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**CREATING COUNTRY:
ABSTRACTION, ECONOMICS AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF
STYLE IN BALGO ART**

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To Jess, Maggie Bee and Jonah.

Nothing will take this long again, I promise.

the Berndt Museum. Eileen Farrelly was extremely accommodating in being interviewed, and thereafter giving me access to her wonderful letters written from Balgo during the 1980s. Father Matt Digges; whilst we probably had our differences, ideological or otherwise, your hospitality and generosity never wavered. For that I am still grateful. Brother Bernie, KP, Brother Cal and Sister Nola were always great company; and of course, Sister Alice Dempsey. We had some illuminating cups of tea. James Hannah will annoy me forever if I don't mention him in my 'book', so there you go.

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John Carty

Canberra

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Images

This thesis is a story about art, but is also a story told *through* art. Without the help of the following people in securing images of Balgo works for this study, this story would have been greatly depleted:

Thanks to Father Matt Digges, former parish priest at Balgo, for generously allowing me the time and freedom to photograph the church paintings included herein.

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ABSTRACT

The translation of traditional Western Desert iconography, narrative conventions and ceremonial aesthetics into the medium of acrylic painting, and onto the emergent plane of 'Aboriginal Art', has been among the great artistic achievements of the modern era. Despite the wealth of scholarship dedicated to this phenomenon, key aspects of it remain obscured in anthropological and art historical analysis. Based on fieldwork in the Australian Western Desert community of Balgo, this thesis develops an ethnographic account of how 'Country' is created through abstraction, kin-based processes of transmission, and the economics of art.

Combining methodologies from anthropology and art history, this research seeks to develop an appreciation of Western Desert abstraction as a socio-cultural process. Abstraction is treated not merely as a particular kind of distilled formalism that resonates visually with 20th Century Western art historical and critical notions, but as a conceptual and creative process linked to a deconstruction of form and reconfiguration of meaning. In Balgo art these processes have resulted in the iconographic forms of the desert graphic system being superseded by other aesthetic features of that same system, particularly the practice of 'dotting'. This thesis analyses the development of dotting and other technical innovations into 'styles', and explores how these styles have in turn become an object of exchange and contestation within Balgo.

The thesis also grapples with another significant, and related, gap in the anthropological literature: that of the economic contexts around acrylic painting. While Aboriginal art is widely acknowledged as part of an economic system, the forms on canvas or bark are rarely analysed as themselves implicated in, responsive to and expressive of fields of economic influence and motivation. In order to move beyond the dominant ritual-oriented interpretations of desert painting, this research frames painting as a form of Aboriginal labour. I treat art as work. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the work of art, the thesis affords new interpretations around the novel forms on canvas as crystallizations of human action, as objectifications of value and the social processes that create it.

In uniting the aesthetic and economic aspects of my analysis, I build a portrait of the way style develops between people who share camps and other resources. I show how the innovations and abstractions pioneered by individuals become sedimented in culture as tradition through processes of intergenerational transmission. In this context, as objectifications of practices of sharing and co-residence, the forms of acrylic Country in Balgo art can be understood not as representational, but as Country itself. Country in the form of acrylic dots, styles, entire paintings, or the relationship *between* paintings, is an embodiment or objectification of Aboriginal value that can be exchanged both within Balgo (between kin) and without (through the market) in the creation of other kinds of value. Through localised kin-based transmission of painting style and redistribution of artistic income, Balgo artists have recalibrated acrylic 'Country' as the customary basis of their economic autonomy.

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Introduction:

Abstraction, economics and the (missing) ethnography of Western Desert acrylic art

The translation of traditional Western Desert iconography, narrative conventions and ceremonial aesthetics onto the emergent plane of 'Aboriginal Art' has been among the great artistic achievements of the modern era. Western Desert painting, through its absorption into the canons of contemporary fine art, resonates with – and is arguably an iconic expression *of* - the overarching (and unsettled) political, historical, economic and symbolic currents of recent world history.

This artistic movement has also encompassed a dramatic socio-economic movement for people who continue to live on the margins of the Australian and global political economy in the 21st century. It is hard to imagine that the 'world' has changed more rapidly for many people on earth than it did for those Western Desert people who – for a variety of reasons – left their customary hunter-gatherer existence throughout the mid 20th century to settle in missions, cattle stations and townships that were emerging around the perimeter of their desert world. Through the processes that attended this intersection of worlds, desert people became increasingly dependent upon another world for their material well-being. The economic basis of customary Aboriginal life was radically interrupted; and in these culturally corrosive conditions the values of religious and social life were also undermined. The emergence of Western Desert art is a response to these historical, social and economic circumstances. Through an ethnographic account of Balgo art, this thesis is an attempt to come to terms with two key aspects of that response that have received inadequate attention in anthropology and other disciplines.

There has never been an adequate anthropological analysis of the processes of abstraction that have dominated Western Desert art. This thesis is, therefore, an attempt to develop an ethnographic account of the changes in desert painting that have occurred in recent

decades. It is also an attempt to grapple with another significant, and related, gap in the anthropological literature: that of the economic contexts and motivations around acrylic painting.

Abstraction

Anthropologists, art critics and curators have written reams about the acrylic movement.¹ Yet analysis of a defining characteristic of desert painting over recent decades, what I will call in this study 'abstraction', is almost entirely absent from the anthropological literature. Those desert paintings that were, in recent decades, absorbed into markets and institutions as fine art were those that seemingly reflected aspects of modernist aesthetics (minimalism, op art, abstract expressionism) or articulated with Western discourse around abstraction in 20th Century painting. While the articulation with modernist traditions has been central to the success of desert art, this absorption into the Western canon elicits categorical confusions that have arguably disabled certain kinds of critical engagement. As art historical 'content' played out in anthropological 'contexts', a disciplinary tentativeness has also attended the analysis of Aboriginal painting practices; with neither art historians nor anthropologists effectively broaching the divide between formal and cultural analysis.

Desert art did not merely resonate with a Western taste for abstraction; it involved a process of artistic and cultural abstraction in and of itself. Over the past thirty years in Balgo art, as in Papunya Tula painting and elsewhere, there has been a clear statistical decline in the occurrence of what might be seen as 'traditional' iconography in acrylic art, and significant increases in the proliferation of those aesthetic features that used to accompany iconography in the early days of the painting movement: outlining, concentricity and dotting. This process is one that I describe as 'abstraction', whilst remaining conscious that such Western notions of abstraction are not necessarily applicable to Aboriginal traditions. In relation to Balgo art, however, where the constituent elements of a graphic system have become the semantic focus, *some* notion of abstraction

¹ During the process of writing this thesis, a process which admittedly kept the door ajar for many years, no less than six books were written about Papunya Tula art alone.

is not only possible but necessary. I explore abstraction not merely in terms of a particular kind of distilled formalism that resonates visually with 20th Century Western art historical and critical notions, but as a conceptual and creative process linked to a deconstruction of form and reconfiguration of meaning. Such processes have always been integral to artistic practices across cultures, and were exemplified by the Western movement towards Modernism. It is with this more wide ranging use of abstraction that I am concerned in this thesis; of abstraction as a cultural process manifest in art, not merely an artistic process that emerges in different cultures.

However we define it, abstraction is a notion that has been conspicuously under-utilised in relation to desert artistry, and there are complex reasons for this. Most obviously, the recession of iconographic forms – long the focus of ethnographic analysis - has destabilised the conventional interpretive relationship between form and content.

Where once iconographic forms provided an index of the content or meanings of a painting – the ancestral travels and actions of the Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) - today anthropologists are faced with different interpretive challenges. Today most Western Desert artists still understand themselves to be painting their Dreamings, but there is no longer the same necessary *or* prescriptive correlation between the form and the content of such painting. Today the abstract, expressive forms on canvas continue to index the Dreaming, and the Country that artists are entitled to paint, but they do so in ways that require different kinds of analysis and interpretation.

There are different, and ultimately related, reasons why abstraction and economics remain relatively unexplored in the anthropological literature of desert art, and these are examined throughout the thesis. However, the principal reason is perhaps simply because there has never been – remarkably - a dedicated ethnography of contemporary acrylic painting practices; by which I mean there has never been a dedicated attempt to research, describe and analyse acrylic painting as an integrated social, economic, political and aesthetic phenomena.

The seminal ethnography of the desert visual system (Munn 1986 [1973]) was researched before the acrylic movement took off. Similarly the most complete ethnography of desert life created during the development of the painting movement (Myers 1986) offers little

specific insight into that movement. For Munn the movement came too late, for Myers it was perhaps too early: too recent a phenomenon (and not the focus of his research) to be incorporated in any depth into the ethnography underpinning *Pintupi Country, Pintupi self*. Myers (1995, 1999, 2002, 2005) has subsequently made important contributions to the anthropological analysis and public reception of Aboriginal art. Dussart (1988, 1999, 2000, 2006) has written incisively on the socio-political aspects of Warlpiri painting at Yuendumu, while Eric Michaels (1994) made significant interventions in thinking around the emergent form of acrylic art. Yet in all of these cases, anthropologists embarked on other research projects and found themselves entangled in, and uniquely positioned to untangle for others, the emerging realm of Aboriginal art production. None entered their fieldwork intending to develop an ethnographic portrait of acrylic painting; and none sought to analyse abstraction or the economic aspects thereof. Christine Watson's (1996, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2007) analysis of the relationship between sand drawing and acrylic art practice at Balgo has been among the only ethnographic research programs dedicated to the sustained visual analysis of contemporary Western desert painting practices. Although Watson's work has proven influential in my own thinking, her work is likewise largely devoid of reference to Abstraction or economic considerations.

These works have all been influential in framing the present study, both in their specific contributions and in the analytical absences that emerge between them. This thesis can be read as an attempt to address at least two of these absences in anthropological literature. However, the art of Balgo today cannot be used retrospectively or simplistically to fill gaps in the history of anthropological scholarship. The paintings that constitute the data of this thesis are significantly different from the iconographic forms catalogued and interpreted by Munn. They are also significantly different from those first encountered by Myers in the 1970s, and by Dussart in the 1980s. Furthermore, they are also substantially different from those that formed the basis of Watson's research on Balgo art in the early 1990s. Acrylic painting is a dynamic adaptation and transformation of Aboriginal social, political and economic practices. These practices continue to be a site of ongoing transformation, and the paintings produced out of them likewise express these dynamics. Different approaches are needed not only to make sense of the changes in contemporary art, but to relate it in meaningful ways to the art, and the anthropology, that came before.

Making marks and tracking traces: ontological implications in visual analysis

Given the focus of this thesis on Balgo art, it is important to acknowledge the debt, and identify the points of differentiation, between Chris Watson's work and the present study. Watson has made significant contributions to our understanding of the specific genesis of Balgo art, and the localised image-making practices that account for its unique characteristics. Although her work has not addressed the processes of abstraction in acrylic art explicitly, her attention to the innovations, individual styles and inherent flexibility of the system of sand drawing in Balgo anticipates in many ways the kind of analysis offered here.

In focussing on the relationship between sand drawing practices and those of acrylic painting, Watson's work seeks to show how paintings resonate beyond the 'meaning' of their components:

My aim is to draw out from the sand drawings some of the subtle levels of affect which exist within them, and which in turn imbue the paintings with associations far deeper than the overt meanings of the icons and indices presented in them (Watson 1996:63).

Watson's work at Balgo marks an important development from the influential work of Nancy Munn, whose scholarship on Warlpiri iconography (1970, 1973, 1986[1973]) has remained a benchmark for studies into the relationships between Western Desert graphic or visual systems and cosmology. Munn established a structural analysis which identified the basic elements of the Warlpiri graphic system. This system was broken down into 'constituent strokes' such as the circle, arc or line which Munn identified as the 'minimal, meaningful or "morpheme-like" units of graphic structure' (1962: 973). These core iconographic elements were then combined in myriad ways and built up into 'figures'; from which Munn defined the core figure-types (for example, the site-path; actor-item; and tail-footprint) that dominated the Warlpiri system. Having described the graphic system, Munn provides an invaluable formal and social analysis of how the system works. She shows how the detailed structural analysis of an iconographic system is not merely a

formalistic exercise, but opens up understandings of ‘the wider sociocultural order, and of more general problems in sociocultural process’ (1986:230).

Watson’s work deals explicitly with Munn’s legacy and its application to acrylic art. It shows how contemporary painting practices at Balgo are intimately related to practices of sand drawing. For Balgo women there are different kinds of sand drawing — mundane daily matters, the telling of stories and the revelation of sacred material— just as there are different kinds of painting. Watson demonstrates how the interplay of different genres of sand drawing at Balgo facilitates more personalised styles and innovations than are perhaps anticipated in Munn’s depiction of the Warlpiri Iconographic system. She also explores how the nuances of affect that are transported between mediums— between sand drawing or body painting and acrylic paintings— are integral to an appreciation of the localised aesthetics of Balgo art. While Munn focussed on the iconographic forms, Watson has foregrounded the embodied sensuality of the practices and processes by which the icons are inscribed in surfaces, whether in the land, in the body, or in the canvas. Watson argues that the ‘poking’ or ‘piercing’ of the ground in sand drawing practices is

closely linked with this desire to penetrate the surface of the earth and to enter the realm of experience of the Ancestral beings – the Tjukurra – located geographically beneath the surface of the ground, but experientially beneath the surface of reality (2003:108)

Through Watson’s work we begin to get a sense of how the sensual, aesthetic dimensions of Balgo life impinge upon *Kutjungka*² people’s painting, how the externalised forms are animated in practice. In drawing the connections between touching the land and painting,

² *Kutjungka* is a new administrative name for the region under discussion – Balgo and the communities of Mulan and Billiluna (see map at figure 1.2). It is a useful catch-all for the diverse groups of desert families who settled in Balgo. It means ‘all-in-one’ or ‘together-as-one’ in Kukatja language. While it invariably surfaces here and there when trying to address larger social realities than Balgo encompasses, I tend to use it less than Watson. I prefer to speak of ‘Balgo people’ or ‘Balgo mob’; terms which have more localised currency. These terms have their own shortcomings but as this research illuminates, their own analytical benefits as well.

Watson has directed our imagination away from Western ideas of painting as a two dimensional surface, and the ontological baggage that underpins such preconceptions.³

Watson (2003:52) has argued how the act of painting is linked through its name *wakarninpa*– which translates as ‘poking’- to Kutjungka notions of surface and of the submerged ancestral realities that are accessed and invoked in penetrative acts such as poking with paint. Munn demonstrated that Walbiri cosmology and ontology were mediated by artistic practices ‘bound up with manipulative and tactile as well as visual perception, and thus embedded in immediate sense experience,’(1973: 216). Watson’s analysis of painting as poking, as a penetration of surfaces, embodies the kind of progression Munn’s own work points to and facilitates. It opens up the ways in which localised practices, *embodied* practices, enact cosmological or ontological principles rather than represent them.

Yet my own experience of Balgo art was different from Watson’s, and my ethnography consequently differs in its analytical emphasis and ontological implications. I did not set out to study sand drawing, and my understanding of such practices arose incidentally, as part of the flux of daily events, rather than a concerted research agenda. I encountered sand drawing practices most often when sitting outside the store having a chat or ‘talking story’ in camp or out bush with people. Drawing a scene in the sand was often just another way of explaining or elaborating upon a narrative or conversational topic. I also encountered it constantly in children’s play, where the ground acted as a blackboard or ‘etch-a-sketch’; a surface for doodling or play that can be erased and written over infinitely.



Figure 1. Daily sand drawing practices

³ Watson’s work also points to a more generalised theoretical and methodological deficiency in anthropological research which preoccupies itself with the visual or verbal: sensual realms prioritised in Western experience, and which are no doubt easier to study.

Sand drawing was also used in the adult play of football games and coaching. Often before a game, or at half-time interval, a coach or senior player would draw an oval on the ground and analyse the game visually. Other players would then contribute their thoughts to this drawing, where general principles of passing, or advice about using/avoiding sections of the ground according to wind directions or opposition strengths, would be accompanied by marks made on the ground.

Because of these rather more 'mundane' encounters with sand drawing (as opposed to deliberate research on *kuruwarri*, mythic designs or narratives), my own perspectives on these practices were shaped differently. Without negating Watson's interpretation, my sense (and subsequent interpretation) of the sand drawing practices that I witnessed and participated in was less 'ontological'; and this inevitably informed my approach to acrylic mark-making as well. My understanding of the significance of mark-making in Balgo cultural life, on the reading of tracks as indices of agency, and on the dialogical, social, multi-sensual nature of image-making practices are all consistent with Watson's analysis. Where Watson seeks to establish the significance of an ontology of piercing surfaces in contemporary art, however, I pursue a different emphasis. I see the practices of contemporary painting as more resonant with the agencies and values implicated in traces, tracks and mark-making.

During my fieldwork, artists were no longer referring to the act of painting in terms of *wakarninpa*. Myers has suggested that he never found *wakarninpa* to be used by Pintupi in the practice of acrylic painting, but rather terms such *paintamilarninpa*, combining the English word "paint" with Pintupi word for "doing" *milarninpa* (2002:58-59). This was closer to my experience at Balgo, where the common terminology had been creolised, and people referred to 'making *canvaspa*' or most commonly for older people '*paintingpa*'. Even when talking in Kukatja '*paintingpa*' was the more common usage. This shift in terminology between Watson's work and my own may reflect differences in our respective research focus, but it may also reflect a shift in practice influenced by the very processes of transformation that are the focus of this thesis. During Watson's early research people in Balgo were still commonly using sticks to paint with. My research occurred in an era when the use of paintbrushes, as opposed to sticks, has modified the technical practice in ways that may elicit or manifest different dimensions of Aboriginal ontology. It may be that the

'poking' (and associated ontological resonances) that Watson experienced in the early 1990s had been modified (by the time of my fieldwork in 2003) by the technical transformations and aesthetic innovations resulting from Balgo artists having spent another decade painting with larger soft-bristled brushes.

Whatever the cause, the imagery that constitutes the basis of Watson's analysis from the early 1990s was not the same as that which I encountered from 2003-2005. The processes of abstraction described in this thesis had intervened in demonstrable ways (Figure 2), and this difference is expressed in our divergent approaches. Watson's analytical focus is on the icons, indices and compositional templates that constitute Balgo art. Her ambition is to show how the interpretation of these components requires a broader sensual and tactile appreciation for the practice of image making in Balgo. Whilst likewise determined to move the analysis of desert art beyond the referential meaning of icons, the interpretation of Balgo art that I will develop here differs in critical ways.



Figure 2. A comparison of Eubena Namptijin's work from the early 1990s (l) and during my research (r).

Watson's formal analysis is built upon the iconographic and compositional (template) components of an artistic system that appears to have changed significantly between the period of her fieldwork and my own. Whilst Watson's work illuminates the flexibility and transformational quality of the Western Desert visual system, this is generally articulated through analysis of *variations* in iconography or templates. My own research seeks to explore how transformations play out when these seemingly axial elements of the system themselves undergo significant change. This thesis is not focussed on these iconographies

or compositional patterns, but to some extent upon their *dissolution*. The story I encountered in my fieldwork was of a trajectory of abstraction – a recession of iconography in favour of dotting, outlining and concentricity - that has characterised the demonstrable changes in the visual form of Balgo art. My analysis of contemporary Balgo art suggests that classical forms of iconography and composition that were transferred from other mediums to acrylic painting have been, to some extent, superseded by other features of that dynamic system. Any further analysis of acrylic painting must necessarily concern itself with this transformation.

This central premise of the current study has been explored by Jennifer Biddle in *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas* (2007). Biddle provides an important formal analysis of the way practices of tracing in desert aesthetics (such as outlining and dotting) have become, over time, the principal marks of acrylic art: 'Dots and lines are not fillers, additions or a secondary outlining. They have, in fact, become the practice' (2007: 79). Biddle treats the abstractions of desert painting as a movement away from the depiction of specific Dreaming narratives towards a more generalised expression of the ancestral realm manifest as 'Country'. She makes the important assertion that this is not a process of representation, 'Country is not represented, it is materially made and manifest (2007: 102),' echoing Morphy's observation that the 'use of 'representation' would suggest a gap between signifier and signified that is inconsistent with Yolngu ontology' (1991: 189). Similarly, Balgo painters don't say they are making paintings of their Country, they say they are painting 'Country' or 'My Country'.

Anthropologists of the desert have all wrestled, in myriad ways, with formulating analytical frameworks that preserve and make sense of the emic consubstantiality of persons and place as expressed through Country (and specifically, in the Western Desert, the notion of *ngurra*).⁴ *Ngurra* or Country is not simply a reference to specific places with which people identify. *Ngurra*, as a word and concept, operates on multiple levels in desert experience where it refers to what Myers identifies as 'camp', 'country' and 'place' (1986:54).

The word has two distinct references to socialized space, in referring to both a temporary camp in which people live and to an enduring "country" or named place.

⁴ I capitalise the use of Country in my work to differentiate it as an Aboriginal and/or analytical concept different from common uses of the term in English.

Ngurra is not only the human creation of “camp”, but also the Dreaming creation of “country”. (Myers 1986: 55)

Myers discusses the integral relation between these uses of *ngurra* by way of showing how regular residence in a ‘camp’ can give rise to identification with- and potential ownership of- the Country or named places where one lives. ‘I refer to this process as a transformation of residence into ownership, of everyday experience into identification, an objectification of ‘camp’ into ‘country’ (2000:87). Nancy Munn has characterised Country as the central organising trope of desert life, ‘the fundamental object system *external to the conscious subject* within which consciousness and identity are anchored’ (1970: 143). Together, Myers’ and Munn’s rich ethnographies (on the Pintupi and Warlpiri respectively) continue to provide the basis for anthropological research in Country, art and the experience of desert peoples, and they are likewise the dual comparative touchstones of the current study. The structural quality of their principal arguments about Country, however, have been the subject of criticism from anthropologists, interpreted variously as introducing an ontological dualism between individual and society (Dubinkas and Traweek 1984) or people and environment (Ingold 2000). Ingold takes exception to Myers’ treatment of Country ‘as if it were culturalized space’ (Myers 1986:57) because it institutes an ontological separation, in analysis, of the very premises of the worldview that it purports to explain (Ingold 2000: 54-55). The relational ontology of the Pintupi life-world, in this view, is grounded in the indissoluble connection between land and persons that is analytically dissolved by Myers. To circumvent what he sees as an analytical disaggregation of people and environment, a dichotomy ‘between the ecological interactions *in* nature and cultural constructions *of* nature’ (1996:144), Ingold introduces an ontology of ‘dwelling’. From this perspective

apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world, but taking up a view *in* it (1996:121)

Concerned to place people with real bodies into real landscapes, phenomenologically-oriented anthropologists have made critical theoretical interventions in and contributions to the field. These agendas have been extremely productive in the ethnographic

interpretations of Watson and Poirier (2004, 2005) in Balgo. Myers (2000) has made his own response to Ingold's use of dwelling, which I take up shortly, but I want to evaluate that in the specific contexts of painted Country that this thesis addresses.

In the analysis of Western Desert acrylic painting, Watson and Biddle are concerned to show how people are not simply representing Country that is outside of themselves as some kind of 'object system external to the conscious subject', but actively participating in the ecological constitution of their selfhoods. Both Watson and Biddle approach this through what can be characterised as an 'affective redress'; an attempt to move beyond the analytical object and bring the subjective body and sensory realm into the phenomenological equation. They show how art works through touching the land in sand drawing, or the skin in ceremony, to create a physical relationship between the body, the design, the land and the ancestral realm of the Tjukurrpa. These studies have been critical in the expansion of the theoretical frame in which acrylic painting practices are situated. But the 'affective redress' has very real analytical limitations of its own, and struggles to support the basic claims it makes about the ontological status of Country in contemporary art. Biddle's stated aim 'is to show how country is made sentient, alive, sensuous through the practice of art' (2007:13). Yet in *Breasts, Bodies Canvas*, she fails to contextualise art-making in terms of 'Country' as it broadly understood in the ethnographic literature.

The affective redress, with its important focus on the body, the senses and the *individual*, is analytically reductive in ways that jar with the social constitution of Aboriginal selfhood and therein the broader semantic scope of Country. Munn's work, and Myers', allow us to see that in ceremony, the production of Kuruwarri is not simply about accessing and activating the ancestral realm of the Tjukurrpa, but how the 'the production of symbolic forms constitutes an individual's identity as part of a larger system of relations with others' (Myers 2002: 57). The physical land and specific sites are inestimably important in the constitution of Aboriginal selfhood and experience. But this is one aspect of Country and, as this thesis will endeavour to explain, it is arguably the *least* important aspect of painted Country. Country, whilst experienced by individuals and expressed through them, is the objectification of Aboriginal values and the social, political and economic processes through which they are created. As Myers noted in his response to Ingold,

the larger process in which these dwellings take place suggest that place gains its significance through these value-making social processes of identity production, processes of kinship in the Pintupi sense, mediated by exchange.... One's country is a projection – in a sense – of one's movements and social relations, of kinship, converted to identity with place (2000: 95).

Biddle's analysis of acrylic Country, not unlike Ingold's prior tackling of the concept, makes important contributions to questions of Aboriginal ontology whilst simultaneously overlooking the broader sociological implications of Country as something that indexes relationships with *other individuals*. Despite an astute formal analysis and insightful study of the affective power of the abstractions of desert art, Biddle's work lacks the ethnographic 'thickness' (Geertz 1973) needed to contextualise abstractions – in terms of kinship, local politics or economics - within the flux of social life. *Breasts, Bodies and Canvas* is rightly concerned with what paintings do. Biddle's focus on affect, as opposed to ethnography, constrains her work from demonstrating the broader work that acrylic paintings do as part of an integrated cultural practice. 'Alive' as Country undoubtedly is in Aboriginal experience, Biddle's study denudes it of the *lives*, and the social, economic, historical and personal relationships between those lives, that the more nuanced Aboriginal concept and experience of Country encompasses.

Between economy and religion: reframing Aboriginal art as work

In this thesis I analyse the abstractions and innovations of acrylic art as socially constituted phenomena. I'm interested not only in how they move on the canvas, but how they move off the canvas, or between canvases, through processes of kinship and socio-economic transmission that are themselves constitutive of the reproduction of Country. To make this link between canvases and the social forms that manifest through them, I frame painting as a form of meaningful action. I present art in Balgo as a form of 'work'. This is in part to counteract a central problem that attends the interpretation of Aboriginal art: the implicit separation of economic and 'cultural' dimensions or motivations embodied in the art object. Despite the wealth of commentary on Aboriginal art, there remains a considerable oversight in anthropological approaches to the economies of contemporary painting

practices. This lack is indicative of broader issues in anthropological theory and practice regarding how we speak coherently and holistically of the economic dimensions of artistic practice, let alone social life more broadly.

While anthropologists have been foremost in acknowledging the economic significance of contemporary art, and the relationship therein to cultural reproduction, they have failed to provide the kind of integrated analysis or interpretation one might expect from the discipline. In the introduction to his ethnography of Kuninjku painting, *Seeing the Inside*, Taylor states:

[T]he cash income derived from art and craft is now integral to the Kuninjku economy.... While Kuninjku artists now produce bark paintings for sale, this book will focus on the importance of painting with Kuninjku society before the works are sold.... Far from degenerating into a tourist art that caters to market whims, the artists have integrated bark painting with their vital ceremonial life in a coherent manner that assists in reproducing the central tenets of Kuninjku religion (1996: 1-3)

Here Taylor expresses a characteristic limitation of anthropological approaches to Aboriginal art. He acknowledges the central economic importance of the painting, but in a swift side-step also focuses his own analysis on the ways in which painting is implicated in reproducing ceremonial value and Kuninjku religion. It is not a denial of the interdependence of economy and culture, but it is ultimately an avoidance of the problem. The same principle applies in Watson's work on Balgo art. She is intimately aware of the economic value and motivation behind painting for Balgo artists (2003: 299), yet nevertheless frames her own research around two concerns:

Firstly, to understand how Aboriginal women from the Balgo area... conceive of and produce images, and secondly, to understand how this embodies their religious beliefs and ceremonial activities in relation to land, or Country, as they call it. (2003:13)

These are valid and valuable analytical pursuits. The analytical narrowness of such inquiry, however, cannot but produce a homologous shape of interpretation— not just in terms of

Aboriginal Art, but also in reflection upon the operation of anthropologists own implicit theories of culture.

The relationship between acrylic art and the religious or ritual domain is important and undeniable. These relationships for Western Desert people have been clearly demonstrated by Myers (1999, 2002) and Dussart (1999, 2000: 196-209) and are comprehensively prefigured in the work of Munn (1986). Analyses by Morphy (1991, 1992) and Taylor (1996) reveal the comparative importance of such relations in Arnhem Land. These are arguably the defining anthropological studies of remote Australian Aboriginal art traditions, and they are all strongly focused on ritual. In outlining my resistance to certain ritual-oriented interpretations of desert art, I am by no means rejecting the significance of these connections in general. I am rejecting the supposition that these are the most *important*, or even the most *useful* frameworks through which anthropologists can make sense of the phenomena today.

Watson has demonstrated, in different ways, how Balgo painting likewise has distinct resonances and references points in the ritual domain (see also Berndt, Berndt & Stanton 1998 [1982]: 68-69). As I demonstrate in this thesis, the historical emergence of Balgo art *was* rooted in the translation of religious knowledge and ritual aesthetics, but that is only part of the story. This translation was coterminous with a political and economic transformation in the lives of people living on the Balgo mission. It is the way painting emerged from this historical context, and the ways in which it continues to articulate with the political and economic conditions of people's daily lives in Balgo, that requires a different analytical approach.

In this thesis I demonstrate how the processes of abstraction that have attended the development of Balgo paintings over the past 20 years speak of a more nuanced and complex cultural practice than ritually-focussed analysis can accommodate; a practice best understood in the contexts of Mission history and the socio-economic transition to 'self-determination' that followed it. I want to do this without speaking of painting as a kind of ritual, as referential thereto or as a substitute thereof. This move beyond ritual is not a theoretical endpoint, nor a final position, but a strategic intervention in the anthropology of Western Desert art: a circuit breaker in the dominant channels of thought. There will be

ways of making better arguments around the intersections of contemporary painting and ritual practice, and my arguments endeavour to lead toward them; but first there need to be some intermediate ethnographic accounts that don't *start* from such premises.

To clear the path for the kinds of interpretation required it is insufficient merely to *not* focus on ritual or religion. It is necessary to first explore why it is that ritual or religious interpretations tend to obscure the economic, and it is a theme that manifests differently with anthropology. Sahlins (1976) identified it as the disaggregation of the economic from the cultural. In Australian contexts Povinelli (1995) identifies it as the splintering of the referent of the cultural, and Merlan (1998) in terms of the analytical separations of culture from practice. Beckett (1988:207) has suggested that in Native Title 'the Aboriginal claimant for land is cast in the role of *homo religiosus* rather than *homo economicus*'; and Povinelli prosecutes a kindred argument. Writing with specific reference to the Australian political economy, Povinelli argues that the legalisation of Aboriginal affairs in land rights claims, resource management and other areas has elicited a very specific framework for what is identified as 'cultural'. While Aboriginal 'beliefs' about the Dreaming are duly noted as beyond cultural critique or qualification, Povinelli argues that we treat labor, ecology, and economic value as referring to material phenomena most appropriately approached through a scientific paradigm. Herein, the argument follows, we have

splintered the referent of the 'cultural' and sidestepped a direct confrontation over how to assess human-environmental interactions and cross-cultural notions of labour (1995:505).

Although both Povinelli and Beckett may have themselves exaggerated the extent of the duality, the economic disaggregation that occurs in socio-cultural analysis is undoubtedly a recurring problem in ethnography. There are clear instances of it in the analysis of Aboriginal art; wherein interpretations of artistic practice are consistently segregated from the question of economic motivation or reward. As noted previously, both Watson (2003) and Taylor (1996) acknowledge that people earn money from painting, but don't include this phenomena as relevant to a basic socio-cultural interpretation of art. All the major ethnographic treatments of contemporary Aboriginal art are guilty, to differing degrees, of this same division. Economics is not invisible, however, it is just not integrated. Altman has

long been an important advocate for the position that the 'cultural meaning of art cannot be divorced from its economic meaning and significance' (1988:48); however his economic analyses tend to be statistical or policy-oriented in ways that aren't focussed on integrating findings within a detailed socio-cultural description of the broader system of practice and meaning in which art objects are produced. Myers (2002) has also sought to locate acrylic art at the intersection of political and economic systems and the clash of the values they embody. But even where economics is here central, the analysis of artworks themselves is still somewhat segregated from the economic taint. While art objects are acknowledged as part of the economic system, the forms on canvas or bark are rarely analysed as themselves implicated in, responsive to and expressive of fields of economic influence and motivation.

Art, action and value

Seeking to acknowledge art as economically constituted implies more, according to Morphy, than treating it as a commodity: 'it implies approaching it from the perspective of political economy, seeing art integrated within and integral to some larger socio-economic processes' (2005:19). In recent years Morphy has explored the problem explicitly, and initiated a significant redress of the intellectual landscape around Aboriginal art through the reframing of art as a form of action at the intersection of regimes of value (2005, 2007a, 2009). Action, as an analytical framework, facilitates the condensation of various streams of theory prominent in contemporary social science discourse such as practice and value theory, even phenomenology, without over-determining the relevance of any one such perspective to the phenomena at hand. It also allows for an ethnographic approach to the economic aspects of painting as an integrated aspect of a broader social practice; and to what Nancy Munn, in *The Fame of Gawa* (1986b), identified as value creation processes.

In essence value creation processes in art are ones in which value is produced or located in objects in the context of social action and through socialisation into regimes of value associated with objects. (Morphy 2005:21)

form of work; and use this notion to rethink the ways in which contemporary art practices are normally represented. I provide a comprehensive statistical portrait of Balgo painting practices, drawing on an analysis of over 12,419 paintings produced by 580 artists between the mid 1980s and 2004. From this data I draw conclusions about the changes and continuities in painting practices over time, and about the Aboriginal constitution of that 'work' or art as indexed by factors such as age, gender and life-cycle. I also focus on the social and monetary value produced by this work, and the ways in which Balgo artists use painting to transform money into other kinds of value.

Having set these opening chapters as a foundation stone for building a new interpretation of contemporary Balgo art, the thesis then embarks upon tracking – over several chapters – the transformations that occurred on the surface of Balgo canvases. Chapter 3 seeks to describe the localised processes through which these painting practices developed incrementally into the Balgo Art industry. As a prelude and context to the analysis of what Balgo art has become in recent times, then, this chapter attempts to revisit and reframe the narratives of its becoming. Emerging at the intersection of historical, economic, political and anthropological influences, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agendas and values, Balgo art is a complex, multiply-determined phenomena. This chapter encompasses the history of Balgo art up until the first public exhibition of painting in 1986, and the subsequent development of a dedicated Art Centre, Warlayirti Artists, in 1987. It explores how much of the prescription, censoring or editing that took place in Balgo, regulating what could be painted for public or commercial contexts, was determined by localised Aboriginal processes and values. These processes continued with the development of Warlayirti Artists, but in dialogue with an increasingly influential aesthetic and economic feedback loop called 'the market'.

The paintings produced today in Balgo are markedly different from those produced at the inception of Warlayirti Artists in 1987. In Chapters 4 and 5 I address how the influence of a market, with its own processes of valuation, came into dialogue with the forms of Balgo art. Chapter 4 frames these processes in terms of a formal and statistical analysis of changes in Balgo painting between 1987 and 2004. The study reveals that Balgo art, characterised early on by a combination of prominent iconographic and figurative styles, Christian themed works, and mixed media became somewhat standardised in dialogue

with a market which sought 'authentic' and recognisably 'Aboriginal' forms. Chapter 5 discusses some of the practical and ideological underpinnings of those transformations over the same time frame. Notions of authenticity, Aboriginality and art all converged, and recursively informed each other, in the emergence of these new forms of material culture. These ideas, and their impact on what people painted, are explored here through the role of non-Indigenous art coordinators and the ways in which they communicated market values to Balgo artists; with particular reference to the materials, colours and advice that coordinators provided, or withheld, at different times.

Chapters 3-5 present an anthropological art history of a group of artists, in dialogue with their audience and each other, undertaking artistic trajectories towards what I am describing as abstraction. In Chapter 6 I undertake a dedicated formal analysis of the processes of abstraction. I seek to develop a localised perspective on the uniquely Aboriginal quality of this abstraction by focusing on the intimate aesthetic details, dynamics and constitution of abstraction in Balgo over the past decades. As an axis between the art history and the ethnography of the thesis, this chapter defines and prescribes perhaps my primary field of data: the brushstrokes, the dots, the compositions of contemporary Balgo art.

The final chapters take these innovative marks made by Balgo artists and explore the social, economic and personal dimensions of the work of art through different case studies. Chapter 7 foregrounds the importance of retaining a detailed focus on the labours and specific abstractions of individual artists. Through the prism of Marie Mudgetell's work, I examine the ways in which various factors - life cycle, economics, kinship, relationships, cultural authority – contribute to and coalesce in the processes of abstraction evident in her paintings. Looking at how Marie's painting have changed over time, the chapter traces the development of her career as an artist and maps the processes of abstraction that attended this. I develop here an interdisciplinary formal analysis, drawing on anthropology and art history, through which it is possible to appreciate one person's abstractions as a coherent expression of interdependent artistic and cultural processes.

Chapter 8 takes this intimate portrait and expands its logic to a broader argument about artistic transmission and cultural reproduction as manifest in painted Country. The chapter explores how the innovations and abstractions pioneered by individuals become sedimented as culture or tradition through processes of intergenerational transmission. I show how painting styles develop and move between people who share camps and other resources. Building on Myers ethnographic accounts of Country, I demonstrate how acrylic Country, in the form of acrylic dots, styles, or entire paintings, is an objectification of indigenous value that can be exchanged both within Balgo (between family members) and without (with Kartiya) in the creation of other kinds of value. Through these final case studies I seek to augment the ethnographic record on desert 'Country' by demonstrating that Country is indeed recreated, elicited and made 'alive' in acrylic art. This is not solely in the *affective* sense as articulated by Biddle, but in the sense that Country, as the objectification of rights and relationships, is a very real resource in the social and political economy of life in Balgo.

Methodology

The research methodology underpinning this study seeks to locate the production of acrylic paintings at the intersection of anthropological and art historical modes of interpretation. In order to write an ethnographic account of Balgo art, I found myself increasingly engaged in what would commonly be considered art history. Indeed, I've come to feel that the mutuality between the disciplines – locating detailed formal analysis, of individuals and groups of artists, within intimate socio-political dynamics and broader historical contexts – makes the art historian a natural ethnographer, and vice versa. I also combine such qualitative explanatory frameworks with a quantitative rigour (who paints, how often, and how much) hitherto lacking in the anthropology of acrylic art.

Sometimes I feel my methodology was no more complex than living in Balgo for three years (2003-2005) and watching everybody paint. Yet this in itself has methodological implications that differentiate my research from almost all studies of desert art: my findings are based on an inclusive analysis of *everyone* who painted in Balgo, not just those

considered to be the 'artists'. This overall approach characterized both my day to day research, and the broader statistical or quantitative analysis undertaken herein. The analysis of desert art has tended to focus on the meanings associated with what older, more senior and therefore more 'traditional' people paint. So often the analysis of desert painting rests on those handful deemed to be the 'master' artists, leaving the statistical majority of the painting population (and their paintings) out of the social analysis. Drawing conclusions from such selective data is a tenuous and, at best, partial methodology for anthropologists. It risks making anthropology somewhat of a handmaiden to an art market which effectively selects and filters the data anthropologists are drawn to interpret. So I worked with everyone: young, old, successful and unsuccessful, male and female.⁶

During my fieldwork I sought to understand the visual forms of the paintings that all of these people produced, and over time, endeavored to understand for each painter how they related not only to the forms that came before in their own work, but the forms being painted by the people around them at any one time. I didn't bring significant knowledge of Aboriginal social life to Balgo to apply to the interpretation of paintings; rather I tended to notice things changing in social life, erstwhile imperceptible shifts in social relationships, through changes in what people painted. Far from indexing the mysteries of the Dreaming, paintings indexed for me the far more inscrutable mysteries of kinship and family politics in community life. I came to understand much about social life through paintings. But from this 'emergent' methodology an important and enduring theoretical framework developed. I came to experience paintings as a source of data, as manifestations of social processes that were otherwise invisible to me. Painting became for me as a researcher not dissimilar to what they are for the people who make them: objectifications of social practice and value, the residue of creative action.

My resistance to the ontological expansions of other researchers outlined above, and my response, is to begin my analysis from a far more *superficial* plane. In this study I am not as interested in tropes of depth, on the penetration or enlivening of the surface of reality, but in the rather more prosaic social interpretation and contextualisation of what appears on

⁶ It follows that my ethnography was also not framed by gender restrictions. Whereas Watson's research was focussed on women's sand drawing and therefore women's painting, my own research agenda was not structured by any gender-based restrictions. I spent as much time, if not more, working with female artists as male.

the surface of paintings. This of course, has ontological implications of its own. The topographic quality – the looking down from above – perspective in so much desert art, is an artefact, elaboration or manifestation of the primary perspectival focus of desert life: which involves reading the agencies of the world – human, animal and flora – through marks that are made on the ground. People in Balgo still ‘read’ the world in this way, whether they are out bush hunting for goanna or moving around the community. Poirier (2004) notes that people in Balgo can recognise individual footprints around the community, and it was my experience likewise that people trace the movement of their kids, their dogs, and even white people hiding in their homes or offices, by tracks left on the ground. An elaborated ontological system, and the visual culture through which it is manifest and reproduced, is itself underpinned by these dominant daily visual orientations and attunements.⁷ I’ve found this notion more consonant with my experience of social sand drawing *and* contemporary art. Just as Aboriginal people read marks, tracks and traces as indices of meaningful action, so too do they make marks as an index of their own meaningful action in the world.

This emic sensibility informs the research methodology through which I seek to unify an anthropological and art historical approach to the visual transformations of Balgo art. I suggest that by reading the acrylic marks on canvas with ethnographic insight, through space *and* time, tracking where they came from, where they stop, where they are transmitted or become transformed, we are drawn to fundamentally different interpretations about the Country that is created through art. The marks people make on canvas, I argue, tell us more about the socio-cultural topography of life in Balgo today than about the totemic geography or mythology of desert culture.

⁷ I don’t elaborate upon it here, but James Gibson’s (1986) ecological analysis of seeing and knowing has been influential in this respect, bringing visual perception into the frameworks of anthropological analysis.

Chapter One:

Culture, History and the Emergence of Art

Each 'school' of desert painting has its own origin myth which truncates, for local artists and their audiences, more complex histories into definitive beginnings. In Balgo, that myth centres on the production of the *Luurnpa Banner* (Fig 1.1) in 1981. Whilst it was not the first manifestation of contemporary Balgo painting, the banner, like the Papunya school mural of 1971 (Bardon 1991) or the Yuendumu doors of 1983 (Warlukurlangu Artists 1992), was the primary public, cross-cultural painting event around which the energy and authority to paint was subsequently organised.



Figure 1.1 Luurnpa Banner painted by senior men for Fr Peile's Jubilee, 1981.

It is an object of material culture around which the story of Balgo art continues to orbit. In order to understand Balgo art today, it is necessary to understand this painting; and to understand this painting, it is necessary to first understand the social and historical context out of which it emerged in 1981. To understand this context, we first have to go back further still.

Many have written succinct historical accounts of Balgo and the region, from the various perspectives of the missionaries (Zucker 2005, Scowen 2001, McCoy 2008, Byrne 1973), the art (Watson 2003, Ryan 1993, Cowan 1999), the community (De Ishtar 2005) and the Aboriginal people themselves (Berndt 1973, Poirier 2005, Cane 1984). There are many histories of Balgo, published and unpublished, oral and written, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, contradictory and necessarily unsettled in their representations of a past that is still happening. The ambition in this chapter is not to recapitulate or summarise these

accounts, nor to reconcile them. Rather, the aim is to reframe them through the specific historical processes and engagements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Balgo that have found expression, if not resolution, in contemporary Balgo art.

Today Balgo is an Aboriginal community on the fringe of the Great Sandy Desert and the southern Kimberley region of Western Australia; home to a floating population of around 400 Aboriginal people. Though Balgo was handed back into Aboriginal control in the 1980s, it was Catholic Pallotine missionaries who originally established the mission in 1939. At that time, there were still considerable numbers of Aboriginal families living customary semi-nomadic existences throughout the desert. For various reasons to be discussed, nearly all of these people came, over the next few decades, to settle at Balgo or other settlements in the region.

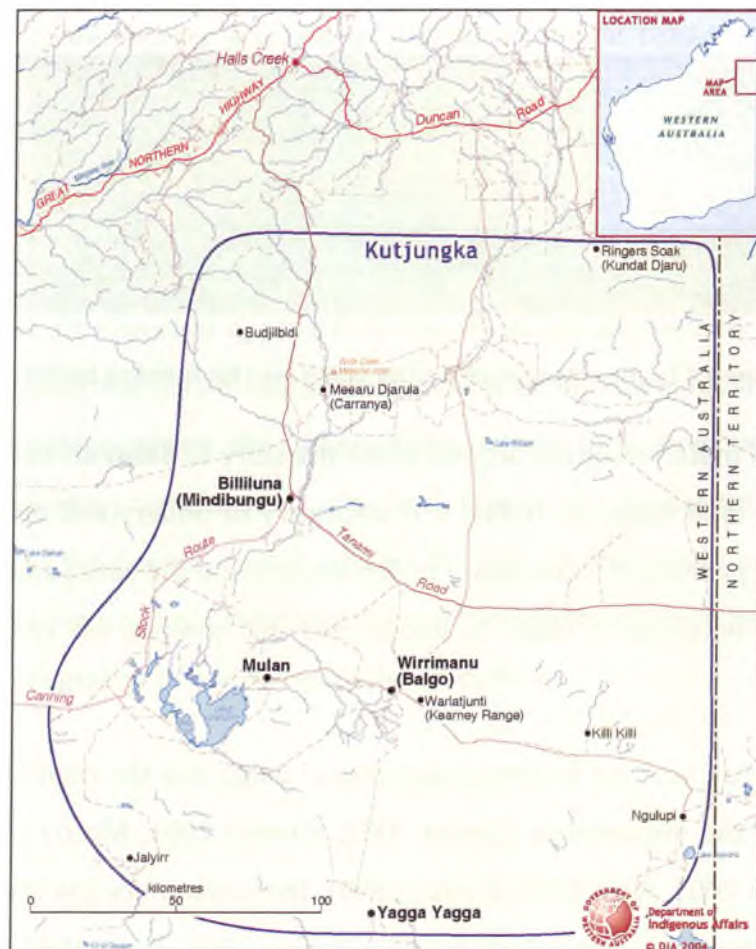


Figure 1.2 Map of the 'Kutjungka' region today.

Cartography courtesy of Department of Indigenous Affairs, Western Australia
(with thanks to Tony Veale, Senior Cartographer)

The population of Old Balgo Mission⁸ was composed predominantly of Kukatja and Walmajarri speaking people, groups who identified most closely with the lands of the surrounding area. While these groups remain statistically most dominant at Balgo, people from other groups from surrounding areas such as the Ngarti, Jaru, Wangkajungka, Warlpiri and Pintupi also settled there and continue to populate Balgo to this day. Stories of many of these groups and their exodus from the desert to missions, stations and more permanent settlements have been relatively well documented. The Kukatja (Smith 2005), Martu (Tonkinson, 1991), Warlpiri (Meggitt 1962), Walmajarri (Richards, Hudson & Lowe [eds] 2002), Pintupi (Myers 1986), Ngarti (Napanangka et al 1997) have all been recorded or reconstructed.

Smith notes in his history of a different diaspora of Kukatja who ultimately came to settle in the Northern Territory, that 'the Kukatja were on the move by the late 1880's, dislodged by changes set in motion by contact' (2005: 1). The eastward migration of the Kukatja, from the more westerly lands stretching north from Lake Mackay to the Stansmore Range in the Great Sandy Desert, was precipitated and intensified by regional drought from 1895 to 1906 (ibid: 29). The social geography of the Kukatja was therefore being transformed by ecological and social pressures 50 years before the Pallotine missionaries arrived in the desert. The creation of the Canning Stock Route in 1906-1910, and the subsequent decades of interaction between desert families and the drovers, also proved influential in determining the dynamics of the desert in the mid twentieth century (Carty 2011).

When the mission was first created in 1939, it was sparsely and only periodically populated. Waves of Pintupi desert migration east to Papunya in 1953-6 and 1960-66 were coterminous with extended droughts⁹ (Myers 1986:35), and one might assume that the northward movements of their kin and neighbours toward the Balgo mission during these periods were influenced likewise. This may be partially so, though the oral histories recorded by the author (Carty 2010, 2011) suggest other interpretations. There are few, if

⁸ People refer to the site of the first mission at Tjalyuwan, some 30 kilometres from the present site of Balgo, as 'Old Balgo'. In the early 1960s, the mission relocated to the present site, which is now the Wirrimanu community. For coherence, I will follow local usage and refer to the new mission site and the Wirrimanu community as Balgo, and the Old Mission site as Old Balgo.

⁹ Thomson also notes, in *Bindubi Country* (1975), that the land had been, until his trip to Labbi Labbi in 1957, in the grip of drought. Interestingly, Labbi Labbi, (or Lappi lappi, as it is written today) was the home Country of people who ended up in Balgo identifying as "Kukatja".

any, references to hunger or drought in this exhaustive collection of stories from people living in and around the region bisected by the stock route.

Artists such as Nora Wompi, Eubena Nampitjin and Nora Nyangapa all moved to Balgo after travelling north with the drovers. Many other families kept a distance from the drovers, through fear or preference, but nevertheless used the stock route waters to guide them north to Balgo; either out of curiosity or to find family who had themselves ventured north previously. In 1958, there were still large family groups living around Natawalu (well 40) on the stock route. The story of their encounter with a helicopter crew is now a famous part of desert lore (Carty et al, 2010:155). The crew had positive interactions with the families,¹⁰ and offered to take a sick child – later to be known as “Helicopter” Tjungurrayi - to Balgo for medical assistance. Reports at the time noted that, apart from the ill boy, the families were happy and extremely healthy, and they were continuing to thrive independently in their desert life. Following “Helicopter’s” departure, and failure to return, the families began moving north to look for him, and eventually arrived at Balgo and Billiluna station. There is no indication in their narratives that they had been intending on leaving the desert before this encounter.

There was no one reason why people migrated to the mission, nor one trajectory for how they finally came to settle there. The colonial frontier advanced in the mid 20th century, and along with it increasing conflicts, arrests, abuse and massacres of desert people. The degradation by camel and cattle of the water sources vital to their survival, coupled with periods of drought, was contributing to the increasing fragility of the desert ecology. But this was not the sole factor driving the desert diaspora northwards. The social ecology of the desert was also changing. As increasing numbers of people gravitated towards missions, cattle stations or other settlements, a human drought was occurring; the declining number of potential marriage partners in an already scarcely populated region further destabilised the reproductive viability of desert society.¹¹

¹⁰ These included people who would in time become key Balgo artists such as Wimmitji Tjapangarti, Lucy Yukenbarri, Patrick Oloodoodi, Brandy Tjungurrayi, Charlie Wallabi, Helicopter Tjungurrayi, Elizabeth Nyumi and Dick Cowboy.

¹¹ Jukuna Mona Chuguna and Ngarta Jinny Bent have documented this increasingly tenuous social landscape of the Northern Great Sandy Desert in their account of living in, and leaving the desert, *Two Sisters* (2003).

Buffing History: Balgo as a Buffer Zone?

Despite success in establishing coastal missions in the Kimberley in the early part of the 20th century, the Catholic Church had been unable to penetrate the northern fringes of the Great Sandy Desert. The Balgo mission was conceived as an opportunity to develop, in the isolation of its locale and the relatively uncorrupted primitives of the inner deserts, the 'model mission' (Choo 2001:179). For the Pallottines, Balgo embodied the 'pioneering work at the edges of civilisation through which they could put into practice their method—winning over the children, mastering the language, encouraging the Aborigines to settle at the mission and creating jobs to keep them there' (ibid). It is not the intention of this thesis to provide a sustained evaluation of the missionary endeavour or the complexities of its historical legacy. There are, however, ways of interpreting and representing the mission that have considerable implications, politically, historically and theoretically, for the research at hand on Balgo art.

Consonant with the protectionist and assimilationist political ideologies of the day, the mission's philosophy (or rhetoric) was to provide a 'buffer zone' (Zucker 2005:139, Berndt & Berndt 1960:1, Cowan 1994:16, Ryan 1993:86) for desert people; a safe space between them and the encroaching ravages of colonialism and the racism and opportunism that followed. This reflected the emerging policy of the time. Released in the same year that the Pallottines set out into the desert to establish their mission, Federal policy in the Northern Territory framed missions and outstations' role in terms of acting:

as buffers between tribal natives and the outer civilisation. It is expected that these buffer stations will gradually attract to them some of the natives from the tribes in the reserves, who, it may be anticipated, will, after making their first contact with civilisation, return to their tribes. Thus gradual contact with civilisation will be established.¹²

¹² McEwen, J. Minister for the Interior, February 1939. *Commonwealth Government's policy with respect to Aborigines*.

The Berndts (1970:65) have also suggested that the mission came to exist as a buffer zone between Aborigines of the southern deserts and ‘those already permanently or temporarily settled on pastoral stations immediately to the north.’ The implication here is that the Mission was not only protecting the desert people from white influence, but quarantining them from other ‘detrribalised natives’: Aborigines whose cultural integrity had already had been compromised, as the missionaries perceived it, by contact with white society. This suggests, as the following analysis teases out, the buffer zone was not merely physically protecting particular Aboriginal people, but protecting a more general *idea* of them.

The Aboriginal approach

However the missions were originally conceived or subsequently reconstructed, to accept the framing of the Balgo mission as a ‘buffer zone’ introduced to protect people is insufficient, if not naive. It not only obviates the self-interest of the missionaries, which will be addressed in due course, but also the agency of desert people engaged the mission on their own terms. This idea of the buffer zone certainly does an injustice to the indigenous oral histories of early contact. Much of the oral history and testimony I’ve heard, and much that has been recorded through other community projects and collated in books (see *Yaartji* [1997] and *Footprints across our land* [1995]), suggests people adopted far more opportunistic and wary approaches to the mission.¹³

Go to Balgo— we see Whiteman for first time in Balgo. ‘What that? He like devil’. We bin looking at whiteman— white like ashes. We don’t know... that kartiya, Father Kumuntjayi and Brother Warana, give us donkey to eat. From there we bin come back to Country— Yaka Yaka. We worry for Country— bush. (Tjama Napanangka, in Napanangka et al 1997:88)

¹³ After the fieldwork for this PhD research was completed, I spent 3 years from 2007-2010 recording extensive oral histories of the Canning Stock Route from Aboriginal artists around the Western Desert. Many of these stories were with Balgo artists, documenting the trajectories and motivations for their approach to the mission or stations. In order to ameliorate a range of complex non-Aboriginal political sensitivities around my research, I have not drawn explicitly on this information in the present thesis, except in cases where material has already been published in the public domain (see Carty et al, 2010, Carty 2011, Carty and La Fontaine (eds) 2011). While this present requirement diminishes the Aboriginal voice in this chapter, at every step that material informs the arguments put forth here and throughout the thesis.

In this account, Napanangka remembers her family approaching the mission with caution and, despite being offered food, remaining unconvinced of the white men and returning south to their desert camps. This was seemingly the pattern for most families in their initial contact. This life narrative became patterned by ongoing visits to the mission over subsequent years, to meet people and acquire food. The mission became incorporated into people's social and ecological itineraries and, without ever defining them, came to articulate with people's life cycle narratives. Napanangka remembers:

My mother take me all around. We bin go up and down, up and down. I bin getting big. I go back and grow at Balgo. Come there when I was a girl. We bin go to Mangkayi now, still girl. When I come back from Mangkayi had ngapurlu- breast like little tomatoes. Back to Balgo. Live at Balgo and Lake Stretch and Sturt Creek. I bin walking self now (ibid: 103).

For others, early memories of Balgo, and what it represented to desert people were articulated primarily in terms of food.

We steal meat from the mission, and chicken stock soup. We put hot water. We bin cookem and eatem. We bin stealing watermelon, pumpkin, onion from mission garden. Father Alphonse find empty tin of meat. He beat people. They steal bullock and chicken. I leave Balba outside fence- chuck bullock bone over fence to Balba. Father find it again. Give me and Balba good hiding. We bin young girls (Nanyuma, in Napanangka et al 1997:106).

The relationship between the mission and food should not be under-represented here; there are dozens of stories like this one, of people either stealing food from Old Mission, or strategically using the mission to acquire food. Official church histories tend to emphasise the meeting of cultures, and the way in which desert people immediately recognised Fr Alphonse Bleischwitz, the founder of Balgo Mission, as a man of god whom they trusted to care for them (Wirrimanu Aboriginal Education and Training Centre 2002:12). Oral histories from Balgo people emphasise, almost without fail, the fact that Fr Alphonse offered food to people. This same indigenous focus on food as defining colonial encounters and exchange reflects an identical focus throughout the desert for the Pintupi (Myers 1986:35) and the Martu (Tonkinson 1991:162).

The missionaries themselves were, of course, acutely aware of this behavioural bent. Scowen (2001:13) notes the recollection of Sister Veronica, a nun at Old Mission, that 'the Aboriginals were very primitive and lived well away from the mission in their humpies, and had very little interest in the mission except to come up for rations and see their children'. This lack of interest in the mission that Sister Veronica observed encompasses the different perspectives that Aboriginal people and missionaries clearly held of this encounter. Desert people were interested in the mission camp, a resource-rich and relatively safe node in the broader socio-economic concerns of desert life; they just weren't necessarily interested in the mission of the Mission. Hamilton (1972:41) offered such a perspective, when she observed of desert people's relationship to the lure of secure rations:

just as they had always moved to the sources of food— the ripening of the figs, the run of witchitties— so they moved to the whites, not in order to take part in white society, not in order to experience social change, but in order to eat the food.

The interpretation offered in this thesis, based on oral sources, mission records, and archaeological and anthropological evidence of pre-mission indigenous social geography, is that the desert peoples used the mission as a kind of *Country*.¹⁴ For all its material novelty, it was effectively a seasonal, strategic resource like other sites, rock holes or desert camps. It became another hub in people's broader movements and agendas in the changing desert ecology: 'All bin living there in bush. We go up and down, up and down to Balgo. Two night, three night, camp. Up and down to Balgo' (Millie Skeen, in Napanangka et al 1997: 102). This conception and use of the mission is even more clearly articulated in Nancy Tax's remembered itineraries of eating and travelling, eating and travelling:

We ate the food... and started walking back to Balgo.... in the morning we all went to get our rations from Fr Alphonse. Then we all went camping out at Tjirtjirr. In the morning we went to another waterhole, shifting camp, Kupartalangu. The baby was sick at this place. Me and my husband had to take the baby to hospital in Balgo.... sister gave him some medicine. Then we left and went camping again. We cooked goannas and ate them again.

¹⁴ I return to this notion of the mission (and the Balgo community today) as a kind of *ngurra*, a resource site, desert camp or 'Country', in the later stages of this thesis.

Then we ran out of flour, tea and sugar. Back to Balgo for more rations. Next day we went out camping again (Nancy Tax, in Crugnale 1995:36-37).

These histories reveal a far more strategic engagement, use and protracted evaluation of the mission by desert people which complicates the rhetoric of protection that buttressed (and continues to buttress) that version of frontier history. The desert peoples, to varying extents and for varying amounts of time, enacted significant degrees of agency and choice in determining how, when and, also, *if* they used the mission.¹⁵ Some parents did not trust their children to the mission's care, taking them to stations further west. Jewess James, for example, remembers 'My father said, 'I'm not giving you (Father Alphonse) my kids. You might take them to another place far away from here'. (Carty et al, 2010: 206).

The discourse of the 'buffer zone' suggests that there was only one real approach to and rationale behind the mission, namely, that of seeking or providing security and protection from the variables of a volatile colonial frontier. Whilst the cattle stations presented an arguably more volatile, unregulated and often exploitative environment which created

¹⁵ It should be part of the historical record that certain people, and certain groups of people, chose not to settle at Balgo. Smith's (2005) history of groups of Kukatja families around the Cleland Hills in the Northern Territory does not even mention Balgo. These Kukatja people were nudged and drawn in different directions by the vicissitudes of the frontier; they made different choices, pursued different resources and ultimately gravitated towards different parts of the desert. Many such Kukatja are perhaps obscured now under the rubric of 'Pintupi' history. [See Myers (1986: 29) for discussion of where the name Pintupi emerged in contact history, and the relationships between the Pintupi-speaking category of people and the Kukatja. See also Smith (2005: 79-80) for a further discussion of the convergence of Pintupi-Luritja-Kukatja country and history.] The Kukatja at Balgo today are but some of the Kukatja, just as they are but some of the population of Balgo. Likewise, while some Walmajarri settled at Balgo, as traditional owners for that Country, far more settled westwards in Fitzroy Crossing and surrounding cattle stations where they could continue to work, and where their children were not subject to the dormitory system. In the most recent collection of oral histories for Walmajarri people, *Out of the Desert: stories from the Walmajarri Exodus* (2002), Balgo mission is not mentioned at all. You have to look to the recordings of Walmajarri people in Mulan community today, *Minma Manpangu Marnu Yapa Jangka: stories from our childhood* (2000) to learn that many Walmajarri did settle at Balgo. Although their histories have been shaped by different emphases at different places, few if any desert people were defined by any one place. People's oral histories note seasonal, social and strategic movements between the stations, the mission and the bush. Evidently, the language of 'settling' is, like the contemporary bureaucratic language of 'residence' in census evaluations and population analysis, a misleading description of indigenous social mobility in the desert. It needs to be used with this caveat. The point here is that significant numbers of people didn't choose the mission, and initially elected to base themselves elsewhere. And some chose not to 'settle' at all.

significant conflict for Aboriginal inhabitants, they were also, for some people, a risk clearly preferred to relative security of the mission.

From Rationale to Rations: Missionary approaches to Culture

Historians, missionaries and anthropologists have all framed Balgo mission as a buffer zone, whether to protect the desert people from kartiya,¹⁶ or from the deleterious influence of 'detrified blacks' from stations and towns further north. Another interpretation is that the Balgo buffer zone was not about protecting desert people, but about protecting Aboriginal people on other Kimberley missions from the cultural transmission emanating mid century from the Desert. Ernest Worms, a consultant to the Bishop of Broome who was involved in scouting sites for what would become Balgo Mission, provided reports that support this view:

Even today new secret cults are brought from the interior more than 1000 miles away from our Kimberley country. The missionaries have not yet reached the country where these cults originate, but a few years ago they established an advance station, a desert mission... to counter this wave of heathenism (Worms 1955: 147).

