

Art from Roper River

This talk includes some parts of the intro of my thesis and a brief summary of three of the chapters devoted to individual artists. I am going to read it rather than ad lib and I hope you won't find the presentation too formal. Please feel free to interrupt though if you want to ask anything or do it at the end.

Ngukurr community, the administrative centre of the Roper region, lies at the very south eastern edge of Arnhem Land. To get there one has to drive 400ks down 'the track'¹ from Darwin past Katherine and on to Mataranka. There, at the site of the famous Elsey station, one turns left and follows a thin strip of bitumen, towards the Gulf of Carpentaria, finally arriving at the mighty Roper River, its pandanus-fringed banks stretching for miles in either direction. After crossing at the fabled Roper Bar and negotiating about 40kms of bone-jarring corrugations, a thin strip of bitumen heralds the outskirts of the township. The town is perched on a significant rise above a bend in the Roper, with heavily wooded country stretching away to the distance.

The Roper River marks the liminal edge of Arnhem Land. The lands on the other side of the river, traditionally belonging to the Mara and Alawa are not part of Arnhem Land. This Roper region country, with its wild escarpments, dense woodlands, beautiful billabongs full of lilies, magpie geese and crocodiles; its ruined-city rock formations and mangrove flats is as diverse as the artists and the art works explored in this thesis. It is a place full of stories and signs and hidden matrixes of connection between people, country and the Ancestral past.

Through the Ngukurr township, past the shop and the Yugal Mangi Council buildings, is the Ngukurr art centre. On entering through a wire mesh door, one is assaulted by an amazing sight.

There are art works pinned up all around the walls and piles of unstretched canvases weigh down tables. Competing with these are collections of beads, a forest of brightly painted boomerangs, prints, small wooden sculptures and painted turtle shells. On the walls the more familiar Ngukurr 'landscapes', in pastels and high key palettes, dominate. Canvases of discordant hue hang along side unfamiliar images which mirror styles from further north in Arnhem Land and the 'dot dots' of the desert. Only the bold, high key colour is different. The only thing missing here is bark painting as all the paintings produced here are acrylics on canvas.

I have seen art centres in Top End communities, the Kimberley and some in the desert but I have never seen anything quite like the one at Ngukurr. The overall impression is one of diversity and difference, a lack of cohesion and a dissonant, 'over the top' abundance. This is evident in the work of individual artists as well as the group. At Ngukurr Arts today there is no 'house style'

¹ In this context the term 'the track' refers to the Stuart Highway, which traverses the Northern Territory from Darwin to Alice Springs and ultimately to Adelaide in South Australia.

and there never has been. For most of the time artists painted in the community there was no art centre there at all. Speaking generally Art from this region seems to be in negotiation with and responsive to many histories. It is dynamic and innovative, but hard to define. It is contemporary, yet is rooted firmly in traditional culture and representations of country; country which is depicted as animated and teeming with stories from the Ancestral past. There is a predominance of largely figurative work, with very little pure abstraction. Much of it appears syncretic and stylistically hybrid, borrowing and blending forms and devices from Arnhem Land, the desert and European traditions. This art consistently defies easy categorisation into pre existing stylistic paradigms. It is a potent reflection of the society. Nothing about this region is neat or cohesive. It is an 'in-between' place. The reasons for this are complex and will comprise one of the themes of the thesis.

Amidst this riot of colour and styles, art centre regulars, Sambo Burra Burra and his wife Amy Johnson, painted at green plastic tables. Every now and again they used to exchange comments in heavy Roper kriol. Maureen Thompson paints at another table next to her daughter Faith Thompson Nelson. Faith is the grand daughter of Ginger Riley, whose expansive areal 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. 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.

It's almost 20 years since artists first started painting in acrylics at Ngukurr. Art from the community burst into public consciousness when the bold, raw and very brightly coloured canvases appeared at the NATSIA Award in Darwin 1987. That first flush of art produced some of the most remarkable paintings in the history of Aboriginal art. The early Ngukurr works were the antithesis of the abstract minimalism of the desert and the 'classical' styles of Northern Arnhem Land. They presented a challenge to notions of 'authenticity' in relation to Aboriginal art and were championed by dealers and curators who were looking for something different and who saw these vibrant and energetic works as steeped in culture, emerging directly from senior Aboriginal people, unfiltered and raw.

