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Aboriginal Painting, Gift and Cost

By Marjorie Welish 9/10/09



Sent to the resettlement camp at Papunya, in South Central Australia, to acculturate the Aboriginal children, schoolteacher Geoff Bardon noticed that they were drawing nonstop in the sand, and encouraged them to do this art as a mural rather than to draw the cowboys and Indians they were supposed to draw. On seeing their culture expressed, not repressed, the fathers at the camp approached Bardon and asked to take the initiative. Bardon provided them with materials to convey their ceremonial art and make it permanent, and so, in 1971, began the Western Desert art movement.

The exciting and harrowing story of this initiative unfolds in “Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya,” organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University and now on view at the Grey Art Gallery of N.Y.U. The cultural complexity is not lost—indeed, it is finely narrated through the paintings on view, through Bardon’s and others’ visual notes yet also through original footage of the artists working on site. The catalogue is definitive, if only for the reason that curator Roger Benjamin enlisted essays from specialists, especially that of anthropologist Fred Myers, who did his fieldwork in Papunya in the 1970s and has written two books on the Western Desert people.

The art itself is immediately compelling and needs no apology. Ceremonial designs transposed to permanent portable surfaces may alter the look of designs meant for sand, rockface and human bodies, but the cosmology remains intact and its content uninhibited. The Pintupi people tend to bold symmetrically ordered designs that reflect their hierarchical society; the Anmatyerre tend to filigree and interlace—more individualistically, comments Fred Myers. He also explains that these groups differ in their mentality and so in their attitude toward art. The Pintupi “are phenomenological,” and after laying out the design do not explain anything, but expect you to experience it; the Warlpuri “are cerebral, they explain everything.” Beyond this, differing ceremonial traditions, says Myers, also issue in distinct stylistic traits and characteristics.

Differences aside, all these language groups share a visual vocabulary of elements adaptable to narrating stories and circumstances. Evident is a vocabulary of concentric circles that situates place: a water hole, a tree seen from above, a campfire, or the mouth of a cave. If the circles establish place, the “traveling lines,” as they are called, link circle to circle in a dynamic map of paths, creeks, fingers and dancing trajectories. Swarming dots—the familiar signature of Aboriginal art to even the most inexperienced viewer—create zones of sacred ground within which the story is consecrated. (A few sacred images, because restricted from being viewed by most Aborigines, are reserved for the Grey Gallery’s downstairs space and published in the catalog’s removable pamphlet.)

Dazzling topologies of the spirit, these paintings also put out unmistakable visceral force. With its red meanders and brilliant white dotted infill, *Stars, Rain and Lightning*, by Kingsley Tjunuerrayi of the Luritja, is proof of this charged expressivity; its

intense skyscape is in dialogue with Van Gogh's *Starry Night*—no doubt about it. Then there's the cosmological layering and interlace typical of the Anmatyerre that give palpable presence to an idea, and for this, the excellent *Women's Dreaming about Bush Tucker*, by Clifford Possum Tjapaljarri, would be proof enough; the artist upped the ante, however, by executing a montage of cosmological patterns! But for sheer power, the Pintupi artists, whose works are prevalent in this show, create arresting images time and again; an example is *Mystery Sand Mosaic*, by Shorty Lungkarta Tungurrayi. With many of the panels' prepared grounds painted "blackboard color," these images may seem too punchy, and yet the traditionally rendered sand paintings also give a vivid shout out.

The Papunya Tula Artists Company founded in 1981 by 20 or so of these artists now continues the artists' collective whose genesis lay in the 750 works created in 1971-'72. This is the positive aftermath of a highly vexed backstory. It is to the credit of all who were involved in organizing "Icons of the Desert" that the art is respected and not treated as symptomatic of postcolonial trouble even as the postcolonial trouble is engaged as one of the strands in the true and present cultural interlace.

Can we really object to the shift from ephemeral to permanent medium and technique? A nagging thought, yes; but the cultural tremors seem much less than those that occurred when, say, European performance practice experienced the technological shift to valved brass instruments—the boom boxes of their times. And to object to preserving ritual is to forget the entire history of painting practice altogether. And for technological havoc, surely a far greater phenomenon is how the digital revolution has messed with our analog minds; so let's get real.

"Icons of the Desert," may be seen at Grey Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, from Sept. 1 through Dec. 5, 2009. Of related interest is a show of art representing the current Papunya Tula Artists cooperative, "We are Here Sharing Our Dreaming," at 80 Washington Square East, which runs from Sept. 12 through Sept. 26, 2009.

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