the youngest of the Pintupi nine, the so called lost tribe, who came out of the desert into Kiwirrkura and experienced major culture shock, as she has stated, 'I hopped into a car and crouched down, and saw the trees move.' From the 1990s, Yukultji has developed a signature way of mirroring the topography of her

homeland in which parallel vertical striations of alternating pale and dark tones are overlaid with reddish horizontal parallel striations that immerse the viewer in the immensity of the Western Desert.

Luritja artist Doris Bush Nungurrayi was born in c. 1942 at Haasts Bluff where she grew up and married George Bush Tjangala. After her husband's death in 1997, Doris spent increasing amounts of time in Papunya, where she began to paint and following the founding of Papunya Tjupi Arts in 2007, Doris quickly became a leading figure in the art centre. Bush paints Papa Tjukurrpa, Wild Dog Dreaming of which she is the Custodian. Her ancestral Dog Dreaming site is Nyunmanu, located southeast of Kintore. If you sleep in this place, you will dream of the ancestral dogs. The circles in these paintings often represent waterholes, and the roundels extending from them are the designs women paint on their breasts. Bush also paints the love story that tells how she met her husband. Doris Bush Nungurrayi's paintings are rhythmic webs of distinctive smooth, curved lines, recalling the marks of women's ceremonial body painting. It's a different look from the layered, variegated character of most Papunya men's painting, which usually has a stronger connection to ground designs.

The Nyaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people of the APY and NPY Lands did not present themselves as acrylic painters until the advent of a new millennium. Their delayed emergence as practising artists partly results from geographical inaccessibility, a difficult contact history and the orthodoxy of their law, which prompted a suspicion of earlier manifestations of the Western Desert Art movement. But in less than a decade a contemporary painting practice burst out of this the last frontier of the Western Desert and offered to the world an aesthetic, ecological and psycho-geographical re-perception of the Australian continent. This living art form is an explosion of iridescent colours, forms, textures.

Katjarra Butler, the Nyaanyatjarra / Pintupi widow of founding Papunya Tula artist Anatjari Tjakamarra, has forged a bold and energetic painting style utterly different from Anatjari's intricate dot and line style of sombre tonality. She works for Tjarlirli Arts at Tjukurla using broad brushstrokes to capture the travels of Katjarra, the Ancestral python through her home Country of Ngamarru. Described as a walking archive by her grandson, Katjarra states, 'I am the python from Korrmanutja, I am the land, that python is and came from Tjukurrpa (creation). We are all one.' Utterly different from the broadly brushed bold and loose canvases of Katjarra are the shimmering, luminescent canvases of the respected nangkari, Better Muffler whose *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)* canvases heal country contaminated by the British nuclear testing of the 1950s and 60s. Like Doris Bush, Muffler who won the general painting prize at the 2022 Telstra Art Award works mainly in monochrome.

Sonia Kurarra grew up in the river country at Yungngora (Noonkanbah) and represents her Country, Martuwarra as a river abundant with fish of all kinds and vegetation. Her painterly manner captures the natural fecundity of this place that is part of her deepest self. These gestural compositions in layered modulations of greys are characteristic of Kurarra's most recent work in both style and subject matter but Kurarra is also a great colourist.

At Warmun in the East Kimberley a new form of landscape painting developed, led by Rover Thomas, Paddy Jaminji and the first generation of Gija artists. Since 2013, millions of people have seen one of Lena Nyadbi's work installed on the 700 square metre rooftop terrace of the Musée du quai Branly, Paris that is visible from the platforms of the Eiffel Tower. It is one of the largest contemporary art installations in Paris, and it reveals Nyadbi's deep commitment to reconstituting the materiality of her own cultural practices. In the east Kimberley when she grew up, extractive and pastoral industries have damaged the land in irreparable ways. Working with an austere monochrome palette, matt texture and an emphatic repetition of one or two simple designs over large surfaces, Nyadbi has formulated an ascetic visual language that conceptualises her innermost feeling for Country, defines the politics of her cultural identity and mourns what has been lost through European interference.

The short vertical lines in the lower section of her work reference the practice of scarification that was performed by Gija people but was forbidden by the pastoralists who owned new Lissadell Station, where Nyadbi grew up. At a place known as Jimbirla, Gija people would collect stones that would be flaked and attached to *karlumnun* (spears) and used for scarification. This painting is an attempt not only to symbolically recapture this cultural practice, but to multiply and amplify its application.

Nyadbi also references the markings on the body of a barramundi named Daiwul. During the ancestral period, his scales, represented by the inverted u-shapes transformed into the various

coloured diamonds that are embedded within the landscape. Nyadbi chronicles the creation of this site before it was destroyed by a mine that was once the world's largest supplier of coloured diamonds. After depleting this site of its monetised resource value, the mine has now closed, and plans are underway to restore this damaged ecosystem. While this environmental remediation is critical, a reassessment is also needed of the regimes of value that allowed this damage to occur for so long. While the healing begins, the scars remain.