Alroe suggests that the Balgo mission (of which Worms spoke) was established in part to 'abort revivals of Aboriginal culture that originated in the Western Desert' (1988: 33).

There is perhaps no single clear interpretation that encompasses the historical rationale behind the mission. However we frame the 'buffer zone' created by the mission, it did not exist solely for the secular wellbeing of Aboriginal people, but as Bishop Otto Raible outlined in the Pallotines' mission strategy in the Kimberley, to bring 'help and comfort... to the hearts and souls of those who are still sitting in the darkness and misery of pagan superstition.' (Raible 1938:272) Without wishing to denigrate the missionary endeavour, it remains important to acknowledge the primary objective underpinning the Pallotines' presence in the desert. Ultimately, they were there to convert Aboriginal people to

¹⁶ *Kartiya* is the local Aboriginal term for white people

Christianity. Without such a mission there would have been no Mission at Balgo. Father Alphonse Bleischwitz, defined his vision in clear harmony with that outlined by Bishop Raible above:

The principal aim of the Mission, as of all religious missions to the primitive people, is to help these people become ideal Christians. The *secondary*, but important, aim is to endeavour to give them any positive good which our modern civilisation is able to give them (Bleischwitz, 1950, italics mine).

Charity, according to the founder of the Balgo mission, was a secondary priority of the mission; a handmaid to evangelisation. Highlighting the ideological foundations and priorities of the Balgo missionaries is not gratuitous and retrospective Church-bashing; it has important implications for how we understand the question and clash of culture that defined the mission and the lives of the people who came under its control. There is no argument that the mission *did* provide a kind of physical haven for desert people, but such haven was not unconditional, and the umbrella of protection was fretted with its own structures of prejudice. One can acknowledge the charity and value of the mission for desert people, without overlooking the prejudice and active suppression of Aboriginal values, practices and relationships it perpetrated in pursuit of its own aims.¹⁷ Making such distinctions is important here, because it effects the interpretations one must come to make of 'culture', emerging as it constantly did at Balgo in the encounter *between* cultures (Wagner 1981), and those aspects of culture that were encouraged and suppressed as a result.

¹⁷ Missionaries were among a scarce handful of people with any real interest in the welfare of desert people mid-century, and their engagement should be honoured on such historically contextualised terms. Yet it is not the role of anthropological analysis to accuse or excuse the actions of historical agents. The aim here is rather to offer interpretations of the past that shed light on the current, historically constituted present; to explore an interpretation of contemporary painting practices in Balgo as culture through the lens of how 'culture' has itself been framed in the history of Balgo.

Christianity and Culture

The question of 'culture' was not simply a random problem faced by individual missionaries in the field; it was explicitly addressed in Church policy. Zucker, in her history of Catholic missions in the Kimberley, reports that Bishop Jobst, who followed Bishop Raible as head of the church in the 1960s, took counsel with sympathetic anthropologists to explore the extent to which Aboriginal Culture could be allowed to persist without undermining the evangelism at the heart of the missionary endeavour.¹⁸

The Bishop asked whether and to what extent aborigines could adhere to their traditions, mythology, their initiation rites and their law when they accepted the Catholic faith. All three consultants were of the opinion that it would be possible to retain these in their entirety. It seemed that such practices were mainly social in character and would not clash with Christian belief and moral law. Exceptions were magic, mutilation such as subincision and child marriage (Zucker 2005: 119).

Among Catholics at the time, this was held as a relatively progressive position; however Aboriginal cultural practices were still only acceptable insofar as they did not conflict with Catholicism. The church believed it could weed out the undesirable elements of Desert culture, without eroding the autonomy or integrity of that culture. McCoy has noted the inherent contradiction in this position: 'At Old Balgo the Church espoused its respect for the values of an ancient culture, but the missionaries moved firmly and clearly to change those values' (McCoy 2004:80). It is clear that this dedicated discouragement of cultural practices and the values that inhered in them was not, however, limited to the pioneering

¹⁸ The men consulted were: Dr Helmut Petri, a professor of anthropology and ethnology at Cologne University, Dr Micha, a German ethnologist, and Fr E. A. Worms, himself a Pallotine Missionary trained in anthropology and active in the missions of the Kimberley. The men were to help develop a mission policy on Aboriginal cultural practices

period of cross-cultural engagement. It continued at the new mission, and most aggressively under Fr John McGuire's reign into the late 1960s.¹⁹



Figure 1.3. Stockman George Tuckerbox under a sign erected by Father McGuire at the entry to the new Balgo Mission, mid 1960s. (Photo by Joe Mahood, © Kim Mahood)

People in Balgo today remember, either because they witnessed it or it has been passed down in local oral histories, that Fr McGuire personally rounded up sacred objects of the people and had them destroyed.²⁰ Such transgressive interventions were not restricted to seemingly inanimate material culture. Brian McCoy, a former parish priest at Balgo, writes

¹⁹ McGuire is an almost mythical, Kurtzian figure in Balgo history worthy of more space than this thesis affords. Kim Mahood recalls, in her memoirs of childhood on a local station, that McGuire was 'larger than life, with his own arrangements between the Lord and his whiskey habit,' an autocrat and a pugilist who 'used the kind of language only available to an Irishman and a man of God' (Mahood 2000: 116). Innovative and entrepreneurial as he was, Balgo was his fiefdom, and he ruled it with a severity remembered today.

²⁰ John Carty, fieldnotes, 03/01/04

of the times when Fr McGuire actively tried to prevent initiation ceremonies taking place by stripping the sacred hair-belt off a novice (2004: 75, 2008: 59-60). McGuire believed that the 'oldfellows take the boys away for horrible practices' (McGuire 1959), and clearly made dedicated efforts to eradicate the religious life of people under his control at Balgo. His interventions became ever more calculating. Bishop Jobst, in his memoirs, wrote that 'Fr McGuire used to send the young boys to Derby hospital for circumcision by the doctor,' (Jobst 2000: 29) so that they could not be initiated into the Aboriginal religious life.

Ronald Berndt also recorded that 'boys are... sent by the missionary to be circumcised in Broome or Derby, so that the actual physical operation is no longer the prerogative of the religious leaders' (1972: 204). Yet the Berndts, knowing better than any how destructive such interventions were, failed to comment further on these radical cultural transgressions. Preserving good relations with the Mission was central to the Berndts' own research ambitions in the region, and commenting on these strategic interventions in ritual practice, however distasteful to the anthropologists, would have compromised their capacity to return to Balgo.²¹ Nevertheless, the omission is not trivial. The Berndts fail to articulate what they must clearly have known; the potentially cataclysmic effect of such intervention on the religious life of the community.²² To take away men's capacity to initiate younger males, to reproduce them as mature social beings, is to rupture a defining element not only of their identities, but the reproductive fabric of their cosmos. As Myers argued of the Pintupi, 'in initiation, the strands of Pintupi social life are brought together at the fulcrum of the system: the construction of related individuals' (Myers 1986:228).

²¹ See Alroe (1988:30) for a critical discussion of the power missionaries had over anthropologists in the Kimberley

²² The Berndts seemed to make a point of not publicly criticising the missionaries at Balgo, with whom they clearly enjoyed a fruitful and supportive relationship in stark contrast to other places in Australia, and particular nearby stations such as Birrindudu. In his report into the status of the mission in 1960, Ronald Berndt explicitly states: 'In the circumstances, there is little direct criticism which can be levelled at the organization of this Mission.... Balgo is a place for which we personally have much affection...and we have the utmost cooperation from all the Mission staff. We would like to put on record here our sincere appreciation for their kindness and help.' (Berndt & Berndt, 1960:3) The kind of work the Berndts did, their endless arduous travel, must have been offset by the small hospitalities of places like Balgo where they were welcomed, housed and generously fed. The Berndts' generosity to the mission is understandable, though it has inhibited, perhaps, some of the more critical interpretations they might have otherwise presented. Even as late as 1988, their loyalty to the Balgo missionaries persisted. They wrote of the practice of interventions in ceremonial law and initiation in other parts of Australia, but neglected to mention their observations of the same processes at Balgo (Berndt & Berndt 1988: 48).

The identities of women, as mothers, sisters, wives and ceremonial authorities, were thereby interrupted equally by such intervention. These interventions were not just about male initiation and identity, but, given the centrality of initiation ceremonies to the reproduction of relationships and values that underscore desert life, to the very foundations of desert identities and culture.

The Church in Balgo appears to have held the power not only to intervene in the cultural, spiritual and social reproduction of desert people, but also in the anthropological interpretation of such processes. McGuire's interventions were never ultimately successful, however traumatic they must have been for people at the time. The religious life of the community continued, secretly, only to return to the mission with any strength on McGuire's departure. As the people of Balgo found ways around the religious interventions in their culture, so too, in its own way, did Ronald Berndt's anthropology. In his analysis of Balgo society in a time of flux, it was the broader scope of the religious – not merely the ritual aspect, but its entanglement in economic and environmental contexts – that underwrote the intervention in the religious logic of desert life.

Ronald Berndt's observations of Balgo in the early days recognised the link between the economic and religious conditions of peoples' lives, and grounded them in their unifying sphere of the environment. His descriptions of what he believed had happened to the people of Balgo suggest that physical dependence on the mission systematically interrupted and undermined the integrity of their religious life, and of their culture. Based on research conducted during the 1960s, Berndt concluded:

the balance of traditional existence has been drastically upset.... The basis of their religious life and of the values manifested through it has been undermined, though not entirely. They are no longer dependent... notwithstanding the fact that some of them still believe they are— on the mythic beings and on what those mythic beings symbolically stood for: they are no longer directly dependent on their natural environment. And, except in retrospect, most of them are no longer Desert people (1972:12).

Berndt was not overtly critical of the evangelising and religious intolerance practised at Balgo. He did not attribute changes in the cosmological integrity of people's lives to the confrontation with Christianity as an ideology, but rather with the transformation of the

economic conditions of their subsistence. For Berndt, the interdependence of religion and economy, cosmology and ecology, was at the heart of desert society. In this, he provides a key to unlocking the less obvious corrosion of cultural practices occasioned through missionary practices.

Feeding Dependence

I have argued that, from an Aboriginal point of view, the Balgo mission existed as a curious utility, a resource to be explored and exploited, for some decades before most people eventually settled there. Balgo oral histories reveal a changing pattern of engagement defined by increasing dependence on the mission. It seems that while people exercised considerable agency in deciding how and when they would engage the mission, ultimately a combination of factors militated towards families becoming based there more permanently. For whatever reason people decided to settle at the mission, none could have predicted the impact this would take. The gradual transference of dependence from the resources of the desert environment to the resources of the Mission was perhaps experienced as a relatively coherent process of translating socio-economic relationships and expectations into new contexts; but time has shown it to be more than that. This gradual transference of basic economic dependency rendered the mission, effectively, as the 'natural environment' that provided people with the conditions of subsistence; conditions through which people who were 'no longer desert people' ultimately had to interpret the meanings of their lives.²³

The Mission itself never adequately compensated for this monumental shift in the economies of the desert people. It was, arguably, invested rather more so in exploiting and reinforcing the environmental dependence that was gradually usurped by settlement life. Official Mission strategy was, after all, to settle people by creating physical dependence

²³ In later chapters I explore how Balgo, as a mission and later as a community, has come to be reshaped, rendered as 'place' and incorporated into people's sense of their own place in the contemporary ecology and semeiology of the desert.

and then use this stable population as the core of its evangelising 'mission'. Bishop Raible outlined the Pallotine strategy to

make the native settle on a certain place where he will be able to earn his living by doing a reasonable amount of work every day. The missionary will then be with them most of the time, and can successfully instruct them into the doctrines of our holy faith (Raible 1938:274).

How the natives were 'made to settle' is an important consideration. Rations of flour, sugar, tobacco and tea were clearly central to this strategy of encouraging settlement and fostering dependence. In *White Flour, White Power*, Rowse (1998) has explored the pivotal relationship between rations, dependency and settlement that characterised the entire process of colonisation in Central Australia. Tonkinson's work with the Martu suggests this was a pattern evident in Western Australia as well:

The initial contact pattern was of periodic brief sojourns, followed by a return to the old nomadic life; but it was eventually reversed to a more settled existence punctuated by brief returns to the desert heartlands. This major transition was caused by a subtle process whose implications could never have been sensed by the Mardu: the link between increasing involvement with, and growing dependence on, an alien economy. They had rapidly acquired a strong desire for tea, flour, twist tobacco and sugar- as several Mardu have described it, "We were captured by flour and sugar (Tonkinson 1991: 162).

Like their Martu neighbours, the Kukatja and their neighbours maintained significant autonomy throughout these early decades, exploiting the mission to their own ends; but slowly, perhaps imperceptibly, their dependence on rations came to define, constrict and ultimately control their movements. This 'capture', however, was more complex than any subsistence-oriented interpretation can encompass.

Kinship & culture: the impact of dormitories on families

The desert people who came to settle at Balgo were not merely captured by rations; they were held in an ever diminishing orbit of the mission by the gravity of family. At old Balgo, in return for rations, parents were expected to leave their children in the care of the

mission so that they could receive education . The families camped nearby in the bush, and visited the mission to collect rations and be with their children. As Sister Veronica noted at the time, adults 'had very little interest in the mission except to come up for rations and see their children' (Scowen 2001:13). Initially, some people perhaps enjoyed the freedom that the mission allowed as a kind of desert day-care. Parents could be assured that their children would be housed and fed while they went about their own movements, ceremonial, social and otherwise, in the desert. This care, however, inevitably became a modality of control.

The boys and girls, by living in the dormitories, will be removed from those practices which are definitely immoral and others which are not the most advantageous (Bleichwitz 1951: 33).

Poirier suggests that the main reason Balgo people curtailed their autonomic movements throughout the desert was because 'they felt they were abandoning their children, who were not allowed to join them' (2005:27). Keeping kids in one place, and regulating parental access to them, served to steady and settle whole families. This is reflected in the changing narratives people tell today, wherein tales of coming back and forth to Balgo on long desert itineraries become more localised hunting expeditions:

We went out camping, out from Old Mission to Malarn... hunting for goannas... In the afternoon we started getting more kuka (game) and camped halfway... we came back to old Balgo and cooked more goanna near rockhole for our lunch, other side Old Mission. We got to Balgo and camped one night and got rations... From there we went north to Lake Maddock.... We camped the night, killing more goanna, pussycat and getting bush tucker.... Camped one night at the Malarn Crossing and in the afternoon we went back to Old Balgo and cooked more goanna.... My kid was in the boy's dormitory at Old Balgo....' (Nancy Tax, in Crugnale 1995:40)

The Pallotine mission strategy was oriented towards children (Choo, op cit), and this took the form of a dormitory system which sought to separate children from their parents in order to facilitate their spiritual and practical re-education. The practice of isolating indigenous children from their parents was a strategic policy dedicated to hastening the assimilation process. This, as the Berndts noted, was the embodiment of two generalised comments that held considerable currency in the early history of state and church

engagement with Aboriginal people: 'You can't do much with the adults, you just have to concentrate on the children'; and 'the only way to do anything with the children is to get them away from the adults' (Berndt & Berndt 1970:132).

The means of implementing these views ranged from the wholesale removal of children without consent, through consultation and partial or temporary removal, to emphasis on psychological rather than physical separation (ibid).

On the Balgo mission, the practices of psychological and physical separation were embodied in the dormitory system and the (re)education it facilitated. On Old Mission, the dormitories were not locked and there was more freedom and interaction between children and their families (Berndt 1978: 135),²⁴ though this rapidly changed in the 1960's under Fr McGuire's new mission regime. Missionaries believed that children became unsettled by their periodic visits to their parents' camp, or by being taken on journeys out bush when their parents chose to move. This disrupted the processes of re-socialisation inherent in their missionary endeavour, and they therefore 'deemed it necessary to increase the separation between children and parents so that the children could experience a largely uninterrupted form of education and socialisation.' (McCoy 2007:53) Such policy was crystallised through the infrastructure of the new mission, where girls and boys dormitories were built, and thereafter policed, with systematic policy of separation. Middle aged people today remember that the girls' dormitory was surrounded by a high, barbed wire fence, and they were prevented from visiting their parents in camp, and were allowed to visit freely with their families only on Christmas day, and only for part thereof.²⁵ The boys had slightly more freedom.

Nevertheless, on Old Mission the Berndts (1970: 66) estimated that the children were able to spend only five to ten percent of their time with family. With the new restrictions, this ratio inevitably declined, until the mission had assumed almost total control over the lives of children— and therefore of their families. Despite, or perhaps because of, recent political emphasis on the 'stolen generations', few people think of mission-based children

²⁴ See also Berndt 1970.

²⁵ See also McCoy 2007, for further discussion of these regulations.

as having been separated from their families. But Balgo children, while able to see their parents, were no longer fed, taught or nurtured in any significant capacity by their own kin; and this rupture in the social fabric has precipitated through the generations. Here, in the dormitory system, we find a less obvious, but equally subversive series of practices which conspired against the reproduction of core relationships and values for Balgo people.

Working on the mission

Through rations and dormitories, the Church created a dual dependency, enough to 'make the native settle on a certain place where he will be able to earn his living by doing a reasonable amount of work every day' (Raible 1938:274). In fact, they were able to make several hundred people settle. Creating work to keep these settled people occupied thereafter on the mission was another matter; and it proved to be an endeavour that was never fully successful. Part of the central structural problem and logic of Balgo as a place, both in mission times as now, is that there has never been adequate quantity of work (nor quality thereof) to occupy the population. The Berndts noted this in the 1960s (1970: 67). Whether this was a fault of vision and organisation, or an intractable problem of settling a nomadic people in such a remote location, cannot be definitively answered here. Women were more readily engaged with mission staff, and were funnelled from the dormitories into domestic labour on the mission, cooking, cleaning, baking bread, washing clothes and sheets. Despite significant enterprise and ambition in running livestock, the mission failed systematically to enlist men (in any numbers) into its own vision of economic viability.

Men were considered as the religious leaders and they were regarded, it appears, with some degree of resignation and futility by missionaries in terms of their evangelical potential. They saw women and children as their most receptive subjects for evangelisation (Berndt & Berndt 1988:54, De Ishtar 2005: 129). This ideological and strategic perspective is evident in the ration system put in place on the new mission, whereby women, children and the elderly were fed, while men were not. Only men employed to labour on the mission were allowed access to rations.

Consequently, they were faced with the following choices: to depend on what they could get from their womenfolk or from others; to hunt for the food, as they had done before; to be employed by the mission; or to try to find work on pastoral stations farther north. The majority of men at Balgo, at that time, could be classified not only as unemployed but also to some extent as unemployable, because they were not trained to cope effectively with introduced demands and also found them more or less uncongenial (Berndt & Berndt 1970: 66).

As the Berndts intimate here, Balgo men were enamoured neither of the work, nor the unresolved power relations inherent to such work on the mission. Those men still alive who remember working on the mission tend to frame their work in a dual fashion: they are proud of the hard work they put in and their achievements (especially and pointedly in contrast with the current work ethic of Balgo youth), but they also unanimously, in my experience, frame such work with resentment as a kind of *enforced* labour (see also Poirier 2005: 27). Apart from the handful who could work as stockmen, there appears to have been a failure to generate any common ground between the ambitions of the missionaries and the values of the men. To press the issue, and enlist their captive labour force, the missionaries had to be more strategic; and here I return again to dual question of food and social control.

'He giveth with one hand...'

Food is a central focus, and key object of exchange, in social relationships in desert society. The practices of the missionaries sought therefore not only to create dependence with food to encourage settlement, but thereafter to transform social relations through the systematic regulation of that resource. The feeding of children in the dormitories, away from their customary care-givers, was one such strategy. Withholding food from men to force them to work was another, though this practice ultimately failed because women were able to bring their own rations back to share with the men. The mission therefore faced problems experienced on nearby secular stations in the Northern Territory, where

administrators such as Superintendent Webb came to believe that 'until meals are prepared and eaten in a communal dining room very little control can be exercised over natives or rations' (Webb, quoted in Rowse 1998:154). Thus, along with the regulatory infrastructure of the dormitories, a communal dining room was established in Balgo to replace the less governable ration-giving system. While only women, children and working men continued to be fed, they were also now prevented from preparing and sharing that food on their own terms, according to their own culturally specific codes of relationship.

Such communal dining rooms became common in Central Australia, a seemingly innocuous policy and practice Rowse identifies as among the most profoundly disruptive: 'a form of socialising radically different from eating in family based camps, communal feeding was probably the most important attempt by colonial authority to intervene in the indigenous domain (1998: 153).²⁶ Following Mary Douglas' notion that 'food is not feed' (1982: 117-124), Rowse argues that the communal dining rooms cannot be framed in terms of caloric nourishment, but must be interpreted with an eye to the symbolic capital and currency of food in indigenous society. The production and consumption of food is a processual necessity in the reproduction of an Aboriginal culture predicated upon one's obligations to give food in order to create relationship. Eliminating this possibility struck at the heart of Balgo people's autonomy and identities. Coupled with the segregation of children in dormitories, this final disintegrative pressure on the Aboriginal domestic unit of the 'camp' worked to eradicate families' capacity to share food and therefore reproduce themselves as a family (*walytja*) in daily exchange. Such radical interventions were arguably more deleterious influences on desert social life than the more obvious or visible attacks on the 'culture' of ceremony or ritual.

In the light of the history presented here, it is impossible to sustain the interpretation that 'the church did not understand or interfere too much in the Aboriginal culture issues at that time' (Scowen, 2001:14). It is rare in human history to find that a *lack* of

²⁶ It is important to note that child mortality rates were among the main reasons for introducing the communal kitchens in Central Australia. There were, therefore, intended and unintended consequences in such policy; and we should be wary of over-determining the mission's intention in its introduction.

understanding somehow prevented the interference of one group in the autonomy of another. While protecting people from exploitation on the colonial frontier, the mission came to embody that very colonial frontier through practices which actively sought to change Aboriginal ways of life and foster dependence on an alien economy. From the evidence arrayed here, I contest the historical construction of Balgo, by missionaries (Zucker 2005, Worms 1970, Scowen 2001, Byrne 1973), anthropologists (Watson 2003) and art writers (Ryan 1989), as a less acute site of dispossession than other parts of the colonial frontier. That Balgo people were protected from the most explicit violence of the colonial encounter has arguably obscured the more subtle and systemic violence that was perpetrated daily against their culture.

Choo (2001: 179) described Balgo as the Pallotine model mission, wherein 'they could put into practice their method— winning over the children, mastering the language, encouraging the Aborigines to settle at the mission and creating jobs to keep them there'. Implicit in this description of Pallotine missiology are the three interwoven strands of control: rations, dormitories and work. I have described how, with the movement to new mission, the rations people had come to depend upon became increasingly and strategically enmeshed in efforts to transform indigenous kinship, sociality and labour. These efforts, in turn, have led us back to the broader questions of culture. I argued in the thesis introduction that we can productively accept a working definition of 'culture' as a marker of difference; as a system of practices and beliefs reproductive of that difference. Within this framework, the missionaries, encouraging Aborigines to adopt kartiya values of education, working and thinking, were also engaged, both wittingly and unwittingly, in a broader project of suppressing Aboriginal culture as a value, a principal of difference, in and of itself. The practices by which the mission engaged and sought to suppress Aboriginal culture were not the improvisations of charitable pioneers or accidents of the cross-cultural encounter: they were the expression and implementation of mandated policy, dually pronged by ideologies of Christianity and Civilisation, supported by the state and oriented towards assimilation.

The 1970s: a cultural renaissance

The 1970s saw a coalescence of influences (Aboriginal, political and church-based in their origins), work to change the situation on the Balgo mission. Following from the referendum in 1967, the emergence of land-rights and the implementation of 'self-determination' policy under the Whitlam government saw the development of a political climate critical of assimilationist policies of the past. Under the new stewardship of Father Ray Hevern,²⁷ these broader socio-political changes 'reshaped the interactions between mission and government and transformed the relationship between Balgo's missionaries and the indigenous residents'(De Ishtar 2005: 89). The devolution of the dormitory system and communal dining in the early 1970s coincided with broader opening up of mission practices under the less autocratic, more conciliatory regime of Fr Hevern.²⁸

This era also saw the arrival, in 1973, of Father Peile, the first Balgo-based priest to learn the local Kukatja language. Peile researched and wrote widely on Kukatja language, his work resulting in the Kukatja dictionary finally edited together by Valiquette (1993). He developed a scholarly interest in Kukatja understandings of health and the body, and came to document Aboriginal notions of health, healing and sickness in significant ethnographic detail (Peile 1997). In his role as a priest Peile was primarily engaged, deliberately and systematically, in documenting local culture. This was encouraged by the Church, which was endeavouring to pursue new ways to proselytise by developing better understanding of Indigenous culture (Zucker 2005: 119).

Culture & ritual in the 1970s

As children moved back to be with their families in this era, those families also developed increased freedom and mobility for the first time in decades through cash income and motorcars. As many sought to reconnect with kin long segregated on other settlements far

²⁷ The aptly named Fr Hevern replaced Fr McGuire as Balgo Mission Priest and superintendent in 1969.

²⁸ Children whose families lived in Balgo were free to return home under Ray Hevern. Some children, whose parents continued working on Billiluna station, for example, continued to be housed in the dormitories at Balgo for schooling purposes.

to the east and south, the 1970s were characterised by what Akerman described as a ritual 'renaissance' (Akerman 1979; see also Moyle 2001, Poirier 1992, De Ishtar 2005, Kolig 1981). In the mid to late 1970s a swell of ritual activity across the Kimberley and desert communities animated the region. Men whose initiations had been curtailed or prevented altogether during mission times were initiated in mass ceremonies. Akerman (1979:237) suggests that during the Christmas period of 1977-78, as many as 69 men were fully initiated in Balgo.²⁹ Apart from ritual initiation ceremonies, the heightened mobility-sociality nexus of this period also saw the development and exchange of new ritual cults between Kimberley and desert communities such as Balgo.

Along-side the administrative and social changes outlined above, the late 1970's were characterised by a progressive increase in the incidence of ceremonial activities, culminating in 1982 when, over a 10-month period between February and November, groups of residents gathered at least 115 times to practise or perform rituals.... (Moyle 2001:14)

The church came to support this process.³⁰ Fr Peile, along with Fr Hevern, began to facilitate Balgo people travelling to participate in Law ceremonies; namely, in the same initiation ceremonies their predecessor McGuire had endeavoured to stop. These acts of facilitation, a quantum leap from the obstructive and destructive acts of McGuire previously, encompass a changing orientation to indigenous Culture from the church. Furthermore, such facilitation may well have been a crucial part of the ritual renaissance that characterised the region in the mid to late 1970s.

Clearly the church was moving to a position in which the culture of Aboriginal people was no longer antithetical to evangelisation, but rather now increasingly necessary to it. Following three decades of evangelisation in which no adult had ever asked to be baptised, the missionaries were changing their approach. On sending Fr Peile to study anthropology, Bishop Jobst expressed his concern in a letter that 'we have incorporated into our liturgy,

²⁹ This is an extraordinary number of men: ten times as many as were regularly initiated in the early 1970s (Akerman *ibid*), and about 7-8 times the annual number routinely initiated today.

³⁰ Moyle notes that in 1979, Fr Peile 'took a truckload of Balgo women to Jigalong to begin an exchange of rituals' (2001: 17 fn10). McCoy (pers comm. 2005) and Nieass (2003) both provide other examples of the church facilitating Law travel during their time in Balgo in the 1970s and early 1980s respectively. While Fr Peile's personal attendance at these ceremonies was not always appropriate or appreciated (according to Nieass), the transport provided by the church in these instances invariably was.

for instance, next to nothing of the native's culture, hence religion presented to them, particularly the liturgy, will always be alien and foreign to them' (Jobst 1964). An acceptance and incorporation of Aboriginal 'culture', or at least the trappings thereof, was seen as crucial to rendering Christianity more coherent. De Ishtar (2005:146-153), Moyle (1997:17), and Alroe (1988:37) have each criticised the superficial and tokenistic engagement with 'culture' undertaken by missionaries. They argue that this belated recognition of Aboriginal religion was not a movement to genuine syncretism, but a strategic appropriation of Aboriginal aesthetics to make the Christian Gospel more palatable. Such perspectives, while a valid critique of some missionaries, tend to obscure the agency and syncretic agility of Aboriginal people themselves, some of whom found great resonance with their own traditions in the Bible.

Either way, local people in Balgo clearly had some sense that their conversion of the missionaries was far from complete, and remained aware that the full extent of their cultural practice was only acceptable to a point. This is evident in the fact that they sought to hide one of the most important ceremonies of the era, the *Tjulurru*, from the missionary gaze. Moyle recalls that in the late 1970's people secretly left the mission under cover of darkness and walked silently until they were far enough away that they could learn the ritual without alerting the mission to their subversive activities. He suggests that Balgo residents were wary of making their practices known:

Although the mission had succeeded in converting very few people to Christianity in its years of operation, the community held the superintendent, Fr Ray Hevern, in some fear. Because aspects of *Tjulurru* were considered as conflicting or competing directly with Christian belief, people were anxious that he not discover their activities (Moyle 2001: 126)

Moyle observed that people were essentially frightened of 'some kind of retribution from the Mission for learning of a ritual believed to empower Aborigines to the point of equality within White Law' (ibid). This may be overstating the Aboriginal sentiment, however. While there were limits to the recognition afforded by the church, Poirier notes that by 1980, only a year or two after Moyle's observation, even this apparently politically-charged ritual was being performed openly in the camps at Balgo (Poirier 2005, see also Swain 1997:253). Either way, significant change continued to unfold throughout the region in this era.

Mobility, Autonomy and Art

Underscoring all this ritual energy was not simply a religious revival, but a relatively mundane one; mobility. In the 1970s people in Balgo had increasing contact with family – from whom they were long separated – at Jigalong, Papunya, Yuendumu and the Fitzroy Valley. Mobility is a value closely tied to notions of autonomy in desert culture; this nexus was undoubtedly amplified by its suppression or curtailment on the mission.

Mobility defines one's access to kin, to Country, to the ceremonial performances and social exchanges that reproduce desert societies on intimate and regional scales. Aboriginal 'culture' in Balgo was disrupted by incremental parsing of mobility fostered by dependence on the mission. Through the principal strategy of 'encouraging the Aborigines to settle at the mission and creating jobs to keep them there' (Choo, op cit), the techniques of assimilation were all oriented towards discouraging disruptive 'nomadic' tendencies. Sedentarisation was a central plank of assimilation policy because it is mobility that is so critical to the maintenance of other indigenous values. It is not surprising to find that increased mobility – through relaxed mission protocols and increasing access to vehicles - was the driving momentum behind the reconstitution of Aboriginal practices and values in the 1970's and early 1980's.

Apart from the travel facilitated by church vehicles, for ceremony or even regional sports competitions, other factors were contributing to steady increases in mobility of Balgo people away from the mission. New mining and outstation movements, with their requisite archaeological or heritage surveys and myriad mapping projects, produced a series of opportunities for people to reconnect with their Country.³¹

'Over the years, the tentacles of multinational imperialism have scarred the desert landscape with a multitude of grid 'cut lines'. The aborigines started using these

³¹ In the late 1970s and early 1980's, many Balgo people went on significant trips back to their Country for a variety of reasons. Ray Hevern took people, as did the film-maker Malcolm Douglas, and anthropologists such as Kingsley Palmer, Scott Cane and Kim Akerman.

tracks... because they were suitable for motor vehicles and allowed the locals to go farther into the desert for hunting and gathering activities, and to reconnect with various sites'. (Poirier, 2005: 44-45)

These various journeys (and the interests underpinning them) also rekindled, or elicited, the very idea of Country as an object of intercultural value; something that Kartaia could value, and over which Balgo people could again exercise authority. Reconnection with country, as a social, political and ecological resource, clearly had significant implications; country could be hunted for food, to supplement food from the store; country could become a community or outstation, where people would be paid their full welfare entitlements away from the mission (see below). The mobility of desert people also brought the idea to Balgo, through people such as Timmy Payungka and Yanyatjarri Tjakamarra from Papunya, or family at Yuendumu, that Country could also be painted and sold.

[T]here was a lot more contact with people from Yuendumu, not only for ceremonial but particularly more and more for sporting and cultural events that were outside the established pattern of contact, and I think the enthusiasm for painting was in part spurred on... by events at Yuendumu. They were very aware of what was going on at Yuendumu, and at Papunya of course... people at Balgo were aware of what was happening and they were very keen to join in (Stanton 2005).

The ritual and social renaissance of the 1970s was coterminous with, and a factor in, the emergence of contemporary painting practices in Balgo. South east of Balgo in Papunya, where the families of many Balgo people had been settled 20 years before, the birth of the Aboriginal art movement in the desert had begun in 1971 (Bardon 1991). The ceremonial exchanges that opened up travel and communication between these communities also opened out the idea of 'Art' to Balgo residents. A major figure in Papunya painting, Timmy Payungka, brought his family to live in Balgo from 1976 to 1981 (Johnson 2010: 243), and it is in this period that painting practices took hold in Balgo.³² Through these kinds of influences people in Balgo developed awareness that one could paint Dreaming stories, one's Country, that these objectification could in turn be exchanged with the dominant kartaia regime of value as 'culture'.

³² See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of this era.

This notion was reinforced by three quite different influences that converged in Balgo in the early 1980s: the anthropologist, Ronald Berndt; the artist, Warwick Nieass; and the art dealer, Mary Macha.³³ In 1980, Berndt, who had a long relationship with Balgo, began to encourage men to paint their Dreaming stories for his own research, and solicited two suites of secret-sacred paintings. Warwick Nieass was the mission cook in 1980 when Berndt was working with the men. Nieass and his then-partner Sylvie Poirier, who later returned to Balgo as an anthropologist, became engaged socially with the local people (Poirier 2005:32-33). Nieass in particular took great interest in the local stone carving practices, and sought to support these where possible in his spare time. He also began teaching art lessons at the newly established Adult Education centre, and through this process saw the value in men's own 'traditional' paintings which he sought to encourage. In 1981 he applied for funding, which he received, from the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council to commence an arts enterprise (Nieass 2004; see also Watson, 2003: 127).³⁴

At the same time, Mary Macha was employed by the Department of Native Welfare in Western Australia to explore the economic potential of indigenous art and craft industry in the Kimberley and the desert. The original idea behind the government's efforts to encourage and market the production of traditional arts and crafts in the early 1980s was to 'promote Indigenous material culture as economic grounds on which to support the process of transition to self-governance' (Macha 2005). Macha arranged for Balgo people to be paid for producing artefacts, carvings and eventually paintings, which the government then on-sold through Traditional Aboriginal Arts in Perth.

From the context of private exchange with Berndt, the artistic momentum gained through Nieass, and the economic motivations facilitated by Macha - not to mention the broader contexts of ritual exchange, and the burgeoning climate of self-determination and economic independence— 'art' was born in Balgo. Significantly, it emerged from a confluence of anthropological, artistic, and economic engagements with the notion of

³³ Again, I explore each of these influences in Chapter 3, but it is important for the arguments being developed in this chapter to introduce them here.

³⁴ Poirier took over Nieass' cooking duties on the mission while Nieass effectively became the first funded art-coordinator at Balgo. This narrative is explored in further in Chapter 3.

'culture'. In articulation with these historical convergences, the public emergence of Balgo art was also, specifically, a cross-cultural elicitation of that very notion.

The Luurnpa Banner

The very first public painting executed by the men of Balgo occurred in 1981 in response to the celebrations for the Jubilee of Father Peile. Until this point in local history, any such paintings were either made for Ronald Berndt's eyes only, for discrete sale to outsiders through Macha, or by men in restricted painting groups with Warwick Nieass. The Church and Adult Education³⁵ staff had seen the paintings that were emerging from the men's work with Nieass. Spurred by the more open engagement that was emerging between people and the Church through Sister Alice Dempsey and this program, there was a dedicated attempt to foreground and encourage the participation of local 'culture' in Peile's Jubilee celebrations. Fr. Peile's ongoing interest and respect for their language and culture would have rendered the gesture all the more coherent— both for the Church officialdom and for locals.

[Peile] had contributed considerably to the recognition of local Aboriginal knowledge, and members of the community wanted to acknowledge his role in what can best be seen as a gift exchange' (Watson 2003:128).

Watson's framing of the Jubilee Banner in terms of exchange is appropriate, and I address the questions of art and exchange in depth throughout chapters to come. Here though, the broader historical contexts I have described suggest a more nuanced and expansive kind of exchange was enacted. What we have here is not just a group of men producing an unsolicited 'thank you' to Peile.³⁶ The men were asked by Sister Alice to paint something

³⁵ An adult education centre was established in Balgo at this time to develop programs to assist people in transition to greater independence. This centre became pivotal to the later development of Balgo art, as discussed in Chapter 3.

³⁶ There is not a definitive list of the men involved in the production of the Banner. I have been able to ascertain that the following men were involved: Mick Gill Tjakamarra, Alan Winderoo Tjakamarra, Bruce Njamme, Jimmy Njamme Tjampitjin, Billy Tjupurulla, Donkeyman Lee Tjupurulla, John Lee, Sunfy Tjampitjin, Dick Cowboy Tjapanangka, Tjumpo Tjapanangka. Freddy West and Larry Lodi (according to Warwick Nieass) may also have been involved.

for celebrations that were to include 2000 people, along with the Bishop and guests from all over the Kimberley. They were asked to paint a church-theme using their traditional iconography (Dempsey 2004, Scowen 2001:24). This they did not do. The men responded by painting the entire *Luurnpa* (*Kingfisher*) narrative; the dominant *Tjukurrpa* for the Country upon which the mission was located.³⁷

Luurnpa travelled the desert with the Tingarri ancestors, and in this capacity connects the mission site of Balgo to Jaru Country in the east Kimberley, and to the 'Pintupi' Country of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) far to the south, finally ending his travels at Uluru. This Luurnpa narrative therefore serves to connect those people who migrated from far-flung territories to Balgo; relating them both to each other and to the site of the mission itself through this shared Dreaming. The *Luurnpa* Banner can be read as a historical and political statement: an assertion of the coherent political identity of the desert diasporas who had either taken refuge, or been born there, in previous decades.

It was also a complex religious statement, not dissimilar (though not identical) to the kindred cross-cultural revelations elsewhere in Australia, such as the Yolngu church panels (Wells 1971, Morphy 2007a) and the Elcho Island memorial (Berndt 1962). Ancestors such as *Luurnpa* did not just create land forms, they formed the grounds of the moral and social universe. *Luurnpa* pulled the ancestors of contemporary Balgo people out of the earth; he saved them from dying of thirst in the desert and, thereafter, gave them their 'Law'. Luurnpa, as John Lee Tjakamarra once described him to me, is like Moses. In the emerging political climate of self-determination, where the mission would devolve and become a 'community', the production of the banner asserted the moral, political and historical grounds of Aboriginal authority and identity over the lands on which the mission stood.

This painting is no simple depiction of 'country'; it is a profound political and cosmological statement in the contexts of cross-cultural exchange between the Mission authorities and the local people. But the painting addressed a wide audience, and simultaneously

³⁷ There is remarkably little documentation available on this painting. The only recorded information occurs in an exhibition catalogue (Berndt and Berndt, 1986) which states that the banner was made for the church and depicts "different mythological sequences from the period of the Dreaming". Although there are undoubtedly different narratives intersecting on the canvas, I was given the strong impression during my fieldwork, from men such as Tjumpo Tjapanangka, John Lee Tjakamarra and Bruce Njamme who were involved in its production, that Luurnpa was the dominant or overarching narrative depicted..

addressed cultural and cross-cultural issues through an emergent medium. This first public painting of an important Dreaming can be seen to operate on multiple levels in articulation with the contexts of its production, laying the complex grounds of contemporary Balgo art.

Who needs Whom? Social insecurity on the Mission

The Luurnpa banner was painted in the same year that the mission finally gave people their welfare entitlements directly, in the same year as the first local Aboriginal Council; at the same time as negotiations began to formally devolve the mission and implement Indigenous control of Balgo. The significance of this timing should not be over-emphasised, but nor can it reasonably be ignored. The men who painted the Luurnpa banner were also populous among the men who oversaw this political transition, and who made up the first Aboriginal Council (Fig. 1.4).



Figure 1.4. The first Balgo council, 1981. Top (l-r) Albert Young, Sunfly Tjampitjin, Jimmy Tchooga, Alan Winderoo Tjakamarra, Tjumpo Tjapanangka, Mick Gill Tjakamarra, Sam Willikati Tjampitjin. Bottom (l-r) Larry Gundora, Larry Lodi, Arthur Tjapanangka, Jimmy Njamme, unnamed (Susan Mandijarra's father). Photo courtesy of Sylvie Poirier.

Throughout the 1970s the Fr Hevern and the Mission were engaged in a protracted dispute with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) over the status of the mission. In line with the policies of self-determination that were evolving, the government had decreed that all social service or unemployment benefits should be paid directly to Aboriginal people. The mission, for decades, had used these benefits on behalf of its Aboriginal 'wards', believing them incapable of using their money appropriately. Initially, these monies were invested primarily in rations, and in sustaining the mission. Over time, the mission came to distribute a portion of the payments to people, but retained an administrative levy of approximately 45% (Horton 1994:88).

In the late 1970s, some decade or more after the federal act was passed, these payments were still controlled by mission authorities, a situation which remained a strong point of contention between the government and the mission, and ultimately provided the grounds on which the DAA was able to wrest control of Balgo from the missionaries. It was not an issue taken lightly by local Aboriginal people either. Researching local songs and ceremonies at Balgo in the early 1980s, Moyle (1997:13) noted that dissatisfaction at the withholding of full unemployment benefits prompted a partial exodus to nearby communities where no levy was extracted. This levying practice was not uncommon,³⁸ though it continued later under the Balgo Mission system than almost all other communities in the desert. In Balgo, full entitlements were not paid to residents until 1981, and this was only after Father Hevern had relinquished the position of Superintendent and the Balgo Hills Aboriginal Community Incorporated Council had been formed. In what must have been one of its first actions, the newly formed Council decreed that full social security payments were to be made directly to indigenous recipients (Poirier 2005:30, Zucker 2005:139, De Ishtar 2005:93).

Zucker claims in her history of the mission that subsequent to the community taking control of their unemployment benefits, 'the mission was left with virtually no income' (2005: 139). This reveals a shadow economy of dependence: the mission was, and always had been, dependent upon the Aborigines, upon *their* welfare money, for *its* survival. In

³⁸ See also Altman & Sanders (1991:3) for discussion of this practice of levy extraction and its systemic use in the administration of Indigenous communities.

1979-80, the mission earned approximately \$250,000 from livestock, donations and other independent income. In the same period, it received nearly \$800,000 in social security payments (unemployment benefits, pensions, family/child allowances) from the government which it levied and redistributed as outlined above.³⁹ Evidently, when indigenous social security payments were finally forcibly removed from church control, the mission itself began to devolve, losing its own secure economic rationale. This notion of who needed whom, and whose interests were ultimately being protected on the mission, emerges as a poignant question mark at this point in history. It returns us again to the questionable framing of Balgo as a 'buffer zone' instigated to protect people.

The eventual handover of the mission to secular control was a complicated political process, and one in which long term processes of transition set in place by the mission were hijacked or accelerated by the DAA beyond the capacity of local people to manage.⁴⁰ And while the church remained accountable for nurturing this prolonged state of dependency, the state was equally culpable in its naive determination to empower people at all cost; particularly having failed so dismally in preceding decades to invest in and prepare people for these new directions. Driven by ideological currents of self-determination that lacked foresight and planning, the devolution of the Mission entailed a poorly executed transition, and two decades of subsequent social dysfunction, in which both church and state are mutually implicated. Yet it was in these decades, in the first foam and the long wake of these flawed processes of transition, that Balgo art flourished as a robust economic enterprise.

³⁹ These figures are based on data published in a joint review of Church and Government involvement in Kimberley missions, by McFarlane and Foley (1981).

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Dick Kimber (pers comm. 2011) and Kim Akerman (pers comm. 2010) for shedding greater light on these processes and adding nuance to my understanding of the mission and associated politics at this time. Unfortunately, not all of that nuance is able to be explored in this thesis. Akerman is critical of the DAA, and of the higher church administration, whilst being sympathetic to the plight of the missionaries on the ground in Balgo who he felt were, in the 1970s, working steadily towards increasing Aboriginal empowerment. Internal church politics, between Fr Hevern and the Bishop of Broome (who, according to Akerman, came to perceive Balgo mission as becoming increasingly beyond his powers of administration) were seemingly influential in the Bishop handing the mission over to DAA and undermining Fr Hevern. Whilst there is not the space to examine these politics in this thesis, such insights remind us that members of the church were not a politically homogenous unit, but were themselves disparate historical agents with internal divisions and differences of value and vision.

Conclusion

In just over a decade, Balgo people had gone from having their sacred boards destroyed by Father McGuire to having their painting, in the *Luurnpa* Banner, sacralised in Christian ceremony. The banner was not the first Balgo painting, but the contexts of its production, and its explicitly public, cross-cultural orientation, was a watershed in Balgo history. It was also a watershed in Balgo art history, galvanising public confidence in the possibility of creating a painting enterprise.⁴¹ Macha (2005) has suggested that the ideal behind state-sponsored efforts to support the production of traditional arts and crafts in the early 1980s, in Balgo as elsewhere, was to 'promote Indigenous material culture as economic grounds on which to support the process of transition to self-governance.' This meshes with the way Balgo people seem to have approached painting as a new form of 'work' (see chapter 2) that addressed their changing world. People's early motivations for painting at this time were manifold, but the cultural value of painting was invariably tied to the cross-cultural value ascribed to it by money. In the changing political and economic landscape of the early 1980s described in this chapter, painting was a way that Balgo people could assert, and enable, their own autonomy in exchange with kartiya. For the first time, the ultimate objectification of Aboriginal value – Country and the Tjukurrpa – was able to be brought into exchange with the primary measure of kartiya value: money.

The history presented in this chapter seeks to demonstrate how the primary assault on Balgo peoples' 'culture' – their social values and practices, their *difference* - was not inherent to a competing Christian ideology, but rather in the systematic fostering of economic dependency. Alternatively, the contemporary valorisation of Aboriginal 'culture', through art primarily, has gone hand in hand with recognition and valuation of that very difference. This chapter has therefore sought to build a portrait of Balgo as a specific, historically constituted environment in which we can see more than a circumstantial link between the development of the painting industry, the emergence of economic autonomy from the mission, and the broader ideologies and policies of self governance. It has been necessary to contextualise Balgo art in the light of its very particular history: of the mission, of rations given, economies eroded, of dormitories locked, of fences built, families

⁴¹ This art historical legacy and context is explored in detail in Chapter 3.

divided and ceremonies stopped. Balgo art *is* implicate in cultural renewal, as all popular discourse claims; but this chapter has sought to lay the grounds for a more complex understanding of where such a renewal comes from, and what forms it takes.

Chapter Two:

The Work of Art

Balgo art, both in the contexts of its historical emergence and contemporary operation, is an undeniably economic phenomenon. A significant weakness in the anthropological interpretation of acrylic painting, however, has been the implicit separation of economic and 'cultural' motivations embodied in the art object. Despite decades of research into Aboriginal painting practices, there remains a conspicuous economic vacuum in the ethnography of contemporary Aboriginal art. Anthropologists have struggled to adequately contextualise, in any kind of integrated cultural interpretation, the fact that people earn money from painting. Most ethnographic treatments of contemporary Aboriginal art acknowledge its economic significance, but then move to focus on the ritual, religious, political or formal qualities of the art. The interpretation of Balgo art has suffered a similar fate, and this chapter seeks redress by providing an economic description and interpretation of Balgo painting practices which can be integrated within the broader arguments of the thesis.

The history of Balgo presented herein provides a descriptive foundation upon which the cultural practice of Balgo art can be more closely tied to the politics of rations, state and church-sponsored fostering of dependence, the separation of families and the broader erosion of the economic grounds of desert society, than to the ritual manifestations of 'culture'. I reframe painting, through this historical context, as a form of Aboriginal action or labour, a culturally construed form of 'work'. I also analyse the products of that work, the income that comes from painting, and the ways in which it is used and invested in the creation of social capital in Balgo through kin-based sharing practices. These descriptions and interpretations in turn lay a foundation for the broader arguments around Aboriginal value and the processes of social reproduction and change that underpin the localised economy of Balgo art. This chapter illuminates how the economic dimensions of painting practices are not only able to be integrated within a cultural interpretation, but are in fact essential to it.

History, Governance and Employment

While people in Balgo remained largely resistant to the proselytising of the early missionaries, over time they were drawn and settled into intractable dependencies upon the mission. Although the missionaries saw themselves as helping people to adjust to an inevitably changing world, their strategic interventions in people's capacity to manage their food, family and finances throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s saw to the systematic erosion of any form of economic autonomy. While the church sought to ameliorate this situation in different ways in the 1970s, the hastened handover to self-government in the early 1980s left a vacuum of capacity that, despite the enduring best efforts of Balgo people, has arguably never been filled. It has, however, been plagued by decades of bureaucratic fumbling, incompetence and outright corruption. De Ishtar (2005: pp76-123) provides an important and detailed account of 'Wirrimanu's White Story' that, while ending in 2001, leads coherently to the contemporary scenario which contextualised my own fieldwork from 2003-2005. Her discussion catalogues the litany of mismanagement, self-interest and ignorance which have characterised the bureaucratic history of Wirrimanu⁴², and served to systematically disempower its Aboriginal population over decades of supposed 'self-determination'. There have of course been several periods of cross-cultural collaboration and Aboriginal empowerment over the decades, but they have been routinely undermined by subsequent regimes.

Today, two decades into supposed self-governance, most political and economic decisions that affect the community are still made by non-Aboriginal administrators and bureaucrats. And, like many remote communities in Australia, the particular nexus of geography, people and history that is 'Balgo' lends it a tenuous economic rationale. It has no industry and negligible tourism traffic. Lacking any viable self-sustaining articulation with the broader market economy, Balgo could not exist, and its inhabitants themselves

⁴² Wirrimanu is the proper Aboriginal name for the site on which the mission rests, with 'Balgo' being a hangover from the mission times. Wirrimanu is certainly the name preferred by many people today (Poirier 1992:759), however as the modern day community, and the art itself, is still most commonly known through the name 'Balgo', I continue use this name in the thesis. I return to this tension between Balgo and Wirrimanu in my Conclusion.

could not subsist, without government subsidy and welfare. The central structural problem and logic of Balgo as a place, both in mission times as now, is that there has never been adequate quantity of work (nor quality thereof) to occupy or engage the population. Whether this is a fault of vision and organisation, or an intractable problem of settling a nomadic people in such a remote location, cannot be definitively answered here. Rather the intention is to demonstrate how painting, as a form of labour, emerges from and articulates with this situation.

When I commenced my fieldwork in 2003, 20 years after people were given full access to their unemployment benefits, of approximately 400 residents, one Aboriginal person was employed on a wage in Balgo. The rest subsisted on government payments; a category in which I include those who were employed through Community Development Employment Schemes (CDEP).⁴³

As noted, the State has struggled to provide basic services to Balgo, let alone to envision how it could support and sustain people's desire to live on their land long after the rationale of the mission had faded. CDEP is the logical resolution of a place with no economic rationale; the government pays people to do whatever there can be done, because there is no private sector or economy to otherwise employ people. However, at the commencement of my research there was scarce reliable CDEP Scheme employment in Balgo, due to practical and political issues connected to the negligent administration of the community.

Months after my arrival in 2003, long-standing issues of mismanagement and corruption resulted in the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation being placed under government administration. The serial mismanagement and abuse of the CDEP scheme prior to my fieldwork was a significant factor in the devolution of the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation's power. De Ishtar reports that although 84 people were listed as employed part-time on CDEP, 'this did not present an accurate picture as CDEP was mainly

⁴³ This categorical inclusion is contentious, and may not be applicable in many other Aboriginal communities. An analysis of the history of the program in Balgo, however, renders a conflation of CDEP and welfare payments sadly cogent. It is also worth noting, in introduction, that CDEP has since been overhauled and renamed, but as it was the operational term throughout my fieldwork I continue to reference the scheme under this name.

inoperable during 1999-2001' (2005: 78). A similar number of CDEP positions were funded in Balgo during my research and, consonant with De Ishtar's observations, this official figure artificially inflated the actual employment scenario on the ground in 2003-2005. Despite periods of stability and improvement over the course of my fieldwork, the CDEP scheme remained so fraught with confusion, instability, and periods of complete inoperation, that it was almost impossible to research with any continuity (except as an example of the fragility of such programs in remote areas).⁴⁴

What was clear, however, was that CDEP jobs in Balgo, indeed any such work, was problematic for reasons beyond the administrative. CDEP was originally conceived as a work alternative to welfare payments or 'sit-down money'. It was envisaged as a job-transition program with a focus on training. But with no jobs to transition to, training itself is a strangely configured idea in the Balgo economy. Despite the best intentions of agencies on the ground who deliver training and development programs, without funding to provide properly salaried jobs, there is little motivation or continuity in training. CDEP in Balgo became, for the majority of people, simply a work-for-the-dole program. And given that such a program offered exactly the same monetary recompense as 'sit-down money',⁴⁵ it is clear why people struggled to maintain motivation to engage in recognised working habits.

Another significant factor in the failure of CDEP in Balgo is its resistance to Aboriginal social values, dynamics and mobility. Welfare payments travel; they can be accessed regardless of whether a person is in Halls Creek, in Alice Springs buying a car, in Broome having a holiday, or in another community visiting family, performing sorry or engaged in other cultural practices. CDEP, on the other hand, theoretically ceases as soon as somebody doesn't turn up to work. The risks involved in working, therefore, unless one has assurances from one's employer that they will still put your hours down even if you don't turn up (which was common practice when I arrived in Balgo, and certainly inflated statistical perceptions of CDEP involvement), are too great to sustain.

⁴⁴ I twice negotiated potential research arrangements with the CDEP manager, volunteering to work with crews in order to get a better understanding of how work was constituted through CDEP and more generally. On both occasions such arrangements dissolved due to the hasty departure of the manager concerned. The Wirrimanu CDEP scheme had at least four different managers during my fieldwork.

⁴⁵ During my fieldwork, this figure was \$217 per week.

The CDEP scheme administered through the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation offered jobs in offices, in the clinic, working the store, maintaining community infrastructure and roads, garbage collection and the like. Many of these jobs put people in compromised positions socially, where their obligations in the workplace are brought into conflict with their obligations to kin. This was noted as a problem in the early 1980's, when people were still being made to work for their social security benefits:

Three Aboriginal girls have been employed on check out duties but, due to demands made upon them by relatives, each was found to be unsuitable. The store manager will recommence a training programme when the viability of the store has been re-established. (MacFarlane & Foley 1981:42)

This was in 1980. Twenty-five years later, during my fieldwork, the situation had not improved. There were rarely any local Aboriginal people employed there. The store was routinely staffed by 5-6 non-Aboriginal people, because it was perceived to be more efficient than having to constantly train new Aboriginal staff who, like those three girls in 1980, were regularly forced out by the pressures placed upon them by families to give free or discounted products. Working in a public fashion such as the store can also be a problem in terms of sexual politics, for women in particular. Several times during my fieldwork younger women would start work at the store, only to stop a few days or a week later. The most common explanation, expressed in the following response from a woman in her early 20's who had tried working in the take-away section of the store, was that her partner 'was jealousing too much. 'He reckon all the men were watching... looking you know. I can't work....'

The politics of being on public display in one's work is acute for younger women in Balgo; yet this is not merely a gendered dilemma. Men face it in different forms, but just as acutely. Many of the jobs available in Balgo involve people having to work alone, at least for periods. From my experience, this is one of the major obstacles to employment for people in Balgo, who, despite wanting to work, do not want to appear to be setting themselves apart from their peers. An explicit articulation of this came from a friend of mine who told me he wanted to get off 'sit-down money' and start working CDEP-way for his wages. I was working at the art centre as a volunteer at the time, and L. talked about

coming to work with me at the art centre. He said he didn't want to work at other jobs because 'there are always people watching you, thinking "what's this prick doing, he thinks he's too good."' There was a definite sense in this case that the main attraction of working at the art centre, as opposed to at the store or elsewhere in the community, was the less public nature of the work.

Less obvious articulations of this dilemma are played out every day as people attempt to navigate between their own desire to work and the abiding social milieu. Perhaps the least obvious but most consistent embodiment of this principle was Tjakamarra; a married man in his late 30's who was famous in town for his monopoly on the role of garbage removalist. He took great pride in his work, and earned a relatively good living from the CDEP wages and top-up he accrued from being such a reliable, consistent worker. He was widely appreciated and respected, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Balgo, as 'a good worker'. He had, it seemed initially to me, moved beyond concerns about what other people thought about him working. However, over time it occurred to me that he never, *ever* worked alone. During my fieldwork, I never once saw him driving around in the tractor picking up and emptying bins *by himself*. This was understandable though, given the heavy lifting involved. Even when Wirrimanu bought a fancy new automated garbage truck which picked up the bins and emptied them into the back carriage of the vehicle, Tjakamarra was never seen driving about town on his own: he always had his baby daughter, his favourite dog and at least one other man in the cab with him 'for *marlpa*' (company). There was a general rotation of 4-5 guys who would work with him. Every now and again I would notice Tjakamarra not working for a day or two and ask him why; his most common responses were that the truck wasn't working properly or that he had 'lost the keys' to the truck. It is perfectly conceivable that the truck would have mechanical problems every now and then, but Tjakamarra couldn't, even by Balgo standards, have lost the keys to the truck that many times. Over time it became clear to me that, on the mornings when he couldn't find someone to work with him, he himself wouldn't or couldn't work. He would rather appear to the kartiya CDEP bosses and office administrators as an irresponsible idiot who kept losing the keys, than drive around town doing the garbage by himself: and appear to his peers as someone set apart.

This example of this one man trying, and generally succeeding, to work contains multitudes about the complexity of that ambition in Balgo. It speaks acutely to the notion of the intersection and conflict of values inherent in the practice of CDEP 'work', that must be negotiated on a daily basis by those wanting to earn their money and not simply be passive recipients of 'sit-down money'. There are people in Balgo who love to work, who draw considerable satisfaction from the fact that they earn their own money. There is a higher level of continuity and retention of staff at the school, where teacher's assistants are given more meaningful roles in facilitating the education of younger generations. This quintessentially caring, holding, social form of work, despite its own problems, might explain the greater appeal of the school as a work option. Apart from this handful of people such who simply loved to work, or who were paid 'top-up' over above the welfare line of \$217 to make it worth their while, very few of the positions funded through Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation were regularly filled by a working Aboriginal person during my fieldwork.

My ambition here has not been to provide a comprehensive analysis or even description of the problems of the CDEP scheme and work more generally in Balgo. These examples, however, provide a representative and illustrative context of the opportunities, problems and conflicts that confront people wanting to earn their own money in Balgo. This discussion, therefore, is integral to an appreciation of how painting is constituted and conceived as form of work in the broader economic climate of Balgo.

Painting as Work

In 2004, the State funded 87 CDEP positions in Balgo, and provided just under \$1,000,000 to pay those wages. In that same year, 89 adults from Balgo painted for Warlayirti Artists, bringing in an approximate income to Balgo of \$1,000,000. On purely statistical grounds, it is therefore possible to argue that painting is at least the equal to CDEP as a source of employment and income generation in Balgo. But the success of painting, contra CDEP, is tied to its development as a form of labour that is consonant with Aboriginal values,

motivations and social relationships. Painters can work when they want, where they want, and with whom they want.

There are sound statistical and theoretical reasons for treating art as work; but the initial impetus for me was simply how people in Balgo spoke about painting. Artists frequently told me they were going to 'work' when they were heading over to the art centre to paint. One former co-ordinator remembered a time when the art centre was closed down due to disruptions in the community; a senior artist banged on the door imploring him to open up and let him paint because 'it's my job!'.⁴⁶ At other times, when an artist was particularly proud of a painting they had brought in, they would tell me that they had been "working, working, working all night!"

As with the use of terms such as *Business*, or *Law* in Aboriginal English, work is not a word we can assume to be just an approximation or passive appropriation of English usage. The use of *Business* and *Law* in Aboriginal English to refer to matters of ceremony and cosmology encompass attempts by Aboriginal people to equate and articulate value across cultural domains. Aboriginal notions of 'work', and the relationships constitutive of it, likewise tend to reflect this translation of value between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains. When the Balgo men visited Papunya in 1985 and saw the painting workshop, the older men tempered the younger men's enthusiasm to start painting by warning them that this painting was 'proper hard work' (McCoy 2005, pers. comm). This term surfaced in my own fieldwork almost exclusively when people were talking about ritual and ceremony, the preparation and performance of which was commonly described to me in hushed tones as 'proper hard work' (see also Poirier 2005:32). Here 'work' seems intimately tied to discrete notions of Aboriginal value, and the creation thereof.

In this regard perhaps work in Balgo is easier understood for what it is not. If labour doesn't create that which Balgo people value, they tend not to consider it proper work.

⁴⁶ Other anthropologists have noted this convergence of labour and value in the arts. Kjellgren provides a similar example for the artists of the East Kimberley. There, he argues, artists such as Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie et al understood painting as a "job" - a form of work which met the values of kartiya whilst simultaneously reproducing the values of the creators (Kjellgren 1999: 317, 331). Kjellgren doesn't elaborate extensively on this notion of painting as labour though.

This is clear in their judgements, and evaluations of *kartiya* (whitefellas). Most *kartiya* will argue that they have never worked harder, under more stress, with less comforts and support, than in a place like Balgo. Yet it is overwhelmingly common for *kartiya* to feel that Aboriginal people don't appreciate their hard work. And to some extent, this is true.

One particular community worker, a volunteer, was working considerably hard, under great personal duress, for one of the community organisations. This woman worked so hard she periodically foamed at the mouth and, more frequently, burst spontaneously into tears. Despite her evident passion, Aboriginal people frequently complained that this person was not working for them, because she wouldn't take them hunting, or was too tired or physically incapable of helping with other cultural business. Despite her considerable and heartfelt efforts to help people, to access funding for their desired programs etc, she was not considered a 'good worker'. The counter example is a young woman who was regularly described to me 'as a proper hard worker'. Despite other *kartiya* being critical of this woman for basing her work predominantly outside of an office environment, she continued to structure and balance her administrative duties with community based activities that Aboriginal people valued. She regularly took women out bush for hunting on the weekends, and would even drive people to funerals when required. People saw her doing what they recognised and valued as work, and her reputation as someone who 'was a good worker for us' has endured.

Working for art co-ordinators

These examples elicit the Aboriginal notion that work is relational; you don't just work, you work *for* someone (Myers 1980, 1986:282-283, Anderson 1988, Austin Broos 2003: 128). Often you work for 'bosses' - a notion which has been well documented in Central Australian anthropology (Anderson 1988, Austin Broos 2003, Musharbash 2004) - in ways that reproduce relational structures and values from other social domains. As Musharbash says of the Warlpiri:

Warlpiri ideas about bosses and the relationship with them stem from the Warlpiri concepts of social organisation and land tenure. Country, ceremonies, stories and other things in Warlpiri cosmology are jointly held by kirda and kurdungulu... When the concepts are translated into Aboriginal English the metaphors employed most often stem from the field of labour. Kirda becomes 'boss' or 'owner' and kurdungulu becomes 'worker'... (2004: 159).