Sambo Burra Burra, Amy Johnson and Willie Gudabi were there when the first painting workshops took place in 1987. Along with Ginger Riley, they gained instant acclaim and their works were collected by major institutions shortly after this propitious beginning. Gertie Huddlestone began painting a few years later in 1992. Only two of those artists are still alive today: Amy Johnson Jirwulurr and Gertie Huddlestone.

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. However as time

progressed I realised that the scope of the thesis had to narrow and that by examining only four artists in great detail, whose work had not been catalogued or analysed in any systematic way, was of more value. The enormous richness of the material of those people's lives and the historicized and localized context of the production of their bodies of work was different in each case and needed to be addressed in detail. 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.

Therefore in the body of this thesis I present 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. Firstly I explore the paintings of Wagilak artist Sambo Burra Burra and through a thematic and formal analysis show how he has interpreted and modified aesthetic traditions from other parts of Arnhem Land, developing a localised form of hybridity.

Sambo's wife, Ngalakan artist Amy Johnson developed an interesting form of Aboriginal landscape painting. Through a chronological analysis of changes in her painting style over almost 20 years, notions of 'Aboriginal landscape painting', 'authenticity' and gender in Aboriginal art are explored.

Alawa artist Willie Gudabi, in collaboration with his wife Moima, depicted the iconography of ceremony and place in Alawa country. Issues of local history, biography and identity formation are interrogated through his body of work.

Gertie Huddlestone's representations of country around Ngukurr are explored thematically in relation to her traditional life and to her interest in incorporating Christian iconography. Her work brings up issues of biography, identity formation and syncretism in Aboriginal art.

However no study of the art from the Roper region could omit Ginger Riley. But there has been much written about his art and life already. Instead of repeating this I reference his work and influence in relation to each of these artists and analyse specific works as they relate to key issues in each chapter. Therefore in this thesis, in terms of content and structure, diversity in Aboriginal art and life is a key theme. Before I look in more detail at these artists work I want to map some of my larger concerns and methodological dilemmas.

As an art historian I am interested in art works and it is through looking at the art that the lives of the artists have unfolded for me. I have gathered together a database of artworks, unfortunately not definitive, but large enough to provide a picture of an evolving body of work for each artist through time. These bodies of work proved to be a revelation and wonderful surprise. It is through an analysis of formal qualities of the work, tracking stylistic changes, observing patterns unfolding and tracking the myriad of influences that the

chapters have formed. The presentation, cataloguing and analysis of the paintings is a crucial element of the thesis, as is a developing understanding of the particular intellectual engagement of these artists with their subject matter.

However this art historical methodology, crucial though it is, is only one aspect of the job of representing Aboriginal artists and their work. Much purely art historical writing has been content to maintain a detached formalist approach, which has been used to validate artists and works within the prerequisites of the fine art market, but which has tended to extricate the art from its ethnographic roots. Many art historical discourses have not adequately acknowledged the local contexts of production of Aboriginal artworks, without which we cannot engage with the real challenges of cross-cultural dialogue.

Aboriginal artists perceive their paintings to be representations of 'true' stories that took place in the mythological past when the ancestor spirits were creating the world and handing down the law. In this way the paintings themselves are manifestations of ancestral power. These stories are enacted in ceremony and the paintings often depict public aspects of these ceremonies. In the case of Ginger Riley, Sambo Burra Burra and Willie Gudabi the paintings represent ceremonial cycles that concern ancestral beings and the country through which they travelled. Everything, people, animals, landforms, ceremony, sacred designs and the law were all created by these beings in the Ancestral past. There are different levels of knowledge and access to information about these stories and the designs associated with them, a system of control of access to information and ritual power, which is revealed through processes of initiation. These designs, stories and estates are under the guardianship of specific groups who have rights to them and who must ensure their safety. This web of relationships between people, the dreamings and specific tracts of country in the Roper region are derived from their patrilineal heritage. Innovations take place, therefore within a complex system of 'rules' governing stylistic conventions, revelation and inherited rights to paint. It is in the negotiation between the rules and the individual's interpretive powers of them that creativity takes place. These artists engage in an intellectual and aesthetic negotiation of specific imagery and stories, which results in creative re-interpretation.

