

‘God is Love’

Representations of Christianity in Indigenous Art from Ngukurr, South-East Arnhem Land

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Gertie Huddlestone is one of a number of visual artists from Ngukurr in south-east Arnhem Land who began painting in acrylics in the late 1980s. The artists based in this community developed unique painting styles that exemplified originality, experimentation and diversity in Aboriginal Australian art. These artists are also surprisingly culturally and stylistically different from one another. This diversity is a product of many factors, including a history of decimation of traditional life caused by the onslaught of the pastoral industry in the region from the 1880s.

The Roper River Mission was set up in 1908 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), an evangelical body within the Anglican Church. It was established in response to the well-publicised massacres of local tribes by the various pastoral enterprises that had occupied lands north and south of the Roper River.¹ This invasion eventually drove a number of tribal groups, including members of the Marra, Wandarang, Alawa, Ngalakan and Ngandi tribes, to seek refuge at the mission. As an evangelical body, the aim of the mission in the early days was the conversion of ‘the natives’ to Christianity, the promotion of ‘industry’ and the maintenance of strict control over all areas of people’s lives, including the prohibition of traditional cultural activities.

Some present-day artists who have lived at the mission for most of their lives are practising Christians as well as maintaining traditional beliefs and knowledge systems. In this paper I wish to explore how two artists reconcile these seemingly incompatible belief systems in their work. I will concentrate on the work of Gertie Huddlestone and, to a lesser extent, Maureen Thompson, some of whose paintings reflect both these ideologies.

The artwork from Roper River, which is characterised by bold colour, stylistic individuality and a gestural quality, exploded onto the scene in 1987 with a range of works that questioned what Aboriginal Australian art could be. The early Ngukurr works were the antithesis of the abstract minimalism of the desert and the ‘classical’ styles of northern Arnhem Land and exhibited a diversity of approaches and influences. They presented a challenge to notions of ‘authenticity’ in relation to Aboriginal Australian art.

Gertie Huddlestone started painting a little later, and her work is different from that of many of the other artists who have worked at Ngukurr. She is the only artist to have been born in the vicinity of present-day Ngukurr, at the original site of the mission, about 15 kilometres east along the Roper River. In this respect she is also the only artist whose work can be seen to be ‘of’ that place and reflective of its history and culture. While having a Marra and Wandarang heritage, she inhabits an intercultural space, and aspects of this are embedded in the fabric of her paintings, in terms of both content and style. Her paintings present a traditional Aboriginal Australian as well as a Christian world view in which she depicts ‘country’ consciously and joyously as a ‘Garden of Eden’ and, as such, an abundant source of bush tucker and medicine.

Huddlestone's biography is of interest since many aspects of her varied life and experience are reflected in her paintings. In fact, it could be said that, as well as painting her country and her beliefs, Huddlestone paints her own life story. She was born in the 1930s and grew up at the old Roper River Mission, and, like its other residents, she and her sisters were subject to the gruelling disciplines of mission life. They attended school at night after working at various tasks on the mission during the day. As in all the CMS missions, industry was seen as essential, literally next to godliness, as was self-sufficiency. Huddlestone remembers, 'They taught us to grow veggies. Biggest garden full of veggies: pumpkin, potato. Also fruit: banana, paw-paw trees ... People worked very hard'.²

Many commentators have alluded to the pervasiveness of Christian colonisation. Bain Attwood stated that 'missionaries sought to change the Aborigines' notions of space and time. Fundamental to their reconstruction of Aborigines was a plan to produce a carefully defined and ordered social space ... a didactic landscape, an instrument to transmit Christianity and civilisation'.³ Depictions of the neat and bountiful mission gardens planted in rows and drawn from memory are a recurrent theme in many of Huddlestone's paintings. In fact, the ordered and tiered structure of the gardens seems to have spread further in her work, to represent sections of bush as well. Sometimes whole bush scenes and images of flowers appear to be arranged as if planted in rows and bordered by neat boundaries. This type of prescribed, nostalgic, even romantic world view seems to underlie many of Huddlestone's landscapes.