Aboriginal notions of work – whether in ritual, for the bosses of the cattle stations, for the CDEP coordinator or the managers of art-centres - need to be considered in this light. Certainly these relationships can't be seen to transfer seamlessly or without qualification. Notwithstanding this, there remains in operation, in desert culture, a general principle that you work for people and they in turn take care of you; and in this relationship the exchange of labour and translation of value is coherent. Nowhere is this principal clearer than at art centres, where, as Dussart has noted for Yuendumu:

For the painters, the art-coordinators were to serve as *de facto* stand in for non-Aboriginal audiences and more broadly the state. They were supposed 'to look after', 'to care' (*jinamardarni*) for painters and their relatives (2006: 159).

Managers in Balgo inhabit a similar structural position in the Aboriginal socio-economic milieu. I frame this more, however, in terms of the manager acting as an embodiment of 'the market'. Apart from a handful of tourists, collectors and community workers who buy paintings directly from the art centre – the vast majority of paintings are sold via transactions (by phone, email, and through interstate exhibitions) entirely invisible to the artists. The paintings go to the art-coordinator, and the money comes back to the artist through them. In this way the manager embodies the tastes of the market, and they control, or are seen to control, the influx of income that comes from paintings. Artists in Balgo understand themselves as working for this individual.

This is problematic in the arts industry, where art managers often fail to recognise or acknowledge this *relational* quality to their position. Most managers I've known would humbly invert this logic and frame their position as working *for* Aboriginal artists. Although this discourse is politically appropriate, and to some degree shared, it is not necessarily how most artists understand their *practice*. People in Balgo don't speak of painting for Warlayirti Artists, they speak of painting for Bill or Jane, or more commonly Tjampitjin or

Nakamarra - the kinship terms given to non-Aboriginal managers. Conversely, when painters are discouraged by the managers' failure to secure sales for the work they have done, they will say that they aren't painting *for X* anymore. One artist was convinced she was going to win a major art award a few years ago and, with the prize money, buy a Toyota. When she didn't win, she blamed the art coordinator for making her paint such a huge canvas with no monetary reward. "I can't paint for X, he can't listen. I'm painting all day me, aaaaaaaallllllllll day. And he can't give me Toyota. Greedy one.' Interestingly, the failure of managers to sell paintings is frequently framed through the Aboriginal tropes of 'greed' or 'stealing'. It is not considered a passive or professional failure, but an active negation of reciprocity; a negation of what the painters understand as relationship. As much is clear from Dussart's account of two disgruntled painters at Yuendumu:

They [art-coordinators] sell our paintings sometimes, but for too little, now. Not like before, at the beginning. They probably steal from us..... One day [the art-coordinator] wants me to paint, one day she says nothing. I am tired with the whole lot of them.... That's all we get from them [art coordinators] — money! They do not take me anywhere when I need to, they do not look after me properly, but they should because I am the chairwoman. Sometimes, they lend me money, but they do not look after me. That's not right.

Another senior painter who abandoned acrylics, broadened the indictment:

I am sick of painting canvas. For whom? White people? I do not care for White people. They do not care for me... They did not help me to go to my relatives' funerals. I was really upset with them. They did not help me really with anything, I helped them, I painted canvases for exhibitions when they asked me to. I am not anymore (2006:164-5).

The relational quality of the manager-artist dynamic here is unmistakable, as is the cross-cultural disjunct in terms of what artists expect of that relationship. What is also clear from these statements is the sense that artists painted *for* managers, and therefore expected them to 'care for' them. This relationship is also expressed in Aboriginal terms by the fact that, at Yuendumu as in Balgo, artists held managers personally responsible for the sale (or not) of paintings. No matter how well artists are educated about the workings of the market, no matter how well they appreciate the relationship between the quality of their painting and the price it sells for, no matter how good the art centre governance and

'money story', artists in Balgo (and across the desert) continue to blame art centre managers for not selling paintings. After twenty-five years of art-coordinators at Balgo, this is not a simple misunderstanding of the market; it is an invocation of a different set of Aboriginal values about the relationship, the working relationship, between an artist and the person they work for. It is not, and will never be, a relationship transacted solely in canvas and cash.

Painting as a form of labour is continuous with a many localised socio-economic practices and values that render it a distinctly Aboriginal mode of production. In order to develop a more detailed portrait of artistic productivity, I move now to a statistical and demographic analysis of the production of paintings in Balgo.

Artists & Artworks: patterns of production from 1988-2004

To better understand the work of painting, it is necessary now to explore with more rigour *who* is doing this 'work'. The ensuing statistical analysis of Balgo paintings is based on 12419 paintings produced, and the 580 painters who produced them, between the inception of Warlayirti Artists art centre in the late 1980's and 2004.⁴⁷ To this date I apply a series of interpretations (through the filters of age, gender, and income) intended to quantify and contextualise this productivity and render it coherent as a social practice with discrete economic orientations and implications.

It is clear that the number of paintings produced by Warlayirti Artists has increased steadily since the inception of the art centre in 1987 (Table 2.1). Warlayirti Artists has been slowly developing its productive capacities over the course of the last two decades. What is interesting is to contrast these figures with the number of artists per year (Table 2.2).

⁴⁷ The reader will note that in all the information I present herein the data from the 1993-1996 are missing throughout. I was not able to access this information during my research. I hope to fill this gap in the future, but my analyses here are based on the 12419 paintings produced between the inception of the art centre and the end of the 2004 (excluding) '93-'96).

YEAR	1988	'89	'90	'91	'92	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04
WORKS	440	633	656	695	776	903	681	997	988	1164	1306	1244	1097

Table 2.1 Annual number of paintings produced through Warlayirti Artists 1988-2004

YEAR	'88	'89	'90	'91	'92	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04
ARTISTS	106	161	180	166	165	156	134	172	160	207	184	169	166

Table 2.2 Number of people (region-wide) who painted for Warlayirti Artists each year.

Overall, despite significant increases in painting production, numbers of artists are the same in 2004 as they were in 1991. There have been increases correlated to particular coordinators 1989-90 and again in 2001-2, and drop offs in numbers with other management regimes. In general though, the data in Table 2 suggests that around 160 artists per year is the average base regional pool of painters.

The Painting Population

During my fieldwork, a fluctuating majority of these artists (55-60%) resided in Balgo. The others lived in outlying communities serviced by the art centre. In 2004 slightly over 60% (approximately 100/166) of the people who had a painting catalogued through Warlayirti Artists were Balgo residents. These 100 people constitute half the adult population of Balgo. As such, we are effectively looking at a practice, in painting, that is directly relevant to at least 50% of the working adult population. There is a common perception of desert painting being an industry that is propped up by an ageing and increasingly fragile demographic of older, 'first contact' artists. Certainly, these artists are able to demand far higher prices than younger generations of artists. Yet there has been no adequately detailed analysis of discrete groups of artists over time to shed any light on whether these artists dominate production to the same extent that they monopolise prestige. In Table 2.3 I present figures that open up the question of an ageing labour force in the Balgo art

industry. Perhaps surprisingly, the average age of active artists was lower in 2004 (39) than in 1988 (41.6).

Year	'86	'88	'89	'90	'91	'92	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04
Avg. Age	37	41.6	41.7	43.3	42.1	43.8	43.3	42.8	40	43.3	39	41.6	41.7	39

Table 2.3. Average age of active artists each year.

This 2004 average age of 39 years, achieved also in 2001, is the lowest it has been since the inception of Warlayirti Artists. From these figures one might assume that the artistic labour force is a relatively stable middle aged group with a handful of younger and older artists balancing out the averages. This is actually not far wrong; but such statistics are, however, very limited in what they reveal of actual painting practices and the demography of production. I therefore favour analysis drawn from what I identify as the *average age of production*. This approach focuses initially on artworks as opposed to artists; rather than treating the artist as the agentive unit of production, I treat individual artworks as statistical agents. The *age of production* is the age the painter was when they produced a painting; and this age becomes, in this analysis, a statistical quality of the individual artwork. The average age of production for any given year, then, is established by attaching the age of the artist to each painting produced and then average the age of each painting over the course of a year. This approach accounts then, amongst other things, for the fact that in 2004, ten artists aged in their 60's, 70's & 80's produced 447 of the 1097 paintings executed that year. This is equivalent to approximately 6% of artists being responsible for 40% of total production. In Table 2.4 the results of these calculations (row A) are measured against the conventional average age data (row B) previously presented in Table 2.3.

	'86	'88	'89	'90	'91	'92	'97	'98	'99	2000	'01	'02	'03	'04
A	41.2	44.8	45.8	47.7	47.8	48.4	52.6	53.7	51.2	54.3	50.1	53.7	54.1	52.4
B	37	41.6	41.7	43.3	42.1	43.8	43.3	42.8	40	43.3	39	41.6	41.7	39
C	4.2	3.2	4.1	4.4	5.7	4.6	9.3	10.9	11.2	11	11.1	12.1	12.4	13.4

Table 2.4. Annual average age of production (row A), average age of artists (row B), and the difference between these two figures (row C).

There are three central conclusions to be drawn from this data:

- 1) While the average age of artists has remained steady, and even decreased, the *average age of production* is 25% higher in 2004 than it was in 1986 (up from 41.2 to 52.4)
- 2) Consequently, the difference between the average age of artists and the average age of production (row C) has been steadily increasing for two decades.
- 3) The *average age of production* in 2004 is considerably higher than the average age of artists, suggesting that older artists are indeed producing a disproportionate number of the total artworks.

These calculations, though still inherently partial in their statistical nature, bring us closer to an appreciation of the demographic constitution of painting practices in Balgo. Art is a form of work dominated, quantitatively, by the elderly.

Gender

Of all the statistical information surveyed for this thesis, none stood out so much as the issue of gender, and the changes in gendered productivity that have attended the rise of the Balgo art movement. There has, without any doubt, been a significant shift in the gender balance in painting production over the past two decades. Table 2.5 illustrates an extraordinary inversion, over time, of the gender differential in painting production.

Year	85-7	'88	'89	'90	'91	'92	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	Total
Female %	46	50	55	59	61	63	65	75	67	67	73	74	75	77	67
Male %	54	50	45	41	39	37	35	25	33	33	27	26	25	23	33

Table 2.5. Annual gendered production percentages 1985-7 to 2004

During fieldwork, it was clear from daily observation that women were painting more, and more often, than men. In 2004, women accounted for over 77% (850/1097) of the paintings produced. That percentage has been steadily increasing since the late 1980's, and particularly over the last five years when it has risen by 10%. Though not surprised at the gender reversal here, the proportions, and the proportion of changes, are clearly significant. Figure 2.1 provides a graphic representation of these trends.

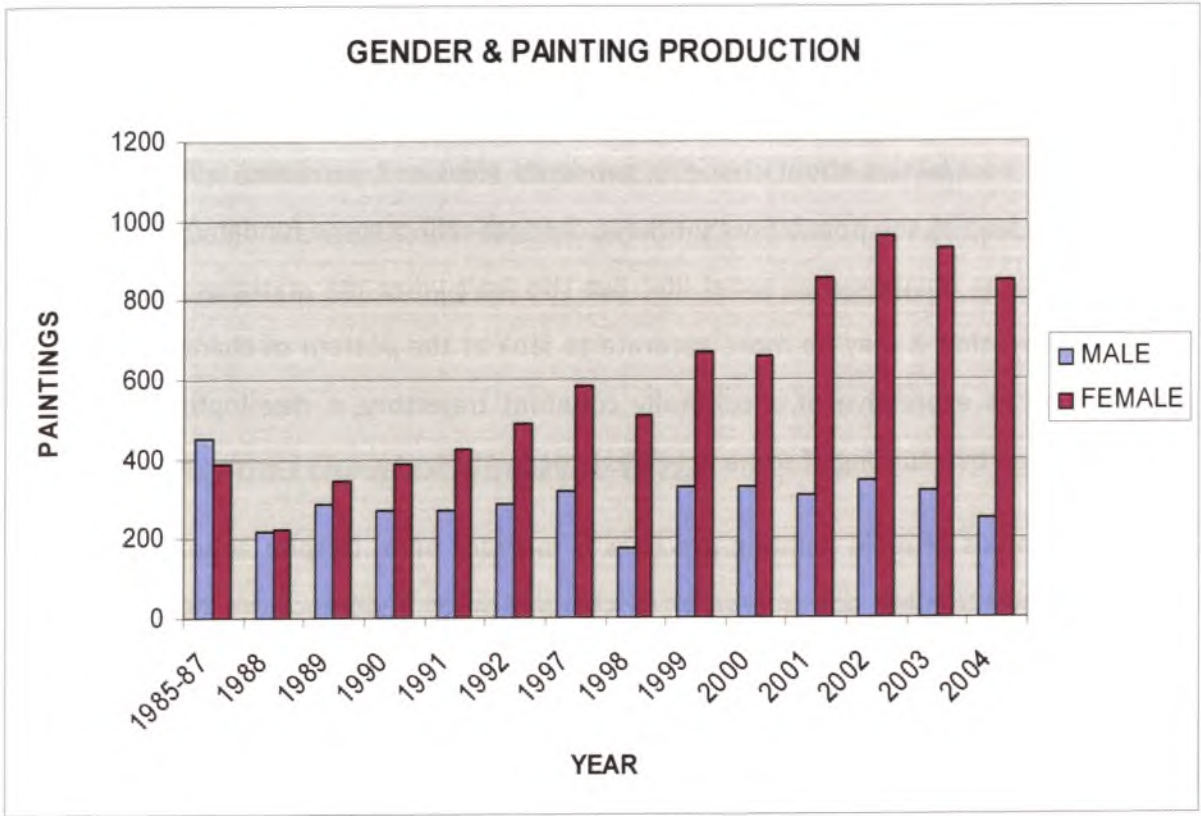


Figure 2.1. Number of paintings produced by males/females each year. (Bar graph)

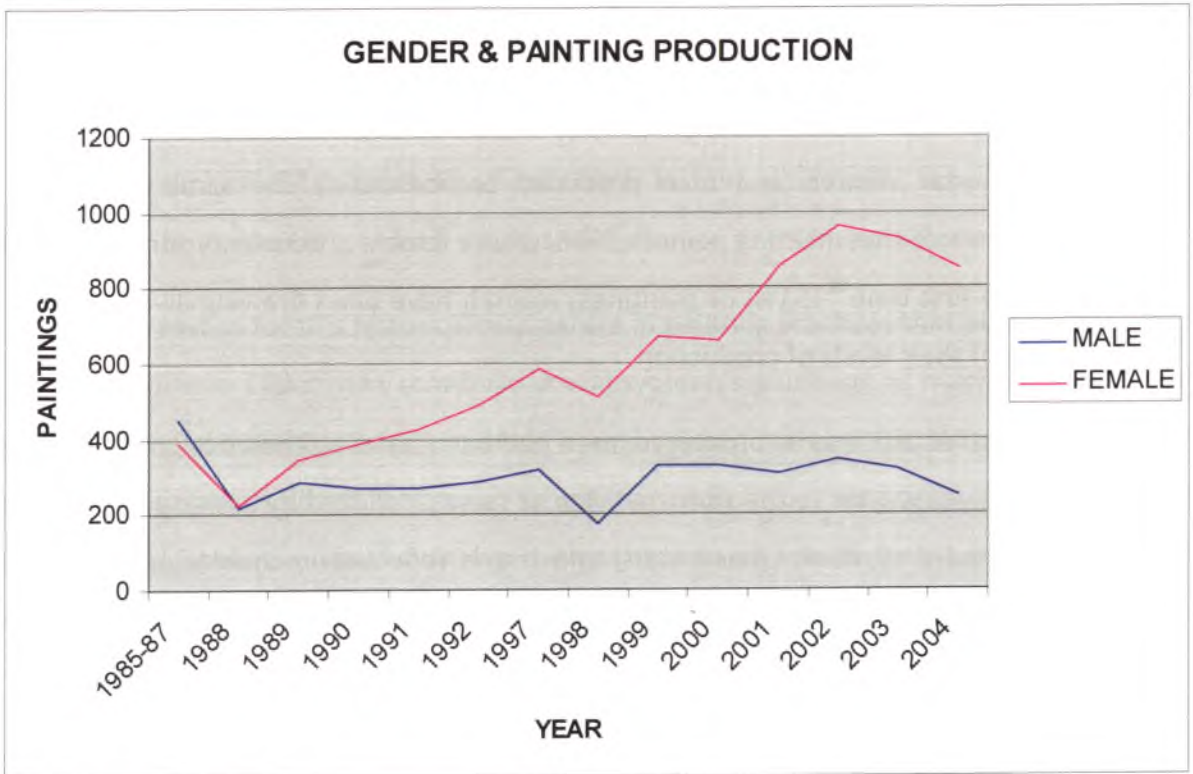


Figure 2.2 Number of paintings produced by males/females each year. (Line graph)

The most obvious question to ask here is 'why has the pattern of gendered production changed so much over the past two decades?' There are obviously some suggestive interpretive possibilities about changing gendered roles and gendered work ethics. It is tempting to leap to the possibility that these changes reflect some fundamental gendered transformations of Aboriginal social life. But this isn't what the statistics suggest. They argue, rather, that it may be more accurate to look at the *pattern* of change; to think of this change as expressive of a culturally coherent trajectory, a developmental process rather than an overturning of some previous order.

A closer analysis of male painting practices is in order here. Despite appearances, male painting production has not tapered off or changed much at all since the late 1980's. This is perhaps clearer in a line graph (Figure 2.2) of the same statistics used in Figure 2.1. This line graph shows that while the percentage of male production decreases in relation to escalating female production, the actual number of paintings produced by the male artists is remarkably consistent over the history of the Balgo art movement. Between 1989 and 2004⁴⁸ male production exhibited an extremely narrow range of variation that never fell below 271 and never rose above 345 works in a calendar year. Men have, collectively, been extremely consistent producers. More tellingly though, the *pattern* of female production hasn't changed significantly either; it has been steadily increasing since the inception of the art centre. Indeed, after the establishment of Warlayirti Artists in 1987, the following year women and men produced approximately the same number of paintings. Ever since that meeting point in 1988, where female productivity surpassed that of men for the first time⁴⁹ (51% of paintings) women have been drawing away from the men in terms of their levels of production.

When Warlayirti Artists was incorporated, men had been painting their designs on boards for at least five years prior to the women. Men, it seems, solicited by anthropologists and missionaries, had a significant head start; and this is reflected in their higher levels of production early on. That it was a culturally coherent head start is not in doubt, but it is

⁴⁸ Excluding the trough in 1998, and the 1993-96 years for which I do not have reliable data. The trough in 1998 was undoubtedly a product of the construction projects the art centre was undertaking at this point in time in building a new art centre. This project took up much of the art coordinator's time and resources and seems to have contributed to a correlated decline in overall painting production.

⁴⁹ In 1988, women accounted for approximately 51% (222/440) of artworks produced

one that nevertheless skews perceptions of the fact that emerges starkly from the statistics post 1987: *women were always going to dominate painting production in Balgo*. Implicit in this contention, and the data that inform it, is the argument that painting practices in Balgo are clearly inflected by economic motivations and capacities, and are therefore patterned in discernible ways by the rhythms of Aboriginal life cycles.

Productivity and the Aboriginal life-cycle

What emerges most clearly from my discussion of gender is in fact what is common to both male and female painters: and that is the way in which age has come to inform levels of gendered productivity. An appreciation of the life-cycle reinforces the contention that painting is a culturally determined form of labour, undertaken by people in Balgo in patterned ways across the life-cycle. Table 2.6 shows how the 12419 paintings that form the basis of this study were produced by people in different age brackets. From these statistics it is apparent that painting is a form of labour most coherently pursued by women in their middle to late age; women who are either mothers or grandmothers caring for their own family, and who possess the cultural and intercultural confidence to learn and paint stories (see also Poirier 1992:773 fn9). Conversely, teenage women have been comparatively hesitant to paint. This hesitancy is 10-fold, statistically, in teenage men; who have never found painting to be a viable social practice over the last 20 years.

There are reasons for this historical disjuncture in painting practices that became apparent during fieldwork. Older men scrutinise young women's paintings as much as young men for any signs of potential infringements. Young women have a repertoire of bush-tucker paintings available to them which can be painted without opening oneself to the dangers of painting Tjukurrpa, or of painting designs incorrectly. Bush tucker paintings can of course have Tjukurrpa association or references built into them, but as a localised category they are recognised as politically benign. Whereas younger women have this safer, culturally coherent way of learning to paint in acrylics, young men do not. Young men face the double bind of being expected to paint Tjukurrpa, but then being heavily scrutinised when they do. Furthermore, they face, like men engaged in other forms of work in Balgo,

the mocking scrutiny of their peers. I found younger men conspicuously reticent to tell me the story for their painting when other men were around. On a couple of occasions when I was recording stories, young men who were narrating a painting would be teased by their peers that they had 'no Tjukurrpa' and were just 'painting rainbows'. This explains the statistically negligible presence of teenage men in the painting records. It also explains why men in their 20s, 30s and 40s are 200% less likely than women in the same age bracket to approach painting as a culturally viable form of work. Male productivity skyrockets, however, for men aged 50-60, suggesting that men aged in this age bracket are old enough, culturally, to paint with autonomy and confidence, before physical ageing adversely affects their productive capacities.

Age Group	Female Works	Male Works	Total Works
1-19	215	26	241
20s	1023	461	1484
30s	1402	617	2019
40s	1052	528	1580
50s	1700	1128	2828
60s	1963	769	2732
70+	910	625	1535
TOTAL	8265	4154	12419

Table 2.6. Number of female, male and overall works produced in relation to age groups between mid 1980s-2004.

These statistics mirror, in some ways, the ecological and political rhythm of the domestic desert economy which was always dominated by women's daily productivity (Gould 1969, Peterson 1970). It also reflects, arguably, the structural disenfranchisement of young men, whose productive capacities have, since mission times, been undermined by the lack of a coherent economic role. The hunger of the art market for older first-contact artists has engendered further changes in this pattern of the life cycle. In pre-contact desert society, and in many communities today, the elderly became increasingly economically dependent upon younger kin for their survival. Several of Balgo's highest earning, and most productive artists, are now in their 70s and 80s. Whether male or female, these changes embody the dualistic quality of painting as an emergent practice. They reflect significant transformations of Aboriginal sociality on the one hand, with younger kin being dependent, economically, on the elderly. On the other hand, they embody significant continuities, with the elderly harnessing the resources of their cultural capital, their knowledge, to reproduce the conditions of social life as they have always done. These transformative tensions between the economic and the esoteric, the commercial and cultural, are at the heart of the painting economy in Balgo.

Levels of Production

This demographic portrait tells us some things about how painting is constituted as a social practice in Balgo. How relevant painting practices are to the lives of individuals who paint is another matter; for there are myriad motivations, strategies and degrees to which painting is constituted and incorporated in people's economic practice. In order to understand how painting practices are approached differently, it is useful to break the pool of artists down into production brackets (grouping artists according to the number of paintings they produce in a year).⁵⁰ In 2004, for example, 31% of artists produced only one

⁵⁰ There are obvious limitations to grouping artists solely by the quantity of their output; the size and quality of a canvas varies enormously, it requires different investments of labour and produces vastly different

painting; 32% produced between 2-4 paintings; 20% produced 5-9 paintings; and 17% produced more than 10. These figures reflect the general pattern of distribution over time (Table 2.7). Whilst these figures do fluctuate marginally each year, as artists move between brackets, the data suggests that the distribution of contemporary production is remarkably consistent.

Production Brackets	1	2 to 4	5 to 9	10 +
2000	29	39	13	19
2001	30	38	18	14
2002	32	31	17	20
2003	31	30	21	18
2004	31	32	20	17

Table 2.7. Percentage of artists painting either 1, 2-4, 5-9 or 10+ paintings per year (2000-2004)

What, then, are the grounds of this consistency, and what do we learn of Balgo art from it? To answer this, it is necessary to move from the statistical to the more qualitative dimensions of these production brackets. Notwithstanding the considerable diversity of painting practices with which my research is concerned, there are patterns, trends and clusters in the ways Balgo painters organise their practice, and these similarities tell us a great deal about how Balgo art is conceived and constituted in the broader economic contexts of people’s lives. I therefore refine the analysis of painting production here to three general, but distinct groups of producers categorised as *‘Prospectors’*, *‘Strategists’*, and the *‘Artists’* (table 2.8).

returns in income. I have, however, found it illuminating to look at painting practices, through the eyes of a vulgar materialist, in the concrete terms of how much people paint.

Production Bracket	People	% of painters	% of works	Avg works: 2004	Avg works: career	Avg Age
Prospectors (1 painting)	51	31%	4%	1	10	30
Strategists (2-9)	87	52%	30%	4	30	37
Artists (10+)	28	17%	66%	25	152	57

Table 2.8. Production brackets for Balgo artists, 2004.

The Prospectors: one painting per year

In 2004, of 166 active painters region-wide, 51 of these produced only one painting. This means that nearly one third (31%) of all painters produced only one work. These 31% of painters produced less than 5% of paintings and 1% of total income in 2004. This extremely high ratio of one-off painters tells us something about the prospective and opportunistic quality of painting practices. Overall, of the 580 people who painted for Warlayirti Artists over the past 20 years, 20% of these have painted only one painting in their careers. Whilst predictably lower than the annual 30%, this overall figure remains surprisingly high. Analysis of these one-time painters over the history of Warlayirti Artists suggests that such people tend not to go on to produce several paintings the next year, and then develop a career. For these people, who have little confidence in the value that accrues to their artistic labour, painting practices are only a marginal dimension of their broader economic reality.

*The Strategists: 2-9 paintings per year*⁵¹

This mobile bracket consistently entails, as evident from 2000-2004 figures in Table 2.8, more than half the total number of artists working in any given year. Of the 87 artists in this category in 2004, they had produced an average of 4 paintings each in 2004, and 30 paintings each in their lifetime. This latter figure suggests that this bracket of painters, whilst neither prolific nor likely to ever earn significant income from painting, nevertheless have continued to incorporate painting within their broader practice over long periods of time. They have continued to paint, it is fair to assume, because painting has continued to provide them with a relatively predictable recompense for their labour.

Unlike the painters in the bottom bracket, these painters have generally developed some confidence that they can sell a work, based on prior success, and therefore invest their labour in painting with a reasonable expectation of return. These people are therefore more likely to paint strategically, using painting to generate extra income to subsidise purchases or travel when other sources of income are not available or sufficient. Painters would regularly tell me that they were going to travel, or to visit family, to buy that stereo or fix their car when a particular painting sold. The painters in this bracket entail the most diversity of motivation, the most mobility in terms of changes in practice and arguably the most variation in terms of degrees of success. Yet they are also limited by their capacity to establish a sustained niche in the market. Whilst few of these artists can rely on painting income to regularly supplement their welfare income, almost all of them can use painting as a useful arm of their broader economic strategies.

⁵¹ Here I have reconstituted the two middle brackets of painters from Table 2.7 (2-4 and 5-9 works per annum) as a relatively coherent category of painting practitioners.

The Artists: 10 or more paintings per year

There were 28 people who painted ten or more paintings for Warlayirti Artists in 2004. This top bracket of painters has produced an average of 152 paintings each in their careers. Contrasted with the average of 30 paintings averaged by the 2-9 bracket, this average is five times higher and suggests a clear categorical distinction: that those painters who produce ten or more paintings in a year tend to be those who do it every year. This comparison leads to a further categorical distinction from the painters in the 2-9 bracket; those painters average 30 paintings in their lifetime, whereas the painters in this top bracket averaged 25 paintings each in 2004 alone. These 'Artists' are the ones for whom painting is, to varying degrees, an integrated and regular part of their socio-economic practice and a relatively consistent source of their income.

There is no coincidence that the top earners are also those who produce the most paintings. However, it is not simply a case of quantity of paintings equals quantity of earnings. The lower brackets of painters would not earn more if they painted more, because those paintings would not sell. The top painters paint a lot because they have confidence their labour will always be rewarded. Some of these artists paint on an almost daily basis. Unlike the middle bracket of artists, who are still feeling out the market and establishing a taste or demand for their work, the levels of production of the 'Artists' were, in 2004, often below market demand.

There are several 'artists' who produce relatively few works per year. There is a high demand in the market for works by these painters, and several could easily double their income if they so chose. But they don't choose that. They paint when they want, and they use the money when it comes. They are male and female, from various age groups, and they have different reasons for limiting their own levels of production. From their example, it is clear that a model of exponential accumulation, supply and demand, fails to contextualise the economic activity underscoring painting practices. Rather, these 'artists' reflect, in their sub-optimal production, the same principles as those painters in the lower

brackets struggling to optimise their painting income; painting exists as an instrumental component of a broader economic system.

Hunting, Gambling, Royalties and Painting: articulations with welfare

The work of painting needs to be integrated within a broader ethnographic description of the economic system at hand. During my fieldwork, everyone in Balgo was on welfare or its equivalent wage in CDEP. That means that every week, people are seeking alternate income to supplement their relatively inadequate income with injections of capital enough to buy a clothes, to fund sorry business (blankets, flour etc) or perhaps fix or fund a motorcar to go travelling. The periodic income that comes from mining royalties, gambling and painting are the only ways that such economic autonomy can be achieved.

Based solely on numbers of participants and income, painting is a form of work that equates to CDEP in terms of scale. But perhaps the most significant form of economic enterprise in Balgo during my fieldwork, in terms of participation and hours spent 'working', is gambling.⁵² During fieldwork, Gambling circles, wherein large groups of people play the idiosyncratic and often inscrutable '3-card' (or versions thereof) for considerable sums of money, proliferated and dominated the social life of sections of the community in the days after welfare payments were received. Gambling, by definition, involves risk. The risk, it seems in Balgo, is always worth it; because gambling is perhaps the only way for most people, however routinely unsuccessful, of potentially transforming one's welfare into something more substantial and increasing one's financial autonomy, however briefly.

Many people who paint would also spend more labour hours gambling than painting. Indeed, gambling, like painting, is perhaps conceived as a kind of work. A conversation I had with Napangarti, herself a famous painter, is illustrative here.

⁵² There are also significant social motivations and benefits to playing cards, which I don't address in this thesis. Furthermore, playing cards doesn't always involve risk; often people just play with rocks or sticks, rather than money, simply because they enjoy playing or for something to do.

Napangarti asked me to take her hunting for *karnti* (yams). I said I couldn't today, but 'maybe tomorrow', to which she screwed up her face in disgust and said 'tomorrow no good!' Her family started laughing in unison and chuckled that Napangarti gets her pension tomorrow and will be gambling all day! I thought she might growl them all for being cheeky, but instead she readily and sombrely agreed; as if she would be busy 'working' her normal job and simply wouldn't have time to fit in hunting. I suggested the following day, a Friday, to which she tutted and reminded me that it was money morning- when the artists get their painting money. 'She right', she said, 'weekend time we'll go'.

This example embodies a great deal about the economic dynamics of individual lives as structured by the state welfare system, which is itself translated through and articulated with customary economic practices. It suggests a strategic localised engagement with the complex and multifaceted economies through which their actions and autonomies are structured. Napangarti wanted to go hunting because she had spent her painting money, it was the day before her pension came, and she was hungry. Hunting practices no longer contribute substantially, statistically, to the overall consumption of food for the average resident of Balgo. In this way it is perhaps different to some extent than the hybrid outstation economies described by Altman (2001, 2005b,) in Arnhem Land. But hunting and gathering is a consistent, integrated and important part of the broader economic strategies of a great many people. It must be appreciated, like painting, or gambling, in this context. People in Balgo are always keen to go hunting (unless a card game is on!) but they tend to structure their hunting ambitions to coincide with a lack of either food or money; namely, people go hunting primarily at the end of a pay cycle when they have run out of money, or on weekends when the store is shut. These conditions speak to the entanglement even of the most 'customary' economic practices in an intercultural economy.

The only external income people in Balgo can count on, other than painting, is mining royalties, which come twice a year in lump sums that are divided amongst relevant families. Because of the diversity of associations to different areas of the desert, many families in Balgo do not receive mining royalties. This was changing slightly at the end of my research, due to new mines opening, but for a long time people in Balgo spoke of 'painting mob' and 'mining mob'; to me these localised demarcations suggested that some

groups of people who were fortunate enough to get royalties didn't need to paint in order to afford the annual Toyota, and so tended not to. This categorical separation between royalties and painting families never held entirely true, there was always some cross-over, but there has also always been a significant distinction between the levels of painting production of royalty and non-royalty income kin groups. People who earned royalties during my fieldwork were almost universally in the lower 'prospector' or 'strategist' brackets of painting production. Without wanting to over-determine the causality of that relationship, it is also reasonable to deduce that those with no prospect of receiving mining royalties have tended to work harder at becoming an 'artist' and securing alternate income streams through painting.

The relative ease with which mining royalties are received also serve to reinforce Aboriginal conceptualisations of painting as 'work'. This was clear to me when, in early 2005, a leading artist who earned a significant income from painting announced that she would stop painting as soon as she began receiving mining royalties from a recently opened mine. I joked with her that she would always keep painting, no matter what, but she was adamant; 'Soon as we touch that one (mining money), I'm finished me!' It turns out that Nungurrayi did not stop painting when mining royalties became part of her income stream. Yet her intention to do so reveals that she conceived of painting as a form of work that would, in principle, no longer be necessary for her to do.

Artistic Income

The preceding arguments about 'productivity' in this chapter, however illuminating in terms of shaping a description of painting practices, remain narrowly focussed on physical production; the painting of canvas. It is necessary now to explore other less tangible, though no less significant, dimensions of this productivity. To appreciate the extent to which painting is 'work', we need to know considerably more about what is returned in exchange for labour. We need to know more about artistic income.

Category	2003/04	2002/03	2001/02	2000/01	1999/00
Paintings	\$1,902,338	\$1,638,434	\$1,354,619	\$1,016,998	\$960,811

Table 2.9. Warlayirti Artists annual income from painting sales, 1999/2000- 2003/2004.⁵³

Based on official Warlayirti Artists documentation⁵⁴, Table 2.9 provides a breakdown of the art industry income at Balgo over a five year period. From this data it is clear that the Balgo art industry, experienced a significant boom following the opening of the new custom built art centre in 1999. Painting sales increased by nearly \$1 million over the five year period. The way that money is distributed among the artists is outlined in Figure 3, where it is clear that vast majority of painters (87%) earned under \$5,000 in 2004.

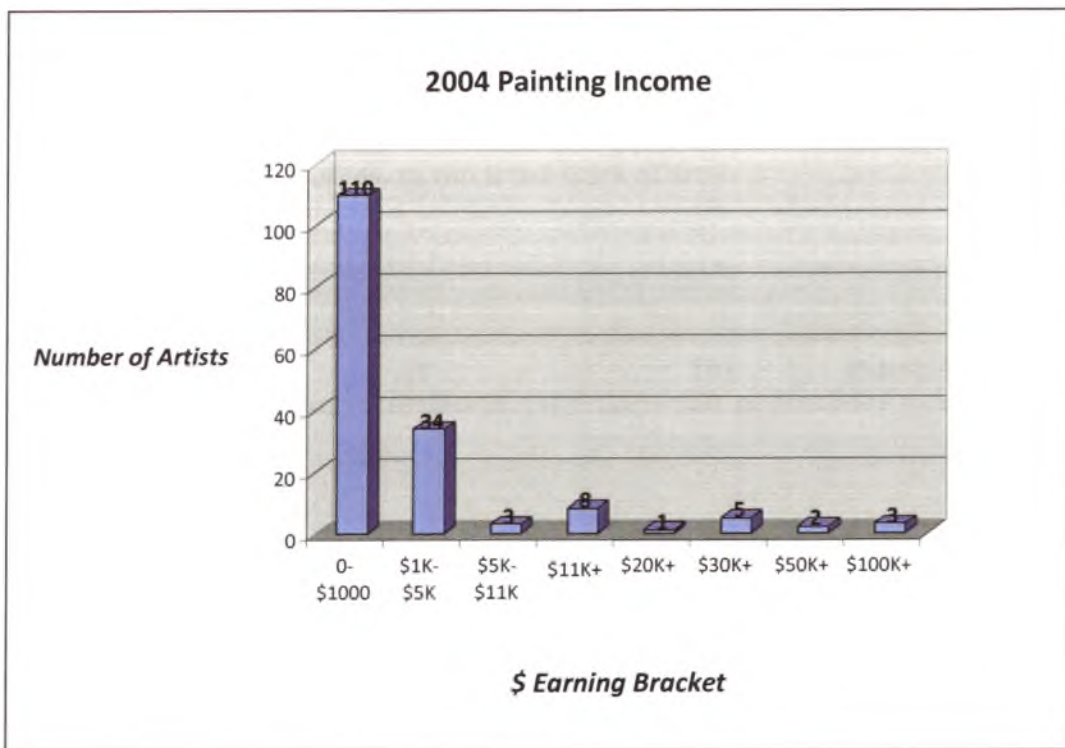


Figure 2.3. Approximate income (by bracket) of Warlayirti Artists' painters in 2004

⁵³ In order to present a concise table, I have rounded down the figures to the nearest dollar, eliminating cents from calculations. This has affected the total turnover by no more than \$1-\$2 in any given financial year.

⁵⁴ I am indebted to Samantha Togni, former Director of Warlayirti Artists, for making this information available to the current study.

Furthermore, most painters earn less than \$1000 per year from painting. The ratio of those Balgo painters who earn less than \$1000 per year - 110 out of 166 painters in 2004 - is very close to the figure of 75% that Altman estimated for Aboriginal artists more broadly in the late 1980s (1989:35). A small handful of artists can comfortably earn salaries far in excess of national averages. In between these two extremes, there are a range of comparisons and interpretive possibilities open to us; yet here it is most relevant to touch on one, that of welfare.

In 2004⁵⁵, 110 people who painted for Warlayirti artists earned less than a \$1000. These people are universally in the category of people who paint less than five paintings per year. This tells us that the vast majority of people who paint do not earn a significant income whatsoever from the practice. Furthermore 88.5 % earned less from painting than the \$11, 284 they would have earned from welfare (Table 2.10).

	Under Welfare	Over Welfare
Number	147	19
Percentage	88.50%	11.50%

Table 2.10. Artists who earned above/below welfare levels of income in 2004.

My earlier discussion of the top bracket of artists, and the favourable comparisons I have drawn here between painting and other forms of income, are not, therefore, intended to imply that artistic income is stable enough to replace welfare payments- even for the major earners. Rather, the arguments presented here suggest that painting is a form of

⁵⁵ Note that this is the calendar year (Jan-Dec), not the financial year (Jul-Jun).

work that has emerged to complement welfare payments; and that it is perhaps only sustainable as a practice in relation to them.⁵⁶

It is important to note that artists in Balgo aren't paid at the time of completing an artwork, as happens at some other art centres. Rather, they are only paid when a work sells, and has been paid for. This economic reality, compounded by the vagaries of the art market, works saved for exhibitions and the increased number of works held on consignment by galleries, all ensure that even successful artists cannot rely on painting income every week. Despite its development into an economy of considerable scale, painting work is still experienced by most painters as the more speculative arm of their economic practice which complements, in its famines and floods, the stability of welfare. Of course, there are greater issues in operation here than simply artistic income. I am not suggesting that welfare dependence is a good thing for the people of Balgo. It is an endemic, recursive thread in the fabric of disadvantage; and these are issues of such complexity and magnitude that I don't pretend to address in any substantive fashion here. The fact, however, is that they *are* dependent upon state welfare; and until such time as an alternative system emerges, so too is the work of art.

Translating money into value

Each year around 100 Balgo residents (half the adult population) paint for Warlayirti artists, and each year they bring approximately \$2M income into Balgo from the sale of their paintings. 40% of that is reinvested into the costs of running the art centre, and 60%

⁵⁶ It is doubtful that the industry would continue to succeed at the level of fine art, in Balgo at least, if it was not underpinned by artists living on welfare. By this I mean that if people were painting to survive on a daily basis, the quantity of work would increase exponentially, the quality would undoubtedly decrease in turn, and the pressures on already over-stretched resources of art centres to be the sole source of livelihood would render the industry completely unsustainable within a matter of weeks. In their submission to the *Inquiry into Australia's Aboriginal visual arts and craft sector* in October 2006, Warlayirti management were already confirming that such changes are being precipitated by CDEP reforms introduced in recent times:

The reforms are encouraging more people to come into the art centre and paint.... often they want a quick buck and if their paintings aren't good they don't sell quickly and because of this we also suspect that a couple of people are taking boards and selling them privately in Halls Creek which is problematic on so many levels. There is also increased pressure on staff to have more boards and sell more and more work and more people humbugging us for money. (Warlayirti Artists 2006)

goes directly to the artists themselves. Tracing the movement of that money, its use and distribution, is critical to any substantive understanding of the dynamics of Balgo art.

In a welfare economy it is almost impossible to use your money for anything other than the basic essentials. \$217⁵⁷ a week doesn't go very far at the Balgo store where food, fuel and basic essentials are significantly more expensive than in cities or regional towns. In Balgo, the week before welfare payments is commonly referred to as 'starving week,' because for most people the money has long since run out on doing a few days shopping and filling up the car once. Artistic income, one's own and that shared by others, carries people through these periods.

Artistic income also supplements the day to day economy with injections of bulk capital enough to buy a fridge, a TV, or a bike for your kid. Such capital purchases are rarely possible in the bi-weekly round of welfare. Daily observations over a few years suggest to me that a significant proportion of artistic income is spent on transport and the pre-eminent desert values that underpin it: mobility and the autonomy it affords. Artists are always buying cars for family or filling up others people's cars with fuel so that they can travel, visit family, or just go hunting. Artists are also frequently called upon to pay for cultural business, particularly sorry business, which, in its relentless regularity, has become a major financial burden on families. Artists pay for coffins, funerals, blankets and most of all, the transport of family members from far away communities to fly to the ceremonies. During my fieldwork artists also paid for people to travel for a variety of other 'cultural' reasons, such as visiting healers, performing payback and travelling for ceremony.

Not all uses of artistic income are so coherently or palatably 'cultural'. During my fieldwork, a government official visited Balgo and raised questions about the way in which Balgo artists were using their money. The implication was that Balgo artists used their money in ways (gambling, travelling and drinking), that ran counter to the state ideology and values of 'development' for which the art centre had been funded. The further implication was that the government had deep reservations about funding the art centre if people were only using artistic income in these ways. Artistic income *is* spent, by some, on

⁵⁷ \$217 per week was the base welfare payment, before deductions for rent, fines etc, during my fieldwork.

alcohol and gambling. It is spent on mobility, on getting away from Balgo, as opposed to developing the infrastructure and viability of Balgo. Altman expressed this dilemma best when describing the Kurulk artists of eastern Arnhem Land:

[W]hile they might be doing what the state wants, they are not doing it in the way that the state wants or in accord with the broader Australian imaginary of how success should be constituted (2006:31).

In these same ways, Balgo artists and their families embody a paradox for the government: they are doing what the State wants in engaging productively with the market, but they then use their money to foster forms of autonomy that conflict with the ideologies of the state. Some of these forms of autonomy can also conflict with, and be corrosive to, other Aboriginal values as well; particularly where parents are separated from their children for extended periods due to illness, addiction or incarceration. But this is symptomatic of a much broader historical context and cannot be simplistically attributed to the income derived from painting.

While it remains bound to welfare dependency, painting, in its articulation with other elements of the Aboriginal economy, has more than any other industry or activity served to ameliorate the problems of dependency by facilitating forms of autonomy Aboriginal people value. The ultimate form of autonomy, for Balgo people, is arguably the capacity to engage freely in the creation of social capital and relationships; and this is expressed in overwhelming majority of uses of painting income.⁵⁸ Of the approximately \$1,000,000 of painting income that pass directly through painters hands each year, the very first thing done with the vast majority of that money is that it is given by the artist to somebody else. It is shared. The arts industry in Balgo has evolved in articulation with this fact.

Money Morning

When an artist sells a painting, the royalties go straight into an account at the art centre. For a decade or so, artists just came and withdrew whatever money they had earned

⁵⁸ Myers has argued that '[a]utonomy is the primary valuing structure of Pintupi social action' (1988b: 619).

whenever they wanted. Often artists would return to the art centre several times a day, with several different kin, to withdraw money to share. Former co-ordinator John Oster noted that the overwhelming regularity of these demands threatened, at one stage, to render Warlayirti staff completely incapable of attending to what *they* considered to be the core business of the art centre: producing and selling paintings (Oster, 2003). So 'Money Mornings' were introduced. These designated times when artists can come to the art centre to withdraw money from their accounts and distribute it amongst their kin, endeavour to mitigate the otherwise endless stream of demands for money throughout the week. In practice, these twice-weekly events have become an institution; a recognisable space-time (9-12 Monday and Friday during my fieldwork) in which family and others gather to lobby individual artists for their share, citing a variety of needs and the inevitable kinship obligations. In Balgo, the Aboriginal economy, manifest in practices such as demand-sharing (Peterson 1993), has been incorporated into the structure of weekly operations at the art centre.

Not many artists make a lot of money from painting, but everyone is related in some way to an artist who does. As the older painters tend to command higher prices, paint more, and consequently earn more constant income, it is they, then, rather than other categories of painters, that tend to be lobbied most systematically on money mornings. Children, grandchildren and siblings of a given artist are the primary supplicants with the strongest claims at Money Morning; and through this emergent institution, the re-distribution of painting income operates primarily along lines of close consanguineal kin. Within this basic framework, developed out of both observation and Aboriginal discourse, there are nuances of redistribution that reflect personalised, ego-centric sets of relations, responsibilities and expectations. What I have described here is what could be termed the norms of money morning distribution; though other circumstances, needs or obligations frequently lead to more distant bilateral kin making demands.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ This takes on a more literal quality now, as kin from far away communities also participate in Money Morning. With the mobility of people today, mobile phones, the technology of bank transfers and faxed purchase orders, the testing of relationships is just as likely to come from outside Balgo. Money Mornings are always punctuated by phone calls from Yuendumu, Kintore, Kiwirrkura or Alice Springs. The reciprocal obligations of kin have always stretched over vast distances in the desert, though these days such demands can be made and met through more abstracted means.

Napaltjarri, daughter to two famous artists - explained the principles of Money Morning sharing as they played out in her family. She said that her father, Tjapanangka gave \$100-\$200 (depending on his income) to each of his kids. If they are not there, he will give \$50 to the grandkids. He also has to share with another family, for whom he is a full uncle, when requested; though this is not a weekly obligation. Tjapanangka also shared his money with a younger Tjapangarti man, who he calls 'son', as this man has taken care of him and provided him with accommodation in Balgo for several years. Napaltjarri's mother, Nangala, shares her painting money with her children, and occasionally with grandkids. She will also share with her brother from Ringers Soak when he is in Balgo. Napaltjarri herself shares her money with her brothers and sisters, while her husband has to share with his side of the family.

Peterson has long been critical of the limited analytical attention given to sharing in anthropology, particularly in Australia, and in the denuded way such practices are framed even when acknowledged:

it reflects a paucity of information on the vernacular formulation of the ethic of sharing and its day to day practice, so that our own deeply held understandings and evaluations slip into the vacuum (1993: 870).

Aboriginal artists face the same kinds of issues in relationship to the economy that underpins their practice. These practices of sharing have, both historically and in recent Australian political discourse and commentary around Aboriginal 'income management', been commonly derided as 'humbug'. As Napaltjarri and I were discussing her family's Money morning sharing practices, I pointed out to her how some kartiya saw this kind of sharing as humbug; to which she responded 'it's not a humbug, we've got a *Tjukurrpa* for that'. By this she meant that contemporary sharing is in many ways mandated by Aboriginal law and explained in *Tjukurrpa* narratives. She continued, 'in the old stories when a man goes hunting, he brings it back and shares it to all the families. Same like painting.' In this description Napaltjarri invokes a cultural precedent which informs the cultural basis of contemporary sharing practices. In so doing she, reinforces Myers ethnographic interpretation of game hunting practices, wherein:

Success secures a particular set of rights to the animal, providing the opportunity to give - to engage in interdomestic exchange, which establishes or promotes a kind of moral identity with the recipients (Myers 1988a:58).

People in Balgo continue to hunt, and to share, in this way and others; yet Money Morning has arguably become the predominant forum of such resource distribution today. In her analysis of demand sharing among the Wiradjuri, Macdonald (2000) explores the notion of *allocative power* to describe the capacity of individuals to accrue and allocate resources and thereby meet the demands of kin. Austin-Broos invokes this term to describe the capacity of 'bosses' or 'powerful men', primarily outstation heads who operate as CDEP supervisors, to access and 'capture the powers of white resource managers' (2003:125) such as cash, vehicles and other commodities. In Balgo this allocative power is vested primarily in artists. Successful painters have developed a significant capacity to capture these 'powers of white resource managers' in terms of art-market cash.

The art market's enduring attachment to senior 'first contact' artists (see Chapters 4-5) means that, financially, older painters are by far the most financially successful. These artists, more than any other people, have the capacity to turn cash into social capital; to translate the non-Aboriginal economy into Aboriginal value. The structure of the painting industry, and the Balgo art centre economy, buttresses Aboriginal gerontocracies and therein the recapitulation of customary forms of authority and hierarchy:

Hierarchy and authority thus come to be presented in the guise of concern and nurturing, and in consequence, generosity becomes the complement of authority. In return for respect and deference, the subordinate generation can legitimately make demands for goods on their relatives in the senior generation (Peterson 1993:869).

Peterson could have been describing the political economy of Money Morning. The relatively constant flow of money into senior artists' accounts provides them with an equally persistent flow of demands, or expectations, and a consistent capacity to meet demands or obligations to extended family. Whilst these demands can become a source of frustration and familial conflict, the capacity to meet them is also a point of considerable esteem and cultural value: as people with power and resources enact their autonomy primarily through their capacity to care for kin (Myers 1982, Austin-Broos 2003). Through

nurturing, *kanyirninpa* (holding),⁶⁰ and *giving* to their kin, senior Balgo artists translate money into social relations and status. They, perhaps like the people described in Munn's *The Fame of Gawa* (1986b) - who strategically share their food in the name of higher values - create something like their own localised 'fame' in Balgo. Beyond the fame of the art world to which they remain largely indifferent, Balgo artists create, through the work of art, a higher value through sharing money than money itself can ever hold for them.

But it's not all caring and sharing. And not all demands are met. Despite considerable pressure to share, artists exercise autonomy in evaluating levels of relatedness - citing the failure of others to meet their social obligations as justification for not sharing income. One such artist, Nangala, developed the nick name 'own-self' in reference to her public claims at Money Morning that she completed paintings her 'own self' with 'no help from any kid'- and would not therefore be beholden to their demands for the income such paintings produced.⁶¹

Such defiance, in the face of familial pressure, is also the domain of more senior people. For younger artists, who earn less money less regularly and have less authority to negotiate the demands of kin, the very public pressures of Money Morning are strategically avoided. This is done through convincing the managers to allow you to withdraw money on other days when no one is watching. Then, when Money Morning comes around, and your account is empty, it is plain for all to see no demands can be met. But everything is eventually plain for all to see in Balgo, and one cannot paint successfully *and* avoid demands for long. This can produce a curious lull in the productivity of younger painters just as their careers appear to be taking off. As Peterson notes of demand-share economies more generally, 'The stresses of having too many social relationships to negotiate lead people to try to reduce demands by... [among other strategies]... keeping production to a minimum (1993:870).' This is precisely what happens in Balgo with successful younger artists who, when they first start to earn significant amounts of money, and therefore face significant social pressures, routinely stop painting or reduce their production. These are just a handful of many examples whereby people strategically seek

⁶⁰ See McCoy (2008) for a thorough analysis of the broader significance of this notion in Balgo.

⁶¹ See Myers (1988:56) for a discussion of a similar case.

to avoid the demands and pressures that attend the artistic economy. But here, the *patterned* way in which people reject, avoid or seek to avoid demands serves to reinforce the operation of a form of demand-sharing in art as a kind of normative rule.

Demand-sharing is best conceived as one of multiple forms of reciprocity or re-distribution (Altman 2010:191), and one of several forms of 'testing, establishing, maintaining and breaking relationships' as suggested by Musharbash (2008: 145). Yet in Balgo these particular processes of demanding and giving have calcified into structures: institutionalised as they are in the weekly operations of the art centre. Played out routinely in the social theatre of Money Mornings, the institutionalised redistribution of the artistic economy has perhaps exacerbated certain forms of demanding, and certain forms of giving, and therein perhaps even reified certain forms of kinship. But kinship in Balgo, and the politics of sharing that underpin it, is not contained between the hours of 9-12 on Monday and Friday mornings. The example provided by Nangala ('own-self') - rejecting demands to share because other related principals of reciprocity had not been observed - reminds us that any demand-share norm is organised and regulated within broader regimes of obligation and exchange. This example, where sharing is rejected because the work itself was not shared, also returns us in conclusion to the notion of painting-as-work with which these arguments began.

Working and Country

I have argued that acrylic painting is most productively understood as an Aboriginal form of 'work' bound to local values and relational principles. This relational quality of work is not merely about working *for art* coordinators, it is also integrally bound to working *with walytja* (kin, family) and friends. Painting is a quintessentially social practice; a time for people to sit around talking together, a time for gossip, a time when older artists sit humming songs for country, when husbands and wives silently work together, when parents and grandparents teach younger people the skills and styles and stories that are now part of their heritage. To analyse painting practices solely in monetary terms is, therefore, to overlook significant aspects of the socio-cultural value it creates. Sackett has

made the same argument in relation to the economic or caloric analysis of hunting practices:

'Hunting was of only minimal economic moment. Of far greater importance were its links, through the Law (i.e. traditional values and beliefs) to ritual.... Going hunting, then, was in and of itself doing something important, meaning that the act was as significant as its proceeds.'(1980:128-9)

People frequently paint their own canvases together in a group (Figure 2.3), or share the work of painting a single canvas. Children, grandchildren and siblings frequently help an artist by dotting a corner of a large painting. The work of art is not restricted to people physically painting. Often family simply sit round an artist's canvas as they work, keeping them company and contributing their presence to the social labour of painting Country. These people are usually the principal supplicants to the artist at Money Mornings. Such practices are reminiscent of Povinelli's (1995:514) argument that simply being on Country, sitting in it, is a kind of productive labour. Acrylic Country may be no different.

This question of Country is not incidental here. The economic basis of social life has shifted monumentally over the past 50 years for people in Balgo. Although life is no longer predicated on exploiting the resources of Country for survival, through the work of art Country has been transformed into a resource that can continue to be exploited through exchange with the novel economic conditions of contemporary life. In her critique of acrylic painting in Balgo, De Ishtar argues that the 'Culture Industry' does not empower Aboriginal people, but 'merely drags people more deeply into to the Western global cash economy' (2005:221). Such assertions are roundly contested by the analysis of painting practices presented here. Despite social, economic and political disadvantage, Balgo artists are not hunter-gatherers caught in the dual net of welfare dependency and capitalism; they are individuals enmeshed in complex economies in which they capture and transform the value of money into values of their own. The medium through which this creation and transformation of value occurs is Country: painted Country.



Figure 2.3. Women painting their separate canvases together, 2003

This chapter has demonstrated some kinds of value that are created and exchanged through the work of art. Although a range of values are expressed in the way people utilise artistic income, statistically and socially the most significant quality it holds is this capacity to be *given*. Artistic income is not just ‘given away’, it is *given*. And sharing in a kin-based society is never wasteful; it is the strategic, emotive and practical engine of identity and relationship in daily life. In Balgo sharing, and demanding, are the principal quotidian acts of social reproduction. Given the statistical and social prominence of painting as a form of Aboriginal labour, a source of income, and a site of sharing in Balgo, it is apt to conclude that the work of art has become integral not only to an analysis of Balgo art, but to any broader analysis of Balgo social life.

Chapter Three

Becoming Art: Balgo before the market (1940-1986)

There is no singular or authoritative history of how acrylic painting emerged as practice among the people of Balgo. It is generally accepted that the Luurnpa Banner was the first public painting, and that after its production in 1981 painting practices emerged through the Adult Education centre. The first exhibition of Balgo paintings, *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*, was opened at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in late 1986. In 1987, following the enthusiasm generated by this event and in anticipation of an increasingly commercially-oriented future for Balgo painters, Warlayirti Artists Aboriginal Corporation (WAAC) was founded and an art-coordinator employed to run the business.⁶²

This, however, is a grossly simplified account. A diverse network of interests, individuals and historical conditions influenced the emergence of Balgo art in the early 1980's. The state, through the agency of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts (and particularly through Mary Macha), anthropology (Ronald Berndt), the church (Sr Alice Dempsey), and private citizens (Warwick Nieass) interested in supporting the development of Aboriginal art practices all played roles in facilitating the emergence of Balgo painting. The myriad threads of this process have been documented in minimal depth and varying focus by a range of commentators (Berndt and Berndt 1986, Cowan 1994, Ryan 1989, 1993) and also from

⁶² The official Warlayirti Artists website presents its potted history thus:

Warlayirti Artists was established in 1987 with the employment of the first coordinator, following the success of the first exhibition of Balgo art – Paintings from the Great Sandy Desert – at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1986. However, the first public paintings by Balgo artists were banners completed in 1981 for the celebration of Father Peile's Silver Jubilee. Following this, people began painting on canvas board through the Catholic-run Wirrimanu Adult Education and Training Centre. ⁶² http://www.balgoart.org.au/art_centre/mainframe.htm (accessed 12/01/07)

within the community (Warlayirti Artists 2004, Wirrimanu Adult Education 2002). To date the most comprehensive account, and the only one that adequately acknowledges the complex diversity of influences, is offered by Watson in her Thesis (1996) and subsequent publication, *Piercing the Ground* (2003).

Despite these documented accounts, there remains a strangely vague, unresolved sense of any definitive genealogy for Balgo art's development. Nebulous references to 'knowledge of painting in other communities' in the 1970s, and then an 'efflorescence of creativity' through Adult Education Centre anchor the signature Balgo art history narratives that emerge in exhibition catalogues and are reproduced through Warlayirti Artists promotional material.⁶³ The nexus between Nieass, Macha, Berndt and the development of painting at Adult Education through Sr. Alice Dempsey remains historically unresolved. My own research, including interviews with each of these protagonists,⁶⁴ likewise produced no mutuality of account. Watson has also been the only chronicler of these events to acknowledge the facilitating contribution of Warwick Nieass (and his partner at the time, Sylvie Poirier) in the early 1980s.⁶⁵ Despite being the first officially funded art-coordinator, Nieass is nowhere mentioned in the Adult Education or Warlayirti Artists' histories of the painting movement. His indisputable contribution as an individual, unattached as it was to any enduring institutional version of events, has been obscured in the histories of the art movement produced subsequently by Adult Education and also through Warlayirti Artists. That said, neither the church nor the art centre recognise the early role played by Mary Macha or the government in seeding these practices with purchases and materials. There is, it seems, little agreement all round.⁶⁶

⁶³ This is also evident in the *Warlayirti Artists- Art and Culture Centres* visitor information sheet given to tourists and art buyers who visit the centre.

⁶⁴ Obviously, I was unable to interview Ronald Berndt, who had passed away well before this research commenced. I have been assisted greatly in his absence by John Stanton of the Berndt Museum.

⁶⁵ Neither James Cowan (1994, 1999), Judith Ryan (1989) nor the Berndts (1986) acknowledge the presence of Nieass in their writings.

⁶⁶ Nieass himself is explicitly critical of Macha's attempts to monopolise the production and marketing of art in the region, and also of the ways in which independent painting practices were later co-opted by the church (Nieass 2004). Macha, in turn, is critical of what she perceived as Nieass' interference in an industry that had already been developing slowly under the patronage of ATA for several years (Macha 2005).

Like any historical process, the trajectory of Balgo is multiply determined. It may not be possible to ultimately reconcile these strands of memory and agency into an authoritative history of Balgo art, but nor is it the ambition to attempt such a reconciliation here. The opaque or ambivalent relations – and competing accounts - between the government and commercial interests, anthropology, the church, and private individuals such as Nieass are, perhaps, not ultimately reconcilable. Their overlapping chronology, and mutualised interest in facilitating the development of painting practices of the region, speaks rather of a multitude of beginnings and coterminous, intermittently competing and complementary influences, ideologies and narratives. Yet to rest on this lack of mutuality in these versions of history would also amount to a certain failure of perspective. Although establishing the veracity and chronology of events and actors is to some extent an analytical and interpretive necessity in developing a history of Balgo art, it is an exercise burdened with presumptions about the kind of history that matters. There is also the sense that the adherence to these pivotal events and catalytic *kartiya*, and their construction through time as a chronology of development, obscures the agency of the many Aboriginal individuals who were operating outside and *across* this documented history.

The unifying thread through these competing histories is the agency of Balgo people and their *desire to paint*; whether privately, commercially, in exchange, or in engagement with the church. The traces of these actions, this agency, are the artworks and artefacts produced by the people of this region. Although evidence of most material culture produced since the advent of the mission until the 1970's remains scarce, that which remains tells its tales. This, then, is a history that foregrounds the visual evidence of what people were doing, rather than the documentary or institutionalised narratives that have since appropriated these objects. The brief history offered here, then, is a history of images. It is not a history of art, but history *through* art. Paintings are the historical 'facts', the aesthetic events through which I seek to interpret the historical processes they mediated. It is a history of engagement 'written', in a unique grammar of exchange, by Balgo artists.

A history through art

Desert people have always been engaged in processes of engagement and exchange - of material culture, ceremonial rights, and people – with other groups of people both within and beyond the localities of the desert region.

A distinctive feature of pre-settlement Australian desert society was the vast geographical scale of Aboriginal hunter-gatherer systems. Residential mobility in this region was invariably high (Smith & Veth 2004), a characteristic that was paired with exchange systems which traded goods across the continent over vast distances (Mulvaney 1976, Akerman and Stanton 1994). With colonisation, these processes came to include transactions with non-Aboriginal agents. Morphy (2005:19) has argued that the creation of material culture and artefacts (including performance) has been a consistent feature of Aboriginal engagement with colonial powers and economies throughout Australian history. Those peoples who have subsequently become engaged in Aboriginal art had therefore actively engaged in dialogue and exchange in cross-cultural encounters – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - long before the current organised market structures supported such practices.

Anthropologists themselves were an important factor in this process, buying and trading material culture, and also soliciting the production of new forms, such as crayon drawings on paper.⁶⁷ The first evidence of the intercultural emergence of art in the region dates back to the mid-1940s, when Ronald Berndt collected a range of crayon drawings from men inhabiting Birrundudu, an outstation of the Gordon Downs pastoral property north-west of the current site of Balgo (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). I use the term 'collected' here, because the notion that Berndt 'commissioned' (Watson 2003: 122) these drawings at Birrundudu is perhaps slightly misleading. Berndt *did* commission such drawings extensively, both in the desert and in Arnhem Land (Berndt, Berndt and Stanton 1998: 72-79), however Berndt's own notes about the Birrundudu drawings suggest a distinctly localised encounter, whereby the men actively sought to use drawing as a means of communication and exchange.

