

Warakurna: All the Stories Got into our Minds and Eyes

By Dr Peter Thorley, Senior Curator, National Museum of Australia

Warakurna: All the Stories Got into our Minds and Eyes is an exhibition of unique works that document a new art movement emerging from the Western Desert community of Warakurna.

The artworks in this exhibition were all produced in Warakurna, a community which lies near the foot of the spectacular Rawlinson Ranges. Warakurna is in Western Australia, 300km west of Uluru (Ayers Rock). The paintings are the product of Warakurna Artists, a thriving art centre in the heart of the Ngaanytjarra Lands.

Ngurrangka-latju nyinarra tjamuku kaparliku ngurrangka. Tjukurrpa ngaparrku-ngaparrku nintira nyuntulu-yan kulira nintirrinytjaku. *We are living in our grandfather's and grandmother's country. We are sharing our stories with you so that you can learn about them.* (Eunice Porter, Warakurna Artists Chairperson, 2012)

The people of Warakurna speak Ngaanyatjarra as their first language and refer to themselves by the term *Yarnangu*. Ngaanyatjarra is a Western Desert language. The Western Desert covers a broad area which includes most of the interior of Western Australia, northern South Australia and the southwest corner of the Northern Territory. Western Desert artists are famous nationally and internationally for their acrylic paintings using traditional designs.

The translation of Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) designs to non-traditional surfaces began at the Northern Territory settlement of Papunya in 1971. Some of the descendants of that original painting group are living in Warakurna today where artists are producing very different paintings in content and in style.

Produced in the last two years, the paintings in the Warakurna exhibition are more figurative in style than traditional Western Desert works. These paintings are also telling a wider range of stories. The artists from Warakurna are now using their paintings to document their history – the

coming of explorers, prospectors and missionaries, the building of roads, missile testing, the return to their homeland and the setting up of their own community.

Ngarnmanypalpi-latju nyinapayi purtingka. Tjamulu kaparlilu tjukurrpa nintipungkupayi palyaratjaku, turlku kanturatjaku, minyma nyanpirratjaku. Mission tayim-latju nyinarranytja. McDougall and Macaulaylu mirrka katipayi purtingka nyinarranyangka. Katipayi-tjananya missionkutu. Palunyalu-latju palyara kulipayi.

In the early days, we always lived in the bush. Grandfathers and grandmothers were teaching the Dreaming stories, teaching us to do the men's dances and the women's dances. In the mission time we were living there [at Warburton]. McDougall and Macaulay [Patrol Officers] would bring food for people living in the bush and would take them into the mission. We are thinking about those things and doing these paintings. (Eunice Porter, Warakurna Artists Chairperson, 2012)

The emergence of the history painting movement at Warakurna coincides with broader changes taking place in the Western Desert – the last representatives of a generation to have grown up living a fully traditional life are passing on. The next generation is eager to reflect on the past and the changes that have taken place in their lifetimes. There is a growing desire for *Yarnangu* to remember the people who left an impression on their lives and to pass this knowledge on to their children.

Through their unique painting style, the artists of Warakurna are recounting incidents and remembering people that have impacted heavily on their lives – the explorer and prospector Harold Lasseter, adventurer Robyn Davidson, Midnight Oil front-man and now Federal Minister Peter Garrett and athlete Cathy Freeman are some iconic Australians who feature in the artworks. In this exhibition, Ngaanyatjarra artists provide their own take on these well-known Australian identities.

The paintings also address what is happening in Warakurna today. They show people living on their land, taking part in land management burning and feral animal control, football games, artifact making and the governance of their art centre and community. Like the paintings, the tjanpi (woven fibre) and purnu (carved wood) sculptures make a vital contribution to the life and

economy of Western Desert communities. Seven tjanpi woven fibre sculptures have been purchased by the Museum to complement the exhibition.

