

Ancestral Forces in Contemporary Indigenous Australian Women's Art: 3 Case Studies of Multi-Dimensional Cultural Heritage Knowledge

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Abstract

The transition from ephemeral, ceremonial art to more permanent acrylic-on-board paintings has made Australian Aboriginal art more accessible to the public than ever before. However, early examples contained secret/sacred motifs and stories - knowledge recorded in the paintings that was normally only made available to initiates. In turn, this prompted contemporary Australian Aboriginal artists to hide, camouflage or remove the sensitive material from their work. It is only recently, through inter-gender and inter-cultural collaborations between contemporary Indigenous Australian artists and non-indigenous ethnographers and anthropologists, that the full ramifications of this transition is becoming apparent. This paper discusses 3 case studies where the traditional expression of Kuruwarri, or Ancestral power, has been transformed through contemporary Australian Aboriginal women's art.

Keywords -- culture, heritage, knowledge, secret/sacred

Introduction

Indigenous Australian culture is based on gendered, revelatory systems of knowledge. Men's and women's knowledge is complementary and often shared in ceremonial ritual situations [8]. However, in many instances male and female knowledge is kept separate and is considered 'dangerous' to the uninitiated, to the young, or those of opposite gender [5]. The problem of gendered and secret/sacred knowledge being revealed within paintings in the public domain has influenced their contemporary expression [20].

The emergence of more permanent art forms, in particular acrylic on board, meant that initially, and naively, many secret/sacred motifs were exposed to public viewing, prompting outrage from other communities involved in the same Dreamings. In place of culturally sensitive icons, paintings began to be infilled with dots, lines and other designs specific to clans. These clan designs invariably refer back to the original sand, ground and body paintings of traditional cultural teaching methods [18].

The recording of this transition is only recently being understood. Historically, the majority of Indigenous Australian cultural heritage information has focussed on the male artist's knowledge interpreted by non-indigenous male anthropologists [2, p53; 14]. More recently, however, Indigenous Australian women's knowledge has been made accessible through intercultural collaborative research by non-indigenous female anthropologists and ethnographers in Australia ([25; 5; 19; 18; 4]. This research is revealing that the production of women's art is not only influenced by their strict adherence to Indigenous Australian Cultural Law, but also the importance of other visceral sensibilities such as the sonic and affective dimensions of their interactions with the Dreamings and Country within which it is produced [25; 4]. It is through these studies of the affective dimensions of Indigenous Australian women's art that non-indigenous people are becoming more aware of the cultural significance of Ancestral power within Indigenous Australian art.

Intercultural gendered knowledge sharing

Anthropologist Vivien Johnson's [7] work in the 1980's with one of the first Indigenous Australian art ambassador's to the world, Clifford Possum Tjapaljarri (now deceased), focused on the artist's 'mapping the Dreaming' and its evocative ethnography [6]. It should be noted Johnson is a young non-indigenous woman working closely with an initiated Indigenous Lawman. It is an example of the recent intercultural reciprocity now occurring in Australia. It heralds a move towards better understanding the knowledge embedded in Australian Aboriginal art works.

Johnson's work reflects upon the transition, in the 1970s, of traditional forms of ethereal performative art to a more permanent acrylic on board (amongst other media). Its more permanent form meant traditional owners of the knowledge contained had less control over its dissemination. The boards inadvertently allowed many secret/sacred motifs and stories to enter the public domain. Once detected, it caused outrage amongst the community Elders whose knowledge it was and should remain so. In time, it became practice to veil

secret/sacred knowledge in artworks for public display by removing or camouflaging it.

Johnson explains how the transformation to painting at Papunya [6] in the 1970's, and the inadvertent revelation of secret knowledge to the public led to the camouflage or removal of much of the secret/sacred knowledge contained. She provides an important insight into the changes wrought upon what were once thought of as traditional styles of Indigenous Australian art and the development of contemporary artistic styles in general.

To avoid public scrutiny: "painting boards were initially kept wrapped in the men's camps in case women or uninitiated young men were inadvertently exposed to knowledge which they were not entitled to know: "The dangers of improper disclosure of knowledge from those painters who should know better were punishable" [6, p60] in extremis under Indigenous Law.