I believe that in order to even get a glimpse of the larger achievements of Aboriginal artists and to actively understand the meaning of paintings as dynamic forms of Indigenous agency and exchange it is also necessary to explore personal, social, cultural, historical and economic factors. Therefore this thesis attempts to present a holistic, account of these artists lives and work which stresses their individuality, their personal motivations, their agency and their voice.

.....

There has been virtually nothing written about the four artists whose work I am exploring. Most research in the Roper region had been undertaken by historians (Roberts) and anthropologists for Land Claims (Bern, Morphy,

Asche et al., Graham) and in the field of governance (Bern). In terms of Aboriginal art literature there is very little written about the Roper region or the artists based at Ngukurr. When Ngukurr is mentioned it is portrayed as an addendum, tacked on like a contrary, idiosyncratic relative that does not fit in anywhere. 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, despite the presence of some major painters with substantial careers, and with the exception of Ginger Riley, have largely been neglected by art historical study.

It could also be said that the art from the Roper region has not generally 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. I 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 Taylor and Morphy. I don't have time for that comparison now, except to say that the situation in the Roper region was different, most obviously in the lack of a cohesive or coherent stylistic tradition and of a history of public art making, separate from the ceremonial domain. In the Roper region there were no iconographic conventions such as a tradition of rock art or a history of bark painting, in the immediate area from which artists could draw inspiration. However there are many resonances, both in terms of subject matter and style between work produced further north in Arnhem Land and that of the Roper region. Teasing out some of these is another aim of this thesis.

In Ngukurr the creation of paintings was divorced from the ritual domain from the outset. Instead, it was made in the art room, along with the T-shirts with an eye to the market and the European viewer. 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 and a different cultural heritage.

While many Ngukurr artists had roots in Arnhem Land such as Sambo Burra Burra, many other prominent artists from the community, such as Ginger Riley and Willie Gudabi had a heritage from south of the river rather than from Arnhem Land proper and called upon other stylistic systems of iconography or, in the case of Ginger Riley, had to invent their own. The historical imperative which caused the migration of diverse groups to the Roper River Mission cannot be ignored as a major driving/determining force in the ultimate style and content of art from the region, particularly of Mara and Alawa artists discussed in this thesis. 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. This invasion eventually drove a number of diverse tribal groups, including members of the Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Ngalakan and Ngandi and Ritharrngu groups to seek refuge at the Mission. A

complex inter-cultural negotiation ensued, for example the lingua franca of Roper kriol developed from 1912 so these diverse language groups could communicate.

As well as the historical imperatives that have led to this unusual grouping of artists, the community's engagements with the art market, dealers and the lack of an art centre have undoubtedly contributed to the fostering of aesthetic individualism. There was an unusual amount of artistic freedom from the beginning with adult educators who imposed no rules, such as restrictions on colour or scale as in many other fledgling art centres, and no editing of 'un-marketable styles'. There was also a history of sympathetic art dealers who saw artists as individuals and fostered their work outside the context of the community or a general community identity. They were largely left to their own devices and, as creative individuals, developed their own styles.

As a consequence of this focus on individuals I have had to reassess some other assumptions. I began my research with the notion of a 'school', or an art 'movement' from Ngukurr, not cohesive but discernable. However the more I looked at the artworks the more the differences outweighed the similarities. The notion of a 'Ngukurr school' only stood up to the most superficial scrutiny. When the richness and complexities of bodies of work such as Sambo Burra Burra's appear alongside that of Gertie Huddleston's, for example, the superficial similarities pale into relatively meaningless generalities. I would have to say there is no Ngukurr style.

So in concentrating on representing artists as individuals first and foremost the notion of biography is important. The biographical tradition is a long one in Western culture and in art history but the life stories of Aboriginal artists have only recently been seen as deserving of the same scrutiny and interest as European artists. There has been a tendency in much writing by western scholars and commentators to homogenize Indigenous peoples and deny their individuality. Jones noted in 1992 that:

Only recently have anthropologists and historians begun to recognise the capacity for individual autonomy among people previously regarded as achieving their identity only within the group. Perceptions of Christian Mission life have further emphasised the lack of individual autonomy, overlooking the fact that Aborigines have made their own particular and reasoned decisions to adopt the Christian religion.
(1992:98)