⁶⁷ Anthropologists such as Tindale, Birdsell, Mountford, Meggitt, Basedow and Berndt all used this practice.

[A]t Birrundudu in western-central Northern Territory during 1944-45, when I was very short of film, Aborigines offered to reproduce— again with lumber crayons on brown paper— all aspects of their ritual and everyday life which I was seeing and recording but was unable to photograph to any extent. (Berndt, 1983: 34)

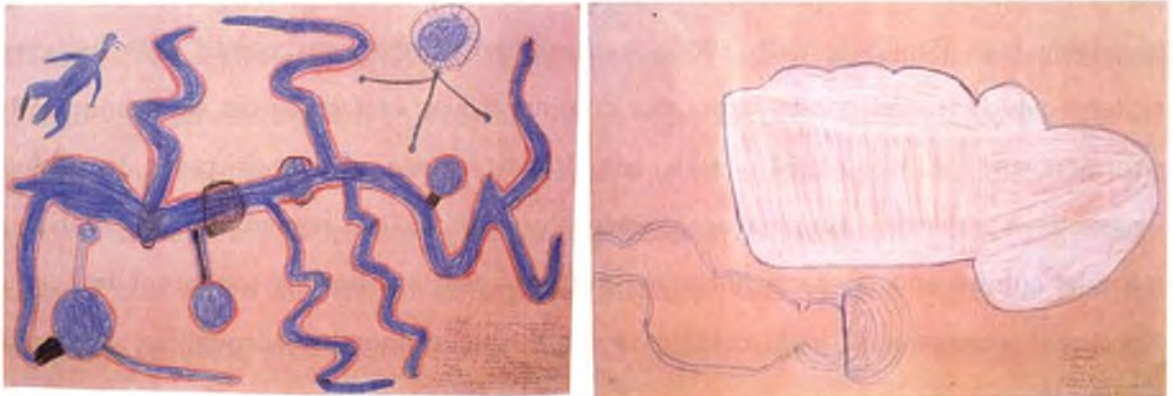


Figure 3.1a & b. Birrundudu drawings, circa 1945, Berndt Museum

Berndt's own brief description of how these drawings came about is testimony to the active, dialogical contexts of their production; contexts of engagement which complexify the notion of a 'commission'. However we frame the production of these images, it is the images themselves which speak both of the elaborate artistic experience of the men in their own cultural contexts, and their aesthetic agility in bringing these traditions to bear on new contexts and mediums.

[T]hese men had never before used such media, let alone handled a pencil-like object. They set to work unhesitatingly, sure of their ability; and in doing so they produced some of the most outstanding and aesthetically pleasing drawings which have yet appeared from Aboriginal Australia. Their traditional style was maintained, but there was also a high degree of innovation when compared with their usual media— incising on wood, body painting, sand structures and occasionally cave paintings. (Berndt, 1983: 34)

The men were of Kukatja, Warlpiri, Nyining, Ngarti and language speaking groups, with homelands arrayed in all directions and a variety of distances from the site of Birrundudu, '[t]hus there were cultural ties, as there still are today, with Papunya and Yuendumu on one hand and Balgo on the other...' (Berndt, Berndt & Stanton 1998: 72). This geographic and linguistic diversity resurfaces forty years later in the constellation of people who constituted the inaugural makers of Balgo art, and must have contributed in some way to the stylistic variation and experimentation of local image making practices. Yet, we don't have to wait until the early 80's to see this; such cross-pollination of styles is already evident in the Birrundudu drawings. The shifts in perspective, the use of multiple perspectives in the one drawing, use of figuration and colour, presentation of action, not to mention the depiction of colonial landmarks such as windmills, demonstrates these men engaging with the questions, problems and possibilities of representation across cultures long before there was a 'market' for Balgo art.⁶⁸



Figure 3.2a & b. Birrundudu drawings, circa 1945, Berndt Museum

From these drawings and the scarce public documentation surrounding them, we are able to make some significant connections to the image-making practices of the countrymen of these artists some 40 years later. These images speak to the fact, often overlooked in solipsistic art market histories, that desert people were actively engaged in processes of translation and exchange through material culture— both between themselves and with non-Aboriginal groups and individuals— long before the formal interventions of the art

⁶⁸ See also Berndt, Berndt & Stanton (1998:72-76) and Watson (2003: pp122-123) for discussion of the innovative qualities of the Birrundudu drawings. These drawings are, however, apart from these references (and Stanton 1989) only fleetingly referred to in the literature and await a comprehensive analysis. No such substantive endeavour is attempted here.

market. Furthering this point, Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell also collected a number of crayon drawings from men at Balgo in July 1954, during the UCLA Anthropological Expedition. Watson has suggested that this practice of drawing for Berndt continued for several decades, 'providing a continuum of painting practice which formed a strong basis for their later entry into the art market' (Watson n.d.). There is, however, no such continuous trajectory between these drawings and that entry into the market in the mid-1980s. While image making practices undoubtedly continued in discrete Aboriginal contexts, as they had always done, between the Birdsell drawings in 1954 and the emergence of acrylic Balgo painting practices in the late 1970s there is scarce material evidence of any 'intercultural' continuities at all. The reasons for this are perhaps reasonably predictable. The focus of the early missionaries was not about learning *from* the adults, or eliciting their knowledge, but of trying to prepare their children for 'civilisation' and the gospel. What is known of Fr McGuire does not commend him as a likely candidate for encouraging the production of any material culture either. As noted previously, McGuire's response to the existing religious and sacred material culture of Balgo people was to discourage or destroy it. He was seemingly indisposed to permit evidence of the existence of Aboriginal religion in his camp, let alone to solicit or support the creation of new forms. Furthermore, the movement of Aboriginal people out of the mission, and of non-aboriginal people into the mission, was so strictly regulated by McGuire in the 1960s that even the production of artefacts for sale or trade with workmen and visitors, which occurred in other kinds of settlements (and other missions) would have been an unsustainable enterprise. There is then, between the Birrundudu drawings and the first paintings that emerged in the late 1970's, a lack of visual or material evidence of any continuum of public painting practices at Balgo.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ The Berndt museum records show that between the aforementioned children's drawings from the mission school, created in 1948, and the first paintings collected by Berndt in 1981, no other paintings/drawings were collected by the museum from Balgo. Such artworks may of course exist in private collections or archives as yet undiscovered.

Stone Carving

There were other practices though, and these are relevant to the history being explored here. Throughout the seventies, as the mission opened up under Fathers Hevern and Peile, people began working with stone sculpture⁷⁰ for sale on the tourist market. Watson notes that, apart from stone carvings, wooden carvings of animals and artefacts were produced, while women also made necklaces and head ornaments (1996: 34). These were collected by Mary Macha (or one of her agents in the region, such as Don McLeod) and marketed in Perth.⁷¹ Berndt Museum records indicate that three stone sculptures thus procured in 1977 were sold to the Ronald Berndt. Two of the figures were birds, and one, interestingly, was a camel. The earliest dated stone sculptures are in the South Australian Museum collection (Figure 3.3), dated to 1975.⁷² The Berndts also collected a series of stone works produced in 1979 and 1980, carvings which included a man, a horse and a fish. Examples collected in 1982 include more birds, a ladle, an emu in bas relief, and a carved shape covered in etched designs.⁷³

Produced primarily for the ethnographic art market, even this surviving cross-section housed at the Berndt Museum exhibits a notably diverse and experimental approach to the medium that has long been associated with Balgo paintings. These stone carvings are no anomaly in the history of the region's material culture; rather, they can be seen to inhabit, and indeed to have created, the ambiguous spaces that Balgo paintings would in time come to fill and reshape in their own way. Emerging dually out of customary carving

⁷⁰ Caruana has put an earlier date on this, suggesting that Balgo people were producing soapstone carvings in the 1950s (1993:147) and that this recommenced in the 1970's. This may be the case, but hasn't been verified at present. The Berndt Museum only has records of stone works collected from the late 1970s onwards.

⁷¹ As noted previously, around this time late 1970s and early 1980s, through the agency of the Western Australian branch of Aboriginal Art and Crafts Pty Ltd, Aboriginal Traditional Arts (ATA), Macha was involved in supporting the burgeoning craft market by purchasing works and providing materials. Macha was focussed on the stone carvings and artefacts coming out of Balgo, and claims not to have provided painting materials to Balgo people at this stage (2005).

⁷² These works were collected by a plumber who was working in Balgo in 1975, before being acquired by the SA museum in 2009. My thanks to Phillip Jones for this information, and for providing me with images of these works.

⁷³ On one of his own visits to Balgo around this time, Ronald Berndt also salvaged a small bust of Jesus' head, carved again from stone, from the local rubbish tip (Stanton 2005). Photographs taken by a local health worker at the time, reveals other differently shaped carvings such as eggs, a zeppelin, a miro-esque curve, a non-descript four legged creature and a bird.

practices associated with the Tjukurrpa, and the production of 'toys' for children, the status of these stone carvings as objects for sale – even something as mundane as a camel (Figure 3.4) - must have been complex. The catalogue card for the stone camel in the Berndt Museum Collection illuminates this. From this card, we know it was created in 1977 by Albert 'Jumpigin' [sic], and was bought by Ronald Berndt from Mary Macha for \$12.50. There are two further points of interest on the card: the first states that it was 'made for sale to tourists'; the second, that it was 'made from stone left by the Tingarri people'.⁷⁴ Hewn, quite literally, from the substance of the Tjukurrpa, yet incorporating introduced animals and produced unreservedly with commercial intent, this multifaceted quality of the camel resonates strongly with the categorical ambiguity of acrylic paintings. However physically distinct from desert Tingari paintings that were soon to emerge, these carvings can be understood as quintessential Balgo 'art'.



Figure 3.3. Stone figures carved at Balgo, South Australian Museum Collection.



Figure 3.4. Stone Camel in the Berndt Museum Collection

⁷⁴ Berndt Museum reference # 2536.00. Tingarri, intimately associated with the travels of post-initiates, are a major complex of Dreamings for Western Desert people. For some, Tingarri is more than a subset of the Tjukurrpa, it is synonymous with the Tjukurrpa itself.

1978: the first Balgo paintings

Shortly after these stone carvings began being produced for the 'ethnographic' or 'tourist' market, along with other wooden artefacts, the first trickle of paintings also began to be produced in Balgo for sale to outsiders. The earliest dated paintings from this time appeared in 1978, the most recent discovery being a work by Wimmitji Tjapangarti (Figure 3.5) which was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.⁷⁵ The AGNSW records for this artwork state:

'The owner was a lay missionary who was living in the Balgo Hills in 1978 and had close contact with Wimmitji and his family and as a result was given this work, (with 3 other objects, a miniature Coolamon, snake and boomerang) as 'symbols' of being adopted into Wimmitji's family. The painting was completed to explain Wimmitji's country to the missionary.'⁷⁶



Figure 3. 5. Wimmitji Tjapangarti, *Untitled*, 1978. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Accession No 120.2004, natural pigments on hardboard, 53.0 x 31.0cm board

⁷⁵ The precise contexts of this painting's production remain unknown. Wimmitji's family have since suggested that Father Peile had encouraged Wimmitji, his primary informant in extensive linguistic and ethnographic research, to make some paintings of his Country. In 2006, Jimmy Tchooga confirmed that Peile had indeed provided Wimmitji, and perhaps others, with materials and encouraged them to paint. Another possibility is that the work was produced in a workshop recorded by filmmaker Malcolm Douglas, who was making documentaries with Balgo men in the late 1970s and recorded some early painting practices.

⁷⁶ My thanks to Cara Pinchbeck at the AGNSW for supplying this information.

In 2003, one of Wimmitji's works sold at auction for \$80, 000. 25 years earlier, he gave this, perhaps his first painting, to a kartiya with whom he had social relations. Although clearly not (yet) a commercially-oriented object, this painting continues the narrative of image-making as exchange. This is also consistent with the increased interest in and acceptance of Aboriginal 'culture' during the time of Fr Hevern and Fr Peile. In the following year, 1979, the church also encouraged the painting of a large mural at the Balgo airstrip (Figure 3.6). This monumental image, whilst intended to welcome visitors, remained off-limits to local women.⁷⁷ This dual nature of painting- both opening out through intercultural processes, but retaining Aboriginal cultural protocols and restrictions- suggests the tensions that attended the emergence of art, and that continued to restrict and inform its development for years to come.



Figure 3.6. Balgo airport Mural under construction in October 1979. Photo courtesy Kim Akerman (c) 1979

The ambiguous status of paintings seems to have remained a key factor in the cautious emergence of Balgo art. People at Papunya had been painting for at least seven years

⁷⁷ Whilst women have invariably seen the mural in subsequent decades, using the airport frequently as they do, Brandy Tjungurrayi and Bruce Njamme both confirmed in 2011 that the painting was originally restricted and not for women to see.

before the first Balgo paintings appeared, and 15 years before their first public exhibition; and we know beyond reasonable dispute, due to the strong familial links and ceremonial relationships between the communities, that the Balgo artists were aware of the painting that was occurring at Papunya in the early 1970s (Johnson 1996: 76). They were also aware of the problems and politics associated with those paintings being released into other contexts (Myers, 1986: 160). Paintings the Papunya men assumed were disappearing into kartiya society were in fact being viewed by other Aboriginal people, and this fact destabilised the status of these images yet again. An awareness of the problems at Papunya, and the conservative cultural authority of the senior Balgo men at the time, made the Balgo men either critical of the Papunya precedent or, at best, hesitant to enter the painting fray themselves.

By 1978, perhaps now encouraged by their relatives at Papunya, by the broader 'renaissance' of increased ritual activity occurring throughout the Kimberley,⁷⁸ or the opening up of the mission under Hevern and Peile, more evidence emerges of Balgo art's sporadic beginnings (Figures 3.7a & b).⁷⁹ The first boards seemingly appeared in the Balgo store in 1979 (Berndt 1986), the production of which may have been supported by the then store manager, Terry Murphy, who was encouraging Balgo people to take up commercial painting in the 1970s (Dempsey 2005) and supplying people with materials to do so (Nieass 2004).⁸⁰

Other paintings from this period (fig 3.7a & b) were created by men who, like Wimmitji, had strong familial and ceremonial links to the Papunya artists, perhaps even using materials gained from such kin.⁸¹ The Berndts attribute the emergence of Balgo painting

⁷⁸ This is Akerman's term (1979), see Chapter 1 for more detailed discussion of this.

⁷⁹ Most sources ascribe the existence of these early boards in Balgo to the agency of Mary Macha (Berndt 1986, Ryan 1989, Watson 2003, Nieass 2004, Laverty 2007), though Macha has explicitly denied ever providing people in Balgo with painting materials (Macha 2005). She or her agents would, however, *collect* such boards as were available when making trips to Balgo to support artefact and stone carving production.

⁸⁰ Dick Kimber (pers. comm. 2011) recalls seeing paintings in the Balgo store before this time, possibly in 1978.

⁸¹ The relationships between Balgo and Papunya Tula painters are too extensive to explore in depth here, but specific relationships are important to note for their likely causal connections. Johnny Yungut Tjupurula, another significant Papunya artist, was the brother of Donkeyman Lee Tjupurula, who was to become one of the most prominent of the early Balgo painters. Patrick Tjungurrayi, one of the most celebrated of Papunya Tula's current male artists, grew up and was married in Balgo, and remains a frequent seasonal resident there today. Patrick and his brother Brandy (Figure 3.7a & b) were influential figures in the early days of Balgo art, and have continued to paint for Papunya Tula (when resident in Kiwirrkura) as well.

practices in the late 1970s to processes of exchange between Aboriginal communities, wherein 'painting on sheets of ready-made board has been introduced from the Papunya-Yuendumu areas to Balgo...' (Berndt, Berndt & Stanton, 1998[1982]: 69). It is important to note that it was not simply mobility, but the changed residential patterns afforded by that mobility, which were influential in the evolution of Balgo painting practices. As noted chapter one, it was during this specific period of gestation (1976-1981) that Timmy Payungka was resident in Balgo, and Kimber (pers. comm. 2011) attributes much to his influence over the Balgo artists during this time. Johnson has also noted the influence of Anatjari Tjampitjinpa who was resident in Balgo in the early 1980s, where he 'instructed people about painting with canvas and acrylics' (2010: 86).



Figure 3.7a & b: first known works by Patrick Oloodoodi (l), 1978, and his brother Brandy Tjungurrayi (r), 1979.

Brandy Tjungurrayi's work (fig 3.7b) work was among the first contemporary Balgo paintings encountered by Ronald Berndt in 1979. He soon after commissioned a suite of secret/sacred boards to be executed by the men. Twenty-five years after the Birrundudu drawings were created the Balgo men were again using their visual artistry to communicate and exchange. Although Berndt was not, by his own estimation, the primary catalyst for broader production at this time, this commission may have influenced the *kinds* of production, and the way local men viewed their paintings. As Balgo people tentatively opened out their visual culture into the public realm, Berndt's specific solicitation of restricted men's *kuruwarri* perhaps reinforced a sense that paintings should

be oriented towards sacred designs and the negotiated revelation thereof. John Stanton (2005) has noted that those commissioned paintings were not only produced for Berndt, 'it was made quite clear that they were not for public consumption; they were done for "Prof" [Berndt]'.

This process of painting for Berndt no doubt complemented the more public socio-economic processes that preceded and followed such commissions⁸² - through whatever sales artists were beginning to negotiate with the store, government agencies, or other private parties. Painted by a large group of men in private away from the main camp, filmed, photographed and documented rigorously (Stanton 2005), the performative production of these paintings and the importance afforded them by Berndt underscored the emerging question of how value might be recognised and exchanged through art. These, the first 'collection' of Balgo paintings, are stored today in the Berndt Museum and, due to their secret/sacred status, are never on public display. Their invisibility in Balgo art histories, and in this thesis, is a testament to their nature, and to the complex category of Balgo art they underpin. Yet these paintings, which were explicitly restricted from public viewing, were painted at the same time and by the same men who were producing their early works for sale. A now rare example of such work is provided in Figure 3.8, photographed by Sylvie Poirier in November 1980.



Figure 3.8: Arthur Tjapanangka, image courtesy of Sylvie Poirier

⁸² Berndt seemingly made two commissions of Balgo paintings between 1979-81.

Painted on ply-board with ochres, this classical circle-line motif animated with sparse dotting was characteristic of men's early painting in Balgo. Whilst visually generic enough to be painted for public consumption, it is also highly likely the *kind* of men's design which was also painted for Berndt in the secret/sacred contexts. So whilst the painting of the sacred boards reinforced the ritual authority that underpinned these other burgeoning painting practices, it must also have contributed to the ambiguous status of paintings as emerging forms of public material culture for people in Balgo.

This unsettled status of paintings in Balgo came to a head in 1981 when, seemingly not long after Berndt's first commission, people in Balgo began to take exception to the hanging and sale of paintings through the local store (Nieass 2004). The public display of paintings, it seems, was now stopping certain people from entering the store; 'people were alarmed, they couldn't come in (to the store), because they (these paintings) were displayed' (Nieass 2004). While paintings had been on view in the store since 1978-1979, by 1981 their status as public objects had apparently changed. Whether restricted paintings started filtering into commercial production after Berndt's commission, or whether it simply provoked in people a heightened sense of the 'dangerous' ambiguity of the kinds of paintings being displayed in the store already, the status of painting in Balgo became an acutely sensitive issue, again.

The store episode seems to encompass something like a 'Papunya moment', when Aboriginal politics and heightened reflexivity entered into the consideration of what painting was to be. A decade before, the Papunya painters were criticised by their desert peers for releasing restricted designs into the public realm for non-initiates and women to view. This transgression and the associated politics had a considerable impact upon the form of Papunya paintings and future direction the art would take. It also created an acute sense of the public or intercultural status of these objects. The Balgo store incident is far from an identical situation, but just as the Papunya men had realised that their paintings were not simply disappearing into a white world, but continued to be seen, and *evaluated* by other Aboriginal people, so too did the public display *within* Balgo (in the store) create a watershed in addressing the public nature of these objects.

The primary response to this situation was to have a meeting between artists and senior community members to discuss the nature of these paintings, and their future.⁸³ Nieass, who attended this meeting, recalls the context of the day:

Here's some people (the store managers) that maybe quite rightfully think they were helping but, didn't really have a lot of understanding there... So we decided to go about it the right way, we had a meeting... we talked about what Papunya was doing... they'd (Balgo mob) been down there, and they also heard stories, and they were unhappy about them passing on some of those paintings to non-initiates... (Nieass 2004).

The meeting addressed the fundamental question, as Nieass recalls, 'about them painting pictures to go beyond them themselves- apart from being destroyed, painted and then destroyed...' (Nieass 2004); specific comparisons between ephemeral sand or body paintings and painting permanent images on canvas boards were central to discussions. In this way, Balgo people addressed the 'Papunya problem' explicitly— the issue of what could be painted and by whom, where it would go and who would see it— and undertook to regulate what could be negotiated into this permanent public form of material culture that would become 'Balgo art'. Painting, at this stage, remained only part of the broader practice of creating forms of material culture for exchange outside the authority and economy of the mission. Nieass' application to the Australia Council for funding, on behalf of the Balgo artists, reflects this; being based on a proposal to 'market carvings and artefacts, to record body painting and perform some public ceremonial sequences' (Watson 1996:37). In April 1981 the Balgo artists were awarded six months operational funding, which included a wage for Nieass, money for materials, and money to purchase artist's works in advance.⁸⁴ Although the operation was initially focussed on supporting the carvings and artefacts, painting became increasingly prominent part of people's practice.

⁸³ This meeting was attended by current and future Balgo artists such as Sunfly, Mick Tjakamarra, Margaret Yinjuru Bumblebee, Nancy Naninurra, Susie Bootja Bootja, Jimmy Njamme, Nellie Njamme, and younger men such as Bruce Njamme and Mark Moora. The participation of so many women in this meeting is significant. Although there are only records of men physically painting during this period (either for sale or for Berndt), the complementary authority of Balgo women clearly remained integral to the social semantics and regulation of those forms of material production.

⁸⁴ This economic aspect of being able to pay artists was important to the viability of art practice even in the beginning. Nieass wanted funding to pay artists 'so that the artist could have a some kind of contribution



Figures 3.9 a-c. Paintings by Jimmy Njamme (l), Sunfly (c), and Mick Gill (r) produced during Warwick Nieass and Sylvie Poirier's time in Balgo. Images courtesy of Sylvie Poirier.

Paintings did not, however, become an instantly public or settled category of objects. In August, 1981, there were no 'traditional' paintings exhibited in the first formal display of Balgo 'art' when the products of this fledgling enterprise were displayed at the Shinju Matsuri festival in Broome (Macha 2005, Watson 1996:37). Lingering insecurity about the ambiguous status of cultural designs painted on canvas meant that the Balgo artists did not want any hung in this public context. The first exhibition of Balgo art, therefore, was comprised almost entirely of what was felt to be the less problematic carvings.⁸⁵ The categorical 'openness' of stone carvings, their commercial success, and their place in the development of Balgo art was, however, fleeting. The future of stone carving in Balgo was curtailed by the death of its primary practitioner, Sam Willikati Tjamptijin. Willikati was so closely associated with that practice, and with its promotion into the public and commercial realms, that his death precipitated a complete cessation of stone carving in Balgo (Watson 1996: 35, Macha 2005). This wasn't, it seems, a simple mortuary avoidance practice, whereby places or ritual songs or dances associated closely with a recently deceased person are avoided for a period of time. Commercial stone carving was permanently stopped. Local discourse surrounding the death focussed strongly on the old man's pivotal role in stone carving practices: 'People felt they shouldn't have been

towards their art, so they're not waiting around for months at a time waiting for their art to be sold.' (Nieass 2004)

⁸⁵ There were also a handful of landscape paintings that Balgo painters had produced through the adult education classes, through the display was dominated by carvings.

touching that rock' (Macha 2005). The local interpretation was that the carving and selling of stone – stone left by the Tingarri ancestors- had entailed an unforeseen cultural transgression which may have been related to the old man's death.⁸⁶

Balgo people clearly wrestled in these early years with the implications and meanings of negotiating their 'cultural' production into the intercultural domain of art. After Willikati's death and the cessation of stone carving, this negotiation was increasingly manifest in the production of paintings. But paintings themselves had still not been formally 'opened' into the public realm. This changed in November 1981. Throughout 1981 artists continued to paint at Nieass and Poirier's house in the community, the mission authorities were aware of this, and became increasingly interested in the role that art could play in bridging the divide between 'culture' and Christianity. This interest resulted in the commissioning of the Jubilee or Luurnpa Banner (Figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10. The Luurnpa Banner

I have previously discussed this painting as the first 'public' painting produced by the men of Balgo, and it is necessary to weave that thread back into this current narrative. Until this point in local history, Balgo paintings were never directed *at* Balgo audiences. They were either made for Ronald Berndt's eyes only, in gender-restricted painting groups with Warwick Nieass, or for private sale to outsiders. The airport mural, whilst encouraged by the church, was in its own way still directed at outsiders, and still restricted within Balgo (i.e. not for women). The ambiguity of these forms of material culture, and their hesitant, faltering uptake in Balgo, was underscored by the fact that, in producing them, people also

⁸⁶ Interestingly, in the mid 1980's Adult education staff, unaware of why carving had stopped, tried to restart the practice: 'we at the adult centre were looking for something for the young men to do. But it didn't take off at all.' (Dempsey 2005) The reticence of people to take up stone carving again, even after several years, was likely tied to this greater cultural imperative.

found themselves to be reproducing social restrictions, eliciting protocols and negotiations of cultural boundaries. Even the seemingly unproblematic stone carvings eventually became, in Balgo, a source of cultural and categorical conflict. The Luurnpa banner cut through that ambiguity and brought some categorical resolution to the question of art.

The painting itself is the work of many hands, each marking the canvas in distinct ways. It exhibits the primary elements of ceremonial aesthetics; the ochre palette, the iconography of concentric circles, the connecting lines and meanders, even the dotting used to emulate the balls of vegetable down used in ritual contexts. The ochres used at the time were



sourced by different men from their respective countries (Nieass 2004). As they were mixed with acrylic paints, the songs for those countries were sung (Watson 2003:128) to invest the new medium with the authority and continuity of the Tjukurrpa and the land it depicted; to invest the painting of this Country with the power of Country itself. This ritualised blending of the ochres and acrylic paint underscores the agile cultural alchemy of this artistic innovation, making possible the dynamic contemporary art movement that would flourish in its wake.

Figure 3.11 Jimmy Njamme and Dominic Martin flank the Luurnpa banner at Father Peile’s Jubilee celebration, 1981. Photo courtesy of Warwick Nieass.

The product of the unquestionable collective cultural authority of the senior men, it was boldly directed outwards to a cross-gender, cross-generational, and cross-cultural audience of 1500 people at the Jubilee (figure 3.11). No painting in Balgo had been so explicitly important and so unambiguously ‘open’ to everyone. No painting had been

directed, until now, at the people of Balgo (black and white) as its audience. The painting of the Luurnpa Banner was the confluence of all the issues, conflicts and influences not only of the time, but of Balgo's cross-cultural history. Although this was clearly not the first manifestation of Balgo art, it was a watershed in Balgo art history.

Having painted the Luurnpa banner, however, the men did not stop. The energy of painting for a public audience spilled over the sides of the commissioned work and onto four other smaller banners (Figure 3.12) that weren't for the Jubilee and weren't for sale but were simply painted because the men involved wanted to paint more; they 'wanted more stories so I rolled down more canvas- they just carried on painting.' (Nieass 2004) In this way the Luurnpa Banner can be seen as an exemplar of processes that occurred elsewhere in the desert (such as the Yuendumu Doors and the Papunya Mural) where major public collaborations released energies around the development of painting practices.



Figure 3.12 The smaller banners painted by the men after finishing the large banner for Father Peile's Jubilee. Photo courtesy of Warwick Nieass.

Soon after the Luurnpa Banner heralded the public birth of Balgo painting, the government-appointed community administrator recommended against the continuation

of the art project (Watson 1996:38). Funding was not renewed by the Australia Council, the cook's position was discontinued by the mission and, now unemployed, Nieass and Poirier were consequently unable to remain in the community. Nieass returned independently, however, to facilitate two painting workshops with the men in January and July of 1982. These workshops were conducted, again, away from the community; on the site that was to become the grounds of the first custom built art centre nearly 20 years later. The images produced in these contexts (Figure 3.13), in the first half of 1982, encompass a concentrated extension of the creative negotiations that punctuated the previous few years.



Figure 3.13a & b. Works produced by men during Nieass' 1982 workshops. Artists unknown.

After the flood of enthusiasm and pride that stemmed from the Jubilee celebrations, these next images (Figure 3.13a & b)) reveal the processes of men figuring out what it was that they could paint themselves, what stories they could tell, paint and sell. It was also, after the collaborative authority (and security) that sanctioned the Jubilee banners, perhaps a process of figuring out what it was that they could paint as individual artists. With the diminishing physical scale of the artworks produced in this six month period – moving from the monumental Luurnpa banner, to the four other banners, and then these small canvas boards - there was a correlated increase in personal accountability, risk and reward for each work. These individual paintings marked another kind of beginning on the continuum of Balgo art's becoming. They are also able to be interpreted here in this ethnographic art history as another kind of *ending*. Whilst people continued to paint outside these recorded contexts, and continued to seek new avenues to painting, there are few records of any

paintings produced for sale from 1982-1985. These paintings therefore mark a coherent end to what I identify as the first, 'classical', period of Balgo painting. This period was defined by certain characteristics which distinguish it from painting periods that followed:

1. painting was restricted to men
2. paintings were executed in private, gender-restricted contexts
3. paintings were not intended for public display in Balgo⁸⁷
4. painting form and content was restricted to the translation of ritual body and sand painting designs, and dreaming narratives

Clearly, throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, various influences at Balgo began to stimulate an increased awareness of the possibility of producing forms of material culture as objects of exchange. The church, through Peile, Hevern and Sr Alice, in the painting of the airport mural and Jubilee banners, were encouraging of the practice. Anthropologists were encouraging the production of secret/sacred material, while the evolving market – through government support and private interest- was encouraging the production of material culture for sale. Important in all this were the relationships with Papunya artists in particular, who were already painting for the market and able to encourage Balgo painters and allay their concerns. Although the evolution of these practices was shepherded through by events and influential individuals, the thread of this practice, of using visual communication and material culture to engage cross-culturally, was maintained and explored by Balgo people. Painting and the production of images and artefacts more generally, were always part of the strategic engagement and dialogue in which the people of Balgo have variously understood themselves to be engaged. The records of this dialogue are, compared to places like Papunya, scarce.⁸⁸ The images we do have of these paintings - in the Balgo church, the mural at the airport, and the handful of early boards for which we have images - remain as markers of an Aboriginal engagement

⁸⁷ Except the Luurnpa Banner.

⁸⁸ These earliest Balgo Boards are a story yet to be told. Unlike the highly prized correlates from Papunya, these paintings are not circulating in art galleries or being resold for monumental sums on the auction circuit. Those that remain in tact are probably in the collections of individual Kartiya, missionaries, medical staff and school teachers who lived, worked or passed through the region. They will, as they resurface in time, no doubt reveal other dimensions of Balgo art that elude the present study.

with transforming cultural contexts. These records of exchange, before the intrusion of explicit market considerations and a formal industry in the 1980s, are acts of translation, artefacts of engagement.

Adult Education and the second phase of Balgo Art: 1982-1986

While people in Balgo continued to seek different avenues through which to use their art in exchange, this art and the nature of that exchange underwent significant changes in the years that followed. There are, between 1983 and 1985, few works that resemble the paintings executed from 1979 to 1982. Christian themes, figuration and experimentation with new media came to dominate artistic production in Balgo. This period, preceding as it did the first public exhibition of Balgo paintings in 1986, can be usefully framed as the 'second phase' of Balgo art history. The defining feature of this period was the developing relationship between Balgo artists and the new Catholic Adult Education Centre. The centre focussed its attentions on adult literacy, but saw the art as a complementary to developing confidence and Aboriginal participation in post-primary education. Younger men and women were encouraged to draw, paint and develop other skills in the classroom environment. This skill-development articulated with the Catholic charter of the centre, and the practice of these skills was frequently combined with the learning and representation of Bible stories. The older Balgo residents who had forged the early painting practices were not prominent in these processes. Consequently, a different kind of painting emerged in Balgo.

The next thing that really happened was, as regards the art... the following easter... Matthew Gill came in and said we want to do a big painting for the church... (Dempsey 2004).

The Luurnpa banner was commissioned by the mission staff to be a Christian work using traditional iconography. That notion initially held no traction or coherence for the senior men, but the idea seemed to resonate with younger men who remained more tentative and unsure about their authority to paint Tjukurrpa publicly. Foremost among these young

artists was Matthew Gill. So while his father, Mick Gill Tjakamarra, and senior men were painting images like the Luurnpa banner, which assert the ancestral narrative and authority over the lands on which the mission sat, Matthew was trying to reconcile this authority with the Bible stories he grew up with as a ward of the mission. He sought to explore this in various painting projects, the first of which was created for the community Easter celebrations of 1982 (fig 3.14).⁸⁹

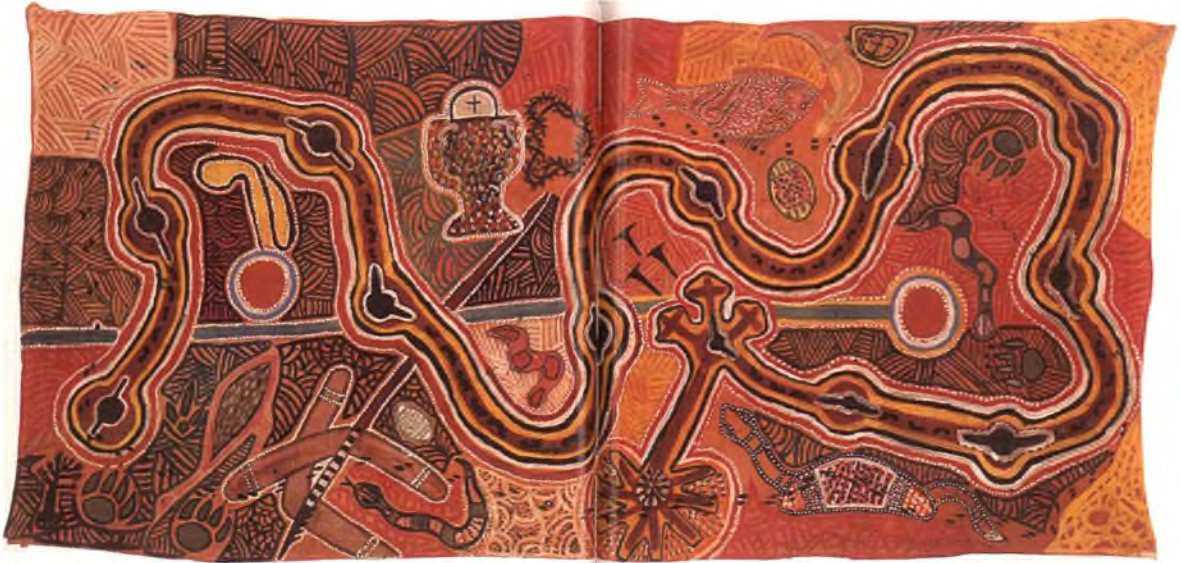


Figure 3.14. The Stations of the Cross painting, 1982. Matthew Gill, Greg Mosquito, Ronnie Tax, John Lee and Gary Njamme (and others).

In contrast to the Luurnpa Banner, the painting of this work, whilst including older men, was overseen by Matthew Gill and Greg Mosquito, two younger mission-raised men. Mosquito laid the itinerary down, from the last supper to Calvary, indicating each station with a stylised 'camp'. From there the work developed collaboratively:

One of the Njammes came in, and he put his bit in there, he put his goanna, and this fella here put his snake and then they said "we'll have to fill it in", so they put that design in the middle... (Dempsey 2004)

⁸⁹ Note that this painting was actually conceived and executed between the two painting workshops facilitated by Nieass in January and July 1982. Without wanting to make an unnatural separation between the two phases of Balgo art, I have also needed to compose thematic narratives as well as historical ones, and it makes sense to discuss this work in the context of the emerging relationship with adult education, rather than in the context of the workshops. This six month period from Jan-July 1982, wherein the 'classical' and 'Christian' periods of painting overlap, only serves to further reinforce the early complexity and multiplicity of Balgo art.

What is most striking about this huge banner, which still hangs in the Church at Balgo, is the way in which Christ's journey to Calvary mirrors local iconographies of ancestral agents going into and out of the earth, creating waterholes at each significant location along the way. The painting is also evocative of the serpentine imagery so dominant in desert visual systems. In this light the Stations of the Cross become a kind of ancestral itinerary of the creator snake-Christ, his tongue forking at Calvary, bringing a moral order to the contemporary 'intercultural' cosmos. This serpentine syncretism is one of the significant creative and theological achievements of Balgo artists at this time. It undoubtedly resonates with Tjukurrpa associated with *Warnayarra*, a local manifestation of the continentally ubiquitous Rainbow Serpent, and also with ecological and cosmological understandings of water that are more localised still.⁹⁰ The prominence of water in Christian mythology and symbolism is unsurprisingly a point of creative traction in the syncretism of Balgo artists.⁹¹ In painting of the first baptisms in Balgo (fig 3.15), Matthew Gill wrote:



*This painting was done for Easter. Many people were baptized then. Here we see the Holy Spirit coming down from God through Jesus to the person Baptised. This water I collected from different waterholes where our old people drank long ago. When this water is blessed it will give new life, the life of Jesus our Brother.*⁹²

Figure 3.15. Matthew Gill Baptism painting

⁹⁰ The snake features in another significant work of this period, Matthew Gill's painting of 'motherhood', designed to silhouette the carved stone statue of Mary in the Balgo church. Whereas in Christianity the snake is primarily associated with evil, Gill's depiction of motherhood evokes the *lingka* (snake) as the essentially creative, even nurturing, presence in the world. Daniel Vachon (2006) has written an insightful account of the overarching relationship between Kalpurtu (ancestral snakes) and Aboriginal relationships to place and water in the Northern Great Sandy Desert. Whilst his research is region-specific, much of its detail, and much more of the insight it affords, is relevant to the people in Balgo who identify with Country and people close to, and overlapping, those discussed by Vachon.

⁹¹ In 1983 a group of younger men expressed this same symbolic transposition around the life-giving sustenance of water, painting a banner for use at a regional church meeting in which Jesus was painted as a waterhole. The painting showed the footprints of all the Kimberley people (represented by the tracks of their various totemic animals) converging on a waterhole with a cross inside it, where they would find rest and refreshment [Warlayirti Artists reference # 83347]

⁹² Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference # 83184

Such paintings were increasingly created in Balgo to commemorate, accompany or explain events in the life of the community- though admittedly these were oriented towards the Christian calendar of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and other events such as wedding and baptisms. So whilst considerable changes were occurring in the form and content of local painting, perhaps the primary continuity from the Luurnpa Banner was the use of paintings *within* Balgo. Returning to the first Church painting in 1982 (fig 3.14), it is important to address the changing social contexts and practices in which these new forms were enmeshed, being both *produced and consumed* in localised social contexts. Of that *Stations of the Cross* painting, Sr. Alice recounts:

We used it for good Friday... we just put that up outside the church and we went around the houses with the Stations of the Cross and we came up there and Greg Mosquito told the story of the Stations of the Cross and that (the painting) was the 'reading'... we didn't need to go to a book, we had that reading... There was tremendous joy in that. It was a new thing, a new era, and it was *their* thing (Dempsey 2004).

Sister Alice identifies a process here whereby painting had developed, from its restricted and/or economic orientation, a logic internal to the life of the Balgo community. During this period following the public revelation of the Luurnpa banner, the audience for Balgo art was primarily Balgo people themselves. Like the visual traditions in sand and body art from which it was drawn, these paintings were used to communicate narratives in public forums. On one level, these narratives were translations of Christian stories; but the mere telling of these stories by Balgo people instead of missionaries, and using Aboriginal visual traditions, undoubtedly elicited intimate historical meanings beyond the Christian narrative. Such paintings tell Christian stories, but they also tell the story of how people in Balgo were beginning to negotiate their own identities and values within rapidly changing social contexts and relations with the church. As the Church became divested of administrative power over people's lives, Balgo people had to reconstitute the place of Christianity in their lives. The political devolution of mission authority seems to have gone hand in hand, historically if not causally, with an increased Aboriginal participation and identification with the church. The efflorescence of syncretic or Christian artworks by

mission-raised painters during 1982-84 is testament to that process and that period in time.

Because of the orientation of the adult education centre through which such painting practices were now supported, these paintings punctuate a period in which the commercial viability of Balgo painting had become sidelined. While the intercultural exchange between younger people and the mission staff flourished, Balgo people clearly felt that the capacity to enter into broader forms of exchange through their art had stalled. This was reinforced by their increasing mobility and travel, and an acute awareness of the commercial potential being realised in other communities (Farrelly 2005).

They didn't want to be left out of this exciting development and so they were very keen to do the art. And this coalesced with the ambitions of the adult education centre who saw the art as a way of encouraging people in the literacy training program. (Stanton 2005)

Whilst educational staff saw art as an entrée to broader literacy programs, some Balgo artists saw the literacy program as an opportunity to rekindle institutional support for their own art practices. In late 1983, an extension was being added to the Adult Education centre in Balgo. Noting this immanent new space, Matthew Gill approached Sr Alice, to ask whether the men could return and take up their painting practices again.⁹³

That was kind of the beginning you know... the conversation about people coming in was just us walking across the oval and I was on my way back to the convent and he (Gill) was all excited about this idea he had: and I said to him, "what kind of paintings?", so he brought in one to show me what it was like... (Dempsey 2005)

That Gill had a painting ready to show Sr. Alice is testament to the fact that Balgo artists continued to paint, and search out avenues of exchange, even when formal arrangements in Balgo did not exist. While Balgo men were encouraged in their practice by relations to Papunya painters, Balgo women were inspired by the success of the female painters at Yuendumu in the early 1980s.⁹⁴ Women were increasingly keen to participate, and to open their painting practice out into a public arena. The women also negotiated this desire

⁹³ It is worth noting that the senior men used one of the rooms in the Adult Education centre to paint the Luurnpa banner in 1981. It would have seemed, then, the logical place for them to reconstitute their painting practice.

⁹⁴ The women who dominated early Balgo painting - such as Nancy Naninurra, Minnie and Sarah Napanangka, Dora Napaltjarri, Margaret Bumblebee, Patricia Lee - were Warlpiri women living in Balgo. They would have been acutely aware, through travel and kinship ties, of the Yuendumu women's painting success in 1983.

through one of their younger mission-raised artists, Gracie Greene. Gracie then consulted Matthew Gill, who in turn took the proposition to Sr. Alice:

After the extension (to Adult Education) was put up, he (Gill) saw there was space and room. He said to me about getting the women in... and I was about saying 'no', because I thought it was a men's thing, and he said *yuwayi* ('its ok')... and for me that was the beginning of the women's painting (Dempsey 2005).

While few records of paintings from this period remain, different kinds of painting practices continued. Father Peile took a group of men out to paint at Old Mission in April 1984 (Farrelly 1985a), and Morice Stephens, an artist who was assisting Adult Ed with accounting, went on several day trips with small groups of people, to paint watercolours and acrylics in June 1984 (Stephens 1984).



Figure 3.16. Morice Stephens on a painting workshop with Benedict Mosquito, Gerard Mosquito, Henry Polly (and one unnamed person). Image courtesy Wirrimanu Adult Education and Training Centre.

Recognising the desire for increased artistic engagement, Adult Education brought in another artist, Tony Jones, to provide more dedicated support to the emerging painters in July 1985. Eileen Farrelly, who was working with Adult Education, wrote at the time that these workshops seemed to have 'raised the awareness of the people, and our awareness as to their art potential' (Farrelly 1985b). People's desire to paint became an increasingly

prominent part of daily events in Adult Education, and women, for the first time, began to take a more prominent and public approach to the place of painting in their own practices:

The old women are recording some of their stories in song and paint. We take a sized piece of calico (80x100cm). On it, the best painters paint their breast and arm decorations, the design of the coolamon or board that they carry in the dance and the story of the dance in symbols. At the same time they will be singing and we record this...This will all be happening at the back of the classroom with maybe half a dozen old ladies making sure it is correct, while in the front other people are doing maths or English. (Farrelly 1985b)

Farrelly's correspondence from this time suggests the enthusiasm for painting that was reinvigorated by the 1985 painting workshops seems to have spilled out over the structure of those contexts: much in the same way that the men kept on painting after they had completed the Luurnpa Banner years earlier.⁹⁵

A catalytic series of events in late 1985 seems to have harnessed this energy and potential, and the myriad beginnings of the previous decade, into a sustained and focussed idea of what 'Balgo art' could be. The first of these events was a visit to Papunya in October by a group of 14 Balgo men,⁹⁶ who were travelling through on their way to the handover of Uluru (Ayers Rock), accompanied by church staff. The Papunya painters were preparing to send paintings overseas for an exhibition and were animated in discussing the Dreamings shared with their western visitors.⁹⁷ It seems the Balgo men were energised by these conversations, reassured by the evidence of how politically resolved this 'public' art had become, and impressed by the financial success and recognition that the Papunya painters

⁹⁵ Farrelly wrote: 'We are quite excited about the outburst of painting that has resulted from Tony Jones' visit. Old men- and young- are coming in and painting vigorously... It is lovely to watch them working, discussing, singing. Sometimes they work with brushes, often with bits of twigs which they bring in. It is something very precious we have the opportunity to see happening.' (Farrelly 1985a)

⁹⁶ These men included Dominic Martin, Luke Dingle, John Lee, Michael Mudgedell, Bruce Njamme, Dennis Njamme, Peter Njamme, Bede Lee, Ashley Brown, Paul Nyangapa, Joseph Yukenbarri and Brian Gordon. See the photo at figure 3.17.

⁹⁷ "One after another (painting) was rolled out for us and the men stood around fascinated. Particularly with the elders they related the symbols to their dreaming and became very excited when a particular painting meant something special to them. Many of the works were being selected for an exhibition in Canada where they could be sold for prices in the thousands of dollars. The men are protected in that they have a group "Tula [sic] Artists inc" to manage finances. Our own Balgo men... are only at a stage where these people were 15 years ago (Farrelly 1985d).

were clearly enjoying. A recurring theme in the recollections of the kartiya present was the excitement and pride generated by the mutual recognition of shared or related Tjukurrpa in the Papunya men's paintings (Farrelly 1985d, Dempsey 2005). This sense of pan-desert relatedness, and of the emerging connection between 'Aboriginal art' and what Balgo people themselves could paint, could only have been further reinforced by the events that followed this meeting.

Following the Papunya visit, the Balgo contingent attended the ceremonies and celebrations for the handover of Uluru: the symbolic and official return of Uluru into the control of its traditional owners. The Balgo men had travelled down as representatives of their community, Wirrimanu, which was itself founded on the Luurn Dreaming track. The place where Luurn 'stopped', going into the ground for the final time on his ancestral journey of creation, was Uluru.⁹⁸ A local traditional owner, Richard Uluru, showed the men around the area and discussed with them the detail of their shared Luurnpa Dreaming as it manifested there in his Country (Farrelly 1985d). While geographically and historically distant from the people and immediate area of Uluru, Balgo people had always been cognisant of their relationship to Uluru through that shared ancestral heritage. For Balgo men raised on the mission, and yet schooled in the Luurnpa Dreaming, their inclusion and implication in the political handover must have been significant on many levels. To commemorate the occasion, and to signify the Balgo people's connection to these historic and political events, the men carried a painting of Luurn to the top of Uluru (Figure 3.17).⁹⁹

Whilst the gender separation that defined early Balgo art practices might seem apparent in the all-male contingent here, it is significant that the painting they chose to take was painted by a young woman, Gracie Green.

⁹⁸ Poirier (2005) gives a fuller account of the Luurnpa narrative in 'A World of Relationships'. Farrelly (1985d) also documents a version of this story, connecting Balgo and Uluru through the Luurn tjukurrpa, as told to her by the men at the handover.

⁹⁹ The artists' story for this painting is given as follows: "It is a dreaming story. The Kingfisher bird (Luurn) was gathering all the people. He was wanting the people to follow him. He was taking the people water. It took them to the berry tree near the creek in Balgo. The kingfisher took off and all the people followed eastward to Ayers Rock. That is where the bird stopped." (Warlayirti Artists reference # 84152). There have been erroneous reports (Johnson 1996:76) that the original "Luurnpa Banner" was taken to the top of Uluru, but as the photo at figure 3.17 shows, this was not the case.



Fig 3.17. Balgo Men with painting of Luurnpa on top of Uluru, 1985. Photo courtesy of Brian McCoy

Furthermore, unlike the previous Luurnpa Banner painted for Fr Peile's jubilee, this painting was entirely figurative: encompassing the changing dimensions of painting — in terms of gender, generation, and style—that had occurred in Balgo between their respective production. While the visual lineage of these two paintings could not be further apart, the way they were used by Balgo people to mobilise their authority and identity in dedicated socio-political circumstances is remarkably similar. While the Luurnpa Banner of 1981 was used to demonstrate Balgo people's authority within the historical contexts of Balgo, the 1985 painting was used to demonstrate that authority within (and in relationship to) the broader currents of social and symbolic history being played out during handover of Uluru. In these circumstances, and in the relationship between them, these Luurnpa paintings can be seen as emergent cultural forms that were mobilised in response to the changing contexts of life for people in Balgo. Both paintings speak to the ways in which Balgo people used their own image-making practices in presenting themselves to an audience within dynamic and expanding social fields.

Painting towards a public

It seems the visit to Papunya was catalytic in galvanising people's ambition to paint their stories and engage with the broader Australian society through an exchange of value. Upon their return, the idea of mounting the first public exhibition of Balgo paintings became a priority that consumed the artists and Adult Education staff. Prompted by Matthew Gill, Eileen Farrelly and Sr. Alice sought the advice of Ronald and Catherine Berndt as to how such an undertaking might be achieved. The Berndts visited the community again in October 1985, and were likewise excited at the renewed energy behind painting. They showed interest in helping to organise a major public exhibition of Balgo works (Farrelly 2005). An enthusiastic advocate for Balgo people and their emergent forms of cultural production, Ronald Berndt was influential in convincing the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) that the Balgo show should be hosted there.¹⁰⁰ The *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* exhibition was slated to open in December 1986. Berndt sent John Stanton to Balgo to support the cataloguing of works and broader preparations required to mount the exhibition. Painters had their portraits taken, their paintings were photographed and catalogued, and their stories for those paintings were recorded on videotape. In these and other ways, Stanton's role served to cultivate and reinforce a concrete sense of this outside audience to which the Balgo artists were addressing themselves. More explicit processes were also undertaken: Stanton explained the public contexts of the exhibition to people, seeking to cultivate local understanding about how the works would be displayed and who would see them, thereby ensuring that only 'open' paintings were included (Stanton 2005). Noting that 'it was an issue; we talked about this quite a lot. People knew that if it was going to be displayed it could only be stuff where

¹⁰⁰ The Berndts role here in ushering Balgo art into the public eye was significant. While Balgo art would have emerged under its own steam in some other way eventually, Adult Education staff were adamant that the exhibition would not have happened without the Berndts. Without Ronald's insistent advocacy at AGWA, it seems unlikely that such a large collection of works from Balgo (hitherto unknown as an artistic community) would have received such unqualified support (for unsighted works) from a major institution.

there wouldn't be an issue over this,' Stanton's (2005) recollections of these discussions echo Warwick Nieass' observations from 1981.

These processes of negotiating a public art form had effectively been going on in Balgo since the late 1970s. Now they were accelerated and intensified by the increasing popularity of painting practices. Between 1983 and the first exhibition of paintings at AGWA, around 500 paintings were recorded through Adult Education; the vast majority of which were painted in 1986. Throughout the production of these works the negotiations about what could be painted, translated for cross-cultural exchange, and by who, were played out. From late 1985 onwards, they were played out in reference to the concrete circumstances of the upcoming exhibition.

Having spent considerable energy over previous years discussing and debating what they themselves could paint, under the spectre of the exhibition senior men began to place restrictions on what others could and should paint. In this way, painting arguably provided senior men with a new medium through which to exercise and invigorate enduring cultural hierarchies. As noted previously, older men initially tempered the younger men's enthusiasm to start painting by warning them that this painting they'd seen at Papunya was, like ritual, 'proper hard work' (McCoy 2005, pers. comm). While the young men were prohibited from painting certain designs, at other times they were instructed on which designs to paint without being given full access to the story they were painting (Stanton 2005). Poirier (pers. comm. 2006) recalls the experience of one younger Tjakamarra, now deceased, who was a prominent early artist. Upon asking him what he had painted, Tjakamarra told her he did not know yet, the old men had only told him *how* to paint the story, not the story itself. This experience, to differing degrees, was arguably that of all younger painters

The increasingly evident entanglement of acrylic painting in Balgo society was no doubt reinforced by senior people's vision that they, like the staff at Adult Education, could use painting to leverage and develop their own pedagogical agendas. These agendas were partly directed at outsiders, who by seeing these paintings might come to understand and respect the authority from which they issue; but it was also directed internally at younger

people in Balgo. A comparative situation was observed by Dussart in the early 1980s at Yuendumu.

Clearly, acrylic painting was becoming a site of negotiation for the reestablishment of socialities between the young and the old. Senior painters... hoped to readjust through acrylic paintings the obligations of younger kin towards the Dreaming and the land as well as intergenerational ritual obligations (Dussart 2006: 6).

In Balgo acrylic painting was harnessed as an emergent cultural process through which younger people could both learn their heritage, and help to make that heritage understandable to outsiders. Painting, as at Yuendumu, was becoming a site of complex cultural agendas. Poirier (pers. comm. 2006) felt at the time that older people in Balgo seemed to envisage painting as a new form of cultural transmission that complemented the ritual resurgence of recent years. Such transmission, in Balgo, is inherently complex. The capacity to give knowledge to another person is highly correlated to the status, power and authority of individual men, and indeed the hierarchical structure of desert society (Myers 1980, 1986). As such, the transmission of knowledge and authority is strictly regulated by older men who, in fulfilling their obligations to pass on knowledge, need to avoid divesting themselves of authority and power in the process. Transmission in Balgo, therefore, in acrylic painting as in ceremonial life, is inextricably bound to the regulation and restriction of knowledge and authority. This explains why, as Stanton noted at the time, the senior men were on one hand encouraging, and on the other determined not to let younger men paint certain themes, or know exactly what they were painting.

The men talked a lot amongst themselves about what they could or couldn't paint and were even more determined that some of the young fellows, like Matthew Gill, could not paint certain things... those younger men were much more constrained in what they couldn't paint. The older men could paint them, but they didn't want to reveal publicly the full stories... It was possible in their eyes to reveal some of the paintings, even though the meaning of some elements was restricted; as long as that meaning wasn't conveyed it didn't really matter about the image being shown (Stanton 2005).

This 'protection' of younger men, or women in general, from painting dangerous things would have been inextricable from the men's own need to conceal as they revealed, to protect their own power and authority even as they sought to pass it on.¹⁰¹ The younger painters in Balgo were, despite their deference, well equipped to deal creatively with these tensions; they had restrictions placed upon them, but they also navigated artistically around these in their own ways in preparation for the AGWA exhibition. Using figuration, landscape and Christian themes to neutralise cultural concerns, they produced a diverse body of work throughout this time. (These kinds of painting are discussed in subsequent chapters.)

Women's painting

While young men were cautiously enabled by their seniors, Women were enthusiastically encouraged to paint by the men. They were, however, prohibited from painting designs that they shared with the men (Watson 1996:52), and encouraged rather to draw on their gendered repertoire of more open 'hunting and gathering' stories.

That's why the men encouraged the women to paint quite a lot because they thought it was safer that the women painted because the women's paintings tended to focus on hunting and gathering activities - as well as Dreaming stuff - but mainly hunting and gathering activity (Stanton 2005).

So while women were openly encouraged to paint for the exhibition, some cultural clauses prevailed upon them and no doubt impinged somewhat upon what they painted for the AGWA show. The extent to which women only painted 'hunting and gathering'-type paintings, or adhered to the discursive restrictions of the men, is arguable; as women clearly drew from their own repertoire of Law narratives.

¹⁰¹ Myers' paper 'The cultural basis of politics in Pintupi life' (1980) provides an ethnographic interpretation along these lines in relation to the more general structure of power relations and transmission in desert society.



Paintings such as Figure 3.18 reveal that women selected their painting content with considerable autonomy and authority. From such evidence it could be argued that some women used this medium to specifically explore those aspects of women's law that overlap with, and even exceed, men's authority.

Figure 3.18 Margaret Bumblebee, *Womens Law and Mens Law*, 1985

Above and beyond the kin-related and gendered politics of what they represented, Women also explored and authored their own restrictions on what they would paint, how it should appear visually, and what they would divulge about certain images. One painting in particular, *Witchetty Grubs* (Figure 3.19), encompasses the complex questions of authority and agency with which women conducted their own negotiations around the early status of Balgo art. This work was painted primarily by a young woman, Gracie Greene, who was supervised in this process by the custodians of that Tjukurrpa. The painting is essentially a composite of two paintings which are stylistically differentiated.¹⁰² When the story was finally given to camera, one half of the painting was described in depth, outlining the story of two sisters out looking for 'Witchetty grubs', and how one sister became lost. The other half of the painting was glossed over elusively. Stanton's memory of that process confirms what appears on the footage:

(T)he story of 'the little girl who got lost' - its only about one half of the painting and the other one is mysteriously... the other half of the sheet - which has a completely different painting on it but juxtaposed- is just ignored in the public statements about that particular work. The propinquity of those two images was undeniable, but one was ignored and one was fully explained (Stanton 2005).

¹⁰² This interpretation is corroborated by the fact that the two halves of the work on calico were, around the same time, painted separately as individual works on boards. See Warlayirti Artists catalogue references #113.3 and # 86116.



Figure 3.19 “Witchetty Grubs” Gracie Green and others, 1986

The relationship between the two images, whilst asserted visually, was elided discursively. When painted separately, both images were able to be narrated (at least in restricted form), as their catalogue certificates attest. Yet when brought into visual juxtaposition, the semantic *relationship itself* was deemed to be too dangerous to reveal.¹⁰³ The dialectical character of such paintings – wherein revelation is bound to concealment- was as prominent in women’s art as men’s. Such processes are, of course, dependent upon the particular audience being addressed, and this painting demonstrates the multiple audiences (and levels of interpretation) potentially available to any Balgo painting.

¹⁰³ At least to certain audiences. For this reason, among others, I do not discuss the story for the other half of the painting, or its relationship to the Witchetty Grub Tjukurrrpa. Despite it being analytically possible to do so, it does not seem culturally appropriate to discuss the details when clearly that explicit relationship was the source of the women’s own caution. The fact of the relationship, and the way women manoeuvred around its meanings, is at present the only appropriate point of discussion (for this researcher) here. In the contexts of the broader arguments of this thesis it is worth speculating, however, that part of the power of the painting is bound up in the way that it reveals the very processes of abstraction that mediate knowledge of the Tjukurrrpa.

Video recorded by Stanton at the time shows that Gracie Greene also gave the story for this painting, but was surrounded by a room full of senior women who informed and sanctioned this process of translation.¹⁰⁴ They also discussed and narrated the story between themselves before Gracie officially 'gave' it to the camera. During this process of discussion, however, footage reveals the women were visibly anxious when a local man entered the room at Adult Education. He wanted to pick up one of his own paintings from behind the women, but was shooed away, being told they were discussing a women's painting. The video shows the women were thereafter unsettled, with one eye on the door, and clearly anxious that men might hear what they were saying, or might enter the room while they were talking about the painting. In 1986, Stanton, and the non-Aboriginal public he embodied through that camera lens, was only one audience for this work. The video reveals the women and their young apprentice, Gracie Greene, as an audience unto themselves, negotiating – with different levels of authority and knowledge - what could be said, and who could say it. Other women looked on silently and learned. The Balgo men, lurking outside the painting room, were another potential audience whose exclusion from hearing the story was arguably part of the performative power of the painting *within Balgo*.

This performative quality of the painting was realised more concretely, shortly afterwards, through incorporation into a ritual sequence. Part of the preparations for the AGWA exhibition involved recording painting stories on video. Through this process, it was decided that the women would perform the ritual sequence represented in one of their paintings and that this would be recorded as well. This video was to be played at the AGWA exhibition, so that kartiya would better understand the cultural bases of the paintings. The women chose to perform the ritual segment of the witchetty grub/little girl lost painting discussed above.

(T)hey acted that out for the sake of illustrating the story of just one half of one of the paintings.... It was thought to be the best one to use because at least that half of it was open to everybody and there was some concern about the sensitivity of some of the

¹⁰⁴ My sincere thanks to John Stanton and the Berndt Museum for making this footage available to the present research.

elements of some of the other paintings that were more sensitive, more restricted....
(Stanton 2005)

There are two principal dancers in this performance. The two sisters of the story are separated: one kneels in front of the singers, rhythmically digging for witchetty grubs out of the roots of a shrub (ceremonial pole placed in the ground), while the other sister walks about in the far distance, periodically crossing the sightlines of the singers and audience and raising hoots of laughter. Halfway through the performance, the painting is brought out by one of the singers and placed in front of the dancer at the foot of the pole. She proceeds to kneel on the painting of the Witchetty Grub Tjukurrpa, rhythmically digging for witchetty grubs, as she acts out the very ritual sequence painted thereon. The two sisters are then reunited, and they dance together in file back to their camp, as shown by the footprints in the painting.

The semantic resonances and cultural transformations — the mobility of meaning between ritual performance and the ‘performative’ quality of paintings in intercultural arenas — is nowhere more explicit in the art history of Balgo than in this moment. This instance is reminiscent of Rover Thomas’ famed *Kurrir Kurrir* ceremony - where men danced with painted boards across their shoulders (Akerman 1999). The incorporation of the Witchetty Grub painting into the ritual dance for the video was different from the *Kurrir Kurrir* in pertinent ways: foremost, it was, unlike the *Kurrir Kurrir*, directed at a non-Aboriginal audience. Yet this new medium of painting and its spontaneous incorporation into the ritual it ‘represented’ treads similar ground in demonstrating how the innovations of contemporary art articulate with the reproduction of customary practice and tradition. It underscores the complex ontological status of Balgo paintings, the relative autonomies they continued to express, and the emergent multivalence of such objects in Aboriginal experience and cross-cultural exchange.