Johnson [6] discusses how, as paintings were being sold outside the Papunya community, neighbouring communities - who also shared the Dreamings depicted in the paintings - complained about the public display of imagery drawn from ceremonial contexts. As a result, the artists changed the way they painted and the content of the paintings. They "began to reduce and camouflage the references to the ceremonial secret/sacred knowledge in their work, leaving out the potentially dangerous images and infilling or disguising 'deeper' levels of knowledge using dots, circles and lines as a background... thus a new, secularised painting language was introduced that became known as the 'Papunya' style" [6, p60].

Secret/sacred Knowledge

To the uninitiated, non-indigenous viewer of the early Papunya art, it would be reasonable to question what it is within imagery from an Indigenous Australian ceremonial context that would make it 'dangerous'? Even if the viewer were constrained to ask out of respect for cultural appropriateness, there would still be a natural curiosity to understand the meaning behind such a statement. Is the danger due to the exposure of initiatory knowledge being inappropriate and thus disrespectful? And, are the Ancestral powers or Kuruwarri (or Ancestral forces) emanating from paintings that reveal the deeper, secret levels of initiatory knowledge dangerous to the uninitiated (and therefore unprotected) viewer?

A partial answer to the question of the dilemma of the unprotected viewer might be found within the knowledge of the lesser known 'affective'(haptic) dimensions of Australian Aboriginal art that are consummately expressed on traditional barks by male Kununju artist, John Mawurndjul, [11; 10; 20] and on modern canvases by contemporary women artists such as Dorothy Napangardi, Kathleen and Gloria Petyarre, and Rosie Napurrurla Tasman [18; 4; 17]. Their affective art is more than a visual experience alone. The paintings are textured in a way that invites touching, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is this affectiveness that

reconnects their art with their more traditional storytelling performances.

The dimensions of the secret/sacredness of the recent artworks were Johnson's focus and, more recently, Biddle [4] also a non-indigenous female anthropologist. Their research and experiences living and working with the women of Western and Central Desert communities supports their understanding of how Indigenous Australian peoples engage with their art [6; 4]. Biddle [4] explores the concept of affect, within the cultural context of Indigenous Australian art, in her research on body painting in 'breasts, bodies, canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience'.

Affective (or Responsive) Art

The concept of 'affect' in Indigenous Australian art is not new. It has been reported by other anthropologists and ethnographers. In the 1970s, Papunya facilitator, Geoffrey Bardon [1, p79] claims "Aboriginal temperament has a predilection to the sensitivity of touch. This is a haptic sensation, a physical quality and tactile, different entirely from the visual sensation in eyesight."

Biddle and Johnson also refer to the sensitivity of touch as an affective physical effect. But this is not the only type of sensation that they refer to explicitly. It is also the sensibility of "touching and being touched by" [4, p15] Indigenous Australian art that is the focus of their research - a considerably more ineffable and perceptual experience. Within Indigenous Australian societies affect is embodied through the peoples' connection to Country in their ceremonial rituals, Dreaming stories and art [4; 25; 18; 5; 14]. Biddle [4] explains how her research and lived experience with Central Desert women artists helps her understand how the adherence to Law (Tjukurpa) dictated the development of women's art, in particular, over the last 50 years. Moreover, the haptic or affective dimensions of their paintings are a vital aspect of their cultural responsibilities as they evoke the powers and forces of the Dreaming to emerge through the paintings.

Biddle [4, p15] defines 'affect' as "a capacity to engender response". She sees Central Desert contemporary women's art not as representative of emotion or as depictions of feelings or transmissions of senses or sensibilities alone, but as agents that generate a capacity to engender response to Tjukurpa: "Central Desert art commands our attention in explicit ways. An energy emanates from contemporary artworks by women, a life force that is irreducibly bodily, palpably visceral, mesmerizing in its effects." [4, p12].