However, Huddlestone, unlike some other artists, did not resent the mission time and looks back on the early days and the missionaries with affection and nostalgia. It is clear from a study of the CMS archives and in discussions with people who lived through various mission regimes that the CMS mission was not a homogeneous entity. It was made up of different individuals with diverse interpretations and notions of 'Christian charity' and tolerance, and over time it developed different policies with regard to the acceptance of traditional values, culture and language. At some times these were actively discouraged and at others they were tolerated, and on occasion even encouraged, as with art and craft production.

Gertie Huddlestone's paintings depict a positive and endearing picture of missionary life and childhood experience. She received a good education and enjoyed many aspects of school, particularly drawing and embroidery. She used the sewing machines, but she excelled at 'fancy work', which has had a big impact on the style of her paintings. Nearly everyone who has written about Huddlestone's work has made the connection between her needlework and the look of her paintings.⁴ Classical notions of women's work, sewing and embroidery, are easy to see in the intricate detail, dotting and lace-like quality of her brushwork.

Huddlestone also has a particular love of flowers, and many were grown in the mission gardens for church services and funerals. She paints local wild flowers, bush fruits, cut flowers and the flowers that she embroidered using transfer patterns, such as waratahs. All of these, and others from her imagination, can appear at times in the same painting. She also refers to Albert Namatjira; she was influenced by seeing his work in picture books.⁵ Like some other artists who painted at Ngukurr, she uses a predominantly Western pictorial space in her works.

Despite her mission background, Huddlestone did not have only a 'white fella' education. She 'footwalked' extensively through the bush with her family when she was young and also during hard times when rations ran low at the mission and people were sent out bush to collect their own food. She learned about bush tucker and bush

medicine during this time. Her mother also made pandanus baskets and mats. These and other traditional objects such as boomerangs and coolamons appear in many of her paintings. She also includes seasonal markers in paintings. Flowers in particular herald the different seasons and point to what bush tucker is around.

Huddlestone's father was in the army during World War II, as was her fiancé. She was married soon after the end of the war and, like her parents, she had a church wedding at the mission. Huddlestone and her husband moved to Roper Valley Cattle Station, where he worked as a stockman and she as a cook for almost a decade. Like many other artists at Roper River, Huddlestone worked hard for a living and retained her Christianity alongside her traditional knowledge of her country throughout this time.

Eventually, Huddlestone went to live in suburban Darwin to be closer to some of her children. During this time she travelled widely to visit other family members in other parts of the Northern Territory and interstate. In the early 1990s, she finally went back to the Roper, after being drawn into what she calls 'an unhappy life of gambling and drinking a lot. But the Lord spoke to me. Take these habits away from me and the Lord answered my prayer. No more drinking and gambling'.

By this time people had been painting at Ngukurr for a few years, and Huddlestone used to go down to Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie's house and watch them paint. She insists that Gudabi did not actually teach her, but she watched avidly, and his influence can be easily seen in her early works. Both Huddlestone and Gudabi favour a close-up view of country, with detailed renderings of a host of animals and plants. Gudabi's paintings, however, have significant, secret ceremonial content, whereas Huddlestone denies any ritual content in her work.

I will consider now three paintings that best illustrate the different ways in which Huddlestone has represented Christianity in her art. *Garden of Eden II* was painted in 1999 and is a large and complex canvas (see figure 1). Huddlestone explained to Margie West, Curator of Indigenous Art at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, what it was about:

Myall Lookout. There are caves in this area and hills where we used to hide when the horse mob came long time ago, when I was a girl. We gather lily roots from the rivers and I use them for medicine on cuts. There are lots of different trees and bushes around this area. Ghost gums, cycads, palms and many others. Lots of different plants and a lotta bush tucker. Winter time after rain ... I am a Christian and this painting reminds me of the Garden of Eden—like in the Bible.⁶

Here Huddlestone makes historical reference to pre- or early-mission times, which she could not have witnessed, but which are part of the oral history of the massacres that took place in the region. This is not obvious in the painting, but integral to the story. The painting is a dense and layered rendition of country south of the Roper River. There is the usual profusion of detailed depictions of flora and fauna, the stitch-like textures, stylised plant forms and high-key, strong colour. Christian iconography is not overt in this painting; rather, it is in the depiction of the country as abundant and overflowing with beauty and bounty, which for Huddlestone recalls the Garden of Eden.