The writing of Aboriginal artists' biographies, particularly ... 'traditional' artists, is a recent phenomenon'. Nonetheless there have been some excellent biographies. Vivien Johnson (1994, 1997) Howard Morphy (The Art of Narritjin Maymuru A multimedia biography 2005) and Liam Campbell (Darby Nampijimpa Ross) have focused on particular Aboriginal artist's

lives and work in admirable depth. There have also been major retrospective exhibitions of Indigenous artists, such as John Mawurndjul, Paddy Bedford and earlier Ginger Riley with substantial catalogue essays devoted to artists' lives and personal stories. (footnote) Brody points to the obvious challenges of Indigenous biography where the kinds of forensic information we take for granted, such as dates of birth and marriage, are often just not available (1997:10). Chronologies are particularly difficult to establish for the older generation of 'bush' artists as memory for such things as dates are not embedded in many older peoples' consciousness. Perhaps this has to do with Aboriginal notions of time. Swain (1993) convincingly argues that Aboriginal ontology and conceptions of memory are overwhelmingly place based rather than time based and that the introduction of the notion of linear 'history' is a foreign concept.

The 'portraits of the artists' in this thesis are neither strictly chronological western biographies, nor traditional ethnographies, but rather impressionistic snippets of lives, viewed through the filter of paintings and what the artists themselves have said about their paintings and their lives. For some artists like Gertie Huddlestone and Willie Gudabi, their bodies of work could in fact be seen to function as instances of autobiography and identity creation. Some common threads run through the stories of the artists discussed here but it will become clear that they are also very distinct, each with different experiences and motivations, with different levels education and traditional ritual experience and different degrees political clout and localised power.

This approach has necessitated an interdisciplinary methodology and 'interdisciplinarity' as a crucial approach to Aboriginal art is another key theme of the thesis. Both the disciplines of Art History and anthropology have historically taken positions of authority, but recently some writers have pointed to the limitations of disciplinary modes of thinking specifically in relation to Aboriginal art. Rubinstein, a New York critic who reviewed the Dreaming exhibition and intuitively sensed that the acrylic paintings shown in New York in 1988 (check) were 'in limbo between two homes...not fully explicable in either [art history's or Anthropology's] language'. Similarly Mueke (2004) reacts to the limiting conventions of disciplinarity in favour of the specifics of person and place.

My attraction to the 'in-between' the undefined and the interstices is echoed in this sense of un-knowing and not being too sure. For a researcher who desires to move beyond the limitations of their discipline the issue of not-knowing must be acknowledged. I have undertaken numerous short fieldwork trips to Ngukurr to immerse myself in culture and country, not really understanding what fieldwork entails. As an art historian it was an alien notion yet as a cross-cultural researcher it was a necessary. Perhaps in the domain of the cross-cultural a position of not being sure and interrogating the unknowable spaces 'in between' is the best approach.

The debates between art history and anthropology, which I discuss at length have led some acute observers to call for a new form of discourse because Aboriginal artworks question and challenge many long held visual art conventions. Some art historians (McLean (2004), Benjamin (2000)) have

acknowledged the paucity of critical writing about Aboriginal art by art historians and begun to see the need for a new approach. John Weber, in particular called for a different kind of art history with a holistic, non-disciplinary approach, '...a new system of critical thought...a rupture in critical constructions...an art dialogue sympathetic to the intent of this work which takes into account the works' vitality, site specificity, political message and narrative subject matter'. It is in this spirit that I attempt to work.

So back to the art. What follows are greatly abridged chapters on three of the five artists from Ngukurr that I have looked at in detail, just to give an idea of their bodies of work their differences and the way in which I am approaching their art. There is not time to look at them all and much of the juiciest bits that are in the complete chapters and the artists voices are also not presented in this brief summary. The first is

Sambo Burra Burra 'Big corroboree stories'

Sambo Burra Burra was one of the first artists in the Ngukurr community to take up the use of acrylics and his body of work is unique among his peers and in Indigenous art in general. His most remarkable works feature monumental representations of ancestral beings, in luminous acrylic paints on canvas, using idiosyncratic variants of x-ray styles and cross-hatched (*rarrk*) backgrounds. Surprisingly, his work has not been chronicled or critically analysed in any way before. It is evident that Sambo Burra Burra interpreted and modified aesthetic traditions from other parts of Arnhem Land, developing a localised form of hybridity, in response to living and working as an artist in Ngukurr. He also developed a number of unique aesthetic devices to convey a sense of ancestral power in his paintings.