The tjanpi works are colourful and quirky, combining traditional grass with modern products such as steel wool and raffia. They echo stories, themes and objects represented in the paintings – people travelling in vehicles, on camels and by helicopter.

Some of the paintings and sculptures document the actual process of art making. These works sum up what the Warakurna exhibition is about – people reflecting on what they do and who they are, as artists and people, engaging with the world in which they live.

In several places, the Warakurna artworks have been complemented by objects from the Museum's collection of historical objects – an Olympic torch and cauldron, a camel packsaddle and a bible and hymn book in Ngaanyatjarra. There is archival footage of the Sydney Olympics, an event which is embedded in the collective memory of Ngaanyatjarra women who performed at the opening and those who experienced the event at home on TV.

The exhibition has been enriched throughout with artist's stories and quotes. Biographies and images of the artists further personalise the experience. The voices of the artists are given precedent – there is very little standard museum text. In this exhibition, the artists are telling their own stories - at times in their own language. A short film produced by Warakurna artists in collaboration with Ngaanyatjarra Media, another local indigenous enterprise, introduces the exhibition.

The majority of the paintings in the exhibition were donated to the National Museum by Wayne and Vicki McGeoch under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Program in 2011. The Museum purchased a further 10 paintings in 2012. All of the paintings have been included in the Museum's permanent National Historical Collection where they will sit alongside signature early Papunya boards and important works from the Canning Stock Route collection.

The curator, Peter Thorley is the National Museum of Australia's specialist Western Desert curator. He has had a long association with Western Desert communities which began when he spent four years working on language programs in the mid-1980s. He has a strong interest in written and

spoken forms of Western Desert languages and has worked on oral history projects with members of the original group of Papunya painters. He was co-curator of the Museum's 'Papunya Painting: Out of the Desert' and 'Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route' exhibitions.

Did you know?

- Western Desert people were among the last groups of Aboriginal people in Australia to have contact with Europeans.
- Warakurna lay in the middle of the flight path of missiles launched from Woomera in the South Australian desert in the 1960s
- Patrol Officers employed by the joint Anglo Australian weapons program were instructed to clear any Yarnangu living under and take them to Warburton mission and other settlements.
- In 1971 the contemporary Western Desert acrylic painting movement began at Papunya settlement, 450 kilometres northeast of Warakurna
- 1973 Yarnangu meet with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to discuss the setting up of outstation communities on their land.
- 1974 A number of families move back to the Warakurna area to set up their own homeland community.
- 1995 The first *tjanpi* (grass) basket weaving workshops are held in the Ngaanyatjarra lands.
- 2000 Warakurna women perform at the Opening Ceremony for the 2000 Olympic Games.
- 2004 Warakurna Artists is established as an art centre owned and governed by Yarnangu
- 2005 Yarnangu are granted native title rights to Warakurna and surrounding areas.



Circus Waters Massacre 2012

By Dorcas Tinamayi Bennett, Judith Chambers and Delilah Shepherd

121x101cm

Acrylic on canvas

In January 1900, Henry Hill's prospecting party passed through the Rawlinson Range, stopping at Circus Waters. Ian Newberry, a senior Warakurna man, gave this account:

This is a painting about three early explorers. The wati (Aboriginal men) saw their camels and killed one with a kurlarta (spear). There was a really big fight, spearing and shooting everywhere. Two of the white men were killed but one man got away with the camels. Three or four wati were killed.



Partirninytjarra (Blackstone Mining Centre) 2011

By Eunice Yunurupa Porter

Acrylic on canvas

76x76 cm

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Wayne and Vicki McGeoch

Copper mining began in the Blackstone area in the 1950s. Hearing there was paid work available, some Yarnangu travelled to the mines and camped nearby. Patrol Officers travelled past delivering boxes of rations.

Eunice's family was camped near the boundary of one of the mine sites.

We had one windmill pumping water for the bore and the shower. The girls didn't go to the mining site – we were too frightened.

Eunice Porter, 2011