

Ngurra Kuju Walyja

(One Country, One People)

The Canning Stock Route Project exhibition



Emerging curators with the collection, June 2008

Image: Ross Swanborough

Kartiya cannot live in my country in the desert, they cannot find water and food. It is the same when I go to town. I get lost! I think about my country all of the time. I like to paint the desert, it makes me think about my parents. I paint my country, the waterholes and I give the name for the water, in the places where we used to walk. Painting brings my country up closer, true, it brings it closer to me.

Mona Chuguna, Mangkaja Arts, 2009

The spectacular art, country, culture and a chorus of artists' voices from across Western Australia's western desert region is being woven together into a new travelling exhibition. Laced across this region is a dynamic network of Aboriginal art centres and community organisations. These centres are collaborating with the Canning Stock Route Project and the National Museum of Australia to produce this exhibition and associated publications, multimedia suite and public programs in readiness to launch in 2010.

The Canning Stock Route Project exhibition *Ngurra Kuju Walyja (One Country, One People)** is for all audiences to see, listen and immerse themselves into the power, resilience and grace of western desert people and Country. In development since 2006 and brokered by FORM, a Perth-based not-for-profit arts and cultural organisation, the exhibition is founded on an alliance with nine community art centres encircling the stock route, including Mangkaja Arts (Fitzroy Crossing), Yulparija Artists (Bidyadanga), Tjukurba Gallery (Wiluna), Ngurra Artists (Wangkajunga), Paruku Indigenous Protected Area (Mulan), Warlayirti Artists (Balgo), Martumili Artists (Jigalong, Punmu, Parngurr, Kunawarriritji), Papunya Tula (Kiwirrikurra) and Kayili Artists (Patjarr).

A core driver of the project was to facilitate the return of artists to their Country, to produce a body of work in the artist's choice of a variety of creative mediums and to ensure that copies of all material be provided to the nine art centres following the exhibition's launch. In 2007–08 a significant collection of artworks and a cultural repository was established. Over 120 oral histories, hundreds of hours of film footage

and thousands of photographs have been collated, providing a 'time capsule' for the personal stories representing nine different language groups and showcasing contemporary community life.

Stories dominate our perceptions and create our place in the world. Our personal and collective history is a story, and the more stories that are told and remembered, the richer our history becomes. The Canning Stock Route Project started off as an arts and cultural project that investigated and built on the connections between some of Australia's leading artists, who — while they are family to each other — live across an extraordinary and large landscape of our continent. But as soon as we began mapping the connections, determining the right people to talk to and be advised by, it became clear that the project would grow and grow. So many people want to tell their stories, their history.



Martumili artists Rosie Williams, Dulcie Gibbs and Muni Rita Simpson painting Kil Kil, Well 36, August 2007

Image: Tim Acker

Through the project's program of returning information to the art centres, the artists' families will be able to learn more about individual and collective stories spanning the desert. The Museum, in recognising the community reach of the project, acquired the Canning Stock Route collection in late 2008, and is also assisting the FORM team to construct the public outcomes and educational platforms required for the many stories to be told. The magic of collaboration is the glue of the Canning Stock Route Project and exhibition. The project's curatorial model is collective, combining Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professionals in a way that shares knowledge and experience. All members of the team contribute in a multitude of ways, each person bringing their knowledge of particular artists and regions and a diverse set of skills, experiences and qualifications. Importantly, the project and the exhibition's architecture could not have grown without the offer of sharing; people, communities and enterprises of the western desert are so willing to engage with all audiences, with trademark positivity, incredible insight and humour.

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