Art from Roper Way:
Discourse on Diversity

This talk to day includes a discussion of the evolution of my PhD, from initial inception, through misconception, to some sort of resolution including what has happened after completing the PhD. Firstly I'll introduce the topic and then discuss how I modified my initial ideas and proposal, ditched pretty much all of the theory and let reality prevail.

My research involved a study of a number of Indigenous artists who started painting in the Ngukurr community in 1987. Ngukurr, the administrative centre of the Roper region, lies at the very south eastern edge of Arnhem Land. It is 400kms down 'the track' from Darwin past Katherine and on to Mataranka. Then anther 240 kms along a thin strip of bitumen, then dirt, towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Roper River marks the liminal edge of Arnhem Land. The lands on the south side of the river traditionally belong to the Mara and Alawa and are not considered part of Arnhem Land.

The Ngukurr Art Centre is an amazing sight. Art works are pinned up all around the walls and piles of unstretched canvases weigh down plastic tables. Competing with these are collections of beads, a forest of brightly painted didgeridoos, prints, small wooden sculptures and painted turtle shells. Ngukurr 'landscapes' are pinned on the walls, alongside canvases of discordant hue and images that mirror styles from further north in Arnhem Land and the 'dot dots' of the desert. The bold use of high key colour is the only common denominator.

Amidst this riot of colour and styles, Sambo Burra Burra and his wife Amy Johnson, once art centre regulars, painted at green plastic tables. Every now and again they would exchange comments in heavy Roper *kriol*. Maureen Thompson painted at another table next to her daughter Faith Thompson Nelson. Faith is the grand daughter of Ginger Riley, whose expansive aerial landscapes became synonymous with ideas of Ngukurr painting and who threads his way throughout the thesis. Gertie Huddlestone also started painting in the art centre in 2005 after a hiatus of a number of years. When she's there, she insists on sitting on the floor near the office to paint, despite a bad knee and her considerable age. Other younger artists come and go but these older artists are the stable regulars.

In this way Ngukurr Arts is quite distinct from most art centres in Top End communities, the Kimberley and the desert, where there is some consistency of style and materials. At Ngukurr the overall impression is one of diversity and difference, a lack of cohesion and an 'over the top' abundance. This is evident in the work of individual artists as well as the group. At Ngukurr Arts today there is nothing that resembles a 'house style'; there never really has been. Art from this region is dynamic and innovative, but hard to define. It is contemporary, yet rooted firmly in traditional culture and representations of country, that is depicted as animated and teeming with stories. There is a predominance of largely figurative work with very little pure abstraction. Art

from the Roper region consistently defies easy categorisation, and in this way it is a potent reflection of the society.

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I came to this research reticently, in some ways, after living in the Northern Territory (NT) for fifteen years. I am neither an art historian in the true sense, nor am I an anthropologist. However I developed an abiding interest in Aboriginal art, during the time I lived in the NT, moving there from Sydney in 1991, as an artist and teacher. I avoided referencing 'Aboriginal business' in my art practice, however, intellectually I was drawn to the debates that circulated around the developing discourse of Aboriginal art. Some of the most interesting dialogues unfolded first and foremost in Darwin in the 1990s, most notably during the *Kulcha Business* Conference (1995) and the *Wijay Na* Forum (1996).

Whilst living in the NT I visited many Aboriginal communities and made some Aboriginal friends. I also had other friends who became art advisors in community art centres and, when visiting them, I developed a love of the country in the Top End. I also lived for one year in Alice Springs, running a contemporary art space there. Experiencing that desert country for the first time was another a watershed in my understanding of the connectedness of country and painting and the lives of Aboriginal artists, an idea that cemented itself every time I went bush or visited another community. My eyes were opened to the complexity of Aboriginal life in communities and to the realities involved in the business of selling and promoting Aboriginal art. In 2000 I returned to Darwin and took the job of Director of 24HR Art, during which time I curated a number of exhibitions which featured Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists. I had become interested in some of the more ambiguous forms of Aboriginal art; the kind of work that is hard to categorise and does not fit easily within defined parameters or cultural systems, what was termed at the time as naïve art.