The affectiveness of Indigenous art is most pronounced in the performative storytelling of the Dreamings. In turn, Dreaming as Law is dependent on a stable form that is repeatable and ritualized. Paintings enact a marking of canvas that is a part of and re-presents Dreaming as Law. In a female-only dreaming ceremony that the Central Desert Warlpiri call 'yawulyu,' women's bodies are painted to invoke the Law. Paintings now

reproduce many of the same marks as the Ancestors themselves first did - as bodily imprints, corporeal traces on an unmade landscape. The painting's surface is as a surrogate 'skin' both literally and metaphorically. This skin of Country is a "somatic surface that feels, that imprints, that scars; boundary and border of what is essentially an animate being" [4, p56]. The forms, features, marks and named places that make up Country hold precise affiliations and identifications as well as powerful and potentially dangerous forces. Marks, and the practice of mark-making, invokes a force that has the potential, for example, to rejuvenate Country and its inhabitants; to control fertility; regulate social relations and heal illness [4].

Kuruwarri (or Ancestral Forces)

Prior to Biddle [4] and Johnson's [6; 7] study of the affective dimensions of contemporary female indigenous art much of this art was popularly understood as a cartography of Country. It has been used in inter-cultural negotiations over native title, land rights and royalty negotiations. Acrylic paintings by Central Desert women have been used as evidence in land hearings. But, it is much more than this. Kuruwarri are designs that are also put directly onto the body. The techniques of painting turn canvas to skin to Country. In the same way that skin of the women's bodies is prepared or 'anointed' (maparni in Warlpiri) with oil or fat before being marked or painted, so too, the canvas is prepared; primed for the imprinting of the bodily traces of the Ancestors [16]. Fat or oil is a significant material in itself. It creates a skin that is lustrous or shining. It glistens, shimmering with Ancestral potency. It is also drawn into the skin - taking the kuruwarri into the body. Following the ceremony, the marks of yawulyu are left on by women for days because they retain their potency and health-promoting potential [4]. Placing marks upon the chosen medium are also tactile and sonic acts through the well known chanting or singing of the narrative that accompanies the image making but also through the action of poking or striking, stamping or beating; dependent on the media used.

Watson [25] describes how the action of striking, or poking, whether in sand painting or in ceremonial dancing, "impacts on the sentient land, setting up vibrations in it, and calls on Ancestral presences within the Country to witness what is happening" [25, p24]. These strikings have their corollary in painting, in the action of painting on the skin or on canvas.

"The rhythmic, repetitious, marking and remarking of the design until the background becomes saturated ensures that the kuruwarri, the Ancestral force, enters the body" [4, p70]. Similarly, the penetrative imprinting of 'dots' in Desert acrylic painting enacts kuruwarri: "What is 'inside is brought out - penetration effects emergence - and it is this that creates the quivering, the shimmering...of texture" [4, p72] - the emergence from kanunju (Warlpiri term translated as that which is secret, 'underneath' or 'below' - i.e. from the Ancestral realm)

to kankarlu (that which is seen in the world 'above' and in the 'public domain') [4, p72].

In simplistic terms, when the 'skin' is penetrated – whether by a stick drawing on sand, or a finger 'painting up' a person's body, or a paintbrush tapping a painting to create dots – the vibrations attract kuruwarri to the surface (or interface), which emerges through the skin. Combined with the sonic resonance of ritual and narrative (which acts as a sonic waveguide of sorts), Ancestral force can be released and safely channelled to emerge, nourish and revitalise Country and its inhabitants within, for example, yawulyu [4].

Kuruwarri in Contemporary Women's Art: 3 Case Studies

The rhythmic striking necessary to invoke the kuruwarri is particularly resonant in the work of women Indigenous artists: Rosie Napurrurla Tasman and Dorothy Napangardi, yet more muted in Kathleen Kemarre Wallace's work. Their work is within the constraints of the Dreaming as 'Law'. It repeats a materiality that dictates how marks can and must be made [4; 25]. However, their interpretations of those responsibilities have produced paintings with vastly differing and unique results as exemplified by the following case studies.

Rosie Napurrurla Tasman is a Warlpiri woman from the Central Desert Lajamanu region in the Northern Territory. She began painting in her 50's in the mid-1980's. Her major Dreaming is Ngurlu (Mulga Seed) and Kurlukku (Diamond Dove) [4]. Napurrula's artistic development over a decade of painting the Ngurlu series exemplifies the transformations cultivated in both the type and methodology of Central Desert women's art.