His biography is important as his personal story had such a major effect on his art. Sambo Burra Burra, a Yolngu man, was born in the 1940s in Wagilak country, near Ngilipidji on the Walker River west of Blue Mud Bay, about 200 kms North East of Ngukurr. This is significant as Ngilipidji is a point where a number of different traditions and art styles coalesce. Unlike most artists who painted at Ngukurr Sambo Burra Burra had virtually no contact with Europeans as a young man, nor did he work in the pastoral industry. He came to the Roper River mission in the 60s after living a traditional life in the bush. He left his homeland when his Wagilak father, Ritharrngu mother and, he says, all his family, were killed. After the loss of his family he embarked on a number of journeys travelling alone through Arnhem Land, following important ritual tracks, learning about the country, singing it and committing stories and places to memory. It would appear that he was collating a vast knowledge about ceremony, songs and art styles from various parts of Arnhem Land. He imbued his travels with a sense of intellectual engagement and interest in many traditions.

Sambo Burra Burra could therefore be seen as a migrant who brought specific and valuable cultural knowledge and experience to the Roper region. He had learnt important ceremony and he had painted on bodies and bark as a young man (Interview 4/9/05). He was aware of painting styles from different parts of Arnhem Land and he understood the notion of Yolngu aesthetics. His heritage

was Yolngu, but his art, which represents an unusual amalgam of styles and influences, seems to owe more of a debt to central and western Arnhem Land traditions. Sambo married Amy Johnson in the mid 1970s at Ngukurr and they both spent time with her family at Costello outstation before finally settling again in Ngukurr in the early 1980s. Sambo Burra Burra became widely respected for his ceremonial knowledge in Ngukurr and other parts of Arnhem Land and in recent times had become the main funeral and initiation man in Ngukurr.

Painting business

Sambo Burra Burra began his painting career in 1987 when the NT open college introduced fabric printing and painting courses into the community. Instead of focussing on printing fabric and T- shirts, both Ginger Riley and Sambo Burra Burra decided they wanted to paint on canvas. In fact they were so keen to get underway that they both started by applying screen printing inks directly onto bright, highly coloured lengths of lawn curtain material with a brush, which, according to Gale Duell, “was the cheapest material and screen printing ink you could find”. This was all they had until the canvases arrived and perhaps this act of painting with saturated screen printing inks on vivid lime green, bright red and yellow curtain material may, in itself, have influenced the early inclination towards bright colouration that typifies most art produced in the community.

Sambo Burra Burra’s first attempts at painting in unfamiliar media demonstrate a clear command of subject matter, colouration and composition and in many ways they bear a striking resemblance to paintings he produced later in his career. Right from the beginning it is apparent that he had painted before and was interested in using strong complementary colours and a bold, figurative style. After this assured start Sambo Burra Burra worked in a blaze of excitement and energy and paintings flooded into Beat St. This first body of work, painted in 1987, marks a period of sustained experimentation. The freedom from the constraints of ritual and the use of Western materials instead of ochres and bark had a liberating effect on Sambo Burra Burra’s style. Yet some of his early paintings have a subtlety, a finesse as well as compositional and intellectual rigour that he rarely achieved again.

Many of Sambo Burra Burra’s early paintings are massive in scale and suggest a great confidence and huge ambition for an artist just starting painting in a new way. Amongst these early works was *Crocodile Story* (1987). It was included in the 4th National Aboriginal Art Award (NATSIAA) held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 1987. It was this work that catapulted Sambo Burra Burra into the spotlight and caught the attention of the Aboriginal art world. To quote Judith Ryan, Curator of Aboriginal Art at the NGV:

The Ngukurr paintings burst on the scene like something out of left field, providing the viewer with nothing familiar: there were no fields of dots, natural ochres or meticulous rarrk. In defiance of convention, Djambu Barra Barra’s *Crocodile Story* 1987 refused to stay within the

usual square format. The bold image had an unruly power, intensified by the crooked shape of the canvas. (Ryan 1997:16).