This painting is a striking example of the broader arguments being developed in this chapter: it encompasses the interplay of paintings more generally as both ‘cross-cultural’ objects addressing audiences outside Balgo and acutely localised vectors of Aboriginal value and social process. It is an emergent form of material culture that encodes and

mediates the historical narrative between different groups of people as much as the visual forms on its surface encode any 'cultural' narrative. And yet those forms – and their production, transmission, restriction, performance and exchange – are distinctly Aboriginal social phenomena that are not accurately rendered through the descriptive inclusivity of the 'intercultural'. Whilst non-Aboriginal audiences at AGWA were invited to apprehend the painting and the footage of its ritual referent being performed, much of the semantic and political life of that painting was played out with relative autonomy from that domain. The senior custodians were teaching a younger, mission-raised woman the knowledge, designs and narratives associated with an important Tjukurrpa. Other younger and middle aged women were involved, less actively, as an audience to this process. The women were also authorising Gracie to 'give' or tell that story; to mediate between them and outside audiences. The gendered dimensions of the painting were also acutely relevant, with the exclusion of men being essential to the maintenance and reproduction of the gendered structure of knowledge and power in Balgo.

Although the separation between men's and women's painting was an important part of the early dynamics and discourse in Balgo, it is important to recognise the interplay of gender and generations that came to inform peoples painting practices prior to the exhibition. A significant factor in the changing face of painting practices during 1986 was the increasingly collective nature of those practices. Initially in Balgo, men and women painted separately; either in separate rooms, at separate times, or even in the same room separated by a line of cushions to demarcate gendered divisions (Dempsey 2004). During the preparations for the show throughout 1986, these divisions tended to dissipate, and the final first burst of Balgo art was generated out of a cross-generational, cross-gendered environment of everybody painting together. Painting stories were still largely delivered in segregated contexts, and these discursive processes remained highly gendered. As the discourse around paintings remained regulated along socially prescribed lines of gender and authority, the practice of painting was increasingly public. The video footage taken at the time shows men and women, young and old, painting together, side by side, chatting and listening to country music on the radio. Whatever formal innovations, dotting techniques or novel palettes were being trialled by one artist would have been visible to every other painter. Despite the discursive demarcations and regulation of content, the

physical proximity of male and female artists, and their visual awareness of what everyone else was painting, undoubtedly led to forms of aesthetic cross-fertilisation between genders and generations.

The semantic and stylistic dynamism of these novel contexts should not be limited by interpretations of simple one-way transmission or translation. Due to her demonstrable skill, Gracie Greene was regularly enlisted to help with the rendering of figurative elements in other female artists work. Younger men were also enlisted to help older men with filling in larger works. It is clear that younger artists also influenced and assisted older artists visually, but their work also provided opportunities for older artists to engage creatively with their own authority and knowledge. This work by Noel Charlie (Figure 3.20), painted for the exhibition, encompasses this complexity of intracultural transmission in the context of cross-cultural translation. The painting is, according to the certificate, discursively concerned with the travels of an old man in the Tjukurrpa who broke his ankle and continued struggling around on one leg. The personal elaboration or qualification Noel gave for this painting, also recorded on the catalogue certificate, is revealing:

All the old people came from this country. They know this business (Law). They used it when they were younger. Now the young people do not know the law. Yet they need to take it over when the old people die.¹⁰⁵

Produced discursively by the artist as an example of the explicit *intracultural* processes that underpinned Balgo art, this painting also reveals some of the more nuanced forms of transmission that paintings mediated in practice. The interpretive life of paintings such as this was never limited to the artist who painted them. Younger men and women were not always authorised or capable of telling the stories they were being instructed to paint. So having told their junior kin what to paint, the older men and women were then called upon to retrospectively provide the stories for such paintings.¹⁰⁶ This created a scenario in

¹⁰⁵ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #86256.

¹⁰⁶ The documentation of the paintings included in the AGWA show reveals many paintings were painted by a younger person and narrated by a senior relative; in some instances this process was considered so integral to the work that the painting was designated as co-authored, even though the senior artist may not have painted a dot.

which senior artists were expected not only to tell the story for the painting, but to translate the (often innovative) visual forms of younger people's paintings back into a predetermined narrative.



Figure 3.20. Noel Charlie, *injured hero*, 1986 (acrylic on board)

Video taken by Stanton of this process in relation to Noel Charlie's painting (Figure 3.20) is wonderfully revealing of this process. Tjumbo Tjapanangka, a senior artist and Charlie's kin, works his way section by section through this complex painting by the younger man, touching each area and reincorporating it verbally into the narrative he summons from his mind. He interprets each colour change and compositional shift — down to minute detail such as a few dots of red — touching and naming each, sedimenting these aesthetic innovations into enduring traditions, weaving them into the authorial fabric of the Tjukurrpa. Tjumbo's translation of Noel Charlie's painting emerges here not simply as an authorisation of a painting, but as a poetic, artistic act itself. It shows that senior men (and women) not only translated their own stories onto canvas, and then translated them into English for the camera and cataloguing process; they were creatively engaged in translating the forms of other peoples' paintings, both for outside audiences and for

themselves. The footage of these processes unfolding in 1986 is testament to the dynamic openness of Balgo art; even as it operated within and reproduced explicit discourses of gendered and generational restrictions.

Conclusion

The localised art history presented here suggests that early Balgo artworks, born out of cross-cultural contexts of exchange, and directed primarily at non-Balgo audiences, nevertheless elicited and reproduced the very protocols, values and boundaries of Balgo 'society' itself: the airport mural, which was directed at kartiya but not Balgo women; the early boards painted in Balgo but restricted from public exhibition at the Shinju festival in 1981; the divisive paintings that literally prevented people from entering the store; and the discontinued stone carvings are all clear examples of artworks emerging from and becoming absorbed into Aboriginal social processes. The works discussed in this chapter also reveal, as in the case of the Witchetty Grub painting, that in the broader art history in question there were always several potential, actual or excluded audiences for any one Balgo painting. Following the AGWA exhibition in 1986 and the public awareness of art from Balgo, another kind of audience, the 'market', was drawn into the dynamic cross-cultural feedback loop that would, over the decades to follow, prove influential in the development of 'Balgo Art' and the forms it would take.

Chapter Four

Becoming Balgo Art: Transformations in painting from 1987-2004

The first exhibition of Balgo paintings at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) was a success on multiple levels, most significant of all being the recognition it afforded Balgo painters in the eyes of the emerging Aboriginal art market. In the weeks following the exhibition, Adult Education staff became acutely aware that the painting enterprise (and economic opportunities it afforded Balgo people) had outgrown the scale and charter of their operation.

It became obvious that the amount of time necessary to service the painting programme for any length of time was beyond the capacity of the voluntarily staffed and funded Adult Education centre. Hence an application has already been made to the Aboriginal Arts board for the appointment of an art manager (Farrelly 1987).

As Sister Alice Dempsey (2005) recounted, 'we knew it had to be run like a business now.' In 1987, Adult Education organised independent funding for a full-time art co-ordinator to manage *Warlayirti Artists*, and the church withdrew from its role. Over subsequent decades this organisation has become a flagship success story among Aboriginal organisations. Marketing Balgo paintings nationally and internationally, it has overseen considerable growth, representing hundreds of local artists and managing turnovers exceeding \$2 million annually.

To date this thesis has addressed what can be framed broadly as the first and second periods of Balgo art that preceded the operation of this market-oriented art centre: the period from 1978-82 which was defined by the processes and politics of senior men translating ritual designs and knowledge into a new medium; and the period from 1983-1986 which encompassed the experimental and exploratory phase of painting through Adult Education. This phase was defined by the charter of Adult Education to develop skills

in various media, and by the inclusion of younger men and women into the realm of public painting practices. Kariya (non-Indigenous) inevitably influenced the form of art during these periods through dedicated workshops, casual advice or opinion, and the provision of specific materials. Notwithstanding this influence, there was relatively little interference in what could or should be painted. Much of the prescription, censoring or editing that took place in Balgo, regulating what could be painted for such contexts, how and by whom, was played out in relatively autonomous Aboriginal domains. These processes have continued ever since, but they have done so in dialogue with an increasingly influential aesthetic and economic feedback loop called 'the market'. Although outside influences were never absent from the emergence of Balgo art, the absorption of painting practice into an organised market economy forever recast the intercultural matrix of elicitation out of which Balgo paintings emerge.

Prior to paintings becoming absorbed into a market for Aboriginal Art, there had been no external constraints or injunctions upon what could be painted in Balgo. Before paintings entered into a regular process of cross-cultural valuation and exchange, there had been no obvious economic disincentive to paint in one style or another. Apart from the personal preferences of the Adult Education staff, there had been no organised cross-cultural interface that fed back into localised aesthetics. With the inception of Warlayirti Artists as a business venture brokering Balgo art into the Aboriginal art market, other notions of what Aboriginal art should be came to impinge upon the development of Balgo painting and the aesthetics of Balgo painting changed in discernable ways. From 1987-2004 these processes are visible in Balgo art history as a broad aesthetic movement from the iconographic and figurative translation of story, to an increasing pre-occupation with the expressive application of paint and the formal concerns governing those processes. Although the paintings produced across this 20-year period could never be described as homogenous, there is a definable pattern of cross-cultural elicitation – manifest in forms of stylistic development and differentiation – that has come to define Balgo art. The objective of this chapter is to identify the specific changes that occurred in Balgo art over this period. This third phase of Balgo painting, defined as it is by what I identify as

processes of abstraction,¹⁰⁷ was what I observed in my fieldwork, and the detailed analysis of these forms on the canvas (and the social forms they articulate with) provides a focus for differing angles of analysis in each of the following chapters.

Approximately 15,000 paintings were catalogued in the Warlayirti Artists archive between the mid 1980s and the period of my fieldwork. During my research I sighted and made notes on nearly all these works,¹⁰⁸ and a comprehensive formal and statistical analysis of that archive has been undertaken. However, the full presentation of such exhaustive material is a thesis unto itself and to represent those findings here in full would impinge upon the broader ambitions of this work. By way of summary, then, distilling the process of comparison over two decades and 15,000 paintings to manageable terms, I have structured the analysis around two epoch-defining exhibitions of Balgo art: the first ever exhibition, *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*, held at AGWA in 1986; and the last major exhibition of Balgo art (which also coincided with my fieldwork), *Balgo 4/04*. These exhibitions effectively bookend the first two decades of Balgo art's development, and they embody the changes and continuities therein.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Within the contexts of this chapter, I find it useful to summarise these complex historical and aesthetic processes with a familiar handle of "abstraction", fully conscious of the cross-cultural limitations of the term. In following chapters, I unpack what this term means, and how it can be usefully applied to Balgo art.

¹⁰⁸ I didn't, of course, physically sight every work. I was able to do this for approximately 3000 works over the course of my research, but the majority of older works were accessed through an archival colour photo, a B&W photocopy of that photo, or sketch diagrams made by earlier art coordinators.

¹⁰⁹ Where they are less representative of overall painting trends, these will be noted. However, based on my research, it appears to me that these exhibitions are highly representative case-studies or cross-sections of the broader data set of 15000 works.



Figure 4.1a. Invitation to AGWA show

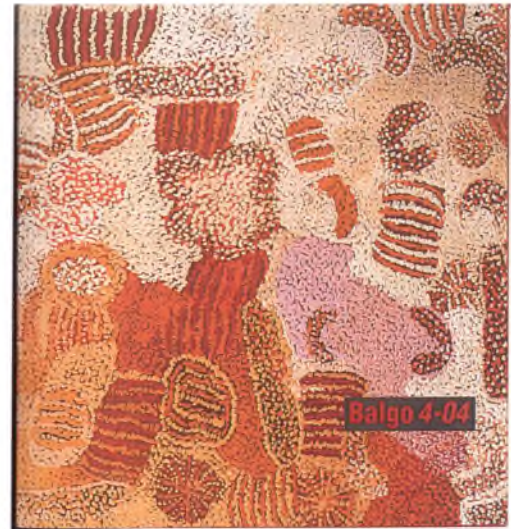


Figure 4.1b. Catalogue for Balgo 4/04

AGWA PAINTING SURVEY

The Balgo style had been put on the map... the works were unfettered and painted in a variety of styles. Artists moved between plain and dotted backgrounds; symmetry and asymmetry; bright primary colours and ochre hues; naturalism and abstraction. Ancient designs and modern materials, symbolic of black and white cultures, collided, sometimes incongruously, on canvas boards averaging 60 x 60cm. If style were multiform not uniform, themes were equally unpredictable.... (Ryan, 1989:58).

What we find in the first exhibition of Balgo artworks in 1986, is that half the paintings on show were not the abstract desert acrylics that were being produced during my fieldwork, and which are now universally associated with Balgo art. *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* seemed to advertise an entirely different brand of Balgo painting from that which the market has come to know over recent decades. Ryan's observation (above) reveals the exhibition for what it was, a survey of the variety of painting practices that defined the evolution of Balgo art in the years leading up to that first exhibition.



Figure 4.2. Larry Lodi, *Tjikai*, 1985

The senior men's paintings displayed at AGWA were at once familiar and idiosyncratic: employing the recognisable components of the emerging desert artistic tradition – the circles, lines and dots – familiarised by kin at Papunya and Yuendumu, they also employed these elements with diverse approaches and an experimental confidence. While some of these paintings showed strong resonance with the more 'traditional' Balgo paintings executed by the men in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see, for example, Larry Lodi's work at Figure 4.2), the majority of the paintings produced by these older men bore the mark of striking visual styles, novel palettes and bold compositions which distinguished even the oldest Balgo painters from their kin at Papunya or Yuendumu.



Figure 4.3a. John Mosquito, *Rain Dreaming*



Figure 4.3b, John Mosquito, *Lightning Flashes*

Paintings such as Johnny Mosquito's *Rain Dreaming* and *Lightning Flashes*, (Figure 3a and b) bear testament to that confidence of the older generation of painters, many of whom had been intermittently playing with these questions of cultural form and innovation since the late 1970s. The formal confidence of artists such as Mosquito, Sunfly (Figure 4.4) and Mick Gill (Figure 4.5) was already confidently established by the time of the first exhibition.

In Figure 4.4a Sunfly pioneered a radical inversion of the basic outlining principle (where dots outline an iconographic form, see chapter 6 for more on this); placing a line of dots down to index the *Wati Kutjarra* (Two Men), and 'outlining' them with negative space.



Figure 4.4. Sunfly



Figure 4.5. Mick Gill

The scope of these aesthetic innovations and the playful surety with which older Balgo men approached painting for the public is evident not only in comparison between the painters in this exhibition, but also within the oeuvre of individual artists. Still discovering the possibilities of the form and the extent of their command over it, senior Balgo men rarely painted similar compositions twice, preferring experimentation over the safety of repetition. The artistic confidence of the senior men that characterised their presence in the AGWA show was perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the work of Dominic Martin. Martin was one of the early participants in Nieass' workshops producing the classic painting styles, where he was also, according to Nieass (2004), among the most concerned about the possibility of too much information being revealed; both to Aboriginal women and to outside audiences. This cultural conservatism is manifest in his own artistic experimentation: eschewing any standardised desert iconography, in the AGWA show he was represented by a remarkable series of works on paper (Figure 4.6a & b).

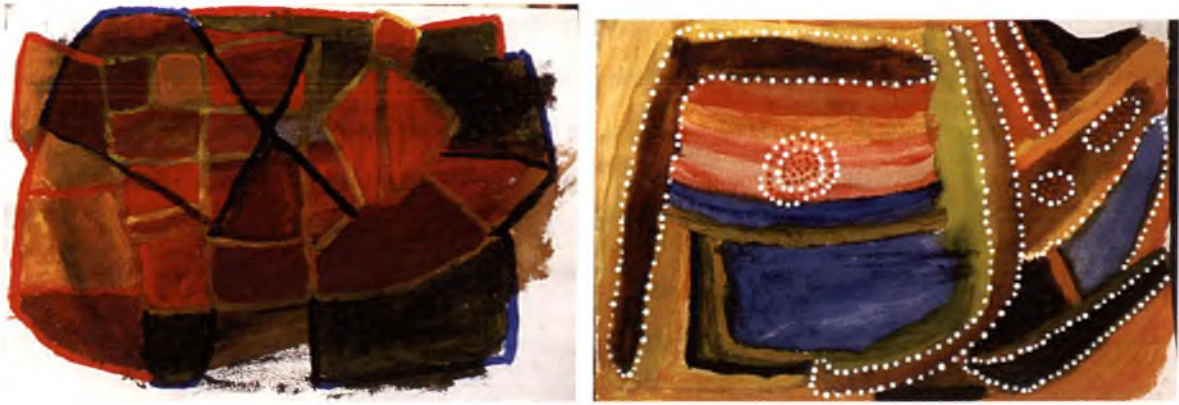


Figure 4.6a & b. Two of Dominic Martin's paintings from the AGWA show

One in particular, an abstract field of coloured squares, painted in watercolours, told the story of people's migration to old Balgo mission (Figure 4.6a). The documentation for the image suggests that, of the ruins of Old Mission observable these days, "Dominic has assembled the building elements, still left standing and scattered, into a composite whole."¹¹⁰ Such an image was by no means standard in Balgo painting at the time, yet the experimental confidence it expresses was characteristic of men's art more broadly at this time. This tangible, indeed *visible*, creative tension between cultural conservatism and aesthetic innovation, even *abstraction*, defined much of the men's painting in *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*. The revelatory nature of men's artistry which perhaps surprised an unsuspecting public— 'bold and experimental, bursting onto the secular stage for the first time' (Ryan 1989: 58) — was the product of years practice and contemplation. It is worth remembering that the AGWA show was held some fifteen years after Balgo men first heard about the painting practices of their kin at Papunya. The confidence of the Balgo men as painters was no doubt underscored by this long period of gestation, negotiating what it was that they could paint, and how it could be done.

Women's paintings at AGWA

Women, on the other hand, were not as well accounted for at AGWA. In this initial public display of Balgo art, women accounted for 27% of the artists and produced only 19% of the artworks in the show. Given the longer history of men's public painting practices, it is unsurprising to find that men were statistically far better represented in the show than women; there were simply more male

¹¹⁰ Berndt Museum Reference: 16992_Dominic Martin watercolour No.3, "Old Balgo Mission

works to choose from. On another level, however, there were significant differences in the social gestation of male and female painting practices in Balgo, and the female paintings in the AGWA show reveal something of these. Although Gracie Green had asked for permission for the women to paint several years earlier, and several had undertaken workshops through Adult education, it was not until mid 1985 that the older women began to publicly translate their stories onto canvas (Farrelly 1985b) with any regularity. Momentum behind these practices seems to have only really taken hold in response to the forthcoming exhibition and, as such, their fledgling painting practices were also entangled in and curtailed by other agendas intersecting that moment in Balgo art history.¹¹¹

Senior female painters contributed some historically and culturally important works to the show, but clearly they had not had the same time to develop the affinity with the new medium, and to negotiate their own aesthetic mandate with confidence. Their paintings were more tentative translations, lacking the experimental conviction of the senior men's paintings in the show. Whilst Sunfly and Johnny Mosquito seemed ready-made acrylic artists by the time of the first exhibition,



Eubena Namptijin's first painting (Figure 4.7) seemingly reveals little of the vivid and expressive style that would soon develop. Bai Bai Napangarti, the wife of Sunfly who would in turn become one of Balgo's boldest female painters, was still grappling with the tensions of figuration and Christianity in 1986 (Figure 4.8a).

Figure 4.7. Eubena Namptijin's AGWA painting, 1986

Nancy Naninurra, a dominant figure in early women's painting, was exploring more prosaic configurations of iconography and experimentations with dotting in her AGWA paintings (Figures 4.8a-c). Sarah Napanangka, likewise an influential female painter, was creating more assuredly spare and minimal compositions, but even examples such as these (4.8c) still appeared somewhat like translations from other domains into painting, rather than compelling and resolved works of acrylic art in their own right. These women were critical contributors to important paintings in the

¹¹¹ Significantly, the women at the vanguard of this movement — Margaret Anjule, Dora Napaltjarri, Patricia Lee, Sarah and Minnie Napanangka, Nancy Naninurra — were women with close family connections to people at Yuendumu, where women's painting was already established.

show (such as the Witchetty Grub painting discussed in Chapter 3), yet they had arguably not yet developed their acrylic transformations and resolved the emergent category of 'a rt' for themselves.



Figure 4.8a Bai Bai Napangarti Figure 4.8b. Nancy Naninurra Figure 4.8c Sarah Napanangka

Indeed, one of the major outcomes of the AGWA exhibition was, from the point of view of the Adult Education staff, that 'the work of a small number of women artists was recognised as important, showing the development of a style very different from that of the men' (Farrelly 1987). Galvanised by this public recognition of the authority and equality of their painting, Balgo women would soon come to dominate Balgo art; but their representation at AGWA reflected the more limited period of development they enjoyed in comparison with the men.

Young Artists

The under-representation of women in early painting practices is further highlighted by the fact that 35% (7/20) of the female paintings in the AGWA show were produced by a single younger artist, Gracie Greene. This example leads to an even more revealing perspective upon that first exhibition, moving the analysis from the question of gender to that of generations. Nearly half the artists represented at AGWA were under 30 years of age. This is a notable departure from the early exhibitions of Papunya or Yuendumu paintings, which were dominated by older and middle-aged artists.

- 54% (58/107) of artworks at AGWA were by artists under 30.
- 45% (15/33) of artists at AGWA were under 30.

This significant representation of young artists says a great deal about the constitution of “Balgo art” in the years leading up to the AGWA show. As the older artists continued the aesthetic project they had already begun much earlier, of translating ceremonial design elements and ancestral narratives onto a permanent painted surface, younger artists inherited arguably more complex problems of translation. For them, the acrylic medium was not just a focus of translating existent skills and knowledge to a new medium; it was often through this medium that those skills and knowledge were being acquired. In learning how they might represent their cultural heritage, the process of translation was also simultaneously one of education. Gracie Greene’s involvement in the *Witchetty Grub* painting was a key example of this. While they were intimately involved in the process of translating the ritual, iconographic realm, the Tjukurrpa, into painting — both on behalf of their elders and as part of their own education — what is equally clear from the visual record of their paintings included in the AGWA exhibition is that different processes of translation were unfolding for younger Balgo artists.

The children of the older artists were a unique generation. Painters such as Matthew Gill, Gracie Greene, Bruce Njamme and Patricia Lee were the first of their people to grow up entirely on a mission. They were the first to be raised in dormitories rather than the bush. They were the first generation to grow up learning English, and to have their primary language replaced by the emerging lingua franca of Kukatja. Born in the 1960s, they were, through the mission practices discussed in Chapter 1, a generation that was initially excluded in differing degrees from the Law, language and daily lives of their families. They were raised, at least partially, by white people, and lived in daily awareness of existing between the whitefella world encompassed in the practices of the mission, and the desert world from which their parents and grandparents had come. Their childhoods, their education, their histories, and the constitution of their identities were necessarily different from their parents’ generation. Their paintings reflect this.

Whereas the works painted for the embryonic art trade in the late 1970s and early 80’s exhibit classical desert iconographies similar to those being painted through the Papunya school, this underwent transformations through the contextual filter of Adult Education in the mid 1980s, where various skill development, religious and educational agendas intersected or accompanied painting practices. These projects, combined with the various watercolour and painting workshops outlined in Chapter 3, generated skills in different media that equipped younger artists to bring their own emerging forms of knowledge and authority into the cross-cultural realm of art. These skills were brought to bear on the specific problems of translation faced by younger artists.

Figuration played a significant role in the representational techniques employed by younger artists in the mid 1980s. Gracie Greene was the most technically proficient of the female figurative artists at Balgo, and she is widely credited with teaching (and often helping) other artists to draw and paint the human form (Greene 2005, Warlayirti Adult Education and Training Centre). Ancestral agents from the Tjukurrpa were frequently painted as figurative men, women or animals by younger artists, usually embellished with iconographic elements and dotting.



Figure 4.9. Gracie Greene



Figure 4.10. Theresa Booling, Two Men

In Figures 4.9 and 4.10 the artists use iconography and dotting, but don't render the key agents in the narrative in iconographic form. Such figuration was a vital tool in the creative development of many younger artists. It was a form of representation that provided a safety net; a way of painting their stories, stories they were still learning, without fear of incorrectly rendering design elements, or revealing things they should not. So while artists were encouraged to learn and paint their Tjukurrpa narratives, the paintings in AGWA by younger artists suggest that such paintings had to be done in such a way that the iconographic forms did not dominate. Very few paintings by younger artists in this period were purely iconographic.

One painting sent to the AGWA exhibition illuminates better than most the complex role of figuration in Balgo art at this time. Tikili Napanangka's painting (Figure 4.11) depicts an important Tjukurrpa for the country south of Balgo. In comparing the work with Watson's analysis of breast-painting designs in this region it seems likely that this is a *Nakarra Nakarra* painting (see Figure 18.3 in Watson 2003: 326), particularly as the design is specific to the Napanangka subsection of which the artist is a member. This painting having been sanctioned by the community for public display at AGWA, it is clear the artist was permitted to paint these kuruwarri designs. She did, however, avoid painting them as free-floating forms disembedded from their representational context, which may have rendered them potentially ambiguous and dangerous.



Figure 4.11 Tikili (Digalli) Napanangka, *Ancestral Woman at Yakka Yakka*.



Figure 4.12 Patricia Lee and Dora Napaltjarri, *Kaliyaka*.

Such paintings of breast designs are not uncommon, and indeed constitute a significant dimension of desert women's aesthetic repertoire (Watson 2003, Biddle 2007). One such painting (Figure 4.12), by Patricia Lee and her grandmother Dora, was even included in the AGWA exhibition, though because of the status of such designs it was designated as '*Not For Sale*'. Also of note here is that the *kuruwarri* in Figure 4.12 were painted by a younger artist whilst being supervised by her grandmother. For a younger artist such as Tikili to produce such a painting (without a senior woman overseeing), at that time in Balgo art history, would likely have been politically impossible. Whether or not it was possible, the painting records demonstrate that it was not done.

A certain amount of ambiguity was valued in senior artists work, where holding back specific meanings from the cross-cultural exchange was part of the localised power experienced in the act of painting. Such ambiguity was dangerous in younger artists work, however, as it opened them to potential interpretations and accusations from more senior people of having made politically or spiritually dangerous errors. Younger artists clearly sought to circumvent the politics of peer scrutiny by avoiding such ambiguity, and figuration played a key role in this cultural process. As Morphy has argued more broadly of Yolngu art, where meaning is not intended to be ambiguous, multivalence in geometric motifs can be minimised, if not entirely neutralised, by the use of figurative motifs (1991:295). The figurative woman in Tikili's painting (Figure 4.11) is not a masking, but rather an *enabling* element; it allows the artist to engage creatively with the central design elements of her tradition without transgressing, or being perceived by others to have transgressed, the bounds of her authority.

Younger men faced similar issues;¹¹² and Matthew Gill was one of only a few artists who explored them through drawing.¹¹³ Drawing was not a popular medium in Balgo, but Gill pursued it as his preferred medium in the mid 1980s and several of these were included in the AGWA show. Through drawing, Gill explored and expanded the range and limitations of what he could represent of his culture. He predominantly drew figurative non-specific ancestral beings (4.13a), and also other 'ancestral' biblical figures such as Noah, Moses or Joseph (Figure 4.13b). In all of these drawings, the body of these agents was a creative 'canvas', a frame within which Gill would experiment with the core iconographic elements of the male visual system: circles, lines, meanders and arcs all figured in these bodies.



Figure 4.13a & b. Matthew Gill drawings

Whilst exhibiting considerable aesthetic differences, the kindred visual strategies employed by Gill and Tikili Napanangka in these examples demonstrates the role that figuration played in neutralising the dangers of painting, and facilitating the emerging authority of younger artists. Figuration was not an end in itself. It provided a neutral aesthetic frame within which younger artists could explore, experiment and gain confidence in using the more 'traditional' components of their graphic system. Gill and Gracie Greene were arguably the pioneers of figurative painting in the mid 1980s, and the influence of both is widely evident in the work of their peers (and some of their elders) at this time.

It should be noted here that there is, above and beyond these analytical observations regarding figuration, something more basic- though no less socially relevant- in operation. What emerged

¹¹² It is worth recalling Stanton's (2005) observation here that "The men... were even more determined that some of the young fellows, like Matthew Gill, could not paint certain things... those younger men were much more constrained in what they couldn't paint."

¹¹³ I discuss Gill and his drawings in greater depth in the following chapter.

from my research with some of these early artists (and observations of younger artists today), is the significant pride people take in showing that they can draw or paint a person or a kangaroo as well as any kartiya. Such figurative and landscape painting also demonstrated, like handwriting or mathematical competence, or spoken English, a proficiency in kartiya ways that was an important part of many mission-raised people's sense of self. Like these other skills, the capacity for realistic representation differentiated the younger artists from the older generations; it was something that their parents could *not* do, or certainly not as well. And like these other skills of *self-representation*, it demarcated younger artists' specific and emergent realm of authority; and therein perhaps a specific and emergent sense of their own *Aboriginality*.

Matthew Gill and Gracie Greene were also both active in exploring the possibilities of Christian themed paintings at this time. Whereas figurative works allayed fears of erroneously representing ancestral narratives (and powers), painting Christian narratives gave young artists the freedom to experiment and adapt the use of classic desert iconography without fear of making dangerous mistakes in relation to the story. Paintings such as Matthew Gill's *Sinai* (Figure 4.14), showing the movement of Moses leading his people out of the desert, reinforce the syncretic value of key



iconographic strategies. The itineraries of biblical ancestral narratives were particularly amenable to being rendered with the classic circle-line motif that anchors the representation of itineraries in the Tjukurrpa. Classical desert iconography was used by younger artists — both male and female — during this period, but how it was used, authorised and aesthetically 'qualified' through figurative or Christian means, reveals the artistic and cultural processes at work, and the interdependence thereof.

Figure 4.14. Matthew Gill, *Sinai*

This circle-line motif was not restricted, indeed it forms the scaffolding of the male graphic system (Munn 1986 [1973]), but younger Balgo men seemed to feel compelled to render it in their own way. When not employed freely in Christian works, these iconographies would tend to become subsumed, perhaps deliberately, in technical experimentation. Often younger artists would take the sparse dotting of their elders and embellish it into a colour field that drew emphasis away from the iconographic elements.



Figure 4.15a & b. Johnny Lewis, 1986

Johnny Lewis was a protagonist of this technique, and developed some complex and idiosyncratic compositions of Country through this principle (Figure 4.15a & b). Bruce Njamme (Figure 4.16) allowed the more iconographic elements of his early paintings to become subsumed in the field of dotting. Other artists like Kenny Gibson (Figure 4.17) allowed their figures to merge with and emerge out of their dotting, constantly innovating around the aesthetic tensions of depicting narratives without emphasising iconographic elements.



Figure 4.16. Bruce Njamme



Figure 4.17. Kenny Gibson Tjakamarra

Another novel approach to painting country that featured in the AGWA exhibition was evident in the landscape paintings by a handful of younger men. Phillip Bell, Peter Nungoray and George Nanya were the most committed of the landscape painters, and their watercolour and acrylic landscapes suggest, between them, a distinctive aesthetic, somewhere between the Hermannsburg and Carrolup schools. In them there is no presage of the bright and shimmering glare of the desert that has come to be associated with contemporary Balgo art. Rather, paintings such as Nungoray's moonscape (Figure 4.18) exude the more sombre atmospherics of the evening

Country. Phillip Bell's watercolours evoke the other side of the dazzling desert light— the softened washed out colour of a life under the sun (Figure 4.19). Bell's images of desert scenes are commonly populated with aboriginal people leading 'traditional' lives in those landscapes, or of Kangaroos hopping about. This medium of landscape painting was important for some younger artists, because it allowed them to paint the Country where they grew up and lived – and which they knew intimately- but for which they were not primary custodians. These seemingly generic landscapes, produced *en plein air* around Balgo and at the site old Balgo Mission, did not elicit the political and cultural sensitivities that may have attended iconographic depictions of the same sites.



Figure 4.18 Peter Nungoray



Figure 4.19 Phillip Bell

As evident in these examples, all of which were included in the first exhibition of Balgo painting, the cultural constraints experienced by younger artists were integral to the nature of their artistic development. Some of these constraints were explicit and prescriptive; others would have been implicit, inferred and assumed. Either way, even as Balgo artists prepared to show their paintings to the world for the first time, those paintings first had to emerge out of the ambient filter of peer scrutiny. Rather than limiting people's creativity, however, this scrutiny (whether real or perceived) necessitated it: such rules and authority, and the fear of their perceived transgression, were arguably the very grounds of the aesthetic innovations that defined this exploratory period of Balgo art leading up to the AGWA exhibition.

In *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*, Balgo paintings were not the product of a spontaneous efflorescence of creativity, but rather a decade of creatively negotiating into the (ever-broadening) public arena the value of painting as a cultural form in Balgo. This first

exhibition can be read effectively as a survey or summary of the art history of the early-mid 1980s at Balgo. The Luurnpa Banner anchored the show as kind of aesthetic progenitor, providing a context and contrast to the formal innovations that followed after it in time, and that surrounded it in space on the walls at AGWA. From the Christian Banners to the great dreaming narratives, the watercolours to the syncretic drawings, the figurative dot paintings and everything in between, the AGWA paintings showcased what Balgo people had negotiated onto the intercultural plane of canvas. What is striking about the creative outpouring that underpinned the birth of the Balgo painting movement, and that first exhibition in which those processes are summarised, was not simply the translation of traditional cultural designs into a new media, but also the working through, on many levels, of what 'art' might be for Balgo people.¹¹⁴

Judith Ryan's seemingly paradoxical description of that exhibition – that the Balgo style had been put on the map through being painted in a variety of styles (1989:58) - reveals something of the complex character of early Balgo art and the public reception of the AGWA exhibition. Visually familiar yet unexpectedly varied in content and form, Balgo art, whilst almost uncategorisable in its diversity, was initially lauded for its diversity of styles. Art critic Ted Snell described the show as 'an excellent example of how traditional stories and imagery can be fused with Western religion and picture making.'¹¹⁵ This aesthetic variety, generated out of the particularities of Balgo and its history, initially set the art apart from other obvious reference points in the desert such as Papunya and Yuendumu.

While Balgo art has long been notable for its rich internal diversity, it is not, however, the kind of diversity exhibited in *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*. The art of this exhibition, produced between 1981 and 1986, is in many ways strikingly different from the forms Balgo art takes today. Whereas the art of 1986 was constituted by iconographic and figurative works, landscapes, drawings, Christian and syncretic works, across multiple mediums (acrylic, ochre, watercolour, ink) the works produced during my fieldwork in 2003-4 were characterised predominantly by expressive mark making and compositional

¹¹⁴ It is worth noting, in using the term 'art', that three-dimensional forms of material culture - jewellery, weapons, toys, ceremonial clothing and the like - were not part of how 'Balgo Art' was now presented to the public. Most notable for its exclusion from the AGWA show is the significant body of work represented by stone carving.

¹¹⁵ Snell's review was in the *The Weekend Australian Magazine* (pp13-14), Dec 13-14, 1989.

tendencies perhaps suitably summarised (for now) as 'abstraction'. This change is due, largely, to Balgo art entering its third identifiable phase: explicit engagement with an 'Aboriginal Art' market (the analysis of which is the focus of the following chapter).

Balgo 4/04

Perhaps the best encapsulation of what Balgo art became since 1986 was the 2004 exhibition, *Balgo 4/04*, curated by the art coordinator, Stephen Williamson. Styled as a survey of the best paintings produced in Balgo from 2002-2004, the exhibition provides a fascinating foil for the 1986 survey at AGWA. While AGWA showcased a great diversity of mediums, genres and visual content, the diversity of Balgo art showcased in 2004 was predicated upon diversity of stylistic expression within a significantly constrained medium. Here perhaps the most obvious comparison between the two exhibitions is in terms of medium: whereas the 107 paintings displayed at AGWA encompassed watercolour, canvas, paper, pen and ink drawings, ochre and acrylics, *Balgo 4/04* entailed 135 acrylic paintings on canvas.¹¹⁶ More interesting yet is what appeared on the canvas, or rather, what didn't appear.

¹¹⁶ Technically, some of these paintings were painted on Belgian Linen, but this variation has no bearing on the uniformity of medium, merely the quality of the 'canvas'. There were also a handful of glass works displayed in *4/04*, but these are not discussed here.

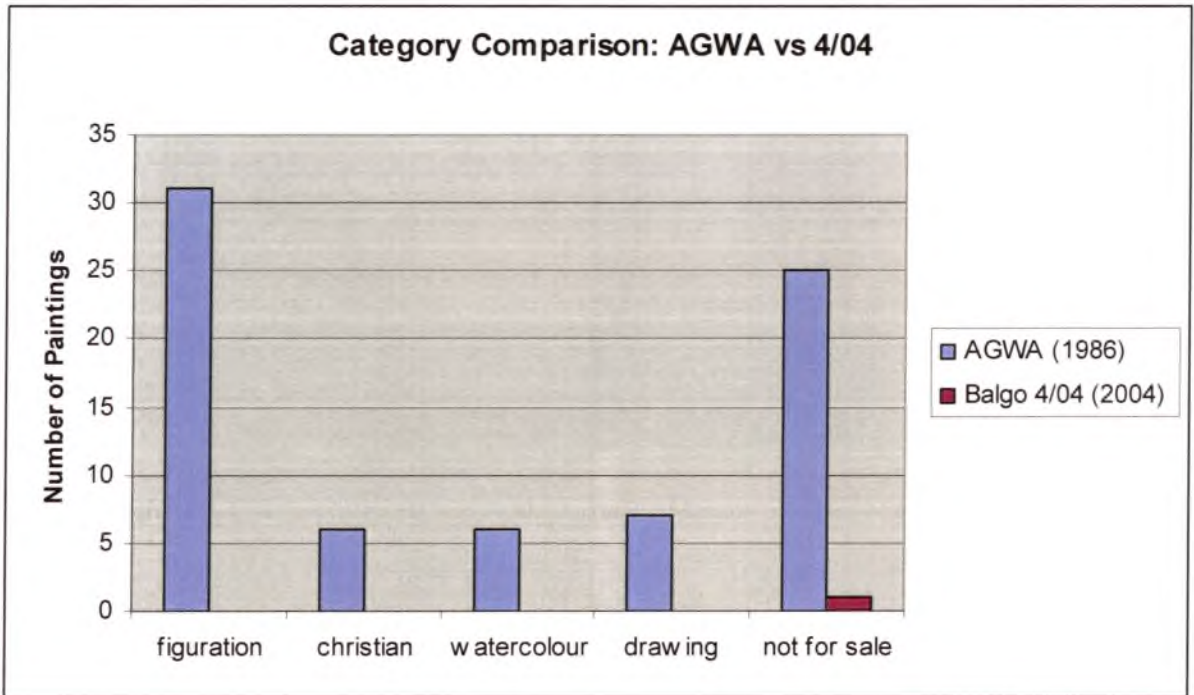


Table 4a. Category comparison: AGWA vs Balgo 4/04

As Table 4a shows, there were 6 Christian-themed artworks in 1986, and none in 2004. There were 7 landscapes (watercolours) in the first exhibition, and none in 2004. There were 6 drawings in 1986, and none in 2004. Overall in 1986 there were over 30 figurative or naturalistic depictions of people, animals or landscape. This amounted to over one third of the paintings on show. In 2004, of 135 acrylic works, the only figuration on display was in the form of ancestral ‘tracks’, footprints, in a handful of paintings. Clearly, statistics suggest a process of selecting out ‘non-traditional’ forms of Aboriginal expression was integral to the re-configuration of Balgo painting as Aboriginal art in the years between the two exhibitions. Yet figuration and Christianity were not the only things to go missing from the surface of the canvas over these two decades. Perhaps surprisingly, the iconographic forms so closely associated with ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art have also diminished significantly over this period as well. A comparison of Bai Bai Napangarti’s works in both exhibitions (Figure 4.20) illustrates both processes - the elimination of figuration and the seeming dissolution of the iconographic – in the work of one artist.



Figure 4.20a & b . Bai Bai comparison of works exhibited at AGWA (left) and Balgo 4/04 (right)

In 1986, the vast majority of paintings that weren't landscapes depicted ancestral agents from the Tjukurrpa through figurative/naturalistic, iconographic (u-shape, circle-line compositions etc) or indexical form (i.e. footprints, animal tracks), or combinations thereof (see Figure 4.21). Two decades later, in *Balgo 4/04*, only 14% of works exhibited any of these forms, and only two of those exhibited discernable tracks. Comparison between the exhibitions also draws attention to a decline in the prominence of another specific iconographic form, the circle-line composition. Although used by both genders, the circle-line composition was a dominant motif in early men's



Figure 4.21. Lary Lodi, *Dingo Dreaming*, 1985

painting at Balgo. It follows that approximately 75% of the male works in the AGWA show were comprised in some way by this classic figure or the innovative juxtaposition of circles and lines. Only a bare handful of paintings in the 2004 show exhibited any discernable focus on the circle-line (site-path) iconographic template.

This marked decline in the visual and statistical significance of classic iconographic forms is one of many striking differences between the two exhibitions, and it is one that requires further analysis, both in this chapter in others to follow. This is because the striking decline in iconography and referential meaning inescapably raises the question of abstraction in Balgo art. While paintings in the *Balgo 4/04* exhibition continue to address Tjukurrpa narratives and ancestral actions in the creating of Country and desert law, they do so in far more stylised and (arguably) abstracted ways

than the paintings exhibited in 1986. This can be seen clearly in a comparison of works by artists who exhibited in both exhibitions.



Figure 4.22a and b. Eubena Namptijin, *AGWA* (l) and *Balgo 4/04* (r) comparison

In Eubena's works here, the clear iconographic basis of her 1986 painting (Figure 4.22a) is, whilst not absent in 2004 (close inspection reveals the suggestion of over-painted lines, and the two faint circles lower left) subsumed within the expressive application of paint. Similar iconographic dissolution is also evident in the work of less technically expressive artists such as Tjumpo Tjapanangka (Figure 4.23a & b).



Figure 4.23a & b. Tjumpo Tjapanangka, *AGWA* (l) and *Balgo 4/04* (r) comparison

These are both paintings of the same place, Wirlginba/Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay), realised 18 years apart in significantly different form. In the earlier painting the story for this country is revealed through a conventional format – innovatively realised – of circle and line composition. The 1986 painting story reveals part of the creation of this Country:

A long time ago the hills around the lake got burnt and fell into the lake, breaking it up into the many smaller claypans (concentric circles) seen today.¹¹⁷

In the 4/04 painting (a good representative sample of his late career works) it appears that a single element of that first painting has been magnified, abstracted over time to become the focus of Tjapanangka's painting: to become his signature style. What is perhaps most interesting is that this element that endures today — the concentric infill dotting — was not necessarily the most focal feature in 1986 painting (based on the narrative, this was arguably the concentric circles). In the 2004 work the concentric infill dotting, which in 1986 was employed to throw the iconographic circle-line forms into relief, has become the entirety of the painting. It is as if the 2004 painting is a microscope lens focussed back through the decades onto one small rectangle of the 1986 work. Likewise in Bai Bai Napangarti's work, it is the line itself which has been disembedded from the broader iconographic system operating in the earlier work to become, in myriad forms, the totality of the 2004 painting (Figure 4.20a & b).

In these examples we see the replacement of iconographic forms with the aesthetic conventions that were initially developed to support the transfer of those forms into the new medium of acrylic painting. This plays out in relation to other specific iconographic elements. At AGWA, just under half of the iconographic paintings (i.e. those that weren't landscapes or naturalistic figurations) included the U-shape to denote the actions or presence of an ancestral being within a broader Tjukurrpa narrative. In 2004, only 19 out of 135 paintings (14%) included the U-shape. Furthermore, those paintings that did include the U shape reveal an 'abstraction of iconography': a process whereby iconographic elements come, over time, to serve primarily as compositional tools rather than forms indexical of corresponding narrative events. Of the 19 paintings with U-shapes in 2004, 8 were painted by Elizabeth Nyumi (Figure 4.24), an artist who no longer uses such iconography to narrate a specific story, but to the aesthetic end of organising a dynamic and well-balanced composition depending upon the scale of the canvas (Carty and French 2011).

¹¹⁷ Art from the Great Sandy Desert, Exhibition Catalogue



Figure 4.24 Elizabeth Nyumi



Figure 4.25. Patrick Smith

Another example from 2004, by Patrick Smith (Figure 4.25), shows how an iconographic design element such as the arc can become stylised and iterated to the point of abstraction. Here, the arc shape used to narrate the activity of ancestral beings is repeated over and over to fill the canvas. The icon is used in such a way here, I argue, as to become a form of abstraction. It is no longer being used *primarily* as a representational means (although it does also fulfil that role) but as an authorising anchor for creative engagements with the canvas. These concentric arcs in Smith's painting are echoed in other iconographic forms across the 2004 exhibition, where we find concentric squares (Figure 4.26a), circles (Figure 4.26b) or rectangles (Figure 4.26c) compounded across the canvas.



4.26a Geraldine Nowee



4.26b Gary Njamme



4.26c Tjumbo Tjapanankga

These paintings were exhibited in the *Balgo 4/04* show as an example of the best work of the artists and of the 'school' more generally. What these works exhibit, and embody in relation to the broader trends in Balgo art, is the sense that when classical desert iconography is used in contemporary painting, it is increasingly common for it to serve as the grounds for creative abstractions or aesthetic elaborations rather than specific narrative ends.

The spread of concentricity across the surface of the Balgo canvases emerges as a significant point of difference between the paintings of 1986 and 2004. An even more significant difference between the two exhibitions, perhaps the most significant in the broader question of abstraction in this thesis, is the increased prominence and emphasis on dotting. Dotting was a regular feature of most Balgo paintings (except the landscapes) in the 1986 exhibition, where it was employed either as outlining or infilling to complement and highlight the structure and iconography of paintings. By 2004, however, it had taken on an entirely different role in Balgo art. (I discuss this process in detail in Chapter 6, but summarise it here for the purposes of the broader argument of this chapter.) This principle is perhaps most clear in the comparison of Nancy Naninurra's works across the two exhibitions - *Women's Song* (Figure. 4.27a) and *Yarlarya* (Figure 4.27b).



Figure 4.27a Naninurra, 1986



Figure 4.27b Naninurra, 2004

The 1986 painting (4.27a) is overwhelmingly iconographic. This iconography, as the title of the painting indicates, indexes ceremonial events: the U-shaped women, seated around a sacred iconographic form (whether this is a sand drawing or board is not specified), are

singing songs for male initiation rites.¹¹⁸ Dotting fills in the background around these narrative elements. In the 2004 work (4.27b), there are no such elements. There are two nominally iconographic circles, but dotting has come to the foreground in such a way that one could argue the painting is *about* the dotting itself. Balgo artists foregrounded the dot in myriad ways, transforming it into a surprising source of both expressive mark-making and technical innovation. Today, it is these dotting techniques, built up into distinctive visual styles—rather than the Country or cultural narratives they illustrate—that have become the key markers of value in the art market. In this light, Naninurra’s two paintings - executed twenty years apart, and exhibited in their time as the best of Balgo art at key moments in its historical development - can be seen to bookend a localised art historical process.

Broader comparison between the two exhibitions shows that, over the intervening two decades, the visual forms of Balgo art were disembedded from their representational contexts and brought, increasingly, into the service of visual experimentation. The formal elements of Balgo art in 1986 – dotting, iconography, concentricity – have increasingly become the very subject matter of paintings in 2004. Form has become content. As illustrated in previous examples, this process didn’t just result in the disappearance of certain iconographic forms, in many ways it has been about the ‘abstraction’ of those very forms. This is not to say that 4/04 paintings by Naninurra or Tjumpo are no longer iconographic or no longer referential to specific sites and narratives – quite clearly they are; rather it is to state that the representational system in acrylic painting has been transformed so that particular conventions such as concentricity or dotting may have taken on an iconographic aspect or function *in and of themselves*.

This art historical process, whereby the conventions of desert painting have been unpacked by Balgo painters and put back together in novel ways, articulated coherently with Western modernist traditions and fine art notions of Abstraction; factors which undoubtedly contributed to the ready absorption of Balgo art into the western art market. In the comparative contexts of this chapter it suffices to illustrate that the paintings that

¹¹⁸ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference # 113.3

dominated the *Balgo 4/04* exhibition were those by artists who succeeded best in transforming some element of the desert visual system into an abstract and recognisable aesthetic signature that differentiated them from their peers. In particular, those artists who were most creative and confident in developing their dotting technique, in abstracting it out of its referential or aesthetic servitude and into novel expressive form, filling the canvas with their signature 'style', were those most supported in the market for Aboriginal art. These artists, such as Eubena Nampitjin, Helicopter Tjungurrayi, Elizabeth Nyumi and Boxer Milner (Figure 4.28a-d) were by far the artists most heavily represented and highly priced in *Balgo 4/04*.



Figure 4.28a Eubena,

b. Helicopter

c.Elizabeth Nyumi

d. Boxer Milner.

Age & Gender

Apart from stylistic change, one of the most striking comparisons between *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* and the *Balgo 4/04* exhibition is the age of the artists represented. These artists discussed above are uniformly 'first contact' people; Aboriginal people who lived their early life out bush and outside the colonial contexts of missions, stations and towns. They are also, therefore, uniformly old, the youngest being in their early 60s around the time of the *4/04* exhibition. As discussed previously, this was not the case in 1986 when younger artists were evenly represented in the exhibition.

In 4/04, only 5 of 134 paintings were painted by someone under the age of 30. Of 45 artists represented in the show, only 3 were under 30. Less than 7% of artists and 4% of paintings in 2004 were created by people under 30. Compared with the AGWA exhibition (see table 2) where people under 30 represented 45% (15/33) of artists, and produced 54% (58/107) of artworks, the 4/04 statistics suggest a radical shift in the demographics of painting production at Balgo.¹¹⁹ Another significant demographic difference that emerges from this comparison is gender (Table 4b). At AGWA, women accounted for 27% of the artists and produced 19% of the artworks in the show. At *Balgo 4/04*, women dominated painting practices with 62% of artists and 77% of artworks. These statistics reveal a fundamental shift in the demographics of Balgo painting, the likely causes of which have been outlined in Chapter 2.

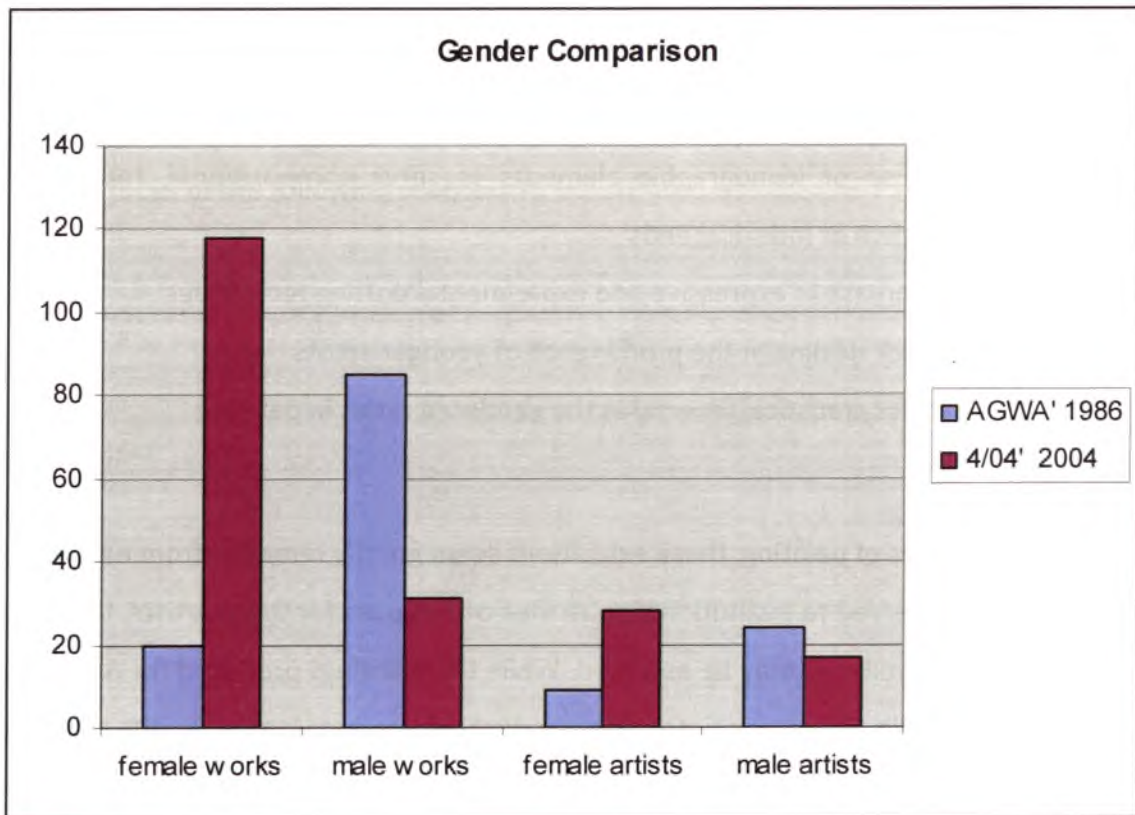


Table 4b: A comparison of gender distribution in 1986 and 2004 exhibitions

¹¹⁹ The reasons for this change are manifold. The influence of localised Aboriginal cultural hierarchies, politics and economic factors are examined elsewhere in this thesis; while the role the market played in this phenomenon between the years of 1987 and 2004 is examined in the following chapter.

Conclusions

I have argued that the first Balgo exhibition, *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*, can be understood as an encapsulation of the processes, politics and painting practices that constituted the second phase in the development of Balgo Art. Similarly, *Balgo 4/04* summarises nearly two decades of artistic development that followed after the first exhibition. The formal and statistical comparison of these two exhibitions reveals the core trends that have characterised the processes of painting for Balgo artists over the last two decades. These are summarised as follows:

- the elimination of figurative, naturalistic styles
- the elimination of Christian-themed works
- a reduction in the use of iconographic elements
- the use of iconographic elements to serve compositional, rather than narrative or indexical ends
- an increase in expressive and experimental dotting techniques
- a major decline in the prominence of younger artists
- a major statistical reversal in the gendered ratios in painting

As surveys of periods of painting, these exhibitions seem greatly removed from each other. Yet as events that served to institutionalise an idea of Balgo art for Balgo artists, they were perhaps not as dissimilar as may be assumed. While the paintings produced for Art Gallery of Western Australia show were not the product of market feedback, the paintings selected to be hung were *selected* by non-Aboriginal curators in Perth. And while these curators acceded to the church's wish for all styles (watercolours, Christian etc) to be represented in the show, they actively selected out 57 works, the majority of which were figurative (65%, or 37 out of 57 works), watercolours, Christian themed or drawings. The

curators effectively selected out as many of the non-traditional forms of Aboriginal art as they were allowed.¹²⁰

It is not accurate, therefore, to oppose the two exhibitions; the processes of editing that culminated in *Balgo 4/04* were already in train before the AGWA exhibition opened its doors. There is a continuum between these exhibitions; the way in which the curation of each played a role in framing aspects of Balgo art and projecting it back, not only to audiences, but to Balgo artists themselves. The difference between the two exhibitions, however, is this: while the paintings in the AGWA show reflected decisions on what kinds of painting were being made in Balgo at that time, *Balgo 4/04* inevitably reflects what kinds of paintings were thereafter selected out of the category of Balgo art. In this way the paintings selected for the *Balgo 4/04* exhibition can be seen to embody the recursive processes of artistic development and market feedback in Balgo art over the past two decades. Framed by notions of “Aboriginal art” as an emergent category in Balgo life, and by the emergent role Art Coordinators in marketing that art, the detail of these processes are the focus of the following chapter.

¹²⁰ Other works selected out, some of which were iconographic, seemed to be simply those ‘lesser’ works by an artist already represented in the show.

Chapter Five

Becoming Aboriginal Art

Warlayirti Artists fulfilled the early vision of Matthew Gill and his contemporaries in establishing a successful artistic and economic enterprise for the people of Balgo; though as became evident throughout the previous chapter, not all Balgo artists and forms of artistic expression survived this categorical transition into the realm of Aboriginal art. It is interesting to compare what happened at Balgo, where various forms of painting were edited out through engagement with an established art centre, and what Bowdler found at Ngukurr.

The most obvious trends in Ngukurr painting – strong, bold use of a wide colour palette, the adoption of quasi-European perspective, representational elements, syncretic styles and individual diversity – all had their genesis in the first year of painting and were never effectively edited out. In fact, these tendencies flourished and were exacerbated due to the lack of an art centre in the community (Bowdler 2008:355).

In Balgo, the opposite situation transpired. Following the success of AGWA and the development of Warlayirti Artists as a dedicated business selling Aboriginal art, the aesthetics of Balgo painting clearly changed in discernible ways. The evidence presented to date indicates that the introduction of a dedicated art co-ordinator, and the recursive influence of the market embodied in that role, clearly encouraged and elicited certain kinds of art and certain kinds of artists. It also discouraged others. Understanding these processes through which Balgo paintings were transformed is essential to understanding the contemporary forms of Balgo art. Equally as important, in this analysis, are those artists and kinds of art that are no longer visible within the frame of Balgo art. The arguments of this chapter therefore converge around the career of one artist, Matthew

Gill, and the question of what and who was excluded from that emergent category of Balgo art.

Balgo painting becomes 'Aboriginal art': 1987-2004

The influence of the market on the visual form of Balgo art is as complex as it is undeniable. A composite of many audiences or customers - gallerists, State institutions, private collectors, community employees, tourists – the 'market' for Balgo paintings is a complex of consumers. From the statistical evidence presented in chapter 3, it can be broadly deduced that market demand for certain styles actively encouraged some painters, and passively discouraged others. In this way the market effectively selected out certain kinds of painting, and supported the ongoing production of others. One way or another, the positive and negative injunctions underpinning these patterns of consumption were recognised in the pattern of production: the practice of the Balgo artists. In the most elementary terms, the institutions of the market formed a feedback loop which communicated to artists that certain paintings did not sell because they were not *valued* by kartiya. However opaque and ambiguous the Kartiya valuation of paintings may have seemed to the artists themselves, such valuation was at least transacted unambiguously through the money exchanged for paintings. People in Balgo came to understand that certain kinds of paintings sold (or at least sold *quickly*), while others didn't, and this undeniably influenced the kinds of paintings produced. This elementary equation defines the third (and ongoing) phase of Balgo art.

It is a phase in which Balgo paintings became re-categorised and transacted as 'Aboriginal Art'. This occurred, furthermore, during a time – the late 1980's and early 1990s – when that emergent category was itself intersecting with categories of 'fine art' in the canons of western discourse. The market was not simply consuming or transacting Aboriginal art as objects, but as an idea. Those Balgo paintings that were absorbed into the market as fine art (by definition those that were 'collected' by art institutions, or private fine art collections, those that were published in art books, and those that continued to attract higher prices) were those that seemingly reflected aspects of modernist aesthetics

(minimalism, op art, abstract expressionism) or articulated with western discourse around abstraction in contemporary painting. They were 'recognised' (or constructed) by these western traditions and institutions, as having sprung, instantly familiar but untainted by modernity, from an ancient wellspring of spiritual 'tradition.' This impregnable tradition served to buttress the shaky metaphysics, the decentred story, of Western art with an aesthetic continuity to the oldest human traditions. In this sense, the 'Aboriginality' or *otherness* of Balgo paintings was integral to their inclusion within the categorical frame of Western fine art. Conversely, those paintings that were *too* familiar, those that bore the visual taint of assimilation - landscapes, Christianity, naturalistic representations - could not be reconciled as authentically Aboriginal, or at least as authentic Aboriginal art, by the market.

Early Balgo art was composed equally of both the familiar and the non-familiar, the seemingly 'traditional' and 'introduced' stylistic conventions. In 1989, Judith Ryan identified the diverse composition of Balgo painting styles:

"The Balgo style still encompasses mission-influenced world pictures in which plants, birds, animals and human figures are depicted semi-naturalistically, framed with patterned borders. These paintings, rather like posters or flags, are in marked contrast to the *undiluted* ideograms of older artists equally representative of the current art from Balgo." (1989: 56, *italics mine*)

Ryan's language here, whilst respectfully inclusive, is also revealing of pervasive practices of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) that underwrote the emerging category of Aboriginal art. By referring to younger artists' works as 'mission-influenced world pictures', 'posters' or 'flags', Ryan implicitly locates them outside the categorical frame of 'art'. The market came to clearly reinforce this distinction in its choices. Such 'non-traditional' paintings were effectively (and remarkably quickly) selected out of the working category of Balgo art in the late 1980s. What was selected 'in' to the category, initially, were precisely those more 'traditional' iconographic works that accorded with Western notions of what constituted authentic, 'undiluted' (to borrow Ryan's term) Aboriginal culture. In time, the examples of this kind of painting that attracted the most interest and value, cross-culturally, were those paintings that appeared to articulate with Western tastes for expressive

brushstrokes, optical or minimalist compositions, and painterly abstraction. As the paintings exhibited in *Balgo 4/04* reveal, the 'undiluted ideograms' that Ryan identified in 1989 are, if they ever existed in acrylic art, no more. Over the past two decades, an interesting by-product of these processes of selection under discussion has been the dissolution of the very forms that indexed the Aboriginality of the early works: the iconography of circles, lines and arcs, along with the footprints and ancestral animal tracks that featured prominently in 1980s. What was literally 'authentic' – a close translation of one traditional domain into a new medium – came to be viewed a few years later as clichéd.

It is clear, from very early on, that the idea of 'art' became increasingly entangled in the question of 'Aboriginality' in Balgo art. If the creation of 'Balgo Art' was simply about identifying authentic aboriginal paintings produced in Balgo, the iconographic works would have remained immensely popular in the market. But they did not, because such works struggled to maintain the interest of audiences who wanted to see these objects as fine art. For such paintings to continue to be art in the Western market, they needed, like Western art, to turn in on themselves, to turn Aboriginal painting inside out. Only those painters who experimented with their formal heritage (taking it apart, putting it back together in novel ways, abstracting it, reimagining it), those painters that thereby came to approximate western models of the contemporary artist, came to fit the model of fine art and receive institutional recognition and financial reward. These artists dominated the *Balgo 4/04* exhibition, and indeed most Balgo exhibitions in the decade preceding it.

Tracing the development of Balgo painting in this chapter, the cross-cultural currents of its 'art history', is not merely to identify the selecting in or out of certain kinds of painting: but to examine the nexus of ideas and practices about art, Aboriginality and authenticity that intersected in the development of Balgo art.

