

ROVER THOMAS (JULAMA)

(c1926-1998)

Kukatja/Wangkajunga language group

Lally Creek, Texas Downs 1991

natural earth pigments on canvas

60.0 x 100.0 cm

dated and inscribed verso: 1991/ LALLY CREEK/ TEXAS DOWNS/
LALLY CREEK 1991

accompanied by an audio recording in which the artist describes
the subject of this painting

PROVENANCE

Mary Mächa, Perth

Caruana Fine Art, Canberra, 2007

Private collection, Sydney

Rover Thomas (Julama) was born at Yalda Soak in the Great Sandy Desert near *Kunawarriti* (Well 33) on the Canning Stock Route in Western Australia. Following his mother's death, Thomas was trained as a stockman in the Kimberley region at Billiluna cattle station in the Tanami Desert, between Balgo and Halls Creek. In 1975 he settled at Warmun (Turkey Creek), where he is credited with pioneering the critically acclaimed East Kimberley painting movement in the period 1979-82.

Judith Ryan characterises Thomas's approach as 'fusing the cosmic with the concrete, condensing complex mythological and topographical information into simple abstract elements on the surface of the canvas';¹ his landscapes and narratives imbued with 'the presence and mystery of the *Narungani*, or creative past.'²

Thomas's mixed artistic heritage of the pictorial traditions of the East Kimberley (*Gija/Miriwoong* people) and his western desert culture (*Wangkajunga/Kukatja*), are evident in his compositions. These are 'marked by lines of dots, used traditionally in the Kimberley to delineate icons and figures',³ and now employed to demarcate country. It was this stylistic dissonance⁴ – elsewhere categorised as a creative paradox⁵ – that propelled his work to the forefront of the East Kimberley movement and onto the world stage.

It is recorded that Rover Thomas had a fond nostalgia for Texas Downs. *Lally Creek* 1991, along with *All that Big Rain Coming from Topside* 1991 (National Gallery of Australia collection, Canberra), depict waterbodies on the station, where Thomas and his co-workers would seek relief from the long days of hard mustering.⁶ The central narrative of *Lally Creek* relates to a waterhole, kangaroo hunting and encampment site, beneath an expansive hillside. This striking painting exhibits the hallmarks of virtuosity and compositional restraint, consistent with other examples from 1990-91, including massacre works held in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

Rover Thomas was known for his deep consideration of the natural pigments selected for his works. As Mary Mächa once summarised, 'Rover has taken the pigments and shown you the country.'⁷ Thomas depicts the *Lally Creek* site in his iconic planar

EXHIBITED

Porta Oberta al Dreamtime: Art Aborigen Contemporani d'Austràlia 1971-2003, Fundació Caixa de Geirona, Geirona, Spain, 24 September - 14 November 2005; Fundació Caixa de Terrassa, Barcelona, 20 November 2005 - 9 January 2006

LITERATURE

Planella, G. (ed.), *Porta Oberta al Dreamtime: Art Aborigen Contemporani d'Austràlia, 1971-2003*, Fundació Caixa de Geirona, Spain, 2004, p.38 (illus.)

\$60,000 - \$80,000

perspective – 'stripped to bare bones'.⁸ Its sumptuous layers of sunbaked sand and earth have been created with matte pigments. The subtle tonal shifts contrast dramatically with the shadows of the hills and the dotted creek lines to create a tension across the picture plane.

In 1990, less than ten years after he famously declared to Mary Mächa, 'I want to paint',⁹ Thomas received recognition and status amongst the country's premier contemporary artists. He was selected as Australia's representative to the 44th Venice Biennale, along with Trevor Nickolls (1949-2012), the first Indigenous artists to be accorded this honour. The same year, he won the acquisitive McCaughey Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In 1992, his work featured in *Crossroads - Towards a New Reality: Aboriginal Art in Australia* (National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo), and two major public gallery solo exhibitions followed: *Roads Cross, The Paintings of Rover Thomas*, in 1994 (NGA); and posthumously, *I Want to Paint* in 2003-04 (AGNSW).

FOOTNOTES

1. Ryan, J., *Rover and Queenie* [exhibition brochure], National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2000, n.p.
2. Caruana, W., *Roads Cross, The Paintings of Rover Thomas*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1994, p.3
3. Quail, A., *The Eye of the Storm: Eight Contemporary Australian Indigenous Artists*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1997, p.92
4. *1990 Venice Biennale, Australia. Artists: Rover Thomas - Trevor Nickolls*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1990, p.13
5. Christenson, W., *Rover Thomas: I Want to Paint*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004, p.61
6. Cubillo, F., and Caruana, W. (eds.), *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art: Collection Highlights*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2010
7. Mary Mächa, quoted in *Rover Thomas* [exhibition brochure], Holmes à Court Gallery, Western Australia, 2000, n.p.
8. Ryan, J., op. cit.
9. 'Introduction: Mary Mächa and Don McLeod interviewed by Duncan Peppercorn,' in *Rover Thomas: I Want to Paint*, op. cit., p.49

Jane Raffan

Jane Raffan is an accredited valuer under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Program. Her arts consultancy encompasses curatorial services, collection management, and a broad range of humanities-based research and writing.