In 2002 I received a Gordon Darling Travel Scholarship to do a road trip from Darwin to Tenant Creek, Borroloola and Ngukurr in order to research an exhibition of art from the region. I soon realised that there was virtually nothing in the literature about art or about artists who worked there, despite a long history of art making. I perceived a very interesting research gap. I quickly developed a thesis, rich with post-colonial theory, to explain this absence and the intriguing diversity of the artists from the region. It was an early impression and, as I moved closer to the art and the artists, I quickly recognised it was a simplistic one.

The gap, nonetheless, was definitely there. The artists from Ngukurr, despite the presence of some major artists, and with one notable exception, have been almost entirely neglected by art historical study. Most research in the Roper region had been undertaken by historians (Roberts 2005) and anthropologists for Land Claims (Morphy 1981, Asche et al. 1998, Graham 1998) and in the field of governance (Bern 1974). In terms of Aboriginal art literature there is very little written about the Roper region or the artists based at Ngukurr. In the majority of survey-style, wide ranging texts on Aboriginal art

(Sutton 1988, Crumlin 1991, Morphy 1998, Isaacs 1999, McCulloch 1999, Caruana 1993) the community is mentioned and the art summarised in one or two pages or is omitted altogether. When Ngukurr is mentioned it is portrayed as an addendum, tacked on at the end of Arnhem Land like a contrary, idiosyncratic relative that does not fit in anywhere. The community and the art represented a complex situation, which defied easy categorisation, making it hard to write about in general texts. The absence of writing about the community is even more striking in books devoted to Aboriginal art from Arnhem Land. Of the almost sixty texts I surveyed, not one makes mention of an artist from the region. Therefore, it is fair to say that artists from the Roper region, with the exception of Ginger Riley, have largely been neglected by art historical study.

When I started this research I was convinced that the art from the Roper Region was unusual and different. This statement instantly begs the question: different from what? It certainly appeared to be different from most of the art from other communities in Arnhem Land. Clearly the art from the Roper region has not been viewed as being strongly associated with the traditions and the aesthetic inheritance of Arnhem Land, despite the fact that spiritually, conceptually and ceremonially, it is patently part of Arnhem Land. It is revealing to compare the situation in the Roper region with the more closed and hermetic artistic systems of the Kuninjku from western Arnhem Land and the Yolngu from eastern Arnhem Land, comprehensively researched by Morphy and Taylor respectively. Their studies, *Ancestral Connections* (1991) and *Seeing the Inside* (1996), set the benchmark for the study of artistic systems in those areas of Arnhem Land. These authors explored the complexities and particularities of the different ways that art is reflective of those societies and they have described long and complex iconographic traditions, within which major artists have been able to create personally distinctive styles and innovations. Both writers stressed the conceptual and physical contexts of production as well as elaborating on the layered forms of the art works.

Both writers stressed the notion of individual innovation within the bounds of traditional forms. In the western and eastern Arnhem Land iconographic traditions, as described by Morphy and Taylor, a sense of stylistic cohesion can be discerned, despite enormous individual variation between artists within those systems of representation. These could be seen as relatively discrete representational systems or certainly regional styles of art making.

The same cannot be said, however, of the Roper region for a number of reasons. The most obvious is the absence of a cohesive or coherent stylistic tradition in the immediate region and the lack of a history of public art making, separate from the ceremonial domain. There was a strict set of rules about what could be portrayed in ceremony and by whom, as elsewhere in Arnhem Land, but no set rules as to how to translate these forms for the outside world. In the Roper region there was no predominant stylistic convention or iconographic system in place such as a tradition of rock art or a history of bark painting, in the immediate area from which artists could draw inspiration. While many Ngukurr artists, such as Sambo Burra Burra, have roots in

Arnhem Land, many other prominent artists from this community, such as Ginger Riley and Willie Gudabi have a heritage from south of the river rather than from Arnhem Land proper and call upon other stylistic systems of iconography or, in the case of Ginger Riley, had to invent their own. Each of the artists who put brush to canvas for the first time in 1987 - Sambo Burra Burra, Ginger Riley, Willie Gudabi - brought with them a different language, a different cultural heritage and a different set of stylistic parameters. They were all drawing on different traditions and personal histories and, in Ngukurr, were largely unconstrained in terms of style, if not in subject matter. I suggest the absence of an overarching stylistic tradition in the region as well as the coming together of culturally disparate groups, had a liberating impact on artistic diversity.