Art Coordinators

There is no question that the tastes of the institutional consumers of Aboriginal art (the dealers, galleries, collectors) have themselves, in their patterns of consumption, been influential in the aesthetic evolution of Balgo art. The art market, its tastes and values, feeds back into what artists paint. Yet retrospectively asserting any causal relationship between the 'market' and the surface of paintings – particularly in the early stages of Warlayirti Artists as a business – is a tenuous analytical act. While artists are able to evaluate the basic preferences of the 'market' by what paintings sell and for how much, they nevertheless remain relatively removed from the more nuanced process of buying and selling in Balgo: mediated as this is by the brokering (Altman 2005) of the non-Aboriginal Art Centre managers. These managers mediate the flow of money back to artists, communicating back to them why a painting has sold for a certain price or, just as often, why it hasn't sold at all. It is these managers, therefore, who come to embody and express the values of the market in Balgo, and through whose influence and actions we can trace more readily the impact of the market on the changing forms of Balgo art.

The first art-coordinator to which adult education handed the reins in 1987 was Andrew Hughes. A decisive aspect of his term was the attempt to turn the myriad experiments and materials exhibited at AGWA into a marketable brand of Aboriginal art. This involved limiting some of the materials and colours that had previously been available to artists and focussing their practice on the one medium: acrylic dot painting. This perhaps necessary period of constriction and consolidation was followed by a period of aesthetic expansion. Michael Rae, who arrived in mid 1988, believed that artists needed to choose their own direction, rather than being coached into producing something for the market. The Warlayirti archive shows his period of management was characterised by an expansion of colours, styles and experimentation by many artists. Rae was followed by Robin Beesey (1992-1995), who, in what Watson describes as "this contradictory period" in Balgo art,

oversaw a decline in the quality of many artists work and the simultaneous rise of the 'master' artists.

James and Wendy Cowan (1995-1997) followed Beesey, and continued the focus on developing an appreciation of individual 'master' artists. They also pioneered the national and international promotion of Balgo painting as fine art (James Cowan produced two books to this end, *Wirrimanu*, and *Balgo: New Directions*), and professionalised Warlayirti Artists in important ways: initiating the introduction of a digitised Artist Management System (AMS) and planning for a new custom-built art centre.¹²¹ John Oster and Julie Fielke followed the Cowans, and their tenure at Balgo was dominated by the construction of the new art centre facility. They also opened the horizons of Balgo art back out into other mediums, introducing printmaking and fabric workshops (re-engaging the art centre for the first time with the adult education). Basketry and glass-art have also featured variably in the broader artistic practice in Balgo over the past decade, though these different mediums have always remained marginal to the Balgo brand. The new Warlayirti Art Centre had a notable impact upon the productivity of the business and of the artists themselves; within it Erica Izett and Tim Acker (1999-2002), followed by Stephen Williamson and Samantha Togni (2002-2005), oversaw a significant expansion in painting practices and revenue. By 2004 the fledgling business handed over to Andrew Hughes by the nuns at adult education was producing 1200 artworks a year, supporting around 160 artists, and turning over approximately \$2,000,000 annually.

Balgo painting had become one of the most successful forms of Aboriginal art. But how, and why, did Balgo paintings become so successful? The impact of each of these art coordinators has been, to differing degrees, influential in the look of Balgo art and the success it has enjoyed. The role of these art-coordinators, and indeed all art coordinators across the Aboriginal art industry, is complex and manifold, but it can also be reduced to a central function: ensuring that the paintings artists produce are able to be sold, and sold for fair prices. This role has the dual character of brokering relations with the market and educating buyers, while also feeding market values back into the processes of painting.

¹²¹ From 1987 -2000 Warlayirti Artists was run out of the ramshackle old mission dining room, a tiny space utterly inappropriate to running the large scale enterprise that Balgo art was becoming.

This is done by art advisors...directing the aesthetics of colour choice, composition, mark making and in some cases subject matter. The aim is to educate the artists how to make a painting that will sell. (Lovegrove 2002:138)

Artists are encouraged and advised, in subtle ways, by arts advisors about the quality of their work. If an artists presents an obviously rushed, sloppy work, an advisor is likely to inform them that such work, even if it were to sell and fetch them a quick earning, may not be in the long term interests of their career. But arts advisors have had a more active role in artistic style as well. As Bowdler notes, 'some advisors mix colours, hide colours, hide paintings, fix messes, decide when a work is finished, cajole, caress, and in some instances erase whole canvases for reuse.' (2008: 367). All of these practices have occurred at Balgo at one time or another. The diary of Morice Stephens, who worked as an accountant and painting workshop facilitator over a period of years at Balgo, is revealing about attitudes: 'did a bit of touching up — couple of artists had used a vicious blue for pool — unable to sell them (Stephens 1989). This kind of intervention, however unpalatable today, has not been uncommon and was no doubt rationalised in earlier periods as helping the artist to sell the work by matching their aesthetic production better to the perceived taste of the audience. This, after all, was what the art coordinator was employed to do. And while professional art coordinators are now less likely to interfere directly with the surface of a canvas, more subtle forms of intervention and influence endure.

It is difficult to analyse, in retrospect, the influence of the relationship between advisor and artist on the aesthetic quality of any particular painting produced. Watson (1996:47) provides a valuable summary of the early influence and patterns of production that emerged around particular art coordinators, showing how stylistic patterns, colour, technique and dotting were all influenced by the presence of specific non-Aboriginal art advisors. Another valuable resource here is the vast visual archive of painting records held at Balgo which allows one to observe patterns of production that emerged in particular artists oeuvre, and across Balgo art more generally, during specific periods of time. My own research expands upon Watson's by drawing on this archive more broadly in light of Eric Michaels' comments on the control of materials in art centres:

Art advisors can deny influencing Aboriginal art until they are mauve in the face. But even if they never commented on a painting in progress or completed, by word or gesture or price... at least one irreducible source of influence persists: materials (1994:154) .

Perhaps the most obvious and lasting influence of the very first art advisor employed at Balgo was the standardisation of materials. Under Hughes, the paper works, ochre works, water colours, pen and ink drawings that emerged out of the Adult Education years were all eliminated from the Warlayirti Artists repertoire. From 1987 onwards, Balgo artists would work with acrylic paint on canvas. What appeared on the surface of that canvas was also changing: the appearance of figurative or naturalistic forms declined markedly in Balgo paintings after 1987. Watson suggests it is likely that 'Hughes discouraged the use of representationalism in the art in an attempt to get back to a more 'traditional' Aboriginal aesthetic' (1996:46). Whether or not Hughes actively discouraged figuration, it would appear that the standardisation of medium contributed to a standardisation of form; the convention of acrylic-on-canvas perhaps serving to discourage those aspects of figuration and landscape that had been prominent in the drawing and watercolour mediums.

During this period the painting surface itself increasingly came to be filled, rather than left open or loosely dotted. The standardised medium of the canvas therefore came to be filled with more standardised forms of dotting. As Watson has noted; 'in this period the use of bands of dots in different colour sequences became the dominant technique of dotting in the work' (1996:46).¹²² Minnie Napanangka's work (Figure 5.1) provides a clear example of this emerging style, as well as another significant intervention by Hughes: the constriction of the Balgo painting palette.



Figure 5.1. Minnie Napanangka, 1987

¹²² It is important to note that this technique first developed under the influence of the Adult Education, and became increasingly prominent in 1987-8. This is discussed more in Chapter 6.

During 1987 the liberal palette of the Adult education years was quickly subdued by the encouragement of more 'traditional' colours. Watson notes that during Hughes' time 'painting in bright Western colours disappeared.... Instead, high contrast shades of the ochre colours brown, yellow, black and white dominated the canvases' (1996:46). Hereby reflecting the dominant aesthetic of Papunya Tula paintings on display in Alice Springs in this era, a lot of art from Balgo at this time seemed to fit Eric Michaels description of the Papunya Aboriginal art aesthetic de jour: '[t]he look was muted, cerebral, and undeniably tasteful' (Michaels 1994: 155).¹²³



Figure 5.2a-c: *Mythscares* paintings by Donkeyman Lee(l), Eubena Namptijin (c) and Mick Gill (r)

Perhaps the most decisive visual summary of Hughes influence on the direction of Balgo art at this time are the works selected to represent the new era in the *Mythscares* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1989 (Figure 5.2a-c). The first major public survey of Balgo painting since AGWA, the *Mythscares* paintings were a telling embodiment of the changing face of Balgo painting in its first years of encounter with the art market. Each of the paintings was produced by an artist over the age of 60. Each was painted on canvas, and each of those canvases was filled with iconographic forms

¹²³ In harmony with Michaels' statement about Papunya, Watson noted that 'The variety of style found in early Balgo works diminished in 1987-8 under Hughes and was replaced by an emphasis on well executed formal works of a 'traditional' nature' (1996:46).

rendered in a starkly homogenous palette of earth tones – brown, red, white, yellow and black. As Ryan noted at the time:

In common with other Balgo works produced in the last year or so, the colours are mainly dark in tone and brownish of hue... Pink, purple and unmixed primary colours are rarely found, although they were common in the inaugural exhibition (1989: 59) .

Although these works continued to encompass the inherent diversity and bold individual styles that would come to define Balgo art, they also bore the undeniable marks of standardisation. Reflecting upon these paintings in light of the material interventions behind them, the dialogical nature of 'Aboriginal art' in Balgo becomes evident: it could be argued that during this first period of marketing Balgo paintings as Aboriginal art, Hughes was also effectively promoting an idea of Aboriginal art to Balgo painters.

Different ideas about art, tradition and Aboriginality have characterised the dynamic relations between art advisors and artists in Balgo ever since. Michael Rae, who followed Hughes in mid-1988, had a seemingly different approach. Rae was critical of art coordinators 'who impose their own view on things – such as the argument that traditional Aboriginal art should only be in the four ochre colours and should not use the newer brighter acrylic paints' (Rae 1990a:36). Whilst retaining the basic acrylic-on-canvas parameters established by Hughes and expected by the market, Rae seemingly eased the constrictions on what artists felt they could paint. Most obvious among the changes in the Warlayirti catalogue during Rae's tenure is the return to the much wider palette of colours used by the artists during the Adult Education years.¹²⁴

The blue and green paint that had been used in the adult Education Centre was still stored in the art centre. Rae began giving out these colours again and ordered in

¹²⁴ This was seemingly in accordance with the wishes of the senior artists themselves. As Watson notes:

The older women wanted to use green, blue and red, despite Patricia Lee and Gracie greens arguments that they should use traditional ochre colours. According to Patricia, the old women said "trees are green, grass is green. We need green. Water is blue. We need blue and green paint" (Watson 1996:44).

bright new shades of red and yellow. The artists began to mix their own colours. (Watson 1996: 50)

A comparison between the Mick Gill painting done during Hughes time (Figure 5.2c) and that done during the early stages of Rae's tenure (Figure 5.3) provides an even clearer indication of the impact of pinks, greens, blues and bright yellows returning to the Balgo palette. A loosening of composition and the bold figuration of the snakes also provide contrast to the earlier painting by Gill.



Figure 5.3. Mick Gill, *Wanayarra*, (#567/89, but painted in late 1988)

In opposition to the standardisation of an Aboriginal style, Rae also encouraged experimentation. According to Watson, 'he felt that Warlayirti Artists was not as tied to producing a certain look for the overseas market as Papunya Tula and that it could afford to experiment (1996: 50fn). The explosion of colour, the developing of confidence and loosening of stylistic constraints is evident across many artists work during this period (see, for example, Ena Gimme, Figure 5.4), and arguably came to define the Balgo style for many years to come. Balgo artists became known for their bold compositions, their loose and expressive mark making, and their exuberant use of colour.



Figure 5.4. Ena Gimme, #320/90

The next observable change in the form of Balgo art came from the market itself when, during Beesey's time, an art dealer visiting from Sydney encouraged the artists to move away from dot-painting and use a more linear style of painting with brushes (Watson 1996: 51). Some artists such as Sunfly (Figure 5.5) had long ago moved successfully in this direction of their own volition, whereas for others the suggested shift proved unproductive; rendering their work as 'messy' Aboriginal art rather than expressive fine art.



Figure 5.5 Sunfly Tjampitjin, 1990

So whilst this technique was not particularly successful during Beesey's time except in those artists who already preferred painting in this way, the deliberate market-driven introduction of this technique speaks to a more general desire in the market that

Aboriginal art should be allowed and encouraged to move beyond the clichés of traditional dot painting. Beesey's time as art coordinator reinforced the emerging view of the Balgo art as fine art – as opposed to generic 'dot paintings', but it also corresponded with what Watson describes as "this contradictory period" in Balgo art:

Artists whose work had previously sold no longer did. Many artists became depressed about painting, with the result that the quality of their canvases declined... Those who managed to maintain their optimism and the standard of their work now stood out from other artists. They began to be singled out as master artists and to receive much greater financial return than others (1996: 51-52).

As the Aboriginal art market evolved in the early 1990s, the importance of the 'Aboriginality' of paintings was sublimated beneath a developing critical faculty – a connoisseurship – for their 'artistic' quality. As audiences developed a critical appreciation for the differences between artists and the development of individual artistic trajectories, individual 'master' artists became increasingly important to the machinations of the market. Michael Rae, prior to Beesey, had been sensitive to the market desire for "superstar" artists and was explicit in outlining the cultural contradictions and long term commercial problems that such a narrow emphasis on a handful of artists would have on the broader development of Balgo art (Rae 1990b). Rae was hesitant, therefore, to isolate and promote the 'master artists' (such as Wimmitji and Sunfly) desired by the market, and persisted with the development of what he framed as 'generic' group exhibitions. It was only after Rae left that Elizabeth Gordon became the first Balgo artist to have a solo exhibition (in 1994, during Beesey's time).

The emerging focus on the aesthetic and artistic (as opposed to distinctly Aboriginal or traditional) qualities of Aboriginal art heralded the next major intervention in the material production of paintings in Balgo: the gradual movement away from stick-work dotting to painting with brushes. Tentatively taken up during Beesey's period, this shift would form a cornerstone of Balgo art in the mid 1990s under the management of James and Wendy Cowan. Having been involved in Balgo art during Beesey's time (James wrote his first Balgo book, *Wirrimanu*, in 1994) the Cowans arrived to the position of art coordinators with a

strong understanding of Balgo painting and equally strong convictions about the status of that painting as an under-valued and under-appreciated form of contemporary art. They felt that 'the tag of 'ethnographic fine art' or 'transitional art' can only act as a barrier to a full appreciation of its worth' (Cowan 1994: 55). This conviction had some highly visible effects on the paintings produced at this time.

Watson has noted that between 1995-1997, more 'minimalist techniques and greater areas of plain background fields were favoured' by the Cowans (2003:117). More importantly, Watson observes that the Cowans 'strongly encouraged' (2003: 161) artists to use paintbrushes, as opposed to sticks, as their primary painting tool. This was introduced in the hope that it would produce more expressive and 'painterly' lines, accelerating the extant processes of abstraction, and addressing the creeping market fatigue with dot paintings. While this sustained intervention in painting techniques had corrosive effects on some artist's style,¹²⁵ it was also an initiative that had some striking results for certain painters and arguably contributed to a broader reception of the work as fine art. Elizabeth Nyumi (Figure 5.6a-b) was one of several artists whose paintings changed markedly when produced with brushes, encompassing a notable aesthetic shift that was seemingly well-received by the market.



Fig5.6a & b. Elizabeth Nyumi stickwork dotting (1989) compared with post-cowan brushwork (1997)

¹²⁵ Multiple artworks from the period illustrate this point: Mati Mudgebell 788/95, Marie Mudgebell 559/95, Millie Skeen 560/95, Ningie Nanala 840/95, Richard Tax 858/95, Tjumpo 178/95.

The strong aesthetic preferences of the Cowans for bold, spacious works are evident in the variety of work they themselves collected from Balgo artists at this time (Figures 5.7a-c). This aesthetic has perhaps seemed more enduring than other coordinators because those preferences were canonised in two publications produced by James Cowan which were influential not only in shaping market tastes for Balgo art, but also because such books – on sale at the art centre- continued to promote particular forms of painting to Balgo artists.



Fig. 5.7a-c. paintings by (l-r) Johnny Mosquito, Millie Skeen and Sam Tjamptjin collected by the Cowans during their time at Balgo.

In the decade since the Cowans, Balgo artists have, on the whole, sustained the shift from sticks to brushes. Rather than continuing to develop spare, linear or minimal works, however, Balgo painters have pursued a rather more abundant abstraction: using brushes to expand dotting techniques into increasingly expressive artworks (these techniques are the focus of the following chapter). Arts advisors from the late 1990s through to my period of fieldwork had discernable preferences in palette and styles of painting (and an enduring distaste for figuration), but on the whole artists have been free to pursue their longer term explorations in form, style, colour and technique that have always underpinned the dynamism and evolution of Balgo art.

Artistic Resistance

This chapter has so far concerned itself with non-Aboriginal influences on Balgo art. This is an important aspect of the broader arguments being developed in this thesis because it disables, to some extent, any essentialised category of Aboriginal art by showing how it is multiply determined and cross-culturally constituted. I do not intend to infer that artists don't make choices, that they don't reject and ignore certain advice, whilst taking on other kinds and adapting it within the broader sweep of their practice. It is, however, analytically unsustainable to approach contemporary Balgo paintings as an entirely Aboriginal product. Even the dots that appear on canvas are, expressive and idiosyncratic as they may be, also expressive of the long-term cross-cultural engagements through which they are elicited.

There is sensitivity, as Bowdler notes 'about ascribing too much influence to advisors and thereby diminishing the agency of the artists' (2008: 359). The aesthetic developments in Balgo painting have often been underpinned by cross-cultural interactions, yet this in no way undermines the Aboriginal aesthetic operating in those artworks. Ultimately, the most interesting absorption of non-Aboriginal influence into the Balgo aesthetic is not in these individual interventions, but rather in how those stylistic novelties are in turn transformed into the stuff of 'culture' – how they are shared, adapted and acculturated in the relationships between the artists themselves.¹²⁶ Yet also untenable in relation to Balgo is the counter argument, articulated by Eric Michaels, that aesthetic considerations were relatively unimportant to many desert artists; themselves focussed on what he called practices that 'promote issues of authority, not authenticity' (1994:162). Michaels position, summarised, was that artistic acquiescence to the influence of a white coordinator did not constitute passivity on the part of the artists, but rather that certain uniform stylistic devices such as dotting and restricted colour were 'incidental' to the artists' primary concerns around enacting their authority through mythological and geographic referents. It is true that some aesthetic qualities, and some material interventions pertaining to those qualities, are relatively incidental to many artists. Artists often asked me to get them some paints when I was at the art centre, and when I asked

¹²⁶ This process is the focus of Chapter 8

what colour a frequent response was “any colour!” However, many of the artists I worked with had also been painting for at least 20 years: they had great experience and very particular relationships to colour and form. With increasing artistic experience, and the increasingly importance of style as an economic resource, aesthetic considerations are no longer incidental to Balgo artists sense of authority or autonomy; if indeed they ever were.



Fig 5.8a-c. A minimal palette emerging in works by Eubena (l), Kathleen Padoon (c), and Naninurra (r)

During my fieldwork, the art coordinator came from a fine art background and had a clear personal aesthetic preference for large scale abstraction and a minimalist palette. He was clearly fond (see fig 8 a-c) of works that contained two, and at most three colours; and preferably these colours would be a combination of white, red or yellow.¹²⁷ These preferences were communicated to the artists in positive reinforcement for paintings using these colours, and also in more prescriptive or interventionist ways. On several occasions I witnessed colours being taken away from artists. But in general this intervention was more subtle: the artists would be provided with a bag of paint pots to

¹²⁷ The market responded positively to the influence of this minimal palette (in the work of Eubena, Kathleen Padoon, Tjumbo Tjapanangka and Nancy Naninurra in particular) with more buyer interest and consequent increase in sales for these artists. In this very concrete regard, the art coordinator can be seen to be doing their job and fulfilling their mandate in relation to these artists.

take home with them, and these would be chosen by the art-coordinator. However strategically acquiescent artists have learnt to be, they are far from passive in making decisions about their paintings.

Chopper [Helicopter Tjungurrayi] came in to get his yellow; the day before [art coordinator x] had given him reds to work with as they tend to produce the most successful painting for Chopper's style. Chopper wanted yellow though and [art coordinator x] said 'no, just for this one painting try those colours' i.e dark reds & black. So Chopper relented but then came back this morning when [art coordinator x] wasn't around and got his yellow anyway!¹²⁸

I have witnessed other artists deliberately 'ruin' a painting because they were displeased with the colours imposed upon them. It is reasonable to assume that similar conflicts, aesthetic negotiations and resolutions have been silently played out on the surface of Balgo canvases since the very beginning. We know, for example, not all artists acquiesced willingly to the move from sticks to brushes (Watson, 2006, pers. comm). Several women, some of them now famous for their style of painting using brushes, were angry at being forced to use brushes initially. Chief among them was Eubena, who is today perhaps the most famous of all Balgo artists for her flowing, 'painterly' style.

To state that art advisers influenced materials is one thing, but the acquiescence (or not) of individual artists is another entirely. I have proposed the argument that Balgo artists understand themselves to be *working for* the art coordinator. This culturally construed relationship undeniably influences the aesthetics of Balgo art, because artists are understandably responsive to the aesthetic preferences of the person *for whom* they paint. Nevertheless there are limitations to such strategic acquiescence. When an artist feels an intervention imposes inappropriately upon their artistic autonomy – they are just as likely to reject, ignore or circumvent it in other ways.

¹²⁸ John Carty, field notes, 03/06/03

Interventions artists don't control

There are, however, material interventions that artists cannot control – and these involve what happens to the canvas and paint after they have been delivered back to the art centre as a 'painting'. Balgo paintings are effectively produced twice: once as a material object by the artist, and once again, discursively, as Aboriginal Art by coordinators, collectors and curators. These two fields of cultural production are not, as this thesis strives to illustrate, separate – they recursively inform each other – but they involve quite separate practices. While over 1000 paintings get produced every year in Balgo, the vast majority are never exhibited or published – never promoted in the public realm – as Balgo art.



Figure 5.9a-c. Figurative aspects of Boxer Milner's work

Figurative paintings are a great example of this. Such works, despite receiving virtually no support from the art market since the early 1990s, despite all the financial disincentives, continue to be painted in Balgo by both younger and senior artists. Senior artists like Boxer Milner, for whom figuration was once part of their repertoire, also return to it from time to time as part of their own processes of artistic renewal. In Figures 5.9a-c it is clear that the process for Boxer of refining and exploring his abstractions of Country was underpinned by a regular return to figuration, either as a narrative focus (Figure 5.9a) as an aesthetic anchor (5.9b) or as an almost imperceptible nod to the story behind a more abstract work, as is the tiny pelican in the detail here of a larger painting (Figure 5.9c).



Figure 5.10 a & b. Anne Nowee in 2003 (l), the re-emergence of figuration in her Luurnpa painting (r).

New artists are always emerging and they, like the young painters in 1980s, seek to resolve the tensions of painting in innovative ways. Figuration remains a part of that process, as can be seen in the comparison at Figure 5.10. During my fieldwork, a promising artist, Anne Nowee, was developing her own signature style of creating interlocking concentric arcs, circles and meanders (Figure 5.10a). Anne was able to use these iconic forms, abstracted into complex patterns, to tell a range of Tjukurrpa stories she was authorised to paint. These sold well and were well received by the managers. It was somewhat surprising then when her Luurnpa (Figure 5.10b) painting arrived during this time; a stark contrast to the increasingly confident abstractions that preceded it. Why didn't the artist paint the Luurnpa story in the same fashion as her other works? The Luurnpa story is shared by so many custodians at Balgo; it was perhaps likely that to paint it in an abstract way would open the artist to potential misinterpretation. Anne would not have wanted be perceived to be fabricating aspects of the Luurnpa story, or painting parts that weren't rightly hers to paint, so a generic figurative kingfisher was painted into the more abstract composition. While the market may have selected Balgo figuration out of its categories of fine art, for painters in Balgo it remains, however marginalised, an enduring, contemporary and culturally essential part of the artistic toolkit.

But figuration had a hard road in Balgo art, and it has not been encouraged by art coordinators. While it was prominent in the Adult education years, Watson has suggested that it is likely Andrew Hughes discouraged representational art in favour of a more 'traditional' Aboriginal aesthetic (1996: 46). If indeed this was the case – and the evidence of what appeared on canvas during Hughes time tends to support this assertion – it cannot be attributed entirely to Hughes or his preferences. The editing out of figuration in Balgo

art occurred as soon as the paintings left Balgo destined for the *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* show at AGWA in 1986: 65% of the paintings selected out of the first exhibition were figurative. Watson observed broader reactions against the naturalism of some Balgo paintings, noting that 'the director of the new Aboriginal Arts gallery in Fremantle was loath to market such paintings' (1996:45).



Naturalistic figuration in Balgo art, whilst encouraged within the pre-market milieu, would soon come to be widely derided as non-traditional, and thereby consigned to the bargain 'tourist art' racks. Some of the paintings culled from the first exhibition met this very particular fate.

Figure 5.11. A Gracie Greene painting cut from the AGWA exhibition and later purchased by the Berndt Museum.

While the Berndt Museum acquired several paintings from this first exhibition, they also acquired some later from a local gallery, Birukmarri. They were languishing in the bargain bin, or tourist-art table, and purchased for nominal price tags. The Gracie Greene painting at Figure 5.11 was bought in these circumstances for \$40. Around the same time in 1990 Birukmarri was hosting a new exhibition of Balgo art wherein the least expensive painting was \$550, with the most expensive being \$4500.¹²⁹ Figuration in Balgo paintings, because of its perceived lack of 'traditional' grounds in the desert visual system, clearly prevented such paintings from entering into the category of 'Aboriginal art'.¹³⁰ Their price tags express this truth about the value and *values* that were attached to them.

¹²⁹ Warlayirti Artists Exhibition pricelist, Birukmarri Gallery, 1990.

¹³⁰ It is significant to note that in the two books produced by Cowan to promote Balgo art as fine art there are, in some 74 paintings, no examples of figuration. There are some animal tracks and generic forms of tree/vegetable iconography, but no animals, and definitely no figurative people.

Art, Age and Aboriginality

The material interventions of art coordinators are complex, and usually well-intentioned acts, which can't be easily disentangled from the broader historical contexts of Aboriginal art that play out in these examples. The politics of the palette in Balgo art is an illuminating case in point. The predilection for a customary ochre palette in arts advisors has come from different angles at different times. Andrew Hughes may have been operating with a benign 'traditionalism' that lead him to feel that non-Aboriginal colours would equate to whitefella art, but this is not so clearly the case in recent history. In recent years the proliferation of red, white and yellow could be clearly traced to the subtle, minimalist, fine art aesthetic personally favoured by the art coordinator, rather than any 'traditional' relationship to the ochre palette. Early on, the palette was an index of Aboriginality; later on that same constrained palette was more so an index of 'art'. Either way, the provision (or withholding) of materials is not a neutral act, but rather inherently bound to ideas of authenticity, Aboriginality, and even just 'art' itself. Perhaps more accurately, it is bound to the particular relationship between these very ideas that underscores the semantic terrain of contemporary Aboriginal art.

In the examples discussed so far in this chapter, it is clear that distinctly non-Aboriginal ideas about colour and figuration — about what looked 'traditional' to non-Aboriginal eyes — came to bear distinctly on the aesthetic development of Aboriginal art in Balgo. Yet what was 'art' came to define what was Aboriginal, just as much as what was Aboriginal came to define art. This complex of shifting semantics impacted not only upon paintings, but upon the people who made them. The radical decline in the participation of younger artists at Balgo in the past twenty years confirms that some highly essentialised notions of Aboriginality have come to influence not only the category of paintings, but the category of painters, that came to constitute contemporary Balgo art.

Arguably the most interesting question regarding the control of materials in Balgo art production is not the materials themselves, but who came to use them. In Chapter 3, the comparison between the *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* and *Balgo 4/04* showed a significant trend upwards in the age of artists represented in Balgo exhibitions: the

percentage of exhibited artists under thirty years of age drops from 45% in 1986 to 7% in 2004. The statistics outlined in Chapter 2 also confirm that older artists are producing an increasing ratio of Balgo art, a pattern that has been evident ever since Balgo paintings entered into the market framework.

Part of the process of establishing Aboriginal art as fine art in Western contexts entailed the identification of 'master' artists. Whilst this was to some degree a valid process of identifying and celebrating painters of merit, differentiating 'good' Aboriginal artists from the more generic field of "Aboriginal art", it was also a process deeply fretted with primitivism. The value ascribed to the paintings of Emily Kam Ngwarray, for example, was not solely correlated to the aesthetic merits of her work within the Western critical paradigms of modernism and abstraction, but to the intangible cultural *authenticity* that her 'pre-contact' Aboriginality lent such paintings. Emily is an extreme case, but she provides an indication of what was happening in the emerging market response to, and fetishisation of, older Balgo artists such as Wimmitji and Sunfly.

There was also a significant cultural rationale underpinning the demographic changes in Balgo art. There is a distinct correlation in desert society between artistic confidence and age; the skill and authority to reproduce designs, let alone innovate with them, being the provenance of senior and, therefore, by definition much older people. But it is not this cultural imperative, or this alone, expressed in the market preference for older artists. Older artists, born and raised in the bush, prior to contact with missions or white men, are the walking, talking embodiments of the sacred to the settler profane. James Cowan was acutely aware of this broader equation, at least in his experience as a broker of Balgo art:

The lure of 'first-contact' art has fuelled the imagination of collectors and auction houses alike. There seems to be an insatiable desire to purchase one of these works, whether it is an African mask or a Balgo painting, simply as a trophy of some imagined expedition to the heart of Aboriginal experience. In the wake of modernism... works fashioned by those who have not come into contact with such a world view remain prized objects. This is why such artists as Sunfly, Donkeyman Lee, Wimmitji and Eubena are considered to be so important (Cowan 1999: 17).

The geographic isolation of these artists from the settler experience of the 20th century allowed such artists to be positioned likewise in time. The 'denial of coevalness' that Fabian (1983) identified in the analytical approach to Indigenous peoples was also central to the value-making processes around Aboriginal art in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite living in the same country as white Australians, first-contact artists remain somehow prior-to the Western world and are, therefore, framed as custodians of the traditions that have been lost in the march of progress. For this reason, first-contact artists have continued (though to a lesser degree in recent times) to be the Aborigines from whom the market wanted its art. The art market wanted authentic Aboriginal paintings, but more than that, it wanted them to be produced by certain categories of Aboriginal people. Consequently, not all Balgo art, and certainly not all early Balgo artists, were translated so successfully into the space of Aboriginal art that opened up after that first exhibition.

Matthew Gill

After the success of *Art from the Great Sandy Desert* in 1986, many Balgo artists fell away or failed to prosper in the new market-oriented regime. For many, this was the natural result of a lack of interest or, simply, a lack of talent. But for other Balgo painters their disappearance is not so easily reconciled. It is these artists and artworks, largely forgotten or overlooked, that it is important to thread back into the narrative of what Balgo art became, what it didn't, and why. Here then, we move deeper into these generalised trends, and discussions of Aboriginality and art, to telescope in on the intimate artistic biography of one artist – Matthew Gill — exploring the extent to which his story, and the way he painted it, encompasses a broader and markedly less visible narrative of the becoming of Balgo art.

In 1986 there were 13 artworks by Matthew Gill exhibited at AGWA. In *Balgo 4/04*, 18 years later, there were none. In the first exhibition, Gill was the most highly priced, highly prized and highly acclaimed of all Balgo artists. Art Critic Ted Snell noted in his review of the show that:

Some of the most astonishing works... are the church banners painted by Matthew Gill. In these large paintings he depicts biblical stories using traditional imagery and combines them with stories of his own people. They are spectacular.¹³¹

In 1986, Matthew's paintings sold for over \$500. In comparison, Sunfly, who would become the embodiment of a Balgo 'first-contact' artist in the market was selling works for only \$150-300 in that same exhibition. The following year, in a show at the Blaxland Gallery, Matthew Gill and Sunfly both had paintings of identical size on show: Gills was priced at \$2,100, and Sunfly at \$1,300.¹³² His paintings, as emblematic Aboriginal objects, were turned into public murals and civic art.¹³³ Before the market had settled on an idea about what Balgo paintings should look like, and who should be producing them, Gill was among the most highly valued of all Balgo artists.

This external attribution of value was consistent with Gill's role within Balgo. As established in earlier chapters, Matthew Gill was a catalyst in the emergence of the painting movement and the instigator of its move to Adult Education. A young man in his mid-20s, and a gifted cross-cultural communicator, he was the link between generations and genders, the man who brought the older painters into adult education, and who brokered the negotiations to likewise bring women into the painting fold. When the enterprise had outgrown its base in Adult Education, Gill was the natural choice to become the first chairperson of Warlayirti Artists. But today, despite his seminal role in Balgo art history, no connoisseur of Balgo art collects him, no gallery exhibits him. His art does not feature in either of the two Balgo books produced by James Cowan. To return to a previous comparison: while Sunfly sold a work at auction recently for \$220,000 (probably 100 times its original sale price), Gill's paintings sell, if they sell at all, for less than their

¹³¹ The Balgo Borrowers, the Weekend Australian Magazine, Dec 13-14 1986

¹³² Source: Blaxland Gallery price list for the exhibition "*A Survey of Contemporary Aboriginal Art II*", Sydney 1987.

¹³³ Gill painted a mural that remains at the entrance of the Broome prison. His painting, *Two Fighting Snakes* was also turned into a giant 5 x 7 metre mosaic in Forrest Place in Perth. The work was made using over 17,000 mosaic tesserae of black, yellow, red, and white granite. The original painting is part of the City of Perth Art Collection.

original price. His value, as an artist, has declined quantifiably. What happened to Matthew Gill is what happened to Balgo art; but his is the art that Balgo left behind.

Gill and his young peers faced different problems of translation when it came to the category of art. Unlike their parents, they couldn't just translate pre-existing authority and knowledge from the ceremonial domain into the public domain of art: because the act of representation often involved the process of learning those very narratives from a senior relative. So when younger artists just wanted to paint, or draw, or create on their own terms, they had to find other means for circumventing the cultural barriers to their own creativity. In previous chapters I explored how Gill pioneered the use of Christian narratives and figuration to explore his own authority in using traditional iconography. The *Stations of the Cross* banner (fig 3.14) was the first indication of Gill's potential, his ambition, syncretic vision and aesthetic agility.

After the collaborative success of the *Stations* painting, Gill became more confident about his own authority to render Christian narratives with Aboriginal iconography. He had the ambition, even the audacity, to request calico cut to similar measurements as the Luurnpa Banner so that he could produce a Christian banner to be hung in the church. He conceived and executed this monumental work in late 1982, only to realise that there was no wall in the Balgo church big enough to hang it. He later produced a reduced scale version of the same painting, refining the composition (Figure 5.12). Matthew's description of the painting is as follows:

God is at the top centre of the painting. Adam and Eve are depicted on the left, joined together, with their backs toward God. The track between them and God, is incomplete or "broken" because they did not "listen to God". However, with Noah on the right, who did listen to God, the connection remains unbroken and this track continues into the New Testament times. Adjacent to him are "angels", amorphous shapes edged in yellow. On the left side, an unbroken track leads to Abraham, surrounded by his descendants. In the centre is John the Baptist, joining up the Old and New Testament. Jesus is heralded by a "big star" with rays going out from it, leading down to the Nativity scene with the Mary and Joseph at the bottom. They

are framed by rays which represent the light coming from Jesus. The Three Kings are on the left. The shepherds are on the right, surrounded by their sheep.¹³⁴



Figure 5.12. Matthew Gill, *Christmas Banner #2*

Here, the Bible is poetically summarised on a few square feet of calico; but Gill's artistic achievement transcends this elegant efficiency. The painting's spatio-temporal holism, the unification of complex mythic narratives and events as a singular semantic itinerary, located in specific, related places, is a quintessential characteristic of the *Tjukurrpa*, or Dreaming, which underpins desert life and meaning. This ochre-coloured testament is thus a distinctive collapsing of biblical events through time into this seemingly intercultural place, this *Christian Country*. Gill completed several Christian works on canvas during the early 1980s, covering themes from Baptism, to the Virgin Mary, and Moses at Sinai. The syncretic complexity of these paintings is deserving of more focused consideration, and art historical prominence, than has yet been afforded to Gill's art.

¹³⁴ This transcription is taken from the Kutjungka Parish Painting Archive, and bears the mark of some kartiya linguistic embellishment. The identification of parts of the painting and their interrelation are, however, entirely consistent with Matthew's description of the earlier, larger version (WA ref 82350). I have included this version here for brevity, as it succinctly identifies which visual forms correlate to which narrative element.

Drawing

Like his Christian paintings, the ink Drawings of Matthew Gill are obscured from, and equally deserving of their place in, any form of Balgo Art history. Drawing was arguably Gills preferred medium, but as drawing was not something that translated into the art market expectations for acrylic works on canvas, it fell away in the late 1980s. It is in Gills drawing, however, that we can most fully appreciate the scope of his artistry.

First and foremost, it is clear from the quantity of works that remain in the adult education archive in Balgo that Gill simply loved to draw. He produced countless drawings of the desert animals with which he was familiar (fig 5.13). Interesting also was the evident experimentation with the x-ray style of Arnhem Land in the *karlaya* (emu), *marlu* (kangaroo) and *kipara* (bush Turkey) depicted here.¹³⁵ Despite the x-ray style of representation not being part of the desert visual system, Gill explored it repeatedly in drawings of desert animals. He adapted this convention from outside his own cultural repertoire in order to communicate his own distinct cultural knowledge (born of hunting, gutting, cooking and eating) of these animals

Gill used naturalistic figuration of animals as a means of telling Dreaming stories, often bringing different constellations or configurations of animals together on the page as indices of the Dreaming ancestors and narratives they represent. Such figuration was a safe way of telling stories, of representing his own cultural knowledge, but Gill also used figuration as a pathway to abstraction. Having mastered naturalistic representation, in terms of both the inside and outside figure of animals, he also sought to take those figures apart. In drawings such as Figure 5.14, the seemingly figurative crabs are abstracted into their constituent elements (carapace, legs, claws, pincers, eyes) and in-filled with a design.

¹³⁵ Watson (1996:36) has suggested that this fascination with Northern Australian artistic systems was aroused in Gill by books available at the Adult Education centre. An awareness of these traditions clearly had a major impact on Gill in the mid 1980's, when his drawings also reveal he experimented with cross-hatching.



Figure 5.13 (l) An early drawing by Gill including experiments with x-ray designs

Figure 5.14. (r) Crabs, Fish and Snake

This is a modest drawing and far from the apex of Gills creative achievements, but its simplicity reveals the more universal artistic processes that were being played out in his drawings through the 1980s. Taking the world apart and putting it back together, absorbing influences that were seemingly outside his cultural repertoire (but which to the artist were obviously natural influences and inspirations), Gill sought to communicate Aboriginal concepts and narratives in novel graphic forms. A striking example of this artist endeavour is *Seven Sisters* (Figure 5.15). In this drawing Gill tells the Dreaming narrative of the seven sisters who, chased by an unwanted suitor across the desert, eventually fled into the sky where they became a constellation of stars (the Pleiades). Through this striking conjunction of figurative aspects of the narrative (the sisters' bodies) with their natural referent in the world (the stars) Gill effectively expresses the implicate nature of story and environment in desert culture.

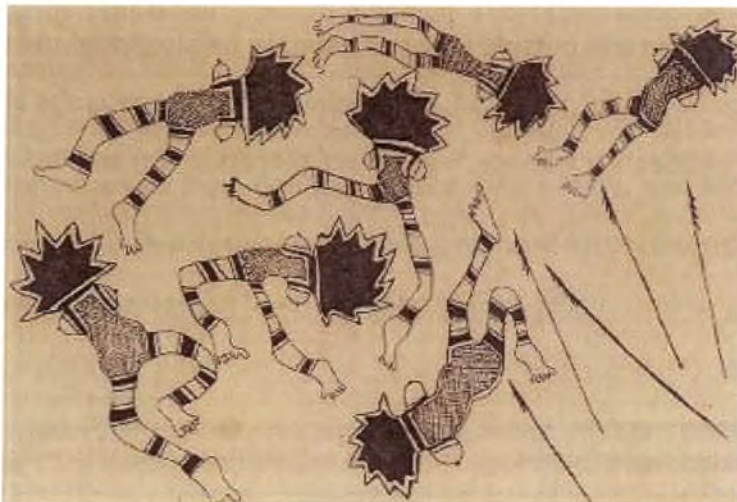


Figure 5.15: Seven Sisters

Stations of the Cross

In contrast to the larger works he later produced on canvas, Gills early drawings appear as a particularly personal medium. The finest example of such drawings, and arguably the apex of Gills artistic career, the *Stations of the Cross* express the personality and complexity of the artist. The *Stations of the Cross* are a suit of 15 pen and ink drawings executed in the mid 1980s. In these *stations* we find a different, more intimate itinerary from that depicted in the collaborative banner (Figure 3.14). The epic iconographic itinerary of that earlier work is here broken up into vignettes (Figure 5.16) where Jesus is a figurative bush turkey who passes through the sites and events leading to his crucifixion.

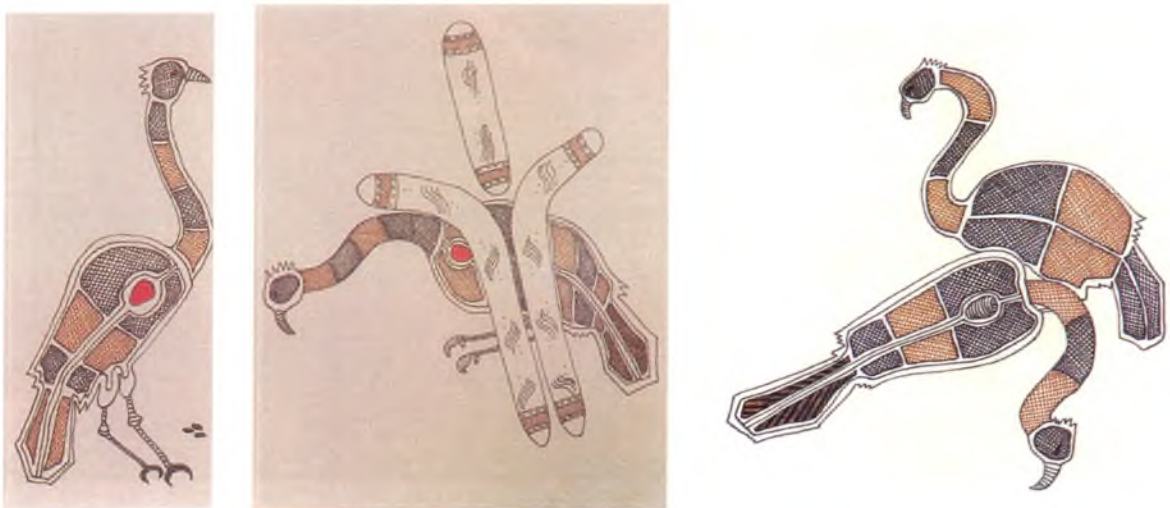


Figure 5.16a-c: three scenes from Matthew Gill's the Stations of the Cross

The interplay of tradition and innovation in these drawings encompasses the range of Gill's artistry. He retains the customary ochre palette, for example, yet there is almost no desert iconography at all. He does use the archetypal aboriginal artefact, the boomerang, for the cross itself (Figure 5.16b). What is most striking about these images is not the cross, but the *cross-hatching* design that covers Jesus' body - a stylistic element that Gill adapted

from Arnhem Land traditions.¹³⁶ Here also, in the stations, the pre-occupation with x-ray drawing is refined to the simple depiction of the turkey's sacred heart. The heart of these drawings, culturally, artistically and (arguably) personally for the artist, is the Turkey itself. The most significant element of these drawings, for all their cross-cultural elements, is Gill's decision to use the bush turkey, or Bustard, in Kukatja called *Kipara*, to embody Jesus. What we might, at one time in anthropology, have called a *totem*, the Turkey is Gill's personal ancestor, his Tjukurrpa; in the most simplistic terms, it is an animal with which he identified intimately and to which he constantly turned in negotiating the meanings of his world through art.



Figure 5.17. The Prodigal Son



Figure 5.18. Lappi Lappi

In another drawing (Figure 5.17) Gill uses the turkey to tell the story of *The Prodigal Son*. Here his predilection for the x-ray style of art from Arnhem Land is even clearer. This drawing leads us further into considering the resonance of the Turkey in Gill's oeuvre. The Prodigal son is the biblical story of a young man who demands his father's inheritance while the father is still alive, and goes off to a distant country where he wastes his substance with riotous living, returning years later hoping for his father's forgiveness. It is

¹³⁶ It is also possible that Gil adapted this from another innovator, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, whose own stations of the cross paintings from the 1970s exhibit similar hatched qualities. Gill may well have seen these paintings through his travels or through the mission Sisters.

a story with enduring and significant resonance for young men in the Western Desert. These same characters, and indeed the same relationship between them, are revisited in this painting of Gill's Country (Figure 5.18). In this painting, his Grandfather (the large turkey) is teaching Matthew's father, the artist Mick Gill, about the Law. Specifically, he is teaching him about the custodianship of a place in his Country. While Matthew never painted in his father's iconographic style (see Figure 5.2c), he painted the essence of that authority in his own uniquely personal way. He painted what painting was *about*.

Throughout his career, Gill seemed drawn to narratives that explored or were structured



around an archetypal relationship between father and son. The Prodigal Son is an obvious one; another that attracted Gills artistic attention was Abraham and Isaac (Figure 5.19). Here, their bodies etched in desert iconography, Abraham is poised with a knife ready to sacrifice his son to his Gods law. It is difficult not to move from this image to speculation that for the artist this narrative and its associated imagery was also redolent with the most intimate of meanings: the sacrificing of boys, their ritual 'death', in initiation to make men through the Law.¹³⁷

Figure 5.19. Abraham and Isaac

In the layering of these images in his oeuvre, however, we begin to get a sense of the semantic depths operating in Gills art; and more specifically of the transpositions of the Tjukurrpa, of the Christian, and the deeply personal, that are embodied for Gill, through the figure of the Turkey. And the ultimate story of Father and Son, that lies at the heart of the Stations.

Throughout the *Stations of the Cross*, the turkey's wings are invisible. They are tucked in and overlaid with cross-hatching. Even when nailed to the cross, or in death, they remain so (see Figure 5.16c). It is only in the final station (Figure 5.20), where Jesus rises from the

¹³⁷ The artist never offered such interpretations for this work, and so such speculation must remain just that.

death, that the turkey's wings appear. And in this final gesture, more than these wings are revealed. Here, for the only time in this suite of drawings, Gill turns to the classical iconography of the desert visual system. The circle-line motif, the core imagery of life narratives and ancestral itineraries in the desert, centres each wing like a spine. Either side of this, the concentric circles suggest the sites of each of the previous stations like desert camps, with turkey tracks the movement between them, that preceded this moment of ascension. The entire journey of this cross-hatched turkey Christ is encoded on his wings, embodied in his person. The figurative is held here in creative tension with the iconographic, as multiple systems of meaning inform and enfold each other. And in this aesthetic reconciliation of his own influences, these questions of tradition, identity and Aboriginality are suspended, however fleetingly, in the transcendence of a turkey.

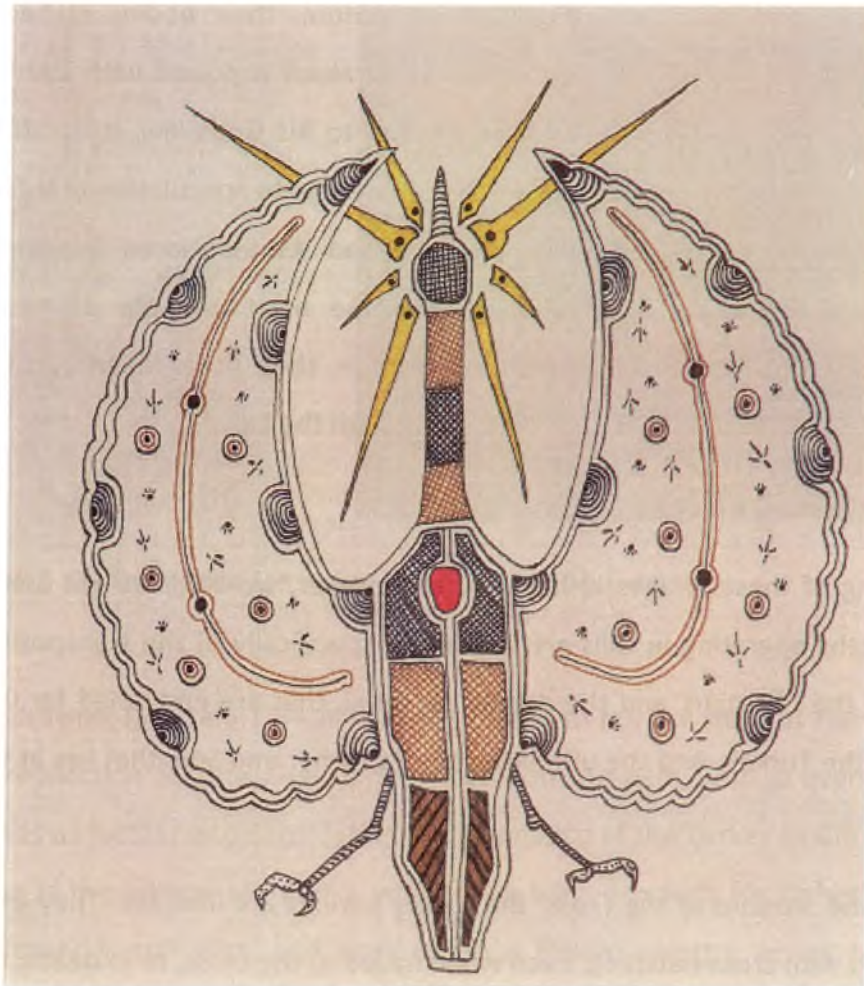


Figure 5.20 The last drawing in Gill's *Stations of the Cross*

What, in other hands, could have seemed like an awkward *bricolage*, Matthew Gill's *Stations of the Cross* are a suite of drawings that aspire to what Bateson describes as their own kind of 'grace' (Bateson 1973). The articulation between Aboriginal symbolism and Christian narrative, the hybridity of design elements from different Aboriginal groups, and above all the deeply personal totemism of the turkey, leave these images redolent with more than the merely cross-cultural or syncretic. Gill's art offers up a profound self-portrait of a man working through the dimensions of his post-mission, post-colonial, Aboriginal Australian self-hood; an artist exploring configurations of identity that transcend concerns with 'tradition' or 'Aboriginality.'

Gill would have been acutely aware of the socio-political climate and discourse of Aboriginal land-rights, economic autonomy and self determination in which the painting movement was emerging. He travelled widely, within Australia and beyond. In 1989 he spent 3 months in Japan working as a visiting Aboriginal artist. In these contexts, as is evident in the painting records, Gill was constantly exploring the possibilities of some broader sense of Aboriginality beyond his direct family, beyond the Kukatja, beyond Balgo. That said, Gill appeared to engage with the question and constitution of 'Aboriginality', as an idea, as a category, as a possibility, more than any other Balgo artist. This continued in the 1990s when, presumably discouraged by lack of any market value for his drawings, he explored acrylic painting. The breadth of Gills' art suggests he was uniquely reflexive and conscious of his position between generations and cultures, and of the ways in which notions of tradition or culture are elicited in these encounters — particularly in the field of Aboriginal art. His description of the painting at Figure 5.21 is explicit in this regard:

'This painting shows the old way of painting in caves and on sand. The circle dots are the old way of painting. The straight lines are the new ways of painting' (Gill, in The University of Notre Dame Australia 2000:49).



Figure 5.21. An acrylic 'dot' painting by Gill

Here Gill has harnessed the ultimate expression of the desert visual tradition, the circle-line motif, to communicate how that tradition is changing. Few people today, or even at the time, would associate this kind of painting with a Balgo artist — old or new. Rather, this painting has clear echoes of Michael Jagamarra Nelson's work. But given that Gill lived for periods in Nyirripi,¹³⁸ and travelled widely to communities where the desert painting movements were flourishing, this is perhaps not surprising. From this mobility came an acute awareness of this emerging field of Aboriginal art, and Gill embraced and explored this category in all its diversity. He absorbed stylistic elements from artists in other desert communities and reworked them into his own distinctive style. It is clear that Gill had a particular awareness of Clifford Possum's work. Several of his paintings evoke a distinct aesthetic affinity with some of Possum's practice; the background patchwork dotting, the 'masking' dotting, the electric radiating lines of dots from the worm Dreamings, and other idiosyncratic stylistic elements from Possum's oeuvre came to infuse Gill's paintings (see, for example, Figure 5.22).

¹³⁸ Nyirripi is the home community of Nancy, Matthew's wife.



Figure 5.22. Marlu Dreaming



Figure 5.23 detail of a Gill ancestral being

But, as is evident in the *Stations of the Cross* drawings, it wasn't just this cross-pollination of broader desert aesthetics that infused Gills work. There was a distinct engagement with groups not only outside his own Kukatja/ Pintupi/Warlpiri desert milieu, but also outside desert society altogether. In drawings and in paintings alike, Gill continually revisited the x-ray style of painting Aboriginal to Arnhem Land. Likewise, the figurative way Gill represents ancestral beings, with their radiating headdresses and mouth-less faces (Figure 5.23), is more evocative of the iconic *wandjinas* of the west-kimberley than of any obvious referent in desert culture.¹³⁹ Sometimes these figures have dilly bags reminiscent of Yolngu culture. Sometimes, like the bustard Jesus, these figures are filled with cross-hatching in that quintessentially Arnhem Land style.

He didn't have to paint this way, gleaning his way through the aesthetic repertoire of his Aboriginal contemporaries, he was clearly capable and authorised to paint the designs and stories of his father, Mick Gill, who was a central figure in the early painting movement. But Matthew chose to paint his stories, histories, identities, in these other searching ways. It was as if he considered all Aboriginal artists his rightful contemporaries, and that his

¹³⁹ Kim Akerman (pers. comm. 29/05/2007) has rightly pointed out that there are rayed figures in desert rock art. Matthew's depiction may therefore very well be based on such desert imagery. However, based on Gills rampant aesthetic eclecticism, his artistic inclination to appropriate other Aboriginal forms, I remain inclined towards the interpretation that these are based on the Wandjina figures that were becoming iconic of aboriginality in the Kimberly during the 1980s and 1990s. Based on Gills personality as an artist, the evidence suggests, perhaps paradoxically, that he would be more likely to use an aesthetic influence from outside his own localised cultural milieu, like a Wandjina, than an esoteric and sacred representational form from the Tjukurrpa. It is the pattern of his practice. In this same vein I would argue he was likely fond of depicting the internal organs of animals in the tradition of Western Arnhem Land precisely because there was no such visual tradition in desert imagery.

own complex identity, and within it the shape and sound of his Aboriginality, manifested most coherently to him in that broader engagement. His body of work betrays an artist who continued to explore - and thereby *enact* - the processual constitution of Aboriginality as a dynamic, perhaps *emergent* category.

Matthew Gill and his Balgo contemporaries were as much involved in the translating Aboriginal art for themselves, translating themselves into it, as they were translating their culture into this category of Aboriginal art. Obviously not all younger Balgo artists in the 1980s engaged so confidently or explicitly with the categories of art, and the emerging Aboriginalities it expressed. However, they were all, in their syncretisms, figurations, landscapes and watercolours, and even in their 'traditional' translations, engaged in the quintessentially artistic processes of playing with the categories, politics and possibilities of their own representation. These processes were antithetical, ironically, to the development of Balgo painting as fine art within the market of the 1990's.

As evident from the discussion of Figure 5.21, Gill explicitly addressed the changes in the desert painting system which were occurring through acrylics. While older artists playfully experimented and abstracted these aspects of their artistic expression, Gill came to work with them quite consciously, rendering explicit the questions and politics of self representation and identity formation. What Gill couldn't have known was that artistic explanations explicitly concerned with the creation of Aboriginality are contra to the concealment of such processes in the marketing of authentic Aboriginal identities through art. From a market perspective, what was artistic about Gill's paintings didn't support what was supposed to be Aboriginal about them. The emerging category of Aboriginal art sought, at least in the discourse surrounding it in the market place, to elide the constructive and creative processes that underpin the practice of contemporary Balgo artistry. Somewhat ironically, it is precisely these constructive processes that so-called 'urban' Aboriginal artists like Richard Bell or Christian Thompson engage with as a cornerstone of their artistic practice. It is common today for Aboriginal artists to be interpreted and lauded for challenging and reframing our notions of tradition, culture, representation and Aboriginality; though we rarely afford desert artists the same personal or political edge. Indeed, as the comparison between the 1986 and 2004 exhibitions shows, those Balgo artists who did explore the tensions, conflict and potential of their

Aboriginality, *whatever* that means, were selected out of the market on precisely the same criteria now employed to laud 'contemporary' or 'urban' Aboriginal artists. Following in the spirit of temporal distancing from Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983), it seems that while it is expected that 'contemporary' Aboriginal artists such as Christian Thompson will engage self-reflexively in such ways, when a 'traditional' Aboriginal desert man such as Gill did it, it served to undermine the categorical position of his work in the market as 'authentic' desert art.

Similar contrasts, between the early Balgo paintings that disappeared and contemporary Aboriginal artists, are found in comparison with artists such as Ian Abdullah. It is significant to note that of the watercolours included in the first Balgo exhibition, only those paintings showing empty landscapes, or 'traditional' bush people walking around in the country, were included. Selected out of the exhibition were paintings by Philip Bell (Figure 5.24) which included contemporary scenes of horses (non-native animals) drinking at the (Catholic) mission dam (a man-made landform) near Balgo. Also excluded from the exhibition were other landscape paintings Bell had done of his family (dressed in clothes) going out hunting with a motorcar near Balgo. Such intimate vignettes, while strikingly reminiscent of Abdullah's work so openly celebrated as contemporary art today, provided a categorical conundrum for the art world. Ironically, artists like Bell were painting a 'traditional' life they had never known, while the authentic scenes of their daily life were not considered worthy of public exhibition as contemporary Aboriginal art.



Figure 5.24. Phillip Bell, Mission Dam

Just as the semantics of the 'Aboriginal' in Aboriginal art can be seen to serve the audience rather than the artist, here we might conclude that the question of 'tradition' came to apply to an idealised Aboriginal people rather than to the artists themselves. John Oster (2003) noted, incisively, that Matthew Gill's lack of continued success, his failure to fit the Balgo art mould, was due to the fact his painting simply didn't appear to 'draw on the traditional genre of work that comes from here.' That tradition, however, as this thesis demonstrates, was already a cross-cultural one, influenced in its form as much by art coordinators and market forces as by any immutable Aboriginal aesthetic imperatives. It wasn't that these younger artists didn't fit the actual emergent tradition of Balgo painting - quite clearly they did continue to paint in ways deeply resonant with the aesthetic, political and cultural traditions of the desert - rather they didn't fit the idea of that 'tradition' in the minds of their audiences.

In the years that followed that first exhibition, and in the settling out of the art market and the cultivation of taste, it became clear that Aboriginal desert art needed to look a certain *kind* of Aboriginal; and Balgo art, despite its extraordinary internal diversity, was no different. Matthew Gill's initial popularity as an artist did not survive these processes. Gill worked closely with the art coordinators (Andrew Hughes and Michael Rae) in the early years, when his particular kind of artistry was appreciated: Rae described Gill as 'the most original and talented of all the younger artists at Balgo' (1990a), and 'technically the most proficient of all the Balgo artists and the most adventurous in his approach to art' (1991:52). This relationship to the art centre was, in the face of market disinterest in the kind of painting Gill was doing, destined for conflict. In the mid 1990s, as arts coordinators successfully promoted the reputation of Balgo paintings as *fine art*, they also began to discourage his particular style: which was becoming categorised by the market as 'graphic design' (Oster 2003) rather than 'art'. Bowdler provides a similar case study in her description of Amy Jirwulurr Johnson in her analysis of the problems of marketing certain Ngukurr artists.

Amy's style of work did not fare well as the art market moved on and the desire for more monumental, minimal and abstract works took hold in the 1990s.... Unable to be pigeonholed or easily described, Amy's work has not always conformed to market expectations of how Aboriginal art should look. It is not reminiscent of any

of the styles associated with European Modernism. It has never been painterly or expressionistic; it is neither minimal nor abstract, but rather figurative and at times decorative. It is neither fragile nor sensitive, but has a graphic quality, a brightness and boldness that resists nuance and nostalgia. Despite the oft-repeated tag of 'naive art', Amy's work does not truly resemble this style either. Rather it is unique and unlike that of any other Aboriginal artist. Amy created some of her most significant and accomplished works... outside the spotlight of the art world, and unfortunately she has not received the publicity and acclaim as she deserves.

(2008:283)

While other Ngukurr artists enjoyed more success than Johnson, in general the characteristic 'bold use of a wide colour palette, the adoption of quasi-European perspective and representational elements, syncretic styles and individual diversity,' (Bowdler 2008: 355) of Ngukurr artists rendered them an ambiguous proposition in the emerging world of Aboriginal art. The same could be argued for several Balgo artists during this period, and particularly Matthew Gill. Everything he did, from the syncretic art, western representational styles, figuration, borrowing from other aboriginal groups- all of it bucked the trend of increasingly expressionistic abstraction that other Balgo artists were pursuing, and being encouraged to pursue. The dancing men he liked to draw (fig 25a), which were exhibited in 1986 and which had been the logo of the Warlayirti art centre for nearly 15 years, came to be considered derivative, clichéd.



Figure 5.25 a & b: Warlayirti Artists logo 1987 (l) and 2000 (r)

In 2000 Gill's logo for the art centre (Figure 5.25a) was replaced with the more abstract, iconographic and identifiably 'desert' Aboriginal logo (Figure 5.25b).¹⁴⁰ Undoubtedly, the art produced by Warlayirti Artists in 2000 was no longer adequately represented by Gill's figurative men. It could be argued, however, that the iconographic logo is equally unrepresentative of what Balgo artists paint today. Of interest here then is the way in which this iconography – despite no longer being prominent in the visual form of Balgo art – served as a visual code for the authentic *Aboriginality* of Warlayirti art in a way that Gill's figurative logo could not. By all accounts Matthew Gill was hurt by his marginalisation from Warlayirti Artists, and he stopped painting in Balgo.

Matthew would know he was a good artist, you know, he also would know he was an innovator too, he didn't just keep doing (the same thing), he was able to innovate... and he wasn't always playing to the gallery either. He would get an idea, and he would do that, whether it was going to sell or not. And that mightn't always have been appreciated. He did say that they didn't want his art... he was left out, and he would have resented that, of course, then of course he turned his back on it... (Dempsey 2004).

Gill moved away from Balgo, he spent some time in prison. In 2002, he contracted melioidosis. Distanced and disillusioned with the art movement he shepherded in to existence, he died shortly afterwards, aged 42. The story of Matthew Gill is the shadow of Balgo art. It is the story of the paintings and the painters that came to be excluded from the category of authentic Aboriginal art, or fine Aboriginal art, in the development of a market for Balgo Art.