Painting the Country is a monumental work painted in discrete sections or vignettes.⁷ In this style, inherited from Willie Gudabi, the sections are not narrative as such, but a way of structuring life experiences and beliefs. Each section is complete and self-contained, delineated by a dotted border. The whole piece is like an embroidered quilt in which the vignettes portray the mission gardens and the

collections of artefacts and objects that Huddlestone's mother used to make. There are sections depicting caves, a canoe on the Yellow Waters billabong, small groups of people, different seasons and cycles of plants and animals that are linked to them. There are sections of bush, specific swamps and lagoons, and the insects and birds that live there in profusion. And amid all the beauty of the country there is also the image of an open tomb, which Huddlestone described: 'Grave empty. Jesus gone. It's when the women came and saw the tomb was empty and He had risen ... Angels told him, "He is with Him"'. This painting is a palimpsest that presents Huddlestone's specific ontology. It is also like a mnemonic, a device to remember bits of past life and encode them in the plastic world, like a tapestry, richly laden with biographical and philosophical information.

God Is Love is a very early painting given by Huddlestone as a gift to Lance and Gwen Tremlett, long-time missionaries at Ngukurr.⁸ It is an intimate painting with an obvious Christian theme. It illustrates the words of a popular hymn: 'Jesus died for all the children of the world, / Red and yellow, black and white, / All are precious in his sight'. Small figures are depicted along the bottom with the words of the hymn. There is also a big cross in the central tree and the words 'God is Love' in another. It is a loving, tolerant vision of the world. Gwen Tremlett talked to me about Huddlestone's painting, in Darwin in October 2005: 'She will tell you that these are the trees, these are the flowers. It's creation all the time. She talks about the beauty of God's creation all over the world. And she paints what she sees in her area, but she always attributes it to God'.

I would now like to look at one painting by Maureen Thompson, a contemporary of Gertie Huddlestone's, who also represents both Christian and traditional elements in her work. Thompson, who is also a Christian and a traditional Mara woman, has a similar life story to Huddlestone, but has been more interested in including traditional stories in her art and is more connected ceremonially to the area.

Thompson was born on a pastoral station in the 1930s, but her family had to leave after her father died. After spending some years living in the bush with her family, she went to the Roper River Mission as a teenager and still lives there today. The pre-mission time in the bush is a constant theme in her paintings. She grew up and married at the mission and has a less benevolent view of the missionaries at Roper River based on her experience.

One of Thompson's paintings is titled *Yumundji—Lightning across the River*.⁹ The story of this painting is complex and contains references to a major ceremonial story of the region: 'Yumundji been striking this country. There was an argument between him and this kangaroo. Kangaroo was up near the church and the lightning struck him and he went off. There are also things from the Bible in this painting. Special coloured stones from the book of Revelations'. As in most of Thompson's work, there is a profusion of detail, as one passage interweaves into the next in her complex, painterly canvases. In a recent interview with Thompson, I asked her how she reconciles her two beliefs. She replied, 'It has to be that way because I'm a Christian woman and a traditional woman. It must be together. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments'. When asked about this reference in the painting, Thompson referred to a verse from her favourite book from the Kriol Bible, Revelation: 'Stones bin very strong. Strong fella stone. Stone bin hava names. They were disciples'.

Thompson learned how to read Kriol from lay missionary Lance Tremlett, who, with his wife, completed the translation of the Kriol Bible, or *Holi Baibul* in 1991. It is easy to see how stories from the Bible could echo those from the Dreamtime, especially when they are in Kriol. Thompson reads the Kriol Bible every

night. There are many passages underlined and often references to what she has been reading appear in her paintings the next day. There seems to be a permeable skin between these activities: one passage sits next to another on the painting, both traditions simultaneously providing the inspiration: 'Two fella law, what God gave us. We must gotta have both'. This is a two-way street for Thompson, and she recalls how she argued with the teachers at Nungalinya Christian College in Darwin when she was a Bible student there and they tried to stop her interest in traditional ways. Thompson says ceremony and traditional law is important, especially for young boys: 'It's a discipline and necessary to make boys into young men. Same as what Moses did'.