What Sambo Burra Burra says about this painting is also illuminating...we have his words as art centre stories

Two ceremonies are held for the crocodile. One is secret, only for the initiated. There are names and songs for the movement of the crocodile. The crocodile has creative thoughts, like humans. He knows how heavy the floods will be. He builds a very clever nest. His eyes are no longer eyes. They are fire...He can see with his eyes closed. The crocodile has killed a man and is taking him to his nest. He eats the man. The fish and the crayfish also eat the man who was caught while swimming.

Right from the beginning it is apparent that worked in between the figurative traditions of NE Arnhem Land, incorporating many forms of infill and other decorative devices including dotting, dashing and detailed rarrk in bright colours on canvas. Broadly speaking there are some relatively distinct stylistic phases that can be discerned in Sambo Burra Burra's painting.

These stylistic periods, rather than delineating strict formulae for describing themes, are loose frames through which the artist explored the expressive qualities of colour, texture and form to create effects. Colour is a defining feature in Sambo Burra Burra's work and is the main way it can be differentiated from other artists in Arnhem Land. He used colour to create affect in a phenomenological sense. In particular his use of colour to express the Yolngu concept of *bir'yun*, which is vibration or shimmer discussed in detail by Howard Morphy. Close examination of Sambo Burra Burra's paintings show he was attracted to, complementary colours that created the most vibrancy on the canvas. At one point in 1987 fluoro paint was introduced because Sambo wanted the brightest possible pigments

There are also some notable patterns that emerge when looking at form in Sambo Burra Burra's body of work. His compositions tend to be full, dense and complex rather than spacious with large figurative forms dominating the space. There are many canvases that are symmetrical or have a centrifugal action where characters radiate around a central force. It is clear from Sambo Burra Burra's explanations of the paintings, many of which reference dancing and singing in ceremony, that there is a performative aspect to these paintings which suggests the paintings work on more than a visual level; The ceremonial activities he depicts are about ritual transformation and the formal rhythms evoke and suggest other formats such as dance and performance.

We do not have time to look at the Major Thematic Subjects in detail but we can look at some examples.

Goanna, Cyprus Pine and Hollow Log Paintings

Sambo Burra Burra calls the Goanna his 'mother'.

Slide 25

Kangaroo Paintings

Slide 26

Devil Devil Paintings

Slide 27

The representation of the Devil Devil is a subject to which he brought a huge intellectual engagement blending different traditions and developing a large repertoire of forms with which to explore their expressive potential.

Very few major artists have managed to paint *rarrk* convincingly in bright acrylic paint on canvas. The paintings of Sambo Burra Burra inhabit an indeterminate space between the 'authenticity' and ethnographic roots of bark paintings and the innovations inherent in the adoption of the acrylic medium. In this way they are ambivalent objects that articulate oppositions between a particular style and its execution. These paintings also express contact between cultures. Not only between the Aboriginal other and Europeans but also between the different cultural traditions of Arnhem Land. They emerge out of a knowledge of stylistic conventions, transplanted to another place and time, formed out of a complex series of exchanges.

* * *

Willie Gudabi Worlds within worlds

Willie Gudabi was a complex personality whose relatively short artistic life was driven by an almost obsessive desire to record and pass on his culture and, conversely, an equally compelling desire not to give sensitive information away. His painted world is populated with real and mythical figures, plants and totemic animals and at the heart is Alawa ceremony, lore and history. A sense of history is interwoven throughout his work as well as geographical and biographical references.

Willie Gudabi was born in about 1916 on Nutwood Downs Station and grew up in Alawa country, which lies to the west of Mara country directly south of the Roper River. The base for Alawa speakers at present is Hodgson Downs, or Minyerri, about 150ks south west of Ngukurr, but Willie Gudabi lived at Ngukurr in his later years when he was painting. Alawa country was one of the earliest and most intensively populated by frontier pastoralists and it is peppered with pastoral properties, such as Nutwood Downs, Bauhinia Downs, St Vidgeon's Station and Roper Valley Station, many of which Gudabi worked at as a stockman before he took up painting.

Willie Gudabi recorded an oral history in 1986 for the NT Archives, (NTRS 219 7P 513.1986) in which he described a life of hard work as a stockman on cattle stations only ever being paid in rations, during what he calls 'bread and beef time'. That finally changed in the 60s when he was made head stockman at Hodgson Downs when he got paid properly 'like a white man'. However this professional competence did not translate into influence back in Ngukurr. Gudabi, like all of the other artists in this thesis, was not a power broker in the community and somewhat marginalised.