Conclusion

Understanding the processes, practices and ideas that lead to the exclusion of Matthew Gill (and others) is critical to understanding the constitution of Balgo art today. Balgo paintings are objects at the intersection of systems of meaning and value. Whilst they

¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, the newer Warlayirti Artists logo, produced by a senior Kukatja/Pintupi man, is an almost identical match to one of the 'iconic' desert glyphs on the cover of the 1986 edition of Nancy Munn's *Walbiri Iconography*.

continue to be produced in the relative autonomy of discrete cultural circumstance in Balgo, these paintings are unquestionably influenced by artists' regular interactions with the values of the market embodied in the personage of the art coordinator. I suggested earlier that, in the initial phase of the business, it could be argued that the art coordinator was – with the best intentions - also effectively marketing the idea of 'Aboriginal art' to Balgo painters. What is evident from the broader analysis is that every art coordinator has, in their own way and to differing degrees, necessarily done the same. It is just that each has had different perspectives on what constitutes Aboriginal art; and 'Aboriginal art' itself has changed demonstrably over the past decades. What was Aboriginal fine art in James Cowan's time was already markedly different from the milieu Hughes faced in 1987.

From 1987 onwards, Balgo art has evolved in relationship to market pressures. Yet these pressures have not merely influenced what people paint, and nor are they simply geared towards the aesthetic selection of the best paintings produced by Aboriginal people in Balgo. Rather, these processes that produce Aboriginal art in Balgo are dialogical, and emerge out of an increasingly complex and sublimated intersection of ideas (for artist and audience alike) around Aboriginality, what art should be, and about what constitutes 'authentic' Aboriginal art.

What is striking about the origins of the Balgo painting movement was not simply the dynamic translation of customary ritual aesthetics and iconography into a new media, but also the working through, on many levels, of what art, Aboriginality, and, ultimately, 'Aboriginal art' might be for the Balgo painters. Early artists experimented with figurative drawing, landscape painting, watercolours, with Christian and historical narratives as well as the translation of their customary repertoire of designs and stories. With the emergence of the art market, and the essentialisms that underpinned its valuations, these experiments were gradually selected out of what was to become recognisable as Balgo Art. While figurative works still appear from time to time in Balgo art, they are certainly not encouraged. They don't sell. Christian or syncretic paintings are still done, but they are no longer catalogued by the art centre, they are given directly to the church. They are paintings by people in Balgo, but they are no longer Balgo art.

It could be argued that what started out as an exploratory process of representing myriad aboriginal selfhoods, became tailored to the production of images that looked distinctively or recognisably 'Aboriginal'. It would be logical to move from this to the conclusion that artists have been railroaded into performing a very specific form of Aboriginality on canvas. Despite the examples presented here, that is not an argument this thesis is able to sustain. In this chapter I have sought to emphasise the relational, recursive, cross-cultural interactions that are foundational in the contemporary constitution of Balgo art. This in no way diminishes the artists' agency, their *artistry*, or the indeed the distinctly Aboriginal values expressed and enacted through contemporary paintings. Rather, it repositions the 'Aboriginal art' created in Balgo as neither simplistically 'cultural' nor theoretically 'intercultural', but as *multiply determined* (Morphy 2007) in ways that continue to challenge the conceptual and descriptive capacities of Anthropology. In the chapters that follow I seek to describe the localised and distinctly Aboriginal complex of values that play out in the creation and exchange of artistic style in Balgo art. We have to remember that regardless of what the market selected out, the Balgo artists have also defined for that same market what it will have to let in. Balgo artists may have painted themselves into certain corners of Aboriginality, but they have continued to paint themselves out of them again and again. What they have done is to work within the categories of Aboriginal art, to quietly shift the frames of that category, to use the frame, unhinge it, smudge it and dot it back together in myriad individual ways. And it is within these frames, re-hung by their parents and grand-parents, which younger artists today assert and explore the Aboriginal and cross-cultural dimensions of their selfhoods, the range of the culture, in exchange with the whitefellas who buy them.

Chapter Six

Analysing Abstraction

To date, this thesis has effectively been an anthropological art history of Balgo painting. It is a history that illuminates what went on in the relationship between Balgo artists and non-indigenous influences to generate and favour movements towards increased abstraction: as something favoured by Western aesthetic tastes, encouraged by art coordinators in specific ways, and as something ultimately 'selected' by artists in dialogue with market forces and their own emerging practice. This art history has been developed to the point where any anthropological discussion of Balgo art cannot proceed further without first addressing abstraction as a phenomenon to be explained in cultural terms. Over the history of painting presented herein, the initial visual forms of Balgo art were disembedded from their representational or narrative contexts and brought, increasingly, into the service of visual experimentation. In the classic equation of abstraction, form became content. What is now needed is an ethnographic perspective on the uniquely Aboriginal quality of this abstraction. This chapter, then, focuses a formal analysis on the intimate aesthetic details, dynamics and constitution of abstraction in Balgo over the past decades. As an axis between the art historical and ethnographic perspectives in operation, this chapter defines and prescribes a central field of data being presented in this thesis - the brushstrokes, the dots, the palettes, the compositions - in short, the visual form of contemporary Balgo art. I argue that the elaboration of these components, in concert with the decline in the explicitly ritual or iconographic content of paintings, is not an expression of the decline in the cultural content of paintings, but rather of the development of painting as a distinct and relatively autonomous cultural practice. It is a practice through which non-iconographic devices (such as outlining, concentricity and ultimately dotting) have become the most efficacious aspects of 'art'.

Dissolving Iconography

Twenty years after its production, the *Luurnpa Banner* was copied onto the outer wall of the new Warlayirti Art Centre to honour its status as the progenitor of the contemporary painting movement; yet Balgo paintings produced inside that art centre today seem, at first, vastly removed from this aesthetic legacy. The most quantifiable change in Balgo art since its inception is the declining occurrence of iconography.

In the first Balgo exhibition, *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*, which opened at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) in 1986, approximately 80% of works exhibited visible traces or indices of ancestral beings: iconographic depictions of their itineraries or actions, or ritual scenes associated with that ancestral agency. Two decades later, in the largest exhibition of Balgo paintings held since that time, *Balgo 4/04*, only 19 out of 135 paintings (14%) exhibited any of these iconographic forms. Only two paintings in the 2004 exhibition exhibited the tracks of an ancestral being or animal (Figure 6.1). For the rest of the paintings that utilised classical desert iconography, the extent to which such usage was 'iconographic' (i.e. representing or indexical of agents or actions) is itself questionable. For artists such as Elizabeth Nyumi, iconographic form, where it persists in Balgo art, is often used for compositional purposes rather than with narrative or representational intent.



Fig 6.1. Dora Mungkirna

These changes represent a major, seemingly systemic change in the very semantic composition of Balgo art. The decline in iconography destabilises conventional interpretive

relationships between form and content, iconography and narrative, in desert art. This is, therefore, not just a problem of formal analysis; the decline in iconography poses significant conceptual challenges to the conventions of cultural analysis of Aboriginal art.

Iconography and the Dreaming

A significant proportion of early acrylic paintings produced in Balgo were paintings of ancestral creative action, or of the human creative actions that occur through ritual in relation to those ancestors. Whether in figurative forms, arcs, footprints, tracks or circle-line itineraries, the visible traces of ancestral agency were central to the Indigenous conception of a painting and the intended understanding of its content in 1986. It is clear that in the early days of painting, when painting was still finding its legitimacy as a cultural and cross-cultural phenomena, senior Balgo artists were concerned to point out to their audiences the cultural practices from which acrylic painting was derived.



Figure 6.2a. John Mosquito. 6.2b. Sunfly 6.2c Patricia Lee

It follows that a significant percentage of early acrylic paintings were representations of imagery produced in sand drawings or on the body ritual contexts. In the AGWA show, nearly twenty percent of the exhibition (20 paintings) represented ritual or depicted the performance of ritual as described in the catalogued story given by the artist. Ten of these paintings were explicitly 'about' other forms of painting in ritual media, either on the body or in the sand. John Mosquito's painting (Figure 6.2a) depicts lightning and rain clouds, and the artist stipulated that 'when men are doing the rain dance they use these design on their bodies.' Sunfly's work (Figure 6.2b) depicts this ritual painting process in action: 'two brothers of the Tjangala subsection are painting other men in preparation for a ritual.'

Patricia Lee's collaboration with her grandmother (Figure 6.2c) shows a ceremonial scene in which the breast paintings for the Witchetty Grub Tjukurrpa feature prominently. Female artists such as Sarah Napanangka also made explicit reference to ceremonial sand drawing practices in her early acrylic art. Eubena's first painting (Figure 6.3a, below) depicts, among other things, two women sitting at the end of a ceremonial sand drawing singing songs. Nancy Naninurra (Figure 6.3b) has painted, within a painting about collecting bush tomatoes, a ground drawing associated with this story.



Fig 6.3a. Eubena



Figure 6.3b. Naninurra

The extent to which this new visual medium drew on other aesthetic practices is undeniable. It is beyond question that there was, in the artist's minds, a significant translation of ritual image-making practices into the sphere of commercial painting. Furthermore, it was important to the artist that their audience understood that fact. They were therefore specific in the ways they communicated the relationship between iconography and ancestral or ritual referents of the Dreaming. Iconography in Balgo painting was, initially, an important index of Aboriginal cultural content for both artist and audience alike. Iconography and ancestral agency, iconography and the Dreaming, were strongly, explicitly linked in the origins of Western desert painting, in Balgo as elsewhere. How we now interpret the exodus of the indices of ancestral agency from the visual form of the canvas is critical to our broader interpretation of contemporary desert paintings.

Acrylic art as an independent cultural practice

The key to understanding the cultural coherence of abstraction in Balgo art is to situate the role of iconography, and its decline, within a historical consciousness of contemporary painting as an emergent and ultimately independent cultural practice; one that is no longer directly or necessarily referential to ritual or ceremonial forms.

In the beginnings of Balgo art, when painting was for most artists a direct translation of desert iconography and ceremonial aesthetics into a new medium, the explicit statement of this relationship was important to both artist and audience. The use of iconography helped the artists to establish, without ambiguity, the specific grounds of what they could translate into paint, the Dreaming narratives or (specific parts thereof) of the Country for which they were custodians. The clearly referential nature of circles, arcs, tracks and lines were also important in helping audiences to grasp that authority; not to instantly understand the stories, as it were, but simply to grasp that there *were* stories to be understood by those capable of doing so. Iconography at this early stage was an index, in different ways for artists and audience, of Aboriginal cultural content.

But this was a specific period in the social genesis of Balgo art. It was a period in which these processes of establishing the authoritative grounds of a new medium of social expression and exchange, for both artists and audience, perhaps necessitated a strong cultural referent: something to simultaneously legitimise and obfuscate the inherently innovative and 'non-traditional' nature of the medium. But having been established through the authority of the Dreaming, acrylic painting has gone on to develop its own logic, its own rationale, its own authority as an independent cultural practice that is no longer directly (or at least visually) referential, for most artists, to the iconography or aesthetics of the ritual domain. This is not to say that there are not ongoing and important relationships for the artists between painting and ceremony, or painting and the Dreaming; but insofar as such relationships continue for artists, they are nowadays less likely to be expressed iconographically.

Given the relationship between iconography and the Dreaming, can we explain the dissolution of iconographic form without asserting a correlated dissolution of cultural content? Are the canvases of 2004 any less engaged with the Dreaming, with the creation of the world, the stories that explain it and the values they express? The answer to this question is multifaceted, because the Dreaming itself is multifaceted. The specific, detailed aspects of Dreaming ancestor's activities have, arguably, become less directly relevant to the discursive production of contemporary art. The Tjukurrpa, its authorial power, and the cultural continuity it provides in the lives of Balgo artists and the art they produce, is as important now as ever; but different aspects of it have come to be foregrounded in the emergent practice of acrylic art. In *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas* (2007), Biddle suggests that there is a direct correlation between the decline in iconography and the nature of the content in desert women's paintings:

A shift is occurring... there is a marked movement away from so-called 'iconic' figuration to a form which has no perceivable 'icons' at all....Combined with a complete absenting of traditional Dreaming stories... this art serves to portray a more generic sense of the Dreaming (2007: 30).

It is this more generic sense of the Dreaming, its power and authority – as opposed to detailed depictions of ancestral action encoded in iconography – that is increasingly evident in Balgo art. While the 'complete absenting of traditional Dreaming stories' is not as broadly applicable in Balgo as Biddle suggests it is elsewhere – even the most abstract Balgo painters will still offer detailed Dreaming narratives for their paintings – there is no longer a *necessary* correlation between ancestral events and visual elements of a painting. The Dreaming is still an important source of inspiration and meaning for Balgo artists, but accessing this experience requires a fundamental shift in the formal analysis of desert painting.

I have argued that understanding the cultural coherence of abstraction in Balgo art requires situating the role of iconography, and its apparent decline, within a historical context of acrylic art as an emergent and independent cultural practice. It is also important to recognise that iconography is now, and has always been, but one element in a complex visual system. While these icons are undoubtedly the scaffolding of the desert visual

system; they should not be mistaken for that system in its entirety. Nancy Munn was herself at pains to circumvent overly reductive interpretations of *Walbiri Iconography*, noting that Warlpiri artistic practices were 'bound up with manipulative and tactile as well as visual perception, and thus embedded in immediate sense experience,'(1973: 216). Watson and Biddle have developed this affective principle in different ways; and while this thesis doesn't focus overly on the sensual context in which desert iconography functions, it is nevertheless an essential thread in understanding the cultural coherence of a receding iconography. Iconography rarely arrives naked in the desert experience. In sand drawing, as Watson shows, they are animated by verbal narration and haptic rhythms. When painted on the body, *kuruwarri* icons are outlined in other colours, gleaming with animal fat (or today, vegetable oil), dotted with vegetable down and animated by the body of the dancer. However discursively and conceptually important the *kuruwarri* icon may be in these contexts, it is the aesthetic elaboration *around* that icon that animates it and brings it to life in the experience of the dancers and audience. As Biddle notes of Yawulyu and Awelye ritual:

the red ochre of the *kuruwarri* mark mixes with the oiled colour on the skin such that what one 'sees' is not the *kuruwarri* so much as the white ochre traces.... the trace is the determinative form through which manifestations of presence are seen (Biddle 2007: 68).

Biddle here focuses on the outlining around an icon as the tracing of it, and argues that this (usually) white highlighting of the form on black skin is actually the means by which the icon is made visible. This is an important insight into the broader aesthetic contexts in which iconography functions in the desert ritual. It is also a key to understanding the way these aesthetics have anchored the processes of 'abstraction' in contemporary art, for, as Biddle continues, 'in much early acrylic painting, the 'dotting' pattern follows and outlines the *kuruwarri* mark in such a way that the mark virtually disappears. (Biddle 2007: 68) Biddle's observation regarding the optical prominence of the trace reminds us that, however central iconography may be to the semantics of desert artistry, it is nevertheless made powerful and *experienced* as such, through non-iconographic means: the processes of 'outlining' and 'dotting' that are now the cornerstones of contemporary painting practice.

Filling the canvas: outlining, concentricity and dotting

The desert visual system evolved to deal with the problems of scale presented by the body, by ceremonial objects or the ground itself. As Munn noted, certain formal arrangements in the Warlpiri graphic system, most notably those designs appearing on the torso, 'can be traced to the influence of body shape' (1986: 108).¹⁴¹

This is especially true of designs painted on breast and shoulders where some strokes may be elongated or otherwise altered to fit the breasts, or 'stretched' from shoulder to shoulder (Munn 1986: 103).

As Kuruwarri were (and are still) imprinted onto the body, onto ceremonial regalia, boards and stones, rock walls, weapons – not to mention the ground – the desert visual system was evidently constantly being adapted to different contexts and media. When designs were transferred from these myriad canvases to the new (and literal) medium of canvas, the flat plane of fabric itself presented novel formal problems and possibilities. Bardon (1979:15) claims that the canvas boards - with their square or rectangular shapes- took getting used to because of the tradition of painting on rounded surfaces of shields, boomerangs and bodies. Sutton (1988:39) also suggested that the overall structure of imagery was affected by the changed shape of the artistic surface. Green (1988: 46) says that canvas liberated people from the limitations of the previous surfaces, while Biddle (2007) argues that desert women have transformed the canvas into a kind of 'skin' on which ceremonial painting practices are reproduced. Some of these interpretations resonate more than others with the Balgo transition to canvas. Yet a formal analysis of Balgo art throughout the 1980s also evinces another quite localised observation: the canvas in Balgo became, unlike bodies or skin or the earth itself, a space to be filled.

¹⁴¹ Hamilton (2000) similarly notes how the topography of the body impacts the shape of designs.



Figure 6.4a Mick Gill, 1981



6.4b. artist unknown, 1981



6.4c Arthur Tjapanangka, 1981

(images 6.4a & c courtesy of Sylvie Poirier, image 6.4b courtesy Warwick Nieass).

In early Balgo art, senior men and women did not automatically fill this space, but often left iconography hanging, animated by sparse dotting, on the canvas. As with the early Papunya boards, dotting was sparingly used in early Balgo painting. Figures 6.4a-c show this clearly, as do the early 'Berndt boards' discussed previously. When dotting was more prominent at this time, it was used as infill (more as it would have been in the men's sand sculptures) around iconography, rather than as a technique for filling the canvas to the edges. Arthur Tjapanangka's work (figure 6.4c) illustrates this tendency, where the iconography is filled in, self-contained as its own frame, but the edges of the canvas are not. There is a clear sense in these paintings (all from 1981) that Balgo painters were yet to consider the canvas as a space to be filled with dotting.

The proliferation of dotting that subsequently came to define the desert art movement had a distinct historical genesis at Balgo. Whereas the proliferation of dotting was elaborated and employed early on at Papunya, in response to cultural sanctions to obscure sacred imagery (Kimber 1995:123) this was not the case in Balgo art. As intimated earlier in the thesis, artists in Balgo faced *cross-cultural* pressures from mission staff, and thereafter art coordinators, to fill the canvas in accordance with non-indigenous aesthetics and expectations of the medium.

'(W)omen began with plain backgrounds or with yawulyu designs with a small number of dots, but people at the education centre would ask why they hadn't

filled the background... According to Margaret Anjule the women invented lines of dots in bands of different colours in order to reach an accommodation between the suggestions of the adult education staff and their own traditions (Watson 2003: 153).

The impact that this had on the visual form of Balgo art is evident in the comparison of women's works at Figures 6.5a-c. Sarah Napanangka's work from the early 1980s (Figure 6.5a) illustrates Watson's point that women began painting, like men, with iconographic designs and relatively plain backgrounds. In Mati Mudgedell's work (Figure 6.5b) we can see how the design structure of female body painting, with 'contrasting colours of ochre being traced in lines around the original kuruwarri twice, maybe three or four times' (Biddle 2007: 69), is elaborated into acrylic form: the ochre palette of dotted lines emanating out to the edge of the canvas from a central form. This change in the orientation to the canvas, however significant, was experienced by Balgo women as culturally coherent adaptation; whilst initially pleasing the sisters at Adult education, it also satisfied the artists because it reminded them of the stripes of different colours they use in body painting to outline iconography (Watson 1996:44). Creating these bands of dots as a kind of acrylic outlining gave artists a safe way of filling the canvas without having to embellish narratives with other elements.



Figure 6.5a. Sarah Napanangka

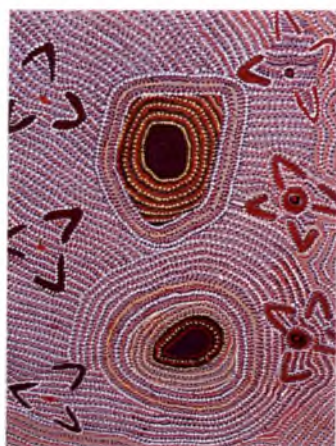


Figure 6.5b. Mati



Figure 6.5c. Minnie Napanangka.

Minnie Napanakga's painting (Figure 6.5c) illuminates how this translation of outlining from one cultural medium to another eventually became an aesthetically independent

adaptation of acrylic painting. In her work the bands of ochre-coloured dotting are no longer used to outline or enliven a specific iconographic form, but to fill and enliven the entire canvas on which those forms sit. This is not to suggest that outlining had replaced iconography, but it had, in what is arguably the first stage of abstraction, become *detached* from it.

Watson has noted the importance of outlining in Balgo art (2003:249), particularly insofar as outlining animates its object, bringing it forward and highlighting its importance. Furthermore, Watson emphasises the physical practice, whether manifesting through dots or lines, as being significant in and of itself; 'the action of outlining the forms... rather than the precise mark used for the outlining, is the most important thing to the artists. (Watson 2003: 249) Watson's research leads us part of the way to our goal of appreciating the dynamics of acrylic painting as an independent cultural practice, but her analysis nevertheless remains bound to the primacy of the icon. As we have seen above however, practices of outlining were adapted in the acrylic medium such that bands of dotting or painted lines were no longer bound to a specific iconographic form; outlining continued to be an important practice, but it also arguably became a kind of 'form' itself.

Take, for example, Ningie Nanala's painting from 2003, *Jalyuyarnoo* (Figure 6.6). Here a few basic elements are traced and retraced to fill the canvas in acrylic ripples from the base forms



of circle and line. There are of course a few loosely iconographic circles which the artist identifies as *tjurnu* (soak waters) in her Country, but these are not what one 'sees' in this painting. What one sees or experiences in the artwork is the significant optical energy generated by the outlining. It is not the forms that are enlivened by this practice, but the canvas itself. The whole painting seems to be *about* outlining. My research at Balgo hereby accords with Biddle's argument from Lajamanu that contemporary desert art has been a process of 'turning the trace into the mark itself' (2007: 69).

Fig 6.6 Ningie Nanala, *Jalyuyarnoo*, 2003

Concentricity

The prominence of outlining in development of the Balgo aesthetic also leads us to a consideration of a kindred component of Balgo art, concentricity. In 2004, twenty-five percent¹⁴² of all paintings catalogued at Warlayirti Artists demonstrated either a complete formal concentricity (canvas covered with compounded circles, squares or other shapes) or a strong compositional component of concentricity. It is one of the aesthetic components of early Balgo art that has been amplified and accentuated by the dialogical processes of market feedback and abstraction that have shaped Balgo art in recent decades. Concentricity has not become significantly more prominent, in statistical terms, than it was in the early days of Balgo painting, but it has become considerably more prominent on the surface of the canvas (Figure 6.7).



Figure 6.7. Examples of concentricity in recent Balgo art

As discussed above, there were early expectations imposed upon the artists that the canvas should be filled. Concentricity was a feature of the desert visual system that translated to early paintings, so elaborating on these existent concentric patterns to the edge of the canvas was, like outlining, an obvious and coherent way of filling the canvas. Whether it is the rippling circles out from a water hole, or the compounded rectangles and squares, Balgo artists continue to place shapes within shapes within shapes (or, it is possible to argue, to *outline* shapes around shapes around shapes.) Although they are visually similar, outlining and concentricity are not, however, identical practices. Whereas outlining was originally concerned with highlighting or enlivening an existent iconographic

¹⁴² Approximately 280 out of 1097 paintings

form, concentricity has its own resonances associated with time, space and other semantic dimensions. The act of drawing a circle around another circle was not, in the desert visual system, primarily geared towards a highlight of the first circle. Each circle in a compounded roundel can have specific semantic content of its own. Munn noted that concentric circles can act as complex semantic units:

(W)hen concentric circles occur in the sand story they constitute a construction of circles nesting inside each other, each with a separate meaning: for example, a line of women dancing around an upright fighting stick (1986: 67).

Concentric circles can be indexical of other rounded physical forms such as women's breasts (Munn 1973: 172), but they are semantically agile and can be variously employed to indicate depth (a hole in the ground), time (water drying up around a rock hole) and quantity (a diversity of foods to be found in a single area), among other things. In early Balgo painting it was clear that these functions of concentricity were being adapted into the acrylic mode of story telling. Fred Tjakamarra, a custodian of *Kapi Tjukurrpa* (Water Dreaming), was concerned with the depiction of water in his paintings and commonly used concentric forms. He produced simple concentric imagery which expresses the principle that water in the clay pans dries up or recedes after rain.¹⁴³ He also demonstrates the semantic complexity of concentricity within a single painting (Figure 6.8) by contrasting permanent water in rockholes against the receding water of the flat lands in between:



This painting shows the water moving around and looking for a place to stay during the Tjukurrpa. The rockholes [concentric circles] are full but the water on the flat lands [concentric rectangles] can be seen shrinking as it dries up¹⁴⁴

Figure 6.8. Fred Tjakamarra, 279/94

¹⁴³ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #276/94

¹⁴⁴ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference # 279/94

Concentricity can show space, in the descending depth of a rockhole, but it can also show time, as in the drying rings of salt left around a clay pan: in Tjakamarra's work it does both simultaneously. In such instances it is possible to think of concentricity in desert art as a representational device for navigating the problems of space and time in an iconographic system.¹⁴⁵

What then, are the implications of concentricity in what I am describing as the decidedly non-iconographic system of acrylic art? The concentricity that occurs in Balgo art today is not about different levels or layers of *specific* meaning. I can't remember an occasion during my fieldwork (there is none in my notes) when an artist identified different semantic referents (as Munn does above) for the different rings in a concentric circular configuration. Concentricity today, like outlining, is about filling the canvas and enlivening it with a visual effect that is satisfying to both artist and audience. Thomas Butler's painting, *Walukitjirri* (Figure 6.9) is a good example of this.

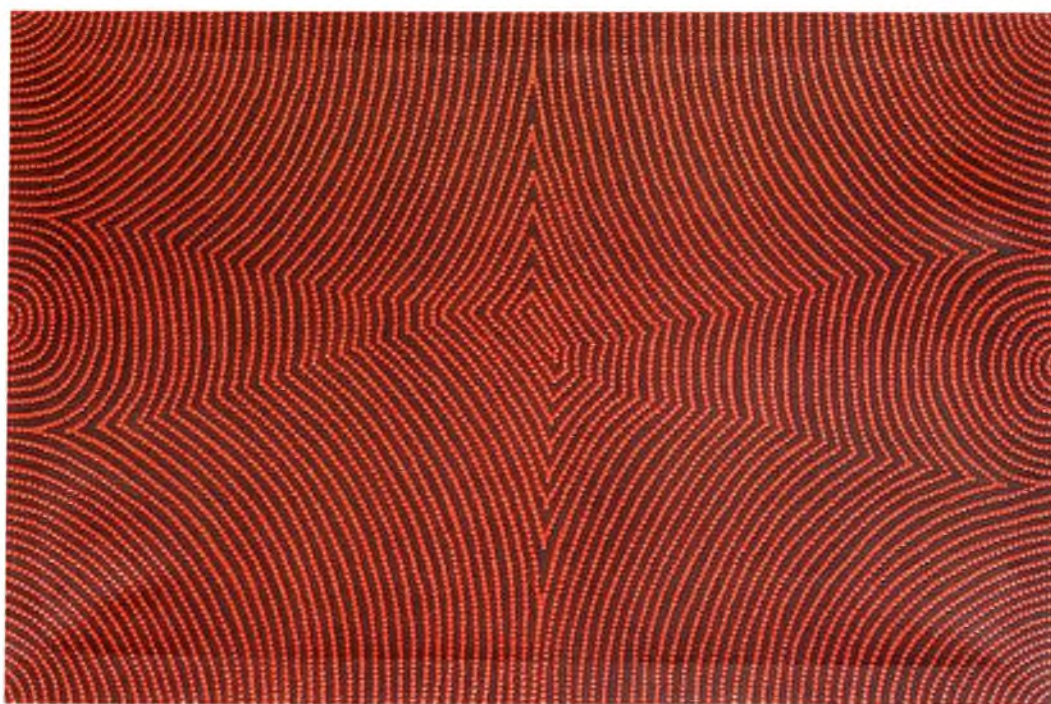


Figure 6.9. Thomas Butler, *Walukitjirri*, 827-03

¹⁴⁵ There are, of course, other dimensions to the semantics of concentricity (see Munn 1973, for example) in the desert system which I have not addressed here. I pick up on some of the broader cultural resonances of concentricity in relation to Country in the final chapter.

Nominally, the painting is of his grandfather's Country of the same name. The artist indicated to me that the central diamond-shape feature of the painting was his grandfather's camp, while the two semi-circles at either end of the painting were rockholes. He then stated that the painting is associated with the Tingarri Tjukurrpa and contained information that cannot be revealed. There is, however, arguably no more 'information' (in the Batesonian sense of the word as "difference that makes a difference") in this painting to be revealed. All the discernable 'information' in the painting has been identified by the artist and given a literal referent. What is left is a dotted red web of shimmering concentricity. I have no doubt that for the artist this painting does indeed have specific resonance with the Tingarri; but here the concentricity is not information to be decoded, but a visual index for that greater 'difference': the power and authority of the Dreaming. Much of the concentricity in contemporary Balgo art fulfils this more general function.

Dotting

Without doubt the most effective and most ubiquitous aesthetic device for animating the canvas in Balgo painting has been dotting. 'Dot paintings' have become synonymous with Aboriginal art, and dotting itself has been the principal technical means through which Balgo artists have explored the medium of acrylic art. The role it has played in the broader processes of abstraction cannot be overstated: it is the technique through which other abstractions such as outlining or concentricity are achieved. It has also become a stylistic and semantic focus of paintings in its own right.

The comparisons of Chapter 4 established a sense that first decades of Balgo art could be summarised, crudely though not inaccurately, by the proposition that a formal inversion has been taking place on the canvas: that the forms of Balgo art were becoming its principal content. This process was illuminated through a comparison of two works by a single Balgo artist, Nancy Naninurra exhibited respectively at AGWA in 1986 and in *Balgo*

4/04 in 2004 (Figure 4.27a & b). Somewhere between the creation of those two paintings, dotting went from being the means by which semantic elements of a painting were highlighted, to becoming the very grounds of that meaning itself. Form has become content. That process of abstraction is defined in my formal analysis by what I describe as the 'foregrounding of the dot'. Appreciating the localised genesis and development of dotting, and tracing the process by which dots moved from the background to the foreground of the canvas, is fundamental to any interpretation of abstraction in Balgo art.

Foregrounding the dot

Dotting as a practice has its cultural foundations in ritual paintings and ground sculpture, where balls of vegetable down are stuck to the body, artefacts or ground in dots to create the relevant designs. They are also shaken *off* the body in performance as traces of ancestral potency. In such contexts the balls or dots of down are emanations of ancestral power (Meggitt 1962: p65, Munn 1973: 217). Watson has also explored interpretations of dotting in relationship to the ways in which fingertips are used to make marks on the ground when telling narratives in sand drawing practices. Dotting in Balgo art today has clearly emerged dually from these different aesthetic precedents, though it was initially understood to be more closely aligned to the vegetable down references in male ceremonial performance. This is evident from the fact that early Women's paintings in Balgo used virtually no dotting. Indeed, because of the strongly gendered quality of dotting, women in Balgo initially had to request permission from the senior men to use dots in their early paintings.

The men were doing their painting with dots. The women asked me to ask the men if the women could do dots in their paintings. I went over to the men's room and asked old man, Dad Sunfly. I went over and sat down next to him and asked him. Old man asked the other men for permission for women to use dots in their paintings; they said, "Yes, its alright." (Gracie Greene, in Wirrimanu Adult Education and Training Centre 2002: 20).

Just as telling as the fact that Balgo women sought permission to use dots is the fact that the men gave it freely. The events describe by Gracie Green¹⁴⁶ above occurred sometime in 1983, and the men's willingness to encourage the use of the dot can be contextualised by the relatively small number of public paintings they themselves had produced in the preceding years.



Figure 6.10 Men's banner, 1981



Figure 6.11 Men's Banner

The very first public paintings in Balgo give us some sense of this. In these banners from 1981 (Figures 6.10 & 6.11), painted after the Luurnpa Banner was completed, it is clear that dotting is already conceived as an aesthetically mobile device. In Figure 6.10 dotting fills the radiating form whilst the canvas is left blank, whereas in Figure 6.11 (painted on

¹⁴⁶ See also: (Watson, 2003: 149)

the same day) the same radiating form is left blank and animated by a surrounding field of dots (a field seemingly *under* or *within* which a snake passes). Around the same time Sunfly gave 'dotting' permission to the women, he was playing with a radical inversion of the outlining principle; placing a line of dots down, and 'outlining' them with negative space (Figure 6.12). The dots in this Wati Kutjarra (Two Men) painting thereby become indexical of the ancestral men, while the outlining 'highlights' their form. In this way, the dots have already come to play at 'content'. Dots evidently had a culturally coherent place in artistic experimentation from the earliest acrylic paintings. Through cross-cultural, gendered and aesthetic negotiations, dotting was the cultural cornerstone of what was negotiated or 'opened' into the emergent plane of art. The enduring mobility of dots to move coherently between traditions, mediums, genders and cultures has enabled them to sustain their function as an integral, dynamic building block of Balgo art.



Figure 6.12 Sunfly, 1983/4



Figure 6.13 circa 1983, artist unknown.

These examples suggest that, emerging as it did a decade after Papunya art, and after mistakes and ambiguities requiring masking had been resolved to some extent, dotting clearly had its own specific and localised genesis in Balgo art history. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the increased use of dots did not evolve to mask cultural information in Balgo art, but to accommodate cross-cultural expectations to fill the canvas.¹⁴⁷ I have already shown how outlining and concentricity fulfilled this imperative, and indicated that these techniques were themselves composed out of dots. But dotting was not merely a

¹⁴⁷ Watson has noted that "the increased density of dotting in paintings produced by members of the second acrylic painting workshop in July 1982 also reflects the influence of the Adult Education Centre" (Watson 1996, 40 fn18)

handmaiden to the forms it created or highlighted. In very early paintings such as Figure 6.13,¹⁴⁸ without notable outlining or concentricity, dotting is already unhinged from its other functions to become the animating field that gives depth to the forms.



Figure 6.14a. artist unknown

6.14b. Tjumbo

6.14c. Patrick Oloodoodi

This aesthetic principle is also evident in works that are primarily using outlining or concentricity to fill the canvas. In Figures 6.14a-c (all paintings from the first Balgo exhibition) Patrick Oloodoodi and Tjumbo Tjapanangka leave pathways as a negative space drawn out by the fine and vibrant dotting. Whilst variously using concentric dots, or dotted outlining, these paintings also share a common aesthetic strategy: they create a depth through negative space, as if a finger had been drawn through the sand to create the links between the iconographic forms. Whilst this interpretation leads us back to Watson's work regarding the relationship between sand drawing and acrylic painting, the specific interpretation of dotting offered here is quite different to Watson's. Rather than dotting being a direct haptic expression of specific sand drawing practices – the poking of fingers into the ground – it is arguably the opposite: in these images (above) dotting here builds up the ground itself into which designs appear to be drawn. Dotting is not yet the

¹⁴⁸ It is not clear from available documentation who the artist was here. Visually it seems to accord with the early work of either Charlie Tjupurulla or Sunfly, though Bruce Njamme suggested in 2011 that it could be the work of Donkeyman Lee Tjupurulla.

semantic focus of these works; but it has become the ground against which meaning is made.¹⁴⁹

It is clear from the paintings above, and from the early banners discussed previously, that dotting was both an aesthetically and semantically mobile element of painting practices. The paintings discussed so far suggest that dotting was being transformed in the early years of painting from a technique originally used to highlight other semantic elements to a semantic element in and of itself. This was not an 'abstract' occurrence: this evolution of the dot needs to be understood in the material context of the canvas it was painted upon. Dotting became the ground/background of Balgo imagery because the canvas needed to be *filled*. Over time, the experimentations that flowed from this imperative to fill the canvas became more expressive and assured, and the techniques for filling the canvas were explored and elaborated. These experiments crystallized into the various 'styles' that have become synonymous with Balgo art.

Throughout the 1990s, Balgo painters played with dots and experimented, developing a series of idiosyncratic applicatory techniques. Lucy Yukenbarri is perhaps the most famous of artists who pioneered a style, the now ubiquitous *kinti kinti* (close close) style of merging the dots into a colour field (Figure 6.15). Other artists have absorbed this innovation into their own practice, but customised it into their own idiosyncratic techniques. It's hard to see that Eubena uses dotting at all unless you look closely or sit with her as she paints; when it became apparent that she has evolved a technique of pushing the paint in a running dot without taking her brush off the canvas. This creates florets of colours pushed together (Figure 6.16). It is harder yet to see how Ningie Nanala uses dots, as her works (see fig a, earlier) appear to be predicated upon fluid lines. However, again, attention to her technique shows that Ningie mixes the acrylics with water to get more liquidity, then literally scoops the paint out with her brush and deposits it on the canvas, in a dot, so that it merges with the last dot like acrylic mercury (Figure 6.17).

¹⁴⁹ Later in this chapter I explore the semiotic aspects of this aesthetic inversion in relation to Wagner's (1977) notion of the figurative/literal construction of worldviews. At this point in the argument, however, it is necessary to further develop the localised art history of the dot.



Figure 6.15 Lucy Yukenbarri kinti-kinti technique (detail)



Figure 6.16. Eubena technique (detail)



Figure 6.17 Ningie Nanala technique (detail)



Figure 6.18. Boxer Milner technique (detail)

Boxer Milner's dots are different again (fig 18). He places one dot precisely on top of the other to create 'peaks', as opposed to flat dots; the undulations in this coloured braille adding a quality of depth to his composition. Contrasted with Milner's formal precision, Elizabeth Nyumi's work (Figure 6.19) emerges out of an energetic overlocker technique; the speed and rhythm of her application with thin sticks translating into a loose luminescence. Not every Balgo artist, of course, can pioneer a new technique. Most artists adapt one of these techniques described above and merge it with innovative compositions and other aesthetic components *built up out of dots*. Patrick Oloodoodi Tjungurrayi is a good example. Feted as one of the greats of contemporary art, his dotting has not itself changed in 30 years. Patrick's signature style is born out of the way he uses colour to generate complex and innovative compositions out of a very traditional dotting technique (Figure 6.20).

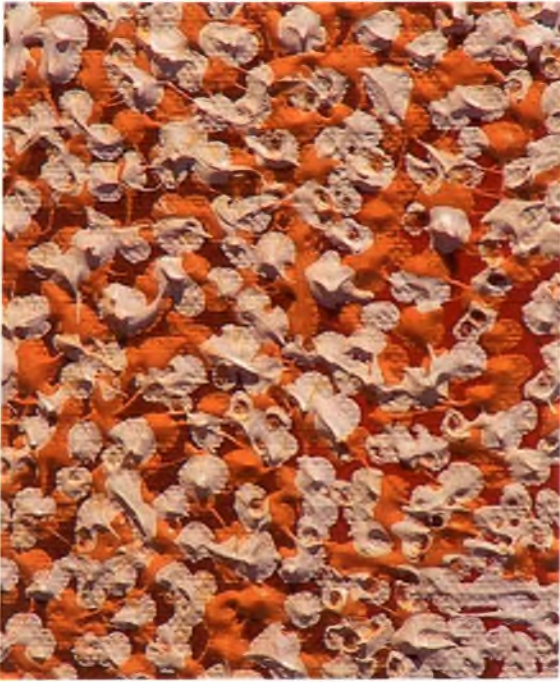


Figure 6.19. Nyumi technique (detail)



Figure 6.20. Patrick Oloodoodi technique (detail)

Today it is these distinctive personal styles, rather than any story or cultural content, which are the markers of value in the art market. The same process is observed in the processes of abstraction that attended 20th century Western painting. Dots, like form itself for the cubists and their modernist progeny, have become the content or subject of paintings. At the beginning of the painting movement, dots became the iconic referent for desert art. Dots indexed the 'Aboriginality' or authenticity of the art form, and therein its mystique and allure for western audiences. As both artists and their audience examined the semantic possibilities of this new medium, Dreaming narratives and the authenticity they indexed became less pivotal to the reception of the work. Or rather, the desire of an authentic Aboriginality was sublimated in 'connoisseurship': authenticity was no longer judged by the Aboriginality of the content, but by the demonstrable authorship of the individual Aboriginal artist. Genesis was transferred to Genius; and, in Balgo art at least, dots became the story of contemporary painting.

Structuring Abstraction

If dots are the story of Balgo art, before we ask what that story means it is useful first to ask: how was this story structured? A defining feature of the anthropological interpretation of desert paintings is that they are, in some discernible way, referential: that particular aspects of paintings refer to designated places, ancestors or events. The processes of abstraction described throughout this chapter have rendered this equation problematic. While iconographic forms endure, they are no longer *necessarily* referential to specific narrative events in the Dreaming. With the semantic transformation of iconography, there is a correlated dissolution of the compositional patterns and structures that once rendered such icons interpretable. Perhaps in concert with this iconographic devolution, there appears in current Balgo painting the dissolution, to some extent, of many of the customary schema or templates that organised the Kutjungka visual system in the early days of acrylic art. Here, then, my research simultaneously builds upon and diverges from the ethnographic legacies of Morphy, Munn and Watson. Morphy (1991: 235-244) has addressed the phenomena of 'templates' in Indigenous visual systems in Arnhem Land. Within *Ancestral Connections*, he illuminates the existence of compositional frames and generative structures latent in the Yolngu visual repertoire, and explores the ways in which these link and elicit the core elements and dynamics of Yolngu meanings. Watson (2003: 21, 29, 336-351) has applied this to her own analysis of Balgo art, identifying some of the organisational frames that were evident in early acrylic art from Balgo.

Watson demonstrates how particular sand drawing compositions or structures, or templates (following Morphy), are repeated for specific sites and the stories that contextualise them. Her work applies this principle in considerable detail to women's image-making at Balgo, and in particular to sites along the *Nakarra Nakarra* Dreaming track (2003: 253-273). Watson also shows how such templates have been transferred to the acrylic on canvas medium. She identifies seven different templates from the *Nakarra Nakarra* paintings analysed in her study: a windbreak (semi-enclosed form); an enclosed ovoid form containing two roundels and internal linear features; a two row format; a three row circle-line grid; a three line format; a compounded roundel; and an anthropomorphic

template. (Watson 2003:255) A decade later, however, I found it difficult to identify these same templates in Balgo painting or, initially, to find many recurrent structures at all. Even in the specific case of *Nakarra Nakarra* paintings being produced during my fieldwork (Figure 6.21a & B), such as those by Kathleen Padoon (who likewise featured in Watson’s study) or Marie Mudgetell, none of the templates Watson had identified were still in operation.¹⁵⁰ These paintings are not without structure, but these are not the structures through which the painting movement seemingly began. These are not the templates translated from sand-drawing traditions or transposed from painted body designs. We need new ways in to the internal logic of these acrylic forms.



Figures 6.21a & b. Kathleen Padoon (l) and Marie Mudgetell (r) *Nakarra Nakarra* paintings

There are of course some basic circle-line and grid compositions that continue to be produced year after year (see Figure 6.1, by Dora Mungkirna, earlier in the chapter), and for a small handful of Warlpiri artists in particular, these structures retain their relationship to specific sites and narrative events.¹⁵¹ But such paintings are, statistically, increasingly non-representative of trajectory of Balgo art. In general I found that the enduring relationship between a compositional regularity and the narrative or site that it referenced

¹⁵⁰ These paintings are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

¹⁵¹ Dora is one of only a couple of artists who has maintained similar iconographic compositions from the 1980s until the present day. In Figure 6.1 her work includes both circle-line, actor-item and footprint figure-types in the one composition. Interestingly, given the importance of these figure-types to Munn’s analysis, Dora is a Warlpiri Woman. Following Watson’s analysis of the more flexible Kutjungka approach to iconography, it may be no coincidence that the iconographic elements that remain in Balgo art are the product of Warlpiri practitioners painting in Balgo. This maintenance of iconographic forms may reveal a decidedly Warlpiri approach to painting, but it is also likely one of the ways that Warlpiri artists continue to differentiate themselves from other groups within Balgo (see Chapter 8).

had declined markedly in the decade between my fieldwork and Watson's; and that this in itself was a part of the evolving artistic system of acrylic painting. Some examples might help to illustrate this.

Although in some cases acrylic conventions have come to apply in the painting of certain Country, the evidence from the first two decades of painting in Balgo is that there is, today, no one way to paint any Country. *Tjawa Tjawa* (Point Moody), for example, is a site in the Great Sandy Desert of significance for several artists and their families. Combing the painting records over the decades, there is simply no one way of painting this one place (Figures 6.22a-e).



Figure 6.22a: Rita

6.22b. Richard Tax

6.22c: Bai Bai

6.22d: Bootja Bootja

6.22e: Rita

A survey of different artists from 1988 through to 2003 suggest that, if anything, *Tjawa Tjawa* is marked by its capacity to be painted in just about *any* way. From these examples of aesthetically-unrelated ways of painting *Tjawa Tjawa*, it seems that whilst certain people may paint the same country, they will tend to paint it in different (and perhaps deliberately differentiated) ways. These differences might be explained in part by the economic arguments around painted Country developed in chapter x, but this is not just a phenomena restricted to differences between artists. It is also commonly the case that a single artist will paint the same Country in myriad ways. If we look at Rita Kuninjti's paintings of *Tjawa Tjawa* (Figures 6. 22a and e), for example, it is clear that there is no one way, even for her, of painting that place. She clearly draws on different aspects of the Tjukurrpa narrative, and therefore different configurations of iconographic elements, in painting this place. But she also draws in painterly adaptations from other people, other narratives and other places. This portability and elasticity of the acrylic system is evident in the fact that the same design can seemingly be used to denote just about any Country.

In Figures 6.23a-e, concentric squares can be seen to represent a vast array of different Country as painted by five different artists.



Figure 6.23a Fred 6.23b Mena 6.23c Monica 6.23d Geradline 6.23e Lloyd

This is, in part, simply an expression of the semantic scope of desert iconography, wherein a limited number of graphic forms can be made to serve an infinite set of meanings. Morphy identifies the same principle in Arnhem Land:

It is a function of the multivalency of the geometric art that fairly similar designs could be related to a variety of difference places (Morphy 1991:244).

The point in this example is that this generic repetition of squares is not how people started painting their Country in Balgo acrylics. It is something that has emerged and been transmitted between artists, across acrylic Country, as part of the evolution of the painting system. Conversely, paintings that look identical, painted by the same artists, can often be of different Country. In Figure 6.24, below, we see seven paintings by Eubena Namptijin produced in 2003; despite an almost identical compositional structure of a central circle (rockhole) surrounded by radiating lines (sand hills), each of these paintings depicts a different place, with a different associated historical or Tjukurrpa narrative.



Figure 6.24. Seven examples (all from 2003) of Eubena Namptijin painting the same composition for different place and narrative referent.

The point here – and in all the examples above - is that there is no longer a *necessary* relationship between what appears on the canvas and the ‘structure of encoded meanings’ that may appear to be inherent in that visual form. Once a Balgo artist has developed a style that they enjoy painting (and that has been likewise valued by the market through sales), they will apply that style or composition to any Country they want to paint in acrylics regardless of the Dreaming narratives or events associated with that site. This phenomenon has evolved over time through the processes of abstraction described in this chapter. As paintings became less iconographic, and therefore less semantically specific, the capacity to transpose a certain style over any narrative or site became an increasingly viable option.

Given Watson’s analysis of templates in women’s painting is based on research from the early 1990s, it is reasonable to conclude that the dissolution of these templates is the fairly recent result of the processes of abstraction described so far in this chapter. But the evidence of the paintings discussed in Figure 6.22a-e (most of which are from early to mid-1990s) suggests a different interpretation: this mobility between style and story was seemingly always an element of the acrylic painting system. Furthermore, the processes of abstraction did not necessarily precipitate this apparent semantic elasticity; they were in part afforded by it.

A recursive spiral between the infinitely adaptable desert system and the increasing abstraction of Balgo paintings has led to a demonstrable, though not absolute, rupture in the relationship between form and content. This is expressed in the marginalisation of templates in the acrylic painting system. It is not that templates are no longer in operation in Balgo art – but rather that templates imported from sand drawing traditions or ceremonial designs are no longer in prominent operation. They were clearly, like the iconographic forms they structured, part of the initial translation of meaning from other mediums to canvas. But the system of acrylic painting has, as described in this chapter, undergone its own evolution. What has come to structure the system of meanings in acrylic painting is an emergent template.

Emergent Templates

The template is not the form itself, but a structure of encoded meanings. The same structure can theoretically be associated with more than one place and with more than one set of paintings. Very similar geometric paintings can be associated with places in different clan territories.... (Morphy 1991:243)

It is hoped that the evidence presented to date has established that the discussion of abstraction presented in this chapter is not an entirely Western imposition on the phenomena at hand. During my fieldwork in Balgo there were a few instances when it became clear that there is also an Indigenous recognition of the process of abstraction, of the disembedding of cultural forms from any recognisable realm of meaning, in the way that artists regulate and critique each other's works.

One day in the art centre Napanangka and Napangarti were both painting their canvases on the floor. These two senior women were old sparring partners, and kept a critical eye on each other. Sharing Country, they occasionally came into conflict over matters of knowledge and authority. Napanangka was the more senior woman, but Napangarti was a powerful character and a much more successful artist. This success was tied in part to her greater facility with abstraction. Napanangka, who continued to paint defiantly iconographic images her whole career, was both sceptical and no doubt a little jealous of Napangarti's success at translating their shared heritage into commercial success. On this occasion, as I discussed both women's stories with them, Napanangka interjected during Napangarti's narrative and joked that "she just painting rainbows!" What she meant was that whatever narrative Napangarti was telling me was in no way related to the abstraction (the rainbows) before me on the canvas.¹⁵² Napangarti took understandable umbrage and the two painted on in silence for the rest of the afternoon. Whilst such peer pressure can be seen to regulate, to some extent, what people paint, such public criticism of other painters was not common in Balgo. Abstraction is far from a free-for-all though. There are also constraints that inhere in the visual system itself that continue to organise

¹⁵² This form of mocking had some cultural currency in Balgo during my fieldwork, as noted in Chapter 2 where young men were also teased by their peers for painting 'rainbows'.

the innovations with which this study is concerned. As is so often the case, I only became aware of such things when one of them went missing.



Figure 6.25a & b. Theresa Nowee experiments in 2003

Throughout the first half of 2003, I had been observing Theresa Nowee's formal experimentations; she was trying to develop a successful style out of her linear dotting and vine-like forms arranged the site of *Nynmi* (see Figures 6.25a & b above). In my field notes I recorded events that unfolded around one of Theresa paintings (Figure 6.26, below).



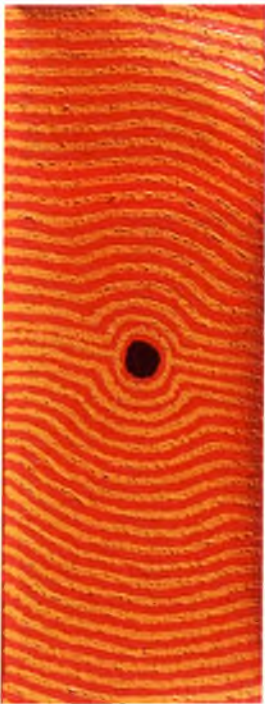
Theresa brought a painting into the art centre with no rockhole in it. Brandy [her father] saw this and made an immediate injunction, I later found out. I only noticed because in the morning the painting looked fairly linear, and then a couple of hours later this rockhole suddenly appeared on the painting. I joked with Theresa that there must have been rain at lunchtime, because a rockhole formed in her country. She said (in a very resigned kind of way), "Brandy made me put it in"; to which Frances Nowee [another daughter] jokingly said "Rockhole, rockhole, rockhole! Always rockhole for Brandy."¹⁵³

Figure 6.26. Theresa Nowee's magical rockhole painting.

¹⁵³ John Carty field notes 28/08/03

On this occasion the artist was forced by her father to add an iconographic element (the central blue circle) into her painting because, without it, he arguably deemed the painting *too* abstracted. From Frances' comments, it is clear that Brandy, himself an experienced artist, could not allow the experiments of his daughters to go so far as to eliminate the rockhole at *Nynmi* altogether. For Brandy, who lived at *Nynmi* and grew up living off such rockholes as he walked the desert, the centrality of a water source in delimiting and identifying a 'place' was important to the content and, significantly, *composition* of the painting. This 'rockhole principle' is not limited to this painting, to Brandy or his daughters.

Emergence of Rockhole template



There are, no doubt, several schemas emerging in response to the changing nature, status and contexts of artistic practice in Balgo. The most pervasive of these is what I have identified as the 'Rockhole Template'. It entails a central rockhole or water source, the named site of that Country, and is surrounded by the signature style or dotting technique of the individual artist. The template does not require that the central circle be envisaged as a rockhole by the artist; the circle is *generally* a rockhole, but it can be a soak or other water source, just as it can be a hill or another landform encompassed by the multivalency of the circle icon (Munn 1986: 67). The *structure* of a central circle surrounded by stylised dotting or lines is what classifies a painting as being of the Rockhole Template.

Fig 6.27. Helicopter Tjungurrayi, an early exponent of the Rockhole template.

In the first 5 years of the art industry in Balgo approximately 10% of paintings exhibited something approximating the Rockhole Template, but these generally included multiple rockholes. A vastly smaller percentage of these were of the single rockhole variety. In 2004, roughly 50% of paintings were composed in the rockhole format. Furthermore, exactly one third (33%, or 365 out of 1097 paintings) exhibited the dominant single rockhole template. This is clearly a major statistical and aesthetic transformation in the visual system of acrylic art that requires analysis.

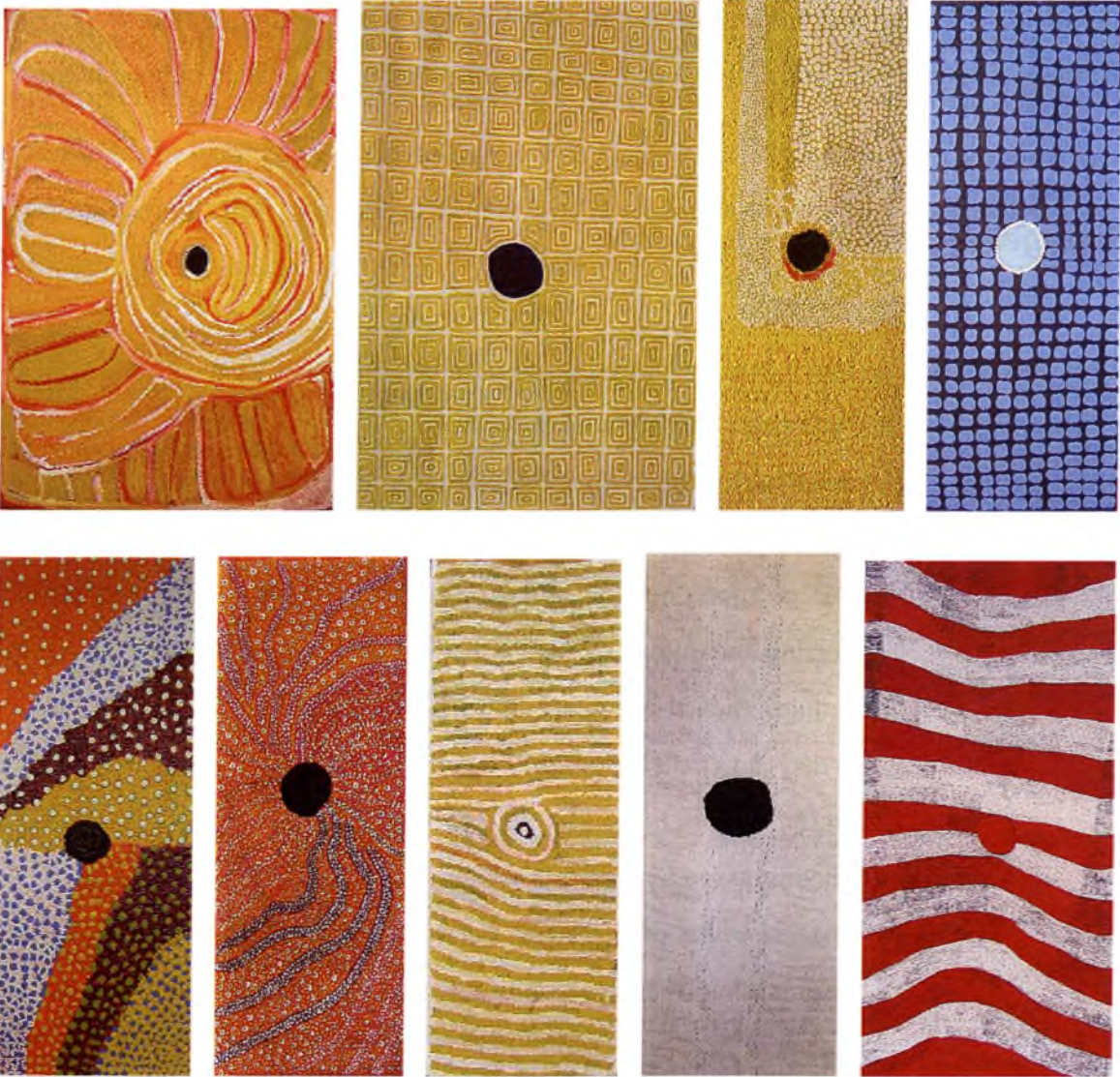


Figure 6.28 Examples of different Balgo artists developing their style around the rockhole template

There is a decidedly literal explanation for the emergence of the rockhole template in Balgo art: rockholes (and other water sources such as soaks) were the most significant navigatory nodes in desert existence. Knowing where water was to be found was arguably the most important information to be coded in Indigenous visual and narrative structures. It is therefore unsurprising to find that the creation and location of water sites is a central preoccupation of desert religion, song, myth, history, and iconography. Munn has suggested of the Warlpiri that:

this nomadic patterning of life- the movement from water hole to water hole- takes precedence as an organising focus over other large-scale rhythmic cycles such as that of the rainy and dry season (1986:7).

Similar conclusions emerge from Scott Cane's narrative reconstruction of the domestic patterns of Kukatja and Ngarti 'nomadism' in the Great Sandy Desert (1984, 1987, 1990). The imprint that rockholes and other water sources must have made on the desert-dwelling imagination is clearly evident in Cane's reconstructive analysis of seasonal movement of those people who came to populate Balgo from the Great Sandy desert:

They congregate around large waterholes during the winter where abundant supplies of fruits, seeds and roots allow participation in large ceremonies. Toward the end of the dry season, [they] move back to major rockholes and practice a generalised hunter-gatherer subsistence strategy.... The size and number of the major waterholes control foraging movement. Water shortages and heat stress prevent people from travelling to areas where food is still available [and] people become trapped on foraging "islands" around large waterholes (1987:394-5).

The availability of water structured and determined almost everything in people's lives. This emergence of the Rockhole Template that I have identified in painting is therefore not surprising as a contemporary expression of the Aboriginal imaginary; as a latent experiential structure of meaning upon which art is predicated.

Old and Young: same rockhole, different story

An ongoing concern of this thesis is to assert that within some of the more totalising arguments about Balgo art, such arguments remain nuanced by analytical separations that recognise variation and discontinuities between artists, particularly between generations. This applies to interpretations of the Rockhole Template.

For younger artists whose developmental ecologies were characterised by water taps in their community housing and visits to the store for cans of coke, one has to be careful when asserting experiential structures of meaning in the emergence of the rockhole format. Younger people remain intimately schooled in the significance of these water sources, the names of these places, the Country where their grandparents and parents lived as younger people. They have never had to rely on these water sources themselves, however. For these younger artists, some of whom have never been to the rockholes they paint, the rockhole format arguably has a more pragmatic lure. An important aspect of the rockhole format is its universal applicability; it is so generic in form it can be applied to any Country without being mistakenly used. This generic quality also means no artist or family can rightfully lay claim to the design. Interestingly, although the single rockhole composition was pioneered and refined by certain artists such as Lucy Yukenbarri and her husband, Helicopter (see Figure 6.27, above), this template has such universal salience that I've never encountered any sense of propriety over it. While the dotting technique or forms that surround the rockhole remain guarded as a kind of property (see Chapter 8), the basic composition has always been available to be adopted and adapted by any artist who cared to try. Anyone can paint it without fear of transgressing political, gendered or familial authorities. This is a particular concern for artists who, due to their relative ceremonial immaturity, lack the ritual knowledge to have any confidence in innovating too far outside the bounds of what they have been told to paint by senior relatives.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ In this sense it could be argued that the rockhole format has become, like figuration in the 1980s, a kind of aesthetic safety net for younger painters that protects them from peer scrutiny.

The same argument could no doubt be made for some of the middle aged women who were pioneering stylistic developments in Balgo art in the early 1990's. Whilst Balgo women were central to the development of Balgo art from the mid 1980's, such women tended to be younger wives of the most senior, and often considerably older, men. Cowan's observation from this period that 'many female artists like to plan their work around a predominant circle motif' (1994: 60) suggests that throughout the historical development of Balgo art, the rockhole template or something like it has been used by a range of artists to organise and authorise their own innovations. The notion that such a template has been central to the innovations of Balgo art has broader salience in the study of change and continuity in Central Australian graphic systems. Dickens' archaeological analysis of central desert painting (1996:26-27) suggests that structure remains as elements change and that the integration of new meanings over time is facilitated by the structure of figure-types, which remain intact, and the multivalent nature of the motifs, which can absorb change (ibid). This archaeological perspective is further enhanced by Munn's structural analysis of Warlpiri graphic system.

In *Visual Categories: An Approach to the Study of Representational Systems*, Nancy Munn describes the basic elements of the Warlpiri visual system in an attempt to 'call attention to an organizing structure implicit in the representational system' (2006 [1966]: 337). She describes that system as having a core-adjunct structure or dynamic, wherein a core symbol (circle or line) is laid down, and may be surrounded or attended by adjunct inscriptions or symbols. Munn notes that 'While other types of constructions occur in the totemic designs, this core-adjunct type is basic to the system as a whole...' (2006: 332). I think the Rockhole Template can be understood as an expression of such a core-adjunct figure-type, which 'consist of either a site circle or a path line with various plural elements ranged proximal to this central "core"' (Munn 1986:153). In Balgo acrylic art (see examples at fig 2a-f above), the core symbol (circle) is surrounded by the 'adjunctive' forms of abstraction (dotting and lines) of an individual's painterly style. This inclusion of abstraction into graphic structure, furthermore, is not *novel* to the system at hand. Munn's analysis of a rain design in Warlpiri iconography suggests resonances with the processes of

contemporary Balgo art. The design consists of two lines (lightning), surrounded by rain clouds, and a rockhole:

This construction does not depict any particular spatial relationship between the rockhole and lightning; it simply aggregates elements in a standardized decorative arrangement. Such “decorative” formations may also provide stereotypes into which standard figure types are pressed, thus “distorting” the usual positions of elements into the more abstract, relatively non-iconic arrangements (Munn 1986:108).

