

37. UTA UTA TJANGALA

(c1926 - 1990)
Pintupi language group
Untitled 1975
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
168.0 x 335.0 cm
inscribed verso with Papunya Tula Artists catalogue number:
UU75302

accompanied by a certificate of authenticity from Papunya Tula Artists, Northern Territory

Provenance:
Painted at Papunya, Northern Territory in early 1975
Geoffrey Bardon, Sydney, until 1985
Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and the late Margaret Carnegie AO OAM, Melbourne

\$80,000 - \$120,000

Papunya has now achieved mythic status in the country's cultural psyche for its place in the history of the *Western Desert Art Movement*, eclipsing its earlier symbolic place in the annals of white exploration of the interior; that of being the nearest town to the Australian 'continental pole of inaccessibility', a geographical construct identifying significant remoteness.

The painting movement that emerged from this remote place stunned the world, and continues to entrance nearly fifty years later. The genesis gospel of the movement, despite near contemporaneous corollaries at Yuendumu (NT), is irrevocably formed around the chronicles of Geoffrey Bardon, a young school teacher who brought contemporary western art materials to Papunya in 1971 for children to use in an act supporting cultural continuum.

Pintupi painter Uta Uta Tjangala's friendship with Bardon has been recorded as catalysing interest in painting by other male community elders', which was quickly recognised as a way to communicate their law and culture to outsiders in an act of revelation or, in Pintupi, *yurtinipa*.²

Western society has absorbed the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity and the transubstantiation of Christ and yet, for many, the Aboriginal concept translated as 'the Dreaming' remains elusive. The Dreaming is a metaphysical coalescence of past, present, future, creation ancestors, law and country; a concept the anthropologist Edwin Stanner termed 'everywhen'. In Pintupi, this concept is called *Tjukurrpa*, which is often translated by the Pintupi themselves as 'business' and 'law'.

Desert paintings have been called 'mediated memories' of 'Dreaming narratives, ritual events, legal and kinship disputes, dispossession and repossession, friendship, aesthetic influences, marketing strategies and exhibitions.'³ From the outset, the artists at Papunya, who hailed from different peoples, recognised paintings for their potential as 'membranes between cultures'⁴ and in 1972, after fourteen months of 'feverish painting activity in a defiant assertion of the enduring place of their own cultural traditions'⁵, they established their own company, Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd.

Uta Uta Tjangala was among the founders and is regarded as an important innovator in the period 1972-1975, during which time Pintupi painting underwent rapid change.⁶ Former Papunya

Tula Artists advisor John Kean records that Tjangala 'pushed hardest at the boundaries of the very conventions he helped establish, disrupting a formal reading of his painting with incursions of idiosyncratic visual elements or vibrant 'non-traditional' colours.'⁷

Tjangala commenced painting large canvases in 1975⁸, after moving to Yayayi outstation, 40km west of Papunya, and was only one of a handful of artists to do so at that early date.⁹ The present work – which exhibits certain stylistic and iconographic ties to the artist's genesis boards from 1972 – was executed in Kean's period of 'rapid stylisation', which Vivien Johnson characterises as 'an outbreak of painterliness... a phase of intense experimentation with the properties of paint and canvas, including colour combinations.'¹⁰

Bardon's view of Tjangala's painterly vitality is evident in the present work: 'his vigour with the brush and unselfconscious patterning produce[d] a seemingly endless stream of loved and honoured imagery [in] intuitive rhythms and pattern without ornamentation.'¹¹

Kean's description of Tjangala's oeuvre as exhibiting 'explosive energy' is also evident in the present work, wherein symbolic elements 'appear restlessly on the surface of the painting'¹²; it shimmers and pulsates with symbolic effervescence. This is, in large part, due to the dotting, which was not symmetrically imposed and controlled as in later works from the Papunya artists, including the artist himself, but organised in clusters, an effect that Bardon has suggested enabled them, and the grounded colour beneath, 'to breathe.'¹³ This approach to dotting was typical in Tjangala's early boards, such as *Old Man's Story* from 1972.¹⁴

In Aboriginal life, the body's skin is a place of mediation between realms of existence: physical, as part of the environment, and metaphysical, as part of *Tjukurrpa*. Howard Morphy describes the metaphysical heart of Aboriginal society as 'centred on the relationship between deep and surface forms'¹⁵. The desert's sand operates in a similar way, as skin on the earth, upon which the power and life forces of ancestral beings in the realms above and below the earth can be called upon in ceremony. Fred Meyers proffers a similar thinking about how best to come to an understanding of the Western Desert paintings, suggesting we explore 'how they relate to the perception or experience of the landscape of living, acting bodies.'¹⁶

Classic Pintupi ceremonial designs and iconography drawn from sand painting is evident in the present work, whose surface designs or 'outside story' are associated with *Tingari* sites related to teaching and initiation ceremonies of young men. The work references the transformative power of ancestral creatures, wartunuma (watonuma/watanuma) or flying ants, which, like the boys at initiation, undergo metamorphosis. Several months of instruction follow, with time spent travelling and learning the stories of the area. One of the sites referenced in the *Tingari* narrative is *Wartunumanya*, a cave that opens to the sky, from which the ants emerge.¹⁷

In Tjangala's *Tingari Dreaming*, a board from c.1973-74 (Australian Museum), irregular swathes of black marks similar to those in the present work represent people coming in for ceremonies to a central significant site¹⁸; the same irregular black marks dominate the central composition of another of his early boards, *Special Pintupi Travelling Ceremony* 1972.¹⁹ In *Boys Corroboree Dreaming* 1972, one sees the same deployment of





Figure 1 (OPPOSITE)
 Yumari 1978
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 339.0 x 170.0 cm
 National Museum of Australia collection, Canberra
 Image supplied by the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

six tightly-grouped parallel lines (white on black) denoting travel between sites,²⁰ which are also used in *Young Man's Travelling Ceremony* 1972²¹, the central design of which is two enclosed arcs emanating from a central site in opposing directions. And precursor figuration iconography can be found in other early boards, such as *Women's Dreaming for the Wallaby Spirit*,²² 1972, in which body parts (brown/black leg impressions in the sand and feet) are depicted in conjunction with conventional U shapes.