Gudabi got married 'white fella way' at the mission to Moima Samuels, a Ngalakan/Ngandi woman. She was born around 1935 and grew up at the old CMS Mission, like Gertie Huddlestone. The relationship between Willie and Moima was very close. They were always together and consequently when Willie Gudabi took up painting, eventually, so did Moima. Most works are in fact collaborations. Collaboration between husbands and wives and among other relatives is relatively common in Arnhem Land between.

Of the major artists who took up painting in the first flush in 1987, Willie Gudabi was the oldest, starting painting at 71, and he had the shortest career. Both Willie Gudabi and Ginger Riley made the conscious decision to become artists in their later years. They thought it was a good thing to do in retirement from stock work.

Paintings general

Willie and Moima's canvases form part of a complex mosaic interweaving time zones and places, with a huge cast of characters. A whole multi-layered microcosm is represented where numerous stories, creatures and places intersect. Their style differs clearly from Sambo Burra Burra and Ginger Riley, whose works tend towards the monumental, either in representations of country or ancestral figures. Gudabi's is a micro view looking down onto the ground, concentrating on a plethora of creatures that inhabit specific tracts of country and the ceremony that they enact. All are represented from the smallest to the biggest: the ants, the birds, the butterflies, the mosquitoes, the scorpions, the crustaceans, the wallaby, the goanna, the birds, a host of medicinal plants, some spirit figures and the mysterious figure of Gudang. None of them are random or decorative and all have a role to play in his complex scenarios, which depict preparations and enactments of ceremony. On the other hand some major dreaming figures are never explicitly depicted in Willie Gudabi and Moima's paintings. The Devil Devil, is only represented by large footprints and the Mermaids are suggested by the presence of mosquitoes.

The canvases usually depict more than one event or story. They are more akin to plays with various acts and sometimes require complex structural devices to organise the narrative content. Willie Gudabi and Moima's paintings represent a kind of meeting place, a call to ceremony and action. They are also battlegrounds where ancestral figures, big and small fight and plot to kill one another, steal ritual food and country. Bullants, for example are guardians of ritual territories, and can be seen massed at the edges of meandering paths, which underlie the detail and often provide the substructure of the paintings. In these dense narratives the artists sometimes depict whole song cycles and epic battles in multi-panelled, intricately layered vignettes.

At first inspection their body of work appears decorative as it features so many plants and little animals. It is undeniably celebratory and festive and there is a sense of fecundity, and of sexual reproduction as well as of country full to bursting with life. Willie Gudabi's paintings are first and foremost about ceremony including public initiation and circumcision ceremonies and others,

such as the Balgin Ceremony, which is secret and not discussed. He incorporates personal totems such as the moon, the Wind and the Butcher bird as well as ceremonial figures such as Dhuwa moiety snakes, including Rainbow Serpents.

Initiation paintings often feature Gudang a character central to an understanding of Willie Gudabi's art. According to Gudabi, Gudang was his 'grandfather', who taught him ceremony and Alawa lore. He was custodian and painter of rock sites and the *Balgin* ceremony from which Gudabi drew inspiration. He is said to be the last myall or wild black in the area after the decimation of traditional lands in the frontier war period. In this way Gudang became a signifier of spirituality and ancestral knowledge in Gudabi's work, linking him to place and his people's recent history. This character has also been described as a figure who still inhabits caves in the area and who was responsible for setting down the original songs and dances of regional ceremonies. That is, Gudang has been presented as both inhabiting the Ancestral past and the present at the same time. It has been suggested that Gudabi's cultivation of the mythic characteristics of Gudang was a deliberate reinforcement of Gudabi's relationship to ancestral power. His desire to record and continue his cultural traditions, which he knew were dramatically affected during the colonial history of the area, is one of the driving forces of his later years.

Looking at a series of ceremony paintings from 1990 – 1995 it is clear that his ideas progressed from depicting single or organically demarcated large sections of the canvas through to the more ordered and symmetrical vignettes of the later works, some of which have as many as twenty more or less equally sized, separate sections. They may be recurring themes in song cycles and there is a strong sense of repetition of forms and figures in these sectioned works.