Like her Western Desert and Gija peers, Madarrpa artist Nongirrŋa Marawili painted her first works very late in her life. Nongirrŋa is the daughter of the pre-contact warrior and accomplished artist Mundukul, who did not live long enough to teach his daughter to paint or to witness an era when Yolŋu women were encouraged to paint. Instead, Nongirrŋa grew up in a strict regime in which painting without authority could be a capital offence. During the 1980s, Nongirrŋa learnt to paint on bark by assisting her late husband, Djutadjuta Munuŋurr, a leader of the Djapu clan and a forthright painter. Since her first solo exhibition in 2011 Nongirrŋa has created paintings of startling visual power and vitality of line. Nongirrŋa, who draws as a plant grows, enjoys figuration, negative space and dramatic tonal contrasts. Her earliest works on bark accentuated the Djapu *miny'tji* of her late husband and mentor, Djutadjuta before she was authorised by her younger brother Djambuwal to paint the designs of her Madarrpa clan. In her work, Nongirrŋa strips away much of the crosshatching applied with the *marwat* (human-hair brush) and pares back the imagery to depart from one of the established canons of Yolŋu art, namely that the 'background' be covered with *miny'tji* (sacred clan designs) rather than left plain. Intriguingly, the negative space and bold simplicity of Nongirrŋa's work enables the *miny'tji* to stand up on the surface and project across space. She often returns to the Djapu iconography she learnt from her mentor, Djuta Djuta as in the four bold grid-like designs on bark displayed here.

In the context of other forms of contemporary Aboriginal women's painting, from its emergence in the late 1980s to now, Sally Gabori's body of work is decidedly different. The naked power of her use of colour as a stationary measure of movement and the impetuous energy of her broken brushstrokes stands alone. Her work is unrelated to the dot-and-line, circle-path iconography of Western Desert communities and differs even more markedly from the narrow, vertical ochre paintings on stringybark of the Yolŋu of eastern Arnhem Land, with their minutiae of *rarrk* (crosshatching) or *miny'tji* (sacred clan designs) authorised by Yolŋu cultural law. Because of these differences of style, iconography and materiality, occasioned by the absence of a customary Kaiadilt painting tradition on object, body, ground or rock and an inherited visual language, Sally Gabori's pioneering painting practice is unique. Nevertheless, Sally Gabori and other visionary women artists, whose works are celebrated in this exhibition, have contributed to an artistic resurgence that has shifted the capital of Aboriginal Australian culture and changed the very history of art in Australia.

Apart from painting, *FEARLESS* presents works beautifully fashioned from found materials. Marlene Panangka Rubuntja is Western Aranda woman born in Alice Springs, whose father Wenton Rubuntja was a prominent artist and activist who led the campaign for the rights of his people to settle in the town camps of Alice Springs. Indeed, Rubuntja's family, along with the Ebatarinjas and Lynches, were the first families to settle permanently in Larrapinta Vallery town camp.

Rubuntja began to make art at Yarrenyty Arltere in 2009, working first as a printmaker and then creating soft felt embroidered sculptures expressive of Country and the stories it holds. She recalled, 'I came to the art centre, I thought, I'll try this, and now I come every day. Then I got strong for this art centre, I love this art. In 2009, I did not see properly what was happening, how this art was getting me strong. In my head and heart, I grew all these ideas, and I started feeling well again. Now I feel like a strong woman, I like talking for this place, this art because I want others to be encouraged to get strong also. When we first started sewing, we were in kindergarten, then we started focusing properly and moving to primary school, then high school then university- and now I am waiting to be a professor of sewing! Look out world, I might sew Parliament House!'

Rather than coil-weaving with sedge or painting in acrylics or ochres on canvas or bark, Waradgerie artist Lorraine Connelly-Northey scours town, farm and bush environments of the Murray River and the Mallee to find other materials – fragments of corrugated iron, innerspring mattresses, jam tins, barbed wire – the detritus of colonisation which she refashions into objects resonant with cultural meaning that provide an oblique window onto the 'hunter-gatherer lifestyle' supplanted by

colonisation. Her free sketch with wire of a narrbong (customary container) possesses the power of startling surprise.

The monolithic narrative of western ways of thinking is challenged by the alternative ways of seeing and thinking revealed in the works in FEARLESS. As Thomas McEvilley has stated:

Today's art can no longer be a holding action for the past. The current mandate is more in keeping with Jean-Francois Lyotard's remark that 'art is a perpetual crisis'. As a map that shows us where we have been and a record that shows us who we were, surely art speaks about the past. But currently it has more to do with intuiting the future, squinting into its darkness for a glimpse of its unknown face.