Napurrula's canvases are prepared and painted whilst laid out on the ground. Early examples are pre-painted (Maparni) in the burnt sienna colours of the local Country. Throughout the series kuruwarri marks are strictly in black, painted and re-painted so thickly that it is possible to see the raised ridges in the brushstrokes as the kuruwarri is continuously re-emphasised. The white and ochre coloured dots surrounding the kuruwarri marks are not mere embellishment but are carefully used to direct the gaze to the black lines and circles in a manner that emphasizes the spaces of the kuruwarri (See Figure 1) [4].

The crucial reiteration of the kuruwarri marks is described by Biddle [4, p71] as "a mnemonic meditation" on their production. A painting can take weeks or even months to complete. The women often sing the associated ceremonial (Yawulyu) songs and may stop to elaborate on narratives or make corrections, dance part of the song cycle, or recount incidents related to the Country or Dreaming. The canvas stretched out on the ground brings the Country and Dreaming close; proximate and immediate to daily life [4].

More generally, the texturing characteristic of Central Desert women's art creates a 3 dimensional effect that assists in the shimmering vibrancy of the

painting as light is reflected and shadows created from the raised marks – re-animating its spiritual potency. The two dimensional horizontal plane transforms into a three dimensional verticality, producing layers of depth through texture and emphasizing the movement between the two realms of Ancestral and human agency.

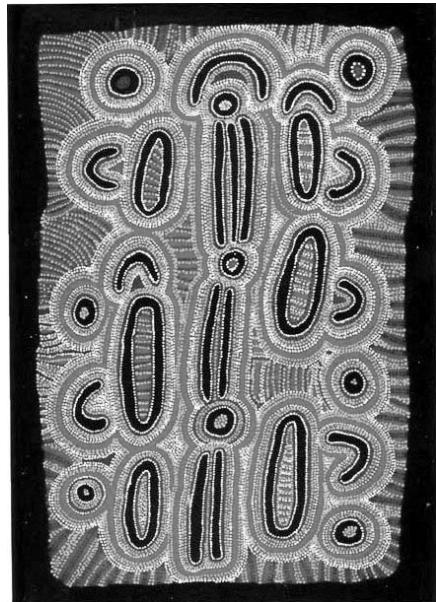


Figure 1 Rosie Napurrula Tasman, Ngurlu 1991 [4, plate 15]

The repetitious outlining of the design ensures that the background becomes saturated with the kuruwarri – the Ancestral force – and enters the body, feeding the woman. The dots and lines poke or pierce the surface of the canvas. The penetration of the marks on the canvas effects emergence of the Ancestral sentience from ‘inside’ the skin of Country [4].

In contrast to Napurrula’s work, Dorothy Napangardi’s artworks depart from the traditional iconographic kuruwarri making, into more figurative patterning. A younger Warlpiri woman, born in the 1950’s in the Mina Mina area west of Yuendumu, Northern Territory, Napangardi has received many awards for her art that expresses her deference to the greater authority of her women elders. By omitting traditional signs and marks of particular Dreamings that she may not have the authority to paint, her titles – such as, Karlangu (Digging Sticks) – refer instead to site-specific place and Dreaming (Ancestral totems) [4].

The rigorous preparation of the background canvas follows the same strict Laws as Napurrula observes in her paintings. The meticulous care taken in the imprinting of marks of the women’s digging sticks upon the clay pans of Mina Mina shows a meditative repetition of the kuruwarri practise (see Figure 2). Napangardi’s use of white dots on a black background has excited non-indigenous commentators to describe comparisons with cartographic or topographic representations of Country. However, the sense of imprinting of kuruwarri and the

shimmering effects are far more evocative. Viscerally present in the associations and possibilities of dots as groups, dots as lines and geometrical grids, or dots emphasizing spaces is their allusion to the movement or actions of Ancestors along paths through Country or resting places along mythical trails [4].

In a Gestalt sense, an experience of optical and cortical ambiguity can occur when viewing Napangardi’s paintings. The effects of white dots on black occupies the conscious optical processes in the brain in trying to discern recognizable patterns [28]. The intermittent disunity of grids and lines draws the viewer into the dark spaces upon which the dots are suspended. ‘Where’ we are viewing from and ‘what’ we are viewing provides intense interest. Whether the macro view of the skin of a reptile such as a snake or lizard (that are both found in Country at Mina Mina), or lines made by digging sticks across the clay pan, or the Dreaming tracks of Ancestors, the lack of scale makes for a visual ambiguity that is simultaneously entralling and disquieting in the absence of a discernible perspective. ‘Inhabiting’ [12] Napangardi’s paintings is not an easy experience – a displacement effect that the artist exemplifies throughout her artworks.