Thompson, like many other people at Ngukurr today, speaks English well and slips easily and constantly between that and Roper Kriol, depending on to whom she is talking. She also still speaks Mara and is involved in a language program at the Ngukurr school. It is tempting to see the way paintings are made through the same filter, slipping seamlessly between one theme and mode of belief and another, and sometimes, as with Kriol, blending the two together to make a different whole.

There are examples of artists who have produced artworks with Christian elements in nearly every community in Arnhem Land and the Western Desert where missions were established. A number of recent exhibitions and writings have focused on these proliferating images of Christianity in Indigenous art, and there has been increasing interest in the manifestations of this kind of cross-cultural intercourse. There is a mounting understanding of the complex two-way processes of colonisation mentioned above and the development of hybrid and 'kriolised' forms.

Nonetheless, there has been some censure of syncretic work from both Christians, who find in the traditional elements 'an unacceptable dilution of the Christian message', and some Aboriginal art observers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who find the Christian elements 'impure ... and unauthentic expressions of Indigeneity'.¹⁰

There is no denying that there are great differences between Christian and Indigenous belief systems. Some people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, believe the two systems to be fundamentally incompatible. It is important to be aware of significant philosophical differences and, in any study of syncretic tendencies, not to make a case for simplistic comparisons between belief systems. Deborah Bird Rose has written about Indigenous spirituality and has noted:

In Dreaming Law the created world is never idealised or denied, never defined as all bad or all good. There is no paradise from which to be cast, no perfection to fall from grace. The created world is the world that is and it includes the power to wound and destroy as well as the power to regenerate and to create.¹¹

This type of belief system is about an active relationship to place and the obligation to sing, dance and paint to keep country alive. The differences are significant. Yet, as has been shown, both of these belief systems are an integral part of the life experience of these artists and reflect the diversity and particularity of Aboriginal Australian people's lives. For Maureen Thompson it is clearly possible to be a 'saved' and practising Christian and still believe in the power of the Dreaming in the landscape—to cower in fear at the thought that *Garimala*, the Taipan, might be watching as we drove near to the Four Archers in Limmen Bight country, her country.

<Fig. 1>

Figure 1

Gertie Huddlestone
Garden of Eden II, 1999
132 x 120 cm
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection (Abart-1629)
Purchased 1999, Shell Development Australia Art Acquisition Fund
Photograph Gilbert Herrada

Figure 2
Gertie Huddlestone
Different Landscapes around Ngukurr, 1996
122 x 199 cm
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Collection (Abart-1564)
Purchased 1997, Shell Development Australia Art Acquisition Fund
Photograph Gilbert Herrada

Notes

- 1 Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church: The CMS Mission to the Aborigines in Arnhem Land 1908–1985*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985; John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity*, Albatross Books, Sydney, 1990.
- 2 Quotes from Gertie Huddlestone and Maureen Thompson are from interviews conducted with the author in Ngukurr, September and October 2005.
- 3 Bain Attwood, *Holy Holy Holy*, exhibition catalogue, Flinders University Press, Adelaide, 2004, p. 27.
- 4 Brenda Croft, *Beyond the Pale*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2000; Margaret West, *Contemporary Territory*, exhibition catalogue, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1998; Margaret West, unpublished interview with Gertie Huddlestone, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1998, pp. 1–9.
- 5 West, unpublished interview.
- 6 West, *Contemporary Territory*.
- 7 Gertie Huddlestone, *Painting the Country*, 1998.
- 8 Gertie Huddlestone, *God Is Love*, 1993.
- 9 Maureen Thompson, *Yumundji—Lightning across the River*, 2005
- 10 Christine Nicholls, 'God and Country: An Analysis of Three Contemporary Indigenous Artists', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, p. 57.
- 11 Deborah Rose Bird, 'Flesh and Blood and Deep Colonising', in J Morny & P Magee, *Claiming Our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars*, Flinders University Press, Adelaide, 1994, p. 337.