This sense of activity is expressed also by the use of strong dynamic colour combinations especially complementary colours, as in the striking use of saturated red, green and yellow in *Singing Ready for Ceremony*, 1993.

Willie Gudabi developed a unique way of depicting his country, which gives an insight to Aboriginal ontology and views of what country can be. Stephen Mueke describes his understanding of this in a way that seems pertinent to Willie Gudabi's intentions:

...seeing *country* so full of traces of life that nature is second nature and history is transformational potential...as having a feeling of the immanence of life in and through worlds that fold in and through each other and across time, life being movement and growth...(Mueke 2004:4)

Finally

Gertie Huddlestone Gardens of Eden

Gertie Huddlestone lived at the Roper River Mission for most of her life and is a practicing Christian as well as maintaining traditional beliefs and knowledge

systems. One of the major themes is an exploration of how she represents these seemingly incompatible belief systems in her work. It appears that she has used her paintings to visually create a world view that incorporates her life experiences and history as well as her belief system. Whilst having a Mara & Wandarang heritage, Gertie inhabits an intercultural space and aspects of this are embedded in the fabric of her paintings, both in terms of content and style. Her paintings present a traditional Aboriginal world view as well as a Christian one in which Gertie depicts 'country' consciously and joyously as a 'Garden of Eden' and as such, an abundant source of bush tucker and medicine.

Gertie Huddlestone started painting in 1992, five years after the first painting workshops and her work is different from 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 15k 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.

Gertie's biography is also crucial to an understanding of her paintings as a wide variety of aspects of her life and experience are reflected in her painted world. In fact it could be said that Gertie, as well as painting her country and her beliefs, paints her own life story. Gertie grew up at the Old Roper River Mission and like all Aborigines there 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. The missionaries over time had established large gardens to support themselves with fresh fruit and vegetables and children of school age worked in the gardens and tended the animals.

Depictions of the neat and bountiful mission gardens planted in rows and drawn from memory are a recurrent theme in many of Gertie'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 ordering and delineating of the landscape can be clearly seen in a later work *We All Share Water* (2001).

Many commentators of Gertie's work have made the connection between her needlework and the content and style of her paintings. Some of the paintings are almost a translation of sewing stitching and quilting. Gertie also has a particular love of flowers and many were grown in the Mission gardens for church services and for funerals. Gertie paints local wild flowers, bush fruits, cut flowers gathered for church 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.

Despite her Mission background Gertie did not only have 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 bush to collect their own food. She learnt 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.

Gertie travelled widely to visit other family members in other parts of the Territory and interstate. Images of her travels to places such as Oenpelli, the Flinders Ranges and even the deserts of Central Australia also appear in certain paintings. The reflection of this peripatetic aspect of her life is unusual in art from the region where most artists only represent a very restricted range of country, usually their mother's country. It also reflects Gertie's life as she independently travelled around the country keeping in touch with relatives far afield. *Different Landscapes around Ngukurr* (1996) is a large multi-panel painting, which despite its title, represents remembered vignettes of landscapes viewed from bus windows, aeroplane seats and also from landscapes well known to Gertie around Ngukurr.

Gertie's landscapes, like Gudabi's reflect more than anything abundance, aliveness. They also reflect a sort of order in the natural world'. It is in that general sense of abundance, plenty with an underlying order and design that Gertie's landscapes represent a vision of Eden. *Painting the Country*, (1998) is a monumental work painted in discrete vignettes. In this style, inherited from Willie Gudabi, the sections are not narrative as such, but a way of structuring life experiences and beliefs. The vignettes portray the mission gardens and the collections of artefacts and objects her 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 swamps and lagoons and the insects and birds that live there in profusion. And amidst all the beauty of the country there is also the image of an open tomb. She says:

Grave empty. Jesus gone. It's when the women came and saw the tomb was empty and He had risen...

This painting is a multi-layered palimpsest that presents Gertie'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. The reference to the cross is totally integrated into the landscape and into the mind of the artist.

What Gertie is doing is creating identity, which challenges the accepted wisdom with regard to community-based Aboriginal painting that it is not about individuals. What is important is that the diversity of Aboriginal life experiences is acknowledged and accepted. The paintings do not suggest a loss of authenticity, but rather the necessity to broaden the concepts of community based Aboriginal art to take into account the conditions under which Aboriginal life has been transformed.