Tjangala's monumental canvases are rare compared to his surviving oeuvre of early boards, which number fifty or more,²³ and his transitional canvases, even more so. The present work is a forerunner to his later, masterful epic narratives of archetypal



Figure 2
 CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI
 Warlugulong 1977
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 202.0 x 337.5 cm
 National Gallery of Australia collection, Canberra
 Sold Sotheby's, Melbourne, 24 July 2007, lot 114,
 \$2,400,000 (including buyer's premium)

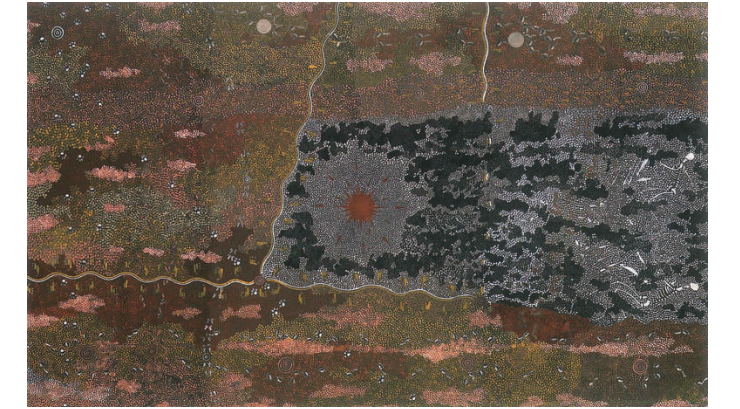


Figure 3
 CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI
 Five Stories 1987
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 176.0 x 563.0 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria collection, Melbourne
 Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Tim and Vivien Johnson, Governors, 1992
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Figure 4
 TIM LEURA TJAPALTJARRI
 CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI
 Spirit Dreaming Through Napperby Country 1980
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 208.0 x 671.0 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 Felton Bequest, 1988
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Footnotes

1. Johnson, V., *Aboriginal artists of the Western Desert: A Biographical Dictionary*, Craftsman House, 1994, p.198 and *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, IAD Press, Alice Springs, 2008, p.25
2. Meyers, F.R., 'Exhibiting Culture at the Boundary: the Fetish of Early Papunya Boards', in *Tjungunutja: From Having Come Together*, Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, Darwin, 2017, p.201
3. Dussart, F., 'Mediating Art: Painters of Acrylics at Yuendumu (1983-2011)', in *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art*, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, New England, USA, p.72
4. Rothwell, N., 'Introduction', *Paintupi: 20 Contemporary Paintings from the Paintupi Homelands*, Hamilton's Gallery, London, 28 June-11 August 2006
5. Johnson, *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, op.cit., p.1
6. Kean, J., 'Uta Uta Tjangala', in *Tradition Today: Indigenous Art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2013 (revised ed.), p.156
7. *Ibid.*, p.156
8. Kimber, R.G., in Johnson, *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, op.cit., p.218
9. Kimber, R.G., 'Recollections of Papunya Tula 1971-1980', in Perkins, H. and Fink, H. (eds.), *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000, pp.213-14
10. (1973-196) Johnson, V., 'Seeing is Believing: A Brief History of Papunya Tula Artists 1971-2000', in Perkins, H. and Fink, H. (eds.), op.cit., p.191
11. Bardon, G. and Bardon, J., *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story. The Beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, 2018, p.70

12. Kean, op.cit., p.156

13. Bardon, G. and Bardon, J., op.cit., p.45

14. Painting 185, *ibid.*, p.260

15. Morphy, H., 'The Lavery Collection: Exploring the Qualities of Aboriginal Art', in *Beyond Sacred: Australian Aboriginal Art, The Collection of Colin and Elizabeth Lavery*, Edition II, Kleimeyer Industries, Melbourne, 2011, p.17

16. Meyers, F.R., 'Graceful Transfigurations of Person, Place and Story: the Stylistic Evolution of Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi', in Benjamin, R. and Weislogel, A.C., (eds.) *Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, New York, 2009, p.54

17. The Papunya Tula Artists' certificate for this work references witchetty grubs rather than flying ants (referenced in the site name), which are also transformative beings. It also refers to flying dingoes forming part of the landscape

18. Painting 41, Kate Khan, K., 'Looking Back: The Story of a Collection. The Papunya Permanent Collection of Early Western Desert Paintings at the Australian Museum', *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum, Online*, No. 25, 2016, pp.36, 52 (illus.)

19. Ryan, J. and Batty, P., *Tjukurrjjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2011, p.142

20. Bardon, G., *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*, Gecko Books, SA, 2006, p.97

21. Sotheby's, *Important Australian & International Art*, Sydney, 26 August 2014, lot 58

22. Painting 319, Bardon, G. and Bardon, J., op.cit., p.368

23. Johnson, *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, op.cit., p.3 – indicates 'at least fifty, and in many cases closer to seventy' for a select group of artists, including Uta Uta Tjangala, without specifying further

24. *Ibid.*, p.34

25. *Ibid.*, p.75

Jane Raffan BA Hons. (Fine Arts); Grad.Dip.
 Environmental Law (Ethical Dealing Art & Cultural Heritage)