Initially my research was focused on documenting the history of the 'painting movement' from the Ngukurr community within the socio-political context of the region. Originally I wanted to present the work of the community through a post-colonial conceptual paradigm with chapters devoted to themes such as tradition and innovation and hybridity and diaspora. The historical imperative that caused the migration a number of diverse tribal groups, including members of the Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Ngalakan, Ngandi and Ritharrngu groups to seek refuge at the CMS Mission, founded in 1908, fifteen kms from present day Ngukurr, underpinned my initial research.

A further consequence of the mingling of distinct tribal groups at the Mission was linguistic disruption and, by 1912, a form of Aboriginal *kriol* had become the 'lingua franca' at the Mission. It is still the dominant language in the community today. It was the idea of *kriol* and the notion of creolisation that sparked my scholarly interest further. Initially it appeared to me that many of the artists had 'lost' much of their 'traditional' culture and creolisation seemed like a conceptually interesting and plausible theory, which could link to a ready-made post-colonial interpretation of Indigenous art from the Roper region. I thought that the art fitted perfectly within a post-colonial paradigm for three main reasons: Firstly, it displayed heterogeneity, hybridity and stylistic freedom as dominant modes of expression; secondly, the community was diapsoric and the migration and movement of people had led to a host of influences and different traditions coexisting in a dynamic system; and finally, because *kriol* was the dominant language, I became interested in investigating notions of 'visual creolisation' as a metaphor for reading the art. For these reasons I thought that the Roper region could be considered as a transitional zone, possibly a middle, dialogical space between the two great forces of Arnhem Land and the desert and that, this, with the influence of Europeans, might be considered as 'a 'Third Space', a space of hybridity' (Bhabba 1990). This initially led me to formulate the presentation of the thesis through a post-colonial conceptual paradigm with chapters devoted to themes such as tradition and innovation and hybridity and diaspora. I became entranced by this idea.

However, not long after my first fieldwork visit in 1995, as I became more acquainted with the art works and the artists themselves, I began questioning the relevance of this type of post-colonial approach. It began to appear that

this form of theorising would be difficult to sustain and I started to question the usefulness of terms such as ‘hybridity’ except when used very specifically. I also became uncomfortable about imposing an overly prescriptive theoretical construction on the art and on the artists I was getting to know. It became clear that the scope of the thesis had to be tightened and that the examination of four distinct artists, whose work had not been catalogued or analysed in any systematic way before, was of more value than a broader survey of many artists. The enormous richness of the material of those people’s lives and the historicised and localised context of the production of their bodies of work was different in each case and needed to be addressed in detail. I became interested in the personal interstices and the complexity of lived lives rather than theoretical constructions. I also recognised that these artists had not ‘lost their culture’ but rather, that I had a limited and erroneous definition of what ‘culture’ entailed for these Aboriginal people. I tend now to agree with Greg Dening’s appraisal: ‘At my last count there were 366 discursive definitions of “culture”. Let me make it 367 and leave it. Culture is talk. Living is story’ (2003:227).

The artists and their bodies of work were in fact so different that representing their diversity and individuality became the main focus of the research and, over time, informed and ultimately dictated the structure of the thesis. The particular theoretical issues raised by each artist were also different. In specific instances, some of the post-colonial theory was relevant to the reading of certain artist’s work and I realised that many major themes, such as authenticity, syncretism, hybridity, agency and identity, addressed by the still forming discourse of Aboriginal art, could be more interestingly engaged with in relation to specific individuals rather than in a larger framework. Therefore in the body of this thesis I presented the lives and work of four artists as discrete, but related entities who have developed original and unique approaches to art making, whilst working in proximity with one another in the Ngukurr community.

The chapters are ordered in accordance with the age of the artists, starting with Alawa artist Willie Gudabi, who was the oldest and ending with Amy Johnson, the youngest of the artists explored in the thesis. Willie Gudabi, in collaboration with his wife Moima, explored the iconography of ceremony and the history of place in Alawa country in ‘Worlds within worlds’.

In, ‘God’s country’, Gertie Huddlestone’s representations of country around Ngukurr are explored thematically in relation to her complex life history. Gertie inhabits an intercultural space and aspects of her biography, personal experience and religious beliefs are represented in her paintings. Gertie Huddlestone is a practising Christian, who also maintains traditional beliefs and knowledge systems.