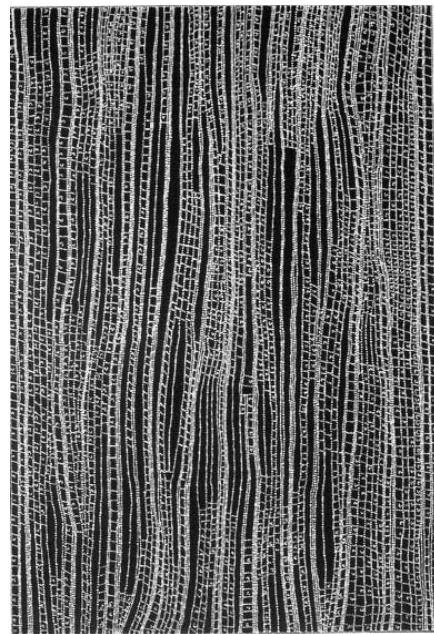


Figure 2 Dorothy Napangardi Robinson, Karlangu (Digging Sticks) 2001 [4, plate 20]

Kathleen Kemarre Wallace’s (known as Mrs Wallace) work, is an example of contemporary Central Desert art that marks a departure from the ceremonial context of Napurrula and Napangardi’s work. While still utilizing the traditional iconographic patterning and colouring that is based upon the rock art and sand drawings of Mrs Wallace’s Arrente Country, there is a marked absence of the repetitive kuruwarri imprinting – more apparent in Napurrula and Napangardi’s work.

Mrs Wallace's [26] 'Mother Tree' is a complex arrangement of mandala-like shapes, floating circles and thin figures that seem at once ethereal and embedded within the landscape. The use of swirling lines creates multiple spaces and overlapping focal planes. The figures are Ancestral Spirits moving through and interacting with Mrs Wallace's Country [21]. However the painting seems to be designed to veil the kuruwarri, or Ancestral force, and present instead a very public and safe generalization of the Dreaming. There is an understanding that the kuruwarri is withdrawn and dormant within the deeper layers of this painting (see Figure 3).

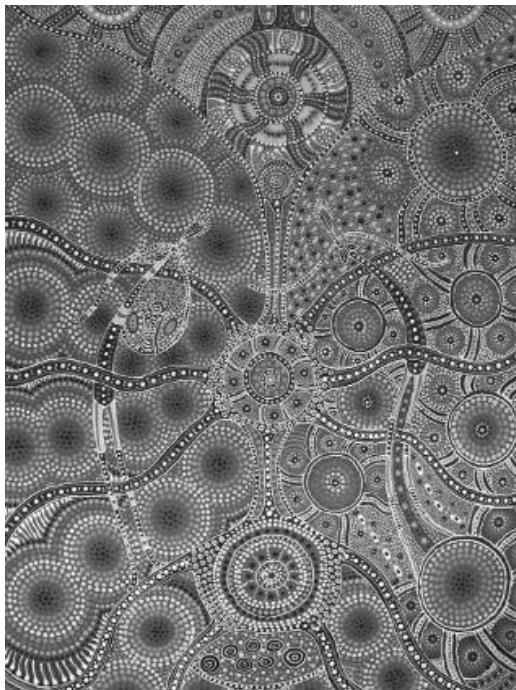


Figure 3 Kathleen Kamarre Wallace, Mother Tree (2009) [21]

The intricacy of Mrs Wallace's use of patterning reduces the spaces through which the 'inner' Ancestral force can emerge into the 'outer' human realm. While the black background hints at the underlying presence of the kuruwarri, it is not dominant as in the previous examples. This effect reduces the feeling of ambiguous disquiet evoked within the art of Napurrurla and Napangardi. There is a sense of familiarity and recognition for non-Indigenous viewers. In other words it feels safer.