‘Big corroboree stories’, explores the paintings of Wagilak artist Sambo Burra Burra through a thematic and formal analysis. Burra Burra was one of the first artists in the Ngukurr community to take up the use of acrylics and his body of

work featured epic, highly coloured representations of Ancestral beings, using variants of x-ray styles on cross-hatched backgrounds.

Sambo's wife, Ngalakan artist Amy Johnson, developed an interesting form of Aboriginal landscape painting. In **'**Colour country', I present a chronological analysis of changes in her painting style over almost twenty years.

No study of the art from the Roper region could omit Ginger Riley. However, as there has been much written about his art and life already, there was no need to re-present it here. Instead I referenced his work and influence in relation to each of these artists and analyse specific works as they relate to key issues in each Chapter.

In the final chapter, 'Isn't someone in charge out there', the community's engagements with the art market, dealers and the lack of an art centre are discussed. The history of art from Ngukurr is more accurately represented as a history of separate lives coming together. There are points of connection and disconnection and to write a linear, encompassing narrative would distort the reality of art making at Ngukurr, which is not a movement in the usual sense.

Therefore the bulk of this thesis, in terms of content and structure, is concerned with the complex life histories and distinct artwork of four individuals, who worked in one remote community, but whose work is vastly different from one another. This study necessitated primary research including numerous interviews with the artists and other Aboriginal people at Ngukurr, as well as people such as missionaries, teachers, anthropologists, gallery dealers and art advisers. It has also necessitated archival research and the assembly of a database of art works held in major collections, private collections and any other sources I found. The database is unfortunately not definitive, but large enough to provide a picture of an evolving body of work for each artist through time. Seeing these bodies of work unfold for the first time proved to be a revelation and it is through an analysis of formal qualities of the work, tracking stylistic changes, observing patterns unfolding and logging the myriad of influences on artists' work that the chapters have formed. The presentation, cataloguing and analysis of the paintings in each chapter represent a crucial element of the thesis, as is developing an understanding of the particular intellectual engagement of these artists with their subject matter. It is through looking at their art that the lives of the artists have unfolded for me.

Cross cultural Methodology
Fieldwork trips
Sitting in the art centre, making cups of tea looking watching and saying very little at first. The being useful, by taking down painting stories, taking people on fishing trips and trips to country, or to the shop. Trying to establish boundaries, but recognising obligation as I was needing information from them and taking their time.

Cross disciplinary engagement

Nonetheless I have attempted to follow an interdisciplinary methodology and move beyond the limitations of my discipline, described in detail further on. I have attempted to acquaint myself, albeit inadequately, with some anthropological knowledge, if not an anthropological mind set. I have undertaken numerous short fieldwork trips to Ngukurr to immerse myself in culture and country. I visited Ngukurr five times in all: the first visit was for a week in September 2003; the second, for ten days in October 2004; then twice in 2005 in August and October; the final two week visit was in July 2006.

My fieldwork methodology such as it was, was to sit in the art centre, watching artists paint, make cups of tea and mix paint, slowly starting to talk with people. I also combed through the art centre files and documentation, (only in existence since 1999) and began documenting paintings and collecting artists' stories for the art centre. During the five fieldwork trips I undertook to Ngukurr I also seized any opportunity to go to country with artists and others and, as one does, gave lifts to artists and their relatives around the community and to fishing and hunting spots. These things are a measure of respect and affinity with the people whose art I was looking at and invariably form part of the process of communication and obligation in exchange for information. It became ever clearer to me that I would never know enough about culture and country but that there was no point looking at the art without trying to understand the context of its production. And that for an art historian attempting to come to grips with Aboriginal art, some sort of 'fieldwork' is necessary. Yet perhaps in the domain of the cross-cultural, acknowledging a position of not being sure and interrogating the unknowable spaces 'in between' is the only approach.

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I have been greatly enriched by the process of undertaking this research and awakened to the diversity the beauty and the complexity of Aboriginal art. The aliveness of Aboriginal culture and the fact that it is not dying that it is not static but evolving and responding the change and influence as art is everywhere.

My experience of Aboriginal art and culture has made me realise that the more I found out about it the less I really knew or understood. And that's OK and how it should be. Were not supposed to know everything. However as my scant knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal art and artists has grown so has my respect for what they have accomplished and their deep desire to show and share their culture with us. I am drawn back and will continue with this research and my engagement with the community as soon as I am able.