Mrs Wallace was born in a Todd River camp in Alice Springs in 1948 and experienced the rapid and pressurized cultural changes brought about by the missionising of her Country in the early 1950's. Wallace describes how, with the passing of the eldest elder in 1984, it felt to the senior men and women of her community as if a line had been drawn. They felt that the death of the last Law holder representing the old ways symbolized the end of the knowledge and cultural

practices.. The grief felt by the families prompted the withdrawal of the traditional teachings; the culture, stories, songs and dances: "They wanted to forget what we had all lost" [26]. Mrs Wallace's paintings and testimony begin from this null point - the moment when the old ceremonies ended. However, her paintings not only record past times but are also the beginning of a movement to share culture and Country inter-culturally [21].

Continuing the spirit of transcultural collaborations between non-indigenous white women and Indigenous Australian artists, researcher, Judy Lovell [26], a non-Indigenous artist and Mrs Wallace have recently produced a multi-media art project in book form with an accompanying CD of song cycles and stories [27]. The stories, songs and dances were all recorded in Country with images of the rock carvings that inspire Mrs Wallace's paintings, and anecdotes of local bush foods and weather cycles. Lovell was motivated to create a means by which non-Indigenous people could experience and learn from Indigenous people - not just through viewing their art, but also by learning about the Country, Dreamings and stories that accompany each painting.

Preserving knowledge and sharing the gift of Country are two aspects of Tjukurrrpa (Culture) that better enable non-Indigenous people to understand Australian Aboriginal art and worldviews. Through her artwork, Mrs Wallace invites the viewer into her Country in an experience that offers more understanding of the full context of art and its relationship to Country and yet a more distant and tamed viewpoint. She says: "Come...listen to us, we will tell you our culture. Learn from us. That way we will all survive. We share this country. We need to work together and learn from each other" [27]. The question remains, however, whether this more tamed and understandable expression of Australian Aboriginal cultural heritage has come at a high a price and what we are witnessing is the last generation of art from traditional holders of the Law as the Ancestral forces recede from the human realm.

Conclusions

Indigenous Australian Central Desert women's art of the last half century has recorded the development of paintings through a series of transformations. These adaptations have resulted from an ongoing dialogue between genders and communities concerning the authority to paint images and icons that are secret/sacred and therefore subject to initiatory Laws and responsibilities.

It is possible to track the changes in style through the initial camouflaging and ultimately the complete omission (or total covering) of kuruwarri marks or imprints. Kuruwarri marks are strictly regulated by community elders according to Cultural Law (tjukurrrpa) as an expression of Indigenous Australian revelatory knowledge systems.

Dots, lines and infills are increasingly used, first to accentuate the raised kuruwarri marks or spaces, and then later to obscure them as increasing cultural sensitivities dictated. Kuruwarri marks are the physical imprint of Ancestral force and agency in Country. The repetitive, meditative strokes penetrate the skin (or surface) of Country, skin of a person, or skin of a canvas to imprint the Dreaming story or song. The action of poking or penetrating the skin also enables the emergence of the kuruwarri (Ancestral power) from underneath or inside (i.e. the Ancestral realm is regarded to be under or inside the skin). Together with the sonic resonance of the accompanying repetitious songs & stories and the stamping of dancing feet, kuruwarri is successfully released into the human realm in a focussed and safe manner. Ceremonies of renewal, healing and increase all invoke the emergence of Ancestral forces in ways that will protect the uninitiated and enable the kuruwarri to feed the land and the bodies of the dancers and artists - thus benefiting the whole community and nurturing Country.

Recent intercultural collaborations between non-indigenous women researchers and indigenous women artists are bringing about an increase in non-indigenous understanding of the affective dimensions of Central Desert art and the importance of sensibilities other than just the visual in the making of Australian Aboriginal art.

It is becoming apparent that Indigenous Australian art communities are also choosing (or have been forced into) the veiling or omission of secret/sacred images as part of their movement away from traditional cultural practices. The loss of traditional Law and language holders is having a major impact upon the artistic development of contemporary Indigenous Australian paintings. Despite receding, the kuruwarri can still be felt in their contemporary artworks. As such, their culture continues to be revitalised and non-indigenous people can gain a greater appreciation of this life-force expressed through an ancient haptic-visual medium, albeit in a contemporary form.

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