The rockhole format emerges as a figure-type that anchors and legitimates, in both social and formal terms, almost any abstraction. Being universally accepted as a legitimate way to paint Country for men and women, young and old, and being so generic in form as to be unattached to any particular Country, the rockhole format is a safe, politically benign option for people learning to paint their Country. For these reasons, it has come to be reproduced, and to reproduce itself, as a ‘template’ (following Morphy’s adaptation of the term):

In each particular case, the geometric design is made into or becomes an appropriate representation of the place by the meanings encoded into it and by the sets of other paintings that it is linked with or that it generates, in other words, by becoming a template (Morphy 1991:244).

It must be remembered at this point in the argument, however, that while 50% of paintings in 2004 were rockhole compositions, and 33% were of the single rockhole format, there were, by definition, an equal number of paintings produced in Balgo that year that don’t fit the analysis being offered here. It is necessary here to remember Morphy’s dictum, with which I began this section, that ‘The template is not the form itself, but a *structure* of encoded meanings.’ (1991:243) Now, I have argued that the single rockhole composition *is* a template, even though it is the ‘form itself’, because within it is manifest a structure of encoded meanings that is repeated constantly in Balgo painting: the country (rockhole or named place) surrounded by the dotting (or other techniques) of

the artist. But in this way the Rockhole Template is also a manifestation of the broader aesthetic logic underlying the innovations of contemporary Balgo art: paintings are composed out of the relationship between the Country of the artist and the individual style they bring to it.¹⁵⁵ This relationship - between the authority of Country and the innovations of acrylic art - is arguably the defining 'structure of encoded meanings' (the template, as it were) of which the Rockhole Template is but the most obvious expression.

From Dreamings to 'the Dreaming': an affective formal analysis

(A)nimation is the central motif... No more figures and icons are present; no internal differences of character exist within the works, nor do secret/sacred designs appear to be hinted at or protected by an obscuring of techniques. Dots and lines are not fillers, additions or a secondary outlining. They have, in fact, become the practice (Biddle 2007:79).

I have argued that these expressive and technical innovations of the dot can be justly understood in terms of 'abstraction'. I have also sought to explain some of the ways in which the processes of abstraction are given form by salient aesthetic principles manifest in emergent structures such as the Rockhole Template. But a formal process of abstraction is not without *meaning*. And how Aboriginal abstraction means is the central problem for an ethnographic interpretation of contemporary Balgo art. In the following Chapter, I provide one answer to this problem by describing how dotting techniques and painting styles have become objects of exchange in Balgo social life. In this chapter my concern is the formal analysis of Balgo art; so my problem here is to explain how the foregrounding of the dot is, in and of itself, culturally meaningful on the canvas.

To date, in this chapter, we have seen that the effect of outlining originally gave ancestral power to specific iconography. In acrylic paintings today outlining provides a more generic experience of that ancestral power. We have seen how concentricity provided an

¹⁵⁵ And in this they are arguably a manifestation of the core dialectic, as identified by Myers, at the heart of desert life: autonomy and relatedness. A notion I examine in greater depth in the following chapter. They also clearly encompass the tensions Poirier (2005) notes in Balgo social life between the 'forms of permanence' and forms of openness.'

iconographic system with the capacity to express specific processes, and provide condensed semantic depth. I have argued that in contemporary acrylic painting concentricity, in its optical effects, continues to index a different and more generic kind of semantic depth: the place and power of the Dreaming in the Aboriginal experience. Where once ancestral energies were manifest in cotton 'dots' being shaken off dancers bodies, such power (in acrylic art) is now indexed by the expressive placing *on* of dots, and the way in which they shimmer off the canvas.

The aesthetic evolution of dotting reveals a broader pattern in the semantic transformations of Balgo art. What is common to each of the dotting techniques described in this chapter above is the way in which they 'animate' the canvas. Whether through the sculptural lifting of paint into three dimensions (such as in Boxer Milner, and in a different way, Eubena Nampitjin), mesmerising lines (Ningie Nanala) or the dazzling luminescence of Nyumi's scattergun style, all of these artists create an optical effect that both capture the eye and refuses to let it rest. This is no accident of modern art, but a manifestation of abiding aesthetic principles. While the iconographic and narratological character of early Balgo art has been transformed, the place and power of the Dreaming in contemporary art is not diminished; it has simply been adapted in accordance with the audience it addresses. By creating visual depth and optical vibrancy in their artworks through these techniques, Balgo painters seek to elicit the power of the Dreaming, and to persuade their audiences of the enduring authority of that realm. This aesthetic enlivening of the canvas is also critical to Biddle's interpretation of abstraction in contemporary desert women's art, where she argues that *animation* has become the 'central motif' of the system (2007: 79).

The animated 3-d texture of the canvas, in short, enlivens literally, materially, in the same way: actively animating country, person, place with the force and effect of Ancestral fecundity (2007:73).

It is difficult, however, to penetrate the obfuscating language here in order to deduce how such conclusions are arrived at. Biddle may be correct that dotting techniques animate the canvas in ways tied to elicitation of ancestral presence, but an anthropological interpretation of this phenomenon needs to be better developed and argued. To this end I turn now to comparisons with the art of Arnhem Land, and in particular to Morphy's

(1992) analysis of Yolngu 'shimmering' surfaces. Yolngu bark paintings, both past and present, those used in ritual and those created for commercial sale, are composed out of a number of components organized in a particular way: 'a base colour, then various internal subdivisions, figurative representations, geometric background patterns and cross hatching' (Morphy 1992: 189). While all of these elements are essential in the constitution of Yolngu art, it is the cross-hatching that completes the painting as an affective form. Through a painstaking process of applying lines with fine brush of human hair the geometric or figurative ancestral designs are in-filled or surrounded by cross-hatching, the visual effect of which is to make the surface of the painting shimmer brilliantly in ways that catch the audience's eye with flashes of ancestral power.

(T)he surface of the painting appears to move; it is difficult to fix the eye on a single segment without interference from others, indeed in some paintings the image seems unstable, almost threatening to leave the surface of the painting (Morphy 2007a:92).

For the Yolngu, the effect (or affect) of this shimmer – the brilliance or *bir'yun* - is interpreted as a manifestation of ancestral power, of making the audience (whether in ceremony or art gallery) *sense* the presence of the ancestors. *Bir'yun*, as a specific aesthetic effect, represents a generalised spiritual power associated with the *wangarr* or Dreaming (Morphy 1992: 192). Balgo artists have never indicated to me that they share any equivalent term or concept. Unlike Arnhem Land traditions, in the desert there is no elaborated vocabulary or articulated preference for a painting that exhibits this optical brilliance. Despite this, Morphy's description of the visual effect of Yolngu paintings is a fruitful point of comparison in the analysis of emerging abstraction in Balgo art. To appreciate the relevance of *bir'yun* to the present study of desert art, then, it is worth quoting Morphy at length:

Yolngu artists aim to create a particular visual effect in their paintings, which is referred to as *bir'yun*. *Bir'yun* is thought of as a shimmering quality of light which engenders an emotional response. The response is associated with phrases that in the context of contemporary European art would be interpreted as being concerned with an aesthetic appreciation of the work as art, to do with feeling of lightness, joy, happiness and power.

In the Yolngu case, however, the emotional effect is interpreted as representing or being a manifestation of ancestral power (Morphy 1992:196).

Although there is no discursive evidence for an equivalent of *bir'yun* in Balgo painting, there is clearly in operation a shared aesthetic geared towards the production of bright, optical (and perhaps 'shimmering') works that dazzle the eye and likewise elicit a *sense* of ancestral presence or power. Whilst this aesthetic is unlikely to be drawn out from what people say, it *is* evident in what they do; and specifically in the way desert artists utilise and favour the properties of different materials.

Dussart (has suggested that desert artists prefer acrylic paints because of their shiny quality: 'the shiny paint is similar to the oil rubbed on the body before it is painted and similar to the best ochres' (1988:37). This is not just a gendered aesthetic resonance. Richard Moyle, working in Balgo in 1981, suggested that young men had begun using the shiny acrylic paints instead of ochre for their chest designs in ceremony (Moyle 1997: 109). Interestingly, this is around the same time that the senior men in Balgo (who were painting the Luurnpa banner) mixed ochres into acrylic paint and sang the songs of those ochres to invest the new medium with ancestral potency. Just as there was a transferral from ritual practice to canvas occurring at this time, there was a simultaneous transferral (in the form of acrylic paint) from canvas painting practices to the ritual realm. These practices continue today: when ceremonies are occurring in Balgo the art centre supplies men with white and black acrylic paint. During my fieldwork the art centre also supplied men with red iron-oxide cement mix, a commercially available substitute for hand ground red ochre. The men favoured this red powder over local ochres because it was substantially brighter on the skin than the local ochre (which could be somewhat dull). Similar issues are evident in women's ceremonial performance. In the absence of animal fat that was used in the past, today women use cooking oil to create a shiny base on their bodies for the application of ochres. Biddle has observed that while butter can also be used in the absence of oil, it is not favoured by the women because 'it does not produce adequate shine, shimmer, gloss that is crucial to potency.' (Biddle 2007: 61)

This transference of introduced materials to the ritual domain speaks to the broader arguments being developed in this thesis about contemporary art. The differentiation between the effects of these materials – between cooking oil and butter, for example – is a clear expression of an Aboriginal preference for certain aesthetic qualities. These examples are also clear evidence that what matters, in the elicitation of ancestral power (whether in ceremony or on canvas), is not a predetermined cultural material (ochre, ash, pipe-clay, animal fat), but the best material for achieving an aesthetic effect. Contemporary acrylic painting can be understood, in some ways, as the ultimate expression of that principle.

These material observations, combined with Morphy's insights into the aesthetics of ancestral power, also help to better contextualise the decline in iconographic form with which these arguments began. Morphy has argued of Yolngu paintings, and of their visual brilliance (*bir'yun*), that;

It is almost as if ancestral power is encoded in paintings by way of the emotional response it engenders in the viewer – a process which is probably widespread in religious art. (Morphy 1992: 196)

A similar case can be made for the relationship between Balgo acrylics and their non-Aboriginal audience. In the early days of Balgo art, it was through iconographic form (and the Dreaming narratives they expressed) that Balgo artists sought to persuade audiences of the authority and integrity of the Dreaming. This is no longer the case. Today the ancestral power of the Dreaming is encoded, or rather, *indexed*, in Balgo art through a series of optical effects produced by outlining, concentricity, and the dotting that dazzles the viewer's eye. Balgo painters did not set out to foreground these elements; rather, they increased in prominence in dialogue with the contexts of their production: i.e in dialogue with the tastes of the market. As I have already established in earlier chapters, the market for desert art came to strongly favour minimal and optical works, paintings of expressive abstraction that accorded most closely with Western notions of contemporary fine art. The galleries, collectors and buyers of Balgo art didn't need elaborate stories to value the Dreaming, they needed energetic visual compositions. The power and value of the Dreaming was 'recognised' by the audience in these kinds of paintings, and this

recognition was communicated in the exchange of value encoded in the sale of such paintings.

Balgo artists haven't reduced or radically changed the aesthetics of the Dreaming in their painting practices; they have just focussed on those aspects of it that were most *affective* for their intended audiences. The aspects of ceremonial aesthetics that were most effective at animating the canvas consequently became the principal expression of the Dreaming in acrylic art.

A cultural interpretation of abstraction

(D)otting, which came to be the strongest visual element of the Papunya Tula style, was generally background, mere fill, inconsequential, and often omitted in the ground and body paintings on which these canvases were based (Michaels 1994:156).

Dots aren't hiding the great mysteries of desert religion in Balgo art, but nor are they without meaning. In comparing developments in acrylic painting to these other mediums, Eric Michaels (quoted above) misses the role dots have come to play in the emergent system of acrylic art. Michaels was asking the wrong questions of desert painting; wondering what dotting means, as opposed to *how* it means, and indeed how it allows the broader system itself to have meaning at all in contemporary life. When Michaels charted the cultural progress of the dot in relation to Papunya and Yuendumu artists, he argued that dots were 'semantically empty' (1994: 156). He reached this conclusion after observing that dots could be 'manipulated for various effects without affecting the correctness of the painting from the painter's point of view' (1994: 190). Michael's interpretation was arguably a correct assessment of a moment in a very localised art history; but it is an assessment that cannot be sustained in relation to Balgo art. If Michaels 'semantically empty' logic were taken to its conclusion, we would today need to accept the majority of Balgo art as (quite literally) meaningless. Michaels lamented that Nancy Munn had never been an arts advisor, because she would no doubt have

discouraged the ‘tendency to foreground the semantically empty dots at the expense of iconic forms, and preserved the centrality of the figure against the ground’ (1994:156). A closer reading of Munn, and of the latent graphic structures organising abstraction, brings this assumption into question. Being sensitive to both the overall structure and dynamics of the system, Munn may well be understood – better than the anthropologists and arts writers that have followed her across the desert sands - the movement to abstraction for what it was: the realisation of active principles of a dynamic system, not the recession from them.

The foregrounding of the dot, I argue in this chapter, is the aesthetic and culturally mediated process by which dotting became the focus of Balgo art; it also provides the principal means by which we can understand the broader processes of abstraction as culturally *meaningful*. This analytical focus on the aesthetics of dotting, and its affective power, has led to conclusions about the semantic shift inherent to abstraction in Balgo: where paintings have changed from addressing “Dreamings” (specific ancestral narratives and events) to eliciting a more generic sense of “the Dreaming” (the Tjukurrpa or ancestral realm). I have explored this semantic shift through a formal analysis of animation (or ‘shimmering’) and ‘templates’ that integrates the ethnographic evidence of the desert with the comparative model established by Morphy in Yolngu art. But there is also a semiotic movement that can be traced in the foregrounding of the dot, and this is just as vital to an appreciation of the transformations (and ongoing operations) of the system of meaning that is operating in contemporary Balgo art.

The semiotics of foregrounding the dot

I began this chapter by questioning how anthropologists are to interpret the demonstrable *visual* exodus of ancestral agency (tracks, iconographic forms etc) from the surface of the canvas, and questioned whether contemporary canvases had become less engaged with the Dreaming, with the creation of the world and the stories that explain it. The evidence presented in this chapter, however, suggests that the movement from iconography to

abstraction, from Dreamings to 'The Dreaming', is not something that can be productively explained in terms of a fundamental change in content.

There is a common assumption, regularly expressed (though never analysed) by curators, collectors and anthropologists alike that the abstractions of contemporary desert art are, however effective, invariably less meaningful than the iconographic creations of the early Papunya (or indeed Balgo) masters. There is an undercurrent of lament in some quarters, as one former art-coordinator expressed to me when returning to Balgo after some years away, that people are not painting 'the big stories, the important Dreamings' anymore. What he meant was that the declining iconicity of Balgo art involved, to some degree, a correlating decline in cultural content. There is also a correlated sentiment that younger artists today don't know the stories that underpinned their elder's artworks, and that their paintings therefore don't have as much cultural content. In both problematic equations here, culture becomes a quantifier.

There are, however, factual inaccuracies (beyond the ideological vagaries) that underpin these assumptions. The assumption that younger artists today don't have the knowledge that artists had 20 years ago is not sustained by the evidence of the historical development of acrylic painting practices in Balgo; as explored in Chapter three, younger artists at Balgo *never* knew the stories. They painted what they were told to paint, what they were permitted to paint, as part of their own cultural education. In this way the pedagogy of painting reflects the prolonged apprenticeships of ritual participation in Balgo, where expectations are that 'executant proficiency in singing and accompaniment should precede any detailed knowledge of the mythology' (Moyle 1997:28). Conversely, the notion that senior artists in Balgo are themselves painting *less* cultural content in their abstractions is also unsustainable. Senior artists, who themselves spent decades 'outlining' icons, animating them with the dots of fluff, or carving their concentric forms into shields, had lifetimes of experience in the execution and efficacy of the self-same aesthetic devices that have come to dominate contemporary acrylic art. It was they who recognised that art form for what it was, an independent cultural practice that was just as efficacious (if not more so) in its intended functions without the iconographic elements. Abstraction in Balgo

art was not pioneered by young artists struggling to translate content into a new medium, but by the most senior custodians of desert culture. Their abstractions are not an expression of a decline in the content of acrylic painting, but are possible because of the absolute mastery of that content and the aesthetic strategies required to reproduce it in the changing contexts of their lives. The Dreaming has not receded in acrylic art, its place in that system has simply changed.

Biddle identifies this same shift in the role of the Dreaming in acrylic painting, but *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas* (2007), but doesn't contextualise these insights through detailed ethnography. Yet these are insights worth arguing for, and worth tabling in the arena of anthropological debate and dialogue. To this end I find it useful to frame these arguments in relation to Roy Wagner's (1977) dialectical insights around 'world view'. Through examining the semiotic construction of world view, or 'world-structure' as Ardener (1989) glosses the same principle, Wagner's concern is to demonstrate how the world-view of any particular people is primarily contingent upon the way in which their understandings are structured semiotically. To begin with, it is acknowledged that every construction of the world that is realised through symbols may be analysed as the articulation of two semiotic modalities: the 'literal' and the 'figurative' (1977:390). A literal construction, such as a scientific law, denotes things, objects or acts that stand in a homologous and representational relationship to some 'represented' context. Literal articulations are, however, dialectically dependent upon this represented context, which is always figurative or metaphoric, for substantiality and validation. On the other hand, figurative constructions incorporate their context into their own articulation; being self-contained, they provide their own validation and substantiality whilst remaining dependent upon their literal context to provide the implied relations.

These figurative and literal modalities, according to Wagner, divide the whole world of human thought and action between them (1977: 393). And each, it seems, is intrinsically dependent upon the other for coherence and meaning. For any symbolic representation to be meaningful, the context of a literal expression must always be perceived as figurative, and vice versa. This leads us back to the 'foregrounding of the dot', and to the more specific ways in which we might understand abstraction as intrinsically *meaningful*. An

Aboriginal world-view, I argue here, is evident in the operation in acrylic art and pertinent to the forms of interpretation brought to bear upon it. In early Balgo painting, the figurative (Tjukurrpa/Dreaming) aspect of the Aboriginal world-view used to contextualise the literal (narrative and iconographic) forms through which it was reproduced. The literal narration of specific ancestral events on canvas was authorised and made meaningful by the overarching figurative context of the Dreaming. Today, in the system of acrylic art described in this chapter, it is often the other way around. Although these narratives of ancestral beings are no longer visible on the canvas in the same way, Balgo people still associate these stories with their canvases; a principle enshrined in the instituted practice of documenting paintings ('giving story') at the art centre. In this way, the (literal) ancestral narratives become a semiotic background and provide the implicit context and authorisation for the symbolic abstractions around the generic concept of the Dreaming. The literal (but invisible) stories contextualise the shimmering (and visible) presence of the figurative Dreaming on canvas. The practice of painting in Balgo has, in the past 30 years, been subject to a semiotic inversion. Abstraction, through the foregrounding of the dot, has effected a transposition of the figurative and the literal in the system of acrylic art.

The dissolution of the iconographic forms initially destabilised the Dreaming as an interpretive referent in the analysis of desert art. The kind of semiotic perspective being developed here helps facilitate the analytical recognition of the Dreaming as an integral and enduring aspect of a broader *system* of meaning. In this chapter I have likewise argued for an appreciation of the system of meaning in acrylic art, through its emergent structure and abstractions, as both an independent cultural practice and the expression of a broader Aboriginal aesthetic. In this light the abstractions in recent desert painting can be understood not as recession from the structure or semantics of the desert graphic system, but as a realisation of that system in new forms. How these abstractions are enmeshed in systems of value and meaning, how they contribute to the transformation and reproduction of indigenous social, political, economic and familial processes and structures, is the concern of the chapters to follow.

Chapter Seven

Marie Mudgedell and the personal arc of Abstraction

Abstraction is no end point in Balgo art. As an ideational and conceptual process, the role abstraction plays in the transformations and reproduction of broader cultural systems requires greater analytical attention. Yet, to avoid turning abstraction *into* an abstraction within the current ethnographic description of art making, it is necessary to retain a discrete and detailed sense of the individual artist. It is at the analytical level of these individual painters that any arguments for social reproduction must also be legible. This chapter seeks to focus the processes of abstraction through the prism of one artist in particular, Marie Mudgedell, and to develop the broader questions of the thesis through her case study.

To this end, it is important that Marie is neither a famous artist nor even an older one. As demonstrated already, the art market is skewed overwhelmingly towards valuing and promoting the work of older, indeed *elderly*, Aboriginal artists. While art historians, curators and critics in Australia necessarily focus on master artists, anthropologists cannot afford to follow suit unthinkingly. There are, of course, legitimate and substantial reasons for anthropologists to focus on those (older) artists who are most successful in the market place. Historically, senior people have often been the most adept at navigating, and communicating, the cross-cultural complexities of new mediums. As Taylor notes of the Kuninjku:

young artists do not generally feel confident that they know enough about the Ancestral realm to be artistic innovators. However, senior artists who understand the artistic system and are fully initiated to the meaning of ceremonies, experience the productivity established through the operation of these systems in a more complete way and can convert their understanding to innovations in the form of paintings (1996:254).

At Balgo, however, this model of older people innovating and younger artists merely copying or inheriting these innovations does an injustice to the agency and artistry these painters – as the analysis of Matthew Gill has already established. A significant preoccupation of my research in Balgo was observing the ways in which younger artists develop their own style; through mimicry, adaptation and exploring the possibilities of colour and form, not to mention the many ways in which artists limit or censor themselves. What emerged from this research was a clear sense that the trials and errors of younger artists are equally as expressive of contemporary Balgo life, kinship, economy and culture, as are the highly successful formal experimentations of senior artists; and this is not something that has been afforded due consideration by anthropologists and other observers in the past.

Younger artists, perhaps even more so than their parents and grandparents, find themselves in dialogue with market values and influences. Younger artists, again perhaps more so than their elders, are encouraged, discouraged and generally influenced by their relationship with the non-indigenous art co-ordinator. The choices these artists make are invariably bound to broader engagements with and constructions of 'authenticity', 'culture', 'art' and 'Aboriginality'. It is therefore important to recognise the ways in which the individual choices and trajectories of Balgo artists, within their particular 'configurations of belonging' (Poirier 2005: 92), are expressive of people coming to terms with their own emergent forms of autonomy and relatedness. In the case studies of this chapter I examine the career of a middle-aged artist (and her husband) and explore the particular ways in which the factors discussed in the thesis to date - life cycle, economics, kinship, domestic relationships, cultural authority – contribute to and coalesce in the processes of abstraction evident in her paintings. Tracing these social, economic and personal determinants through their oeuvre over time, the chapter combines the methodologies of art history and anthropology to establish a framework for a socio-cultural interpretation of individual artist's 'abstractions'. Layering this analysis against the platform of ethnographic description preceding it, I return in conclusion to the question of what Balgo people paint, to the place of the Tjukurrpa in contemporary Balgo art, and to the role of Abstraction in keeping it there.

Marie Mudgedell

Marie Mudgedell is a painter that I followed intimately throughout the period of my fieldwork in Balgo. At the start of 2003 Marie was exclusively painting 'bush tucker' narratives in a highly iconographic style (Figure 7.1). By the end of 2004 she was painting the great *Nakarra Nakarra* Dreaming tracks in an increasingly abstract way (Figure 7.2).



Figure 7.1. Marie Mudgedell 468-03



Figure 7.2 Marie Mudgedell 898/04

An initial comparison of these two paintings suggests that Marie's paintings of late 2004 are, at least superficially, almost unrecognisable to those of early 2003. This kind of acute formal and semantic movement in a single artist's practice is the kind of phenomena the anthropology of desert painting needs to account for. Middle-aged, only moderately successful, and in no way considered a leading 'artist' according to market valuations (aesthetic and economic), the way that Marie Mudgedell painted throughout 2003 and 2004 nevertheless struck me as the very stuff of Balgo art. Furthermore, it was the stuff that demanded attention and interpretation equal to that regularly afforded to painters more acclaimed by the institutions of the art market. A formal and social analysis of what happened in Marie's painting between 2003 and 2004 illuminates a great deal about the inner workings of Balgo art; about the interplay of form and content in contemporary desert art, and the range of meanings that art has for the people who produce it.

Marie & Mati Mudgedell

There is never any single reason why a painter's practice, and their levels of success, changes dramatically; it often relates to their relationship to an art coordinator, and a consequent change in their style that gains some immediate traction in the market. But these changes also tend to correlate to or precipitate from changes in intra-cultural relationships; particularly the death of a parent who was also a successful artist. In recent times at Balgo, the death of senior artists such as Lucy Yukenbarri (see chapter 8) and Tjumpo Tjapanangka has empowered their children to both take up their style, and to paint more frequently. These days it is a common, arguably predictable, consequence of a senior artist passing away that their children or grandchildren will begin painting more readily in that artists style. But it is not always the case. Occasionally the opposite happens; the death of a senior artist can free up younger family members to move away from the stylistic authority they exerted. This appears, initially, to be the case with Marie Mudgedell; who has, since the death of her mother in 2002, undertaken a notable stylistic evolution.

Marie's mother was Mati (Bridget) Mudgedell, who was an important artist in the story of Balgo painting, though she was not as successful in commercial or critical terms as many. Mati was a passionate painter of the *Nakarra Nakarra* Tjukurrpa (Seven Sisters Dreaming) and persisted with painting iconographic depictions of these narratives throughout her career, even as other artists moved more readily to abstraction.



Figure 7.3. Mati Mudgedell (detail)

During the 1990s Mati continued to use the dual bands of fine dotting - in the ochre palette of black, red, yellow and white (see Figure 7.3) long after other senior artists had begun joining dots together in more expressive or 'painterly' ways with brushes. This was not because Mati wasn't experimental; it was because she tended to experiment with different styles simultaneously, and at the same time as maintaining more 'traditional' elements such as the banded dotting. Mati adapted Lucy Yukenbarri's kinti-kinti technique in a variety of ways, played with paint application techniques to create variations in dotting, including her own invention of 'flicked' dotting and even went so far as to try splattering paint (Watson 2003: 252). Mati was both a conservative and experimental artist, and yet seemed to enjoy the dual misfortune of simultaneously conserving what would become the less marketable aspects of early Balgo art (the darker palette, and strong iconographic components), and of experimenting in diverse ways that never enjoyed market support. Often these dual tendencies converged on the same canvas. As established in earlier chapters, the banded dots were themselves an innovation or accommodation to the medium of acrylic on canvas; to Mati, her other innovations were merely continuations of this original one and therefore it would make perfect sense to see them side by side on the same canvas, such as *Palgu Palgu* (Figure 7.4).



Figure 7.4 Mati Mudgedell, *Palgu Palgu*, 1993

Watson has described *Palgu Palgu* as a “harmonious medley of a variety of dotting techniques ranging from single colour fields, in red, the early tjintjil style dotting, single colour kinti-kinti dotting fields, two colour dotting fields, [and] alternating bands of dotting” (Watson 2003: 253). It could be argued, however, that the painting was not entirely ‘harmonious’. It is perhaps harmonious in purely formal terms, as a balanced composition; but there is also a *disharmony* present (for audiences) in the way that established “Aboriginal” forms (the iconography and banded dotting in ochre palette) co-exist with more obvious innovations in fields of green and pink. Mati’s work is fascinating in that the stylistic palimpsest of contemporary desert painting is not segregated on different canvases across her oeuvre, but often intersects on the same painting. This reflexive fusion of styles and techniques, this consciousness of the artistic process, seemed to be interesting in and of itself to Mati; yet it can also be used, in part, to explain her lack of commercial success as an Aboriginal artist. In instances such as these Mati’s work draws attention to the artifice of the ‘traditional’, to its construction, and like Matthew Gill in other contexts, thereby makes such a painting difficult for the audience to read in any simple terms as ‘authentic’ Aboriginal artwork.

In her final years, Mati made something of an accommodation between her artistic impulses, painting bands of dots in a warmer palette, but her experiments, successes and failures were undoubtedly instructive for other artists; and perhaps for none more so than her daughter. Marie Mudge dell painted with, and learnt from, her mother since the late 1980s; copying and adapting key elements of her style (such as the dual- banded dotting in particular). She fluctuated between the strongly iconographic focus of her mother, and Mati’s more experimental technical side, but kept these excursions somewhat segregated on separate canvases; though neither style was particularly successful in the market. Marie never developed either style sufficiently, and no doubt this is partly explained by the fact that painting was not a regular part of Marie’s daily life in the 1990s. Marie did not paint with any regularity during the 1990s, most likely because she was a mother with several young children and teenagers to contend with. In the five years from 1998 to 2002 Marie painted a total of six paintings, barely one per year. Then in 2002, her mother, Mati, died. In 2003 alone Marie painted five works. In 2004, she painted 24.

Something dramatic (at least in statistical terms) changed in Marie's orientation towards painting after Mati died. It is not just the number of paintings that changed, nor the form they took; the narrative content of Marie's work also changed significantly over this period. When I arrived in Balgo in 2003, not long after Mati's death, Marie was painting in a painstakingly neat, 'classic' style of dotting in banded rows showing clearly defined icons in narrative context (Figure 7.5). Marie's paintings in this period were, discursively, produced as bush tucker paintings, generally focussing on the *pinanyi* (waterlily) plant which grows around her father's country in the Sturt creek area.¹⁵⁶



Figure 7.5. Marie Mudgetell, 657-03

In 2002, before her mother's death, Marie had been painting Mati's country south of Balgo.¹⁵⁷ Although she fluctuated throughout her career between painting her mothers and fathers Country, the focus on her father's country in 2003 was a deliberate practice of avoidance associated with Mati's death. Yet despite painting her father's country, it is clear in a painting such as Figure 7.5 that during this period two key elements of her mother's style are reproduced: the rows of dual-banded dotting that became a hallmark of Mati's style, and the iconographic depiction of people with arcs. These elements defined her image making in 2003. But in 2004, Marie embarked upon a striking stylistic trajectory of sustained innovation, adaptation and abstraction that has no obvious visual referents in

¹⁵⁶ In the roots of the *pinanyi* is a small, edible tuber. The full story recorded for this painting is:

Marie has depicted 'Mutkunangu', her father's country near Sturt ck. This is a place where women collect bush lilies (pinanyi). The two (left/right) areas show women digging in dry ground, while the central area shows a woman following the lily stem underwater to gather the pinanyi (tuber) from the creek bed.

¹⁵⁷ For example, Warlyirti Artists catalogue reference #189/02.

her mother's work. Interestingly, the more abstract Marie's paintings became, the more they began to reference her mother's Country and the important women's Dreamings (such as *Nakarra Nakarra*) for which Mati was custodian. It is only through an examination of how Marie painted and what she painted (and how she came to paint what she painted) in the years after her mother's death that the social, cultural and personal and aesthetic influence of that relationship makes sense in artistic terms.

Marie and Patrick: painting in partnership

Marie's aesthetic inheritance from her mother is significant, but this significance is difficult to establish in merely formal analysis of the two women's work – particularly from the vantage point of 2004 where one has passed away, and the other is painting in forms unrecognisable from her own work only a year earlier. Other influences were equally as important in Marie's aesthetic trajectory in 2004. Perhaps the most influential aspect of Marie's individual stylistic change in this period was the nature of her domestic painting practices, undertaken with her husband Patrick Smith. Patrick and Marie work together. Marie is a talented linguist and artist, and works at the school's 'Wakala Centre' developing Kukatja- language books and resources for Balgo school children. Patrick frequently sits and keeps her company as she writes, draws or paints these stories. As with so many couples, when one of them paints for the art centre, the other one paints. As they shared Country and life histories around the *Purkitji* (Sturt Creek) area, either being born, conceived or growing up there, they were able to coherently share the labour of 'working' that Country in their paintings, whilst also exploring their own personal narratives and aesthetic inheritance.



Figure 7.6 Patrick Smith 498-03

Neither artist was particularly successful prior to my fieldwork, but they both enjoyed painting and sold works from time to time; enough to make it a practice worth continuing. An analysis of the archive demonstrates that they had, throughout their careers, shared close country and formal similarities; but by 2003 their styles had settled somewhat and their works were clearly distinguishable. A comparison of Figure 7.1 with Patrick's painting above (Figure 7.6) executed at the same time (around the commencement of my fieldwork period) illustrates this. This was how I first encountered these two artists in early 2003. At this stage, their dotting techniques were also clearly distinguishable. Patrick blended his dots in the kinti-kinti style, and these thick bands of colour were softened by his dabbing the dots together with a large brush (Figure 7.7). Using a smaller brush, Marie's dotting was methodical, sharp and extremely neat (Figure 7.8 below)



Figure 7.7 Patrick's technique from 2003



Figure 7.8 Marie's precise dotting in 2003, 655-03 (detail)

For this reason, it was extremely clear to me one day in late 2003 that Marie was helping Patrick with his paintings. No doubt this had happened in the past, and was perhaps a regular aspect of their practice. It became obvious, however, at this point in their careers when their respective practices had crystallised in recognisable techniques. One day a painting arrived at the art centre with Patrick's name on it, in his general compositional form, but executed with the technique evident in Marie's works (Figure 7.9). Despite using the same palette and composition as Patrick, Marie's involvement was betrayed by her technique of placing the dots carefully on the canvas with a smaller brush. Even when she tried to make it look splodgier her own idiosyncratic mark making was discernible. Instead of textured fields of dabbed colour, each dot was clearly differentiated as a mark on the canvas. This is clear in Figure 7.10, a detail of another painting Marie completed for Patrick around the same time.



Figure 7.9 Marie painting for Patrick, 1178/03



Figure 7.10. Marie painting for Patrick, 69/04 (detail)

Such dual-authorship on paintings has always been an integral aspect of Balgo art, but artists - conscious of market expectations and preferences for painting to be completed, authorised and authenticated, by a single Indigenous hand – tend to downplay the practice.¹⁵⁸ Marie was therefore a little surprised when I asked her if she'd completed Patrick's painting; and then I think she was proud that I could tell her hand from her husband's. Marie then laughed as she explained to me that Patrick sometimes fell asleep whilst painting, and that she would have to finish his work for him.¹⁵⁹ But the context of their respective careers at the time also encourages a less passive interpretation. It was not just the one painting that Marie did for her husband (see also Figure 7.11) and, furthermore, these 'collaborations' were occurring more frequently at a time when Patrick was making greater inroads into the market.¹⁶⁰ In 2003 the market was starting to respond to Patrick's work more favourably. Encouraged to paint more by the coordinator, he received bigger canvases, and more of them. In 2003 Patrick painted 13 canvases, whereas in 2002 he had painted only 4. For a period in late 2003 and early 2004, Marie seemed to be investing her labour into Patrick's boards, because they were the ones that were assured of selling - and of selling for more money than her own.¹⁶¹ Given they were both painting the same general Country, Marie's production of her husband's paintings, overseen by Patrick, were a strategic rationalisation of that resource and the labour required to exploit it.



Figure 7.11 Marie painting for Patrick, 69-04

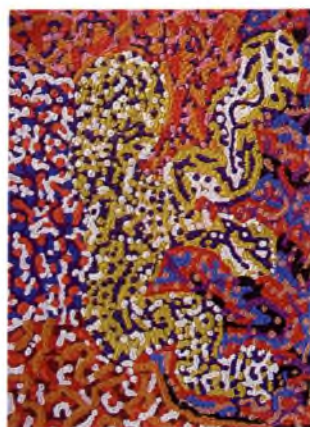


Figure 7.12 *Sturt Creek*, 70-04

¹⁵⁸ This phenomena is discussed in greater detail in other chapters

¹⁵⁹ Patrick has subsequently clarified that, having suffered from cataracts for many years, his eyes get sore if he paints for too long. He often needs to take breaks from painting to close his eyes, and it is in these contexts that Marie helps finish his works for him.

¹⁶⁰ A similar example is explored in the case of Theresa Nowee and her husband Morris Reid in Chapter 8.

¹⁶¹ Warlayirti Artists pricelist, May 2003.

This process of painting anonymously on her husband's canvases seemed to liberate Marie from the more formal, iconographic works she herself was producing at this time. Her second painting in 2004, *Sturt Creek*, (Figure 7.12) reveals a radical break from the compositions of 2003, and heralds a process of transition to more experimental mark making. Interestingly Marie brought this painting to the art centre on the same day she also brought Figure 7.11, another work she had clearly completed for her husband. It was as if working on her husband's canvases had necessitated a shift, a personal *differentiation*, in her own practice. I immediately discussed with Marie the very obvious stylistic change she had undertaken. She told me that her new dotting technique was based on women's sand drawings: not on the iconography, however, but rather on the way her mother and other older women dabbed their fingers in the earth, or dragged them along, in order to tell Marie stories when she was younger.

I asked Nakarra [Marie] how such a new style came about she explained that these merged, splodgy paintings were based on the way old ladies used to talk to her about pinanyi in the sand. Her mother [Mati], Tjama, Pipita; pressing their fingers into the sand to describe the pinanyi and the stories surrounding it.¹⁶²

This example is deeply evocative of Christine Watson's work, connecting this thesis to her argument that '(p)ublic sand drawing is also a major source of the Balgo contemporary painting movement' (2003: 107). It also provides an example of how people authorise innovations and abstractions. Naming the women (including her mother) whose hands she watched telling stories in the sand gives Marie's own innovations a personal, life-historical context and authority. Marie's experiments on canvas began as acrylic instantiations of these moments, these memories of sand stories, and in so doing also elicit a cultural legitimacy for the stylistic innovation of their retelling. This reinvention of her style continued for several months, expressed uniformly as bush tucker paintings of Pinanyi (see Figures 7.13-14).

¹⁶² John Carty, fieldnotes, 16/02/2004

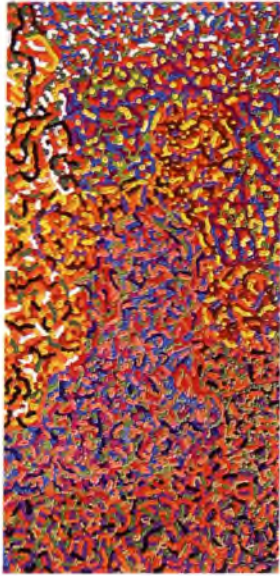


Figure 7.13. 223-04

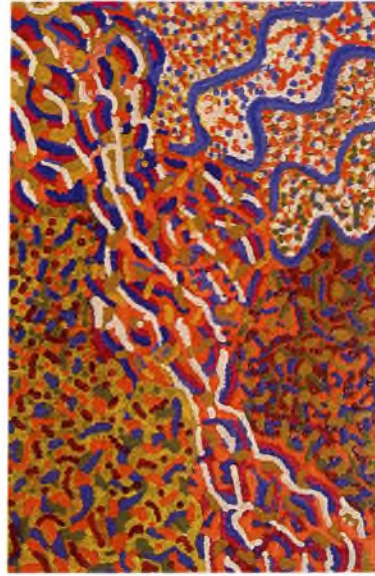


Figure 7.14. 474-04



Figure 7.15. Kilang painting, 473-04

The production of these dappled abstractions was interspersed by a more linear stylistic shift such as evident in Figure 7.15. These paintings, with a distinctly different brush application of paint and linear aesthetic, were not paintings of *pinanyi*, but rather *kilang* (bush honey). Following on from Marie's explanation of the *pinanyi* paintings as based on the form the old women's fingers made in the sand, the dragging of the line here likewise mimics the dragging of fingers through the sand in story telling. The contrast created by the differently coloured bands further evokes the *depth* of those traces in the sand. In both cases, the precise formal dotting of 2003 is replaced by expressive mark making that is explicitly bound to the haptic practices of sand drawing. Marie played with these two styles, and two stories, on separate canvases until later in 2004. Then, in paintings such as Figure 7.16¹⁶³, these *kilang* and *pinanyi* experiments are expressed simultaneously: both in the mixture of dappling and lines on the canvas surface, and in the narrative itself. Marie's description of the painting follows:

The painting mostly depicts the bush tucker to be found in this area including bush berries and a variety of seeds are depicted in the left section of the painting. In the right section of the painting, the top portion represents honey... the middle section

¹⁶³ See also 632/04 for another example.

is *karnti* (bush potato) and the lower section is *pinanyi* (waterlilies) the central section represents *Purkitji* as it flows into *Paruku*.¹⁶⁴

On this canvas, the splodgy abstractions of her *pinanyi* paintings are transferred to other bush foods such as bush potato, berries and seeds. Furthermore, the linear style in the middle section of the painting, pioneered in painting about honey previously, is transferred to *Purkitji*, part of the channel of Sturt Creek that runs into *Paruku* (Lake Gregory). In the next canvas Marie painted in 2004 (597/04), the linear style is employed to tell a *pinanyi* story. This painting, and those that followed it, reveals a watershed in Marie's artistic development: the point at which she begins to combine and transfer her sand drawing-inspired (and authorised) abstractions to a more general painting practice. This moment in her development, crystallised in Figure 7.16, also demonstrates that while formal innovations are initially legitimated through a particular referent (the dappling for *pinanyi* sand drawings, the linear forms for *kilang*), they are not necessarily bound to that referent in future paintings. This transference of innovations, unhinging abstractions from their narrative or phenomenal referent, is an integral part of how Balgo painters develop their confidence and their own sense of authority as artists. It is an integral part of the development of someone's style.



Figure 7.16: *Pinanyi and Kilang styles combined, 476-04*

The question of structure also comes to the fore here. Having experimented with these dotting techniques, and found a confidence to continue with those innovations, the basic formal requirements of organising space on the canvas emerged as the next stage in Marie's aesthetic process in 2004. 'How', the question that emerges from these paintings seems to ask, 'can these expressive marks be coherently, meaningfully composed?' – in

¹⁶⁴ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #476/04

ways that satisfy both artist and audience. In Figure 7.13 Marie attempted sectioning half of the painting, with lines, whereas the rest of the painting was more organically sectioned by the different clusters of dotting. In Figure 7.14 a more fluid sense of structure was employed through a diagonal line holding the array of splodgy dots in some compositional tension. Like the dotting techniques themselves, these approaches also find simultaneous expression in the structure of Figure 7.16. Here, the painting is sectioned into 6 squares bounded by different dotting events, and bisected by linear bands of dotting through the centre. This general structure is retrospectively evident in the paintings Marie completed for her husband, and suggests a deeper continuity in the strategies the artist was employing to resolve the canvas. This composition was maintained over the next few paintings, and while an increasingly loose linearity was spreading from the centre to the peripheral panels (see Figure 7.17), there also remained, arguably, an unresolved tension between Maries changing dotting style and the overall structure.



Figure 7.17 597/04

As already discussed in earlier chapters, older painters at Balgo have almost all moved towards increasing abstraction in their late careers; releasing their practice into expressive mark-making evoking only the remnants of the structure that over years fostered their innovations. They tend to be extremely comfortable in the act of painting and their authority to do so. It is reiterative, meditative and unselfconscious, compositions emerging from an assured command of space on canvas rather than predetermined structures. But this too was a gradual process or trajectory that can be mapped, often over decades, just as it can today for younger painters.

Younger and middle aged painters tend to have less confidence about experimenting or increasing their levels of abstraction, and can resort back to very formal pieces after only one experimental painting; as Marie herself did in 2000. In 2004, however, there was for her a more gradual, coherent artistic and cultural process of abstraction occurring. And just as Marie explored new mark making possibilities, a new compositional structure emerged. In paintings such as Figure 7.18, Marie divided different areas of the canvas into segments as she painted them, moving around the canvas section by section. However, in this work this processual necessity has been incorporated into the structure of the work such that it becomes part of Marie's style.



Figure 7.18. 633/04

A similar process was integral to the stylistic development of Kathleen Padoon. As she gravitated towards increasing abstraction in 2003, her process for filling the canvas was to paint in different coloured sections, red then white, red then white. As these paintings increased in popularity, she received bigger and bigger canvases from the art coordinators. The physical necessity of filling this space with a tiny stick meant that Kathleen methodically completed one square of the canvas at a time. The size of these canvases compared to the size of the stick and precision of the dotting technique rendered the production of such paintings extremely slow. A few squares alone might be completed in one sitting, and then picked up again the next day. When a section was complete, Kathleen would rotate the board, begin a different section, and then connect these squares up to those completed in previous sittings (see Figure 7.19). The relationship between the segmentation was more dynamic by virtue of being painted on different days and from different angles as Kathleen rotated the canvas to reach each section.¹⁶⁵ This organic

¹⁶⁵ Kathleen's smaller canvases from this time tended to be less successful; precisely because the optical effect - created by joining up different segments from different angles - was not generated by the more discrete process of filling smaller canvases. Consequently, these smaller boards were more proportional or symmetrical, less wobbly, and therefore less dynamic or optical in their overall effect.

process of filling the canvas square by square lead to an extremely optical effect, a shimmer of sorts (see Figure 7.20) in her larger paintings which instantly invigorated her market worth.



Figure 7.19. Kathleen Padoon at work



Figure 7.20. Kathleen, 570/03

Marie's paintings were generally not as large as Kathleen's, and there are important differences in their technique. Nevertheless, the principle of the process becoming absorbed into the overall effect is important in each artist's work: both in the way individual dots are placed, and in the way clusters of such dots are brought into relation with other clusters, squares or segments. Marie's sectioning of the painting was well-received by the art coordinators, who began to speak about saving such paintings for exhibitions: an important positive reinforcement for artists, indicating when their paintings have improved in their articulation with the aesthetic values of the market. Non-indigenous staff in different community organisations mentioned to me how much they liked Marie's new paintings and some even bought them. Broader market responses to these kinds of works were also more favourable.

Abstracting towards authority: cultural creativity

Rather than moving her away from cultural narratives, however, this process seems to have been integral to a process of authorising Marie's sense of her own cultural authority. In Figure 7.21, ostensibly a similar painting to all that had come before in the year, Marie for the first time addresses the Tjukurrpa that underpins the Country she has been painting.

The painting tells the story of the people living together in the old days and catching fish, mussels and crabs in Purkitji, depicted as the central feature of the painting. A rainbow serpent is also known to live in the river and got angry one day, forcing all the fish into a cave so people couldn't catch them. The people were then forced to hunt off the land and collect tjunta (bush onion), tjirrilpatja (bush carrot) and goanna.¹⁶⁶

Rather than describing the abstraction here as simple bush tucker (pinanyi, kilang) or places (Purkitji) Marie includes more complex cultural references and narrates this painting as someone who is gaining in confidence about her capacity to express that knowledge in the cross-cultural arena. This process plays out in the very next painting Marie completed, where instead of using the painting to demonstrate her knowledge of the Tjukurrpa, she explores the formal traditional rights for the area she is painting. Whereas the upper 4/5ths of the painting indicate the presence of various foods, "The very bottom squares in the painting represent some of the language groups living here, there are Nardi [sic], Jaru and Walmajarri." This time, the semantic core of the narrative and the linear aspect of the painting are relocated away from the centre of the composition.

¹⁶⁶ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #825/04



Figure 7.21. Marie Mudge 825/04



Figure 7.22. 854/04

Two paintings later, this linear element and the self-conscious squared structure it accompanied and offset, were absorbed and recast in what could arguably be understood as the resolution of the (current) process of abstraction that began in early 2004 (with the painting at Figure 7.12). In *Nakarra Nakkara* (Figure 7.23), by far the largest painting Marie had yet completed, the processes of artistic development explored so far in this chapter – particularly innovations in dotting and compositional structure to support them – are realised most clearly.

Until now the more confident mark-making that was emerging in previous works was still contained by tentative compositions, the squares simultaneously holding the experiment in place (as a practice) but also arguably holding it back (as a successful work of art). In Figure 7.23, however, the tensions between the form and content, the structure and dotting, seem to (momentarily) resolve. The relationship between Marie's experiments in linear and splodgy dotting is also resolved in a looser hybrid of dappled runs. In previous paintings the linear and the splodgy were made to sit side-by-side in an unresolved, and arguably unsuccessful, aesthetic tension. Here the two approaches to mark-making are layered such that the sections of splodgy dotting provide the grounds for the linear. In this painting they contextualise each other through *depth* rather than adjacency.



Figure 7.23 *Nakarra Nakarra*, 874/04

With this structure in place, but subservient now to the act of painting, there is evident in this work more freedom in both mark-making and the overall composition. For the first time in Marie's processes of abstraction the structure seems to emerge from the process of painting itself, rather than being imposed upon it. Confident mark-making expands in myriad directions, cutting across, breaking out of and overlaying the squared structure beneath. It is the most assured act of 'painting', of animating and resolving the space of the canvas through the application of paint, that Marie had ever achieved. These 'aesthetic' descriptions and judgements are admittedly more likely to appear in an art catalogue than an ethnographic tract; but they are employed here to reinforce the analytical interdependence of the cultural and artistic processes being played out on the surface of Balgo canvases. This is evident in the discursive claims the artist herself makes for this work. This was the first time in my experience, and the first time since her mother's death, that Marie had explicitly painted the *Nakarra Nakarra* Tjukurrpa for which her mother was a senior custodian.¹⁶⁷ *Nakarra Nakarra* is a Kukatja/Ngarti version of the Seven Sisters dreaming that traverses most of the continent. It is also, pertinently, the subject of the segmented square paintings executed by Kathleen Padoon during 2003-4

¹⁶⁷ Marie had painted aspects of this story before, when her mother was alive, for example 679/97, or 202/99.

(Figure 7.20). Kathleen was close family for Mati Mudgebell, and the two women shared Country and Tjukurrpa and even painted these stories together, as in Figure 7.24.



Figure 7.24. Kathleen Padoon and Mati Mudgebell, *Nakarra Nakarra*, 1993.

What we find then, in looking retrospectively at Marie's paintings throughout 2004, is an impulse towards abstraction that was contained by a squared structure that resembled the one Kathleen had innovated in her own *Nakarra Nakarra* abstractions.¹⁶⁸ Building on the discussion of the "rockhole template" in Chapter 6, this example opens up further the notion of *emergent templates* in contemporary art: organising structures that emerge out of processes of abstraction, but which, once harnessed to certain subject matter, serve recursively to structure the ongoing reproduction of such content. It is not just claiming the *Nakarra Nakarra* Tjukurrpa for her innovation that is relevant to Marie's case here. The nature of the discursive production of the painting, the story, and its relationship to the forms therein, is also vital.

Nakarra Nakarra is found south of Balgo in the Great Sandy Desert. And is the site of the Seven Sisters Tjukurrpa (Dreaming), a story about seven sisters who travelled this country during the Tjukurrpa running from an old man who wanted to marry the youngest. Today at Nakarra Nakarra a group of hills embody the seven sisters. The marks in this painting represent the tracks the sisters made as they travelled and danced through the country. The upper central section of the painting depicts a

¹⁶⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that Marie consciously adopted this emergent *Nakarra Nakarra* aesthetic from Kathleen; indeed when asked about it Marie stated any correlation here was simply a coincidence.

*willy willy that the women sung for to come and cool them. The lower central section is a cave in which the sisters slept.*¹⁶⁹

There are two key aspects to this narration from Marie. The first element of this narrative to address here is the last mentioned: the discussion of the central elements of the canvas as a wind or 'willy willy' (Figure 7.25a), and a cave (Figure 7.25b).



Figure 7.25a: 874/04 (detail), *willy willy*



Figure 7.25b: 874/04(detail), *cave*

In previous paintings these linear sections had represented the river, the rainbow serpent, or the language groups as discrete narrative elements differentiated within an otherwise abstract aesthetic field. In this painting, however, where the linear dotting is incorporated and integrated as part of that aesthetic field, neither the painting nor the narrative require an obvious differentiation of content from the form. Figure 7.26 is a detail of that central panel from *Nakarra Nakarra*.

Figure 7.26 (below) *central panel of Nakarra Nakarra painting (detail of Figure 7.23), 874/04*



a. willy willy

b. wind

c. wind

d. cave

¹⁶⁹ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference # 874/04

The wind (b, c) from the willy willy (a) flows through the centre of the composition to cool the women in the cave (d). Herein, for the first time, the artist has resolved the spine of the narrative within the spine of painting itself. This resolution of the relationship between form and content is not trivial. This is the first painting in several years in which the artist confidently asserts that she has represented the ancestral travels, dances and actions of the seven sisters. It is the first time since the death of her mother that she has authorised her own narrative of that Tjukurrpa. More importantly, it is the first time since she embarked on her stylistic innovation that she felt she could justifiably claim her innovations as representative of this most important Tjukurrpa, a Tjukurrpa for which there is a highly elaborated graphic system: a system replete with specific iconographies: a system for which her mother was a practitioner and custodian. The harmonisation of form and content expresses an artistic confidence and cultural conviction.

This was, significantly, the largest painting Marie had ever completed; and no doubt the pride she felt at the art coordinator deeming her to be capable of commanding and selling such a work informed the confidence of the subject matter she chose to depict. The formal analysis to date does not allow simplistic explanations that she was just meeting the scale of the canvas with the scale of the content. This is not just claiming a big dreaming for a big canvas. It expresses the principal artistic revelation. This revelation is coded in the statement that “[t]he marks in this painting represent the tracks the sisters made as they travelled and danced through the country.” In this painting, the artist is, for the first time, explicitly connecting her formal innovations, her creative practice, to the creativity of the ancestors who remain, whilst no longer expressed in classical iconography, the subject of her painting. Or rather, perhaps it is the relation between her creative practice, and that of the ancestors, which is the proper *subject* of the painting.

Patrick (Jupiter) Smith

Despite this discernible personal arc in the dissolution of her iconographic arcs, Marie’s was not an isolated creative practice. These processes were clearly informed by the collaborative painting practice Marie continued to share with her husband even as they

explored seemingly antithetical programs of aesthetic experimentation. In 2004, both were developing a confidence in their capacity to experiment and transform the core components of their paintings. As Marie was developing the expressive abstract style devoid of iconography discussed above, Patrick was eliminating everything but iconography from his own paintings (Figure 7.27).



Figure 7.27. Patrick Smith 833/04

A brief synopsis of Patrick's own aesthetic trajectory is needed here. Patrick first began acrylic painting in 1991 with a fine formal style of stick dotting that filled the canvas around a few select icons. After two paintings in this classical vein, he began experimenting with a brush, creating a dappled background which was overlaid with the icons of snakes, people, waterholes and hills in finer dotting (411/91). He dispensed with the brush in 1992, and experimented with embedding the iconography within different kinds of fine dotting generic to Balgo art at the time; both linear (39/92) and concentric tessellations (449/92). In the mid 1990s his relatively small output was dominated by circle line formations and concentric lines radiating out to fill the canvas. Around 1997, as with many artists, Patrick had switched to using a brush entirely, and creating thicker lines of dotting. By 1998 these lines had become extremely thick, almost brushed, and any iconography other than the structuring circles and lines had disappeared entirely (546/98). This seemingly unsuccessful period of painting continued into 1999 (239/99) when the change in art coordinators seems to have influenced a significant shift in Patrick's practice: moving from paint-brushed lines back to finer dotting. The impact of this simple change on

his style, on the complexity of his compositions and the conviction of his mark making, was evident immediately (360/99). Two paintings later, Patrick had merged this finer dotting technique back into the linear style he had been using in previous years to create thick bands of dotting around large icons.



Figure 7.28. Patrick Smith, 889/99 (note, reproduction of a black and white photo)

In Figure 7.28 we find these large icons floating again in a dotted context, much as they were at the start of his career, but now in a style of his own. While Patrick did not paint in 2000, in 2001 he refined his 1999 experiment into brighter compositions now dominated by the floating arcs and interleaving semi-circular shapes. By the end of 2001, Patrick had reverted back to dotting with a brush, but this time had a new compositional structure and dynamism to harness the application of larger dots into lines. The painting in Figure 7.28 also signalled the emergence of the concentric arc element that would come to define Patrick's painting style over the years to come. These concentric arc shapes were conceived by Patrick from their inception as indexical of rainbow serpents, either in the tracks he left through the land as watercourses or hills formed in their passing. This was explicit in their first discursive formulation:

The arch shapes along the edges of the painting are the hills and landforms created in the Tjukurrpa by two wanaira [sic], or ancestral snakes. These snakes created this country by travelling though and it is their tracks that have formed the features of the country. [WA Catalogue # 889/99]

These arcs, it should be noted, are not in and of themselves a formal innovation. They are commonly used to denote the passage of a snake in the desert graphic system. They are linked, visually, to the marks that snakes make as their muscles move their body, and shape the sand, in arcs as they move (Figure 7.29a). A comparison between this image and the Patrick Oloodoodi painting (Figure 7.29b) illuminates how arcs emerge as an index of a snake's movement, and how these are incorporated into the desert graphic system in contemporary art as indices of Ancestral snakes creating landforms.



Figure 7.29a snake tracks



Figure 7.29b. Patrick Oloodoodi snake painting

So the iconography that Patrick Smith was innovating with had firm cultural foundations and specific narrative reference to his own suite of stories involving the *Warnayarra* or Rainbow Serpent. Throughout 2003, these concentric arcs tended to frame the narrative of Patrick's paintings, as well as their physical form, both of which are evident in Figure 7.30. The story Patrick gave for this painting is:

In the Tjukurrpa the rainbow serpent created Purkitji or Sturt Creek as it travelled through the Country. The journey ended at Lake Gregory where it then created the marine life found in there today including freshwater mussels. The vibrant colours indicate the incredible creative power of the rainbow serpent.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #444/03



Figure 7.30. 444/03



Figure 7.31. 573/03

In other paintings, with identical narratives to that above, the concentric arcs begin to spread from the marginal framing and into the centre of the composition. In paintings such as Figure 7.31, the concentric arcs begin to take on an indexical relation to aspects of the narrative other than the Rainbow Serpent itself. This was not an inexorable march of abstraction, however. Throughout the stylistic transformation occurring in 2003, and the increasing prominence of the concentric arcs, Patrick still employed the discernable iconography of single arcs. Three paintings included these (101/03, 1231/03, 2022/03), though the ten others completed in 2003 did not. Such paintings were part of a dynamic in Patrick's oeuvre throughout 2003, where he explored the possibilities of his crystallising style, moving between iconographic and more abstract composition of stories.

Patrick ended 2003 with perhaps his most detailed iconographic work in many years (Figure 7.32). The iconographic specificity of the painting is summarised in story I recorded with Patrick:

Patrick has painted part of the creation story of Purkitji (Sturt Creek) and Paruku (Lake Gregory). The linear movements through the centre of the paintings are the creeks, such as



'Ngayimangayima' that the Warnayarra created in his movement south towards Paruku. The blue and white semi-circles represent the milk-waters that run through the creeks of Purkitji to Paruku today; they also represent the various areas of the Lake itself. The brown semi-circles are the talis (sandhills) that surround the lake area. The U shapes in the top left hand corner of the painting are the Witjangana (freshwater mussel) women. The right side of the painting is populated by ancestral fish which are of the same skin as Patrick- Tjapaltjarri. The yellow arcs are the catfish people, while the brown ones further right are Yawu, the ancestors for the fish that people catch in the lake today.

Figure 7.32: 1231/03

This was perhaps the most harmonious resolution of the narrative, iconographic and innovative aspects of Patrick's paintings to date. But rather than precipitating a stream of reiterations, this painting proved a surprising kind of end point.¹⁷¹ The next major painting Patrick completed himself was Figure 7.33, where – apart from some infill dotting and a structuring line in the centre – virtually the entire painting is constituted by the thickly dotted concentric arcs. In early 2004, as his wife embarked on her journey into abstraction, Patrick seemed to commence his own. With bigger canvases to fill due to his success in 2003, he had to imagine how they could be filled with the same energy and balance as his smaller works. His first instinct was evidently to fill the canvas with iconography. In Figure 7.33 there are 55 concentric arcs: triple the number in any other individual work Patrick had previously completed. He virtually filled the canvas with concentric arcs, allowing his principal aesthetic device to become the entire painting. A

¹⁷¹ Patrick completed one further tiny painting in 2003, then the first two paintings in 2004 were those (discussed earlier) completed by his wife.

similar process is evident in other Balgo artists, who have pushed concentric squares or circles out of their narrative necessity in order to fill the canvas. Similar formal processes also appear on earlier canvases by Patrick, but the reiterative scale of this painting suggests a moment, in a broader aesthetic process, worthy of attention.



Figure 7.33 128/04

This was not a radical shift from the developments of previous years, but in context it was a significant one. This was not just a visual break or development from the paintings that came before: this work is also pertinent because of the social contexts of its production and the discursive shift it signalled at this time in Patrick's practice and oeuvre. Patrick has a broad identity-base, drawn from heritage east of Balgo in the Warlpiri Country of the Tanami desert, and Jaru identity around the Purkitji (Sturt Creek) area. He has painted the respective Tanami and Sturt Creek Country at various times in his career, but has tended to focus on the Sturt Creek area where he grew up and spent most of his life. This Sturt Creek focus became entrenched in 2000-2003, when Patrick didn't once paint the Tanami side of his Country. While the concentric arcs were originally associated with the Wanayarra's actions in the Tanami (Patrick's documented narrative for the 1999 painting at Figure 7.28 explicitly asserts this), this discrete association ended with Patrick's technical experimentation. Since moving away from fine dotting in 1999 and developing his version of *kinti-kinti* dotting, the conjoined splodgy dotting technique structured around concentric arcs, Patrick has only painted Country and Tjukurrpa in the Sturt creek region. It would seem that the dotting technique, and its relative success in the market, came to be associated perhaps exclusively with that Country.

Patrick's domestic painting practices with Marie, who shares that Purkitji Country, may have reinforced or foregrounded this aspect of his identity in acrylics. So it was that when, at the start of 2004, Marie broke away from her Sturt Creek style, Patrick broke away from his Sturt Creek story. Figure 7.33 was the first painting Patrick finished after those Marie had completed for him. Pertinently, it is a new, or different, story.

Patrick has painted some of his Country east of Balgo. This country is found on Tanami Downs Station. The main feature of the paintings is the budgerigar Tjukurrpa associated with Patrick's own skin group, Tjapaltjarri. The parallel lines depicted in the left side of the painting representing the body painting associated with the budgerigar and the U shapes the subsequent dancing. The central vertical lines represent the travelling track taken by the budgerigar and the right side of the painting depicts the Law still going strongly today.¹⁷²

It is not the shared Country of Purkitji that he painted together with his wife, but rather the Country further east across towards Tanami downs. To authorise and invigorate the next visual stage of his art, this narrative break was perhaps necessary. What this narrative also shows, in contrast to that of 1231/03 (Figure 7.32), is how the agents in Tjukurrpa narratives - who were formerly depicted with single arcs - became increasingly subsumed, aesthetically and referentially, into the stylised concentric arc shapes that first emerged in 1999 (Figure 7.28). Here, then, we see the realisation of a process that started at least 15 years prior. But that, as it was for Marie, was not just a process of negotiating innovations onto the canvas. The story for this painting also reveals Patrick's application of his innovations to a startling array of ontological or ideational levels. The arcs in this seemingly single plane refer to the ancestral Budgerigars, their dancing in the Tjukurrpa, and the people today who continue those dances (on the right hand side of the panel). Here, Patrick has applied a device he adapted from the movement of snakes in the desert graphic system, and transformed it into an elastic index of infinite forms of agency - not the least of which is *his own*. While the formal similarities could hardly be further apart, the structural similarities to Marie's process here are illuminating.

¹⁷²Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #128/04

This then is the true emergence of Patrick's own form of abstraction. In the bottom left hand corner of Figure 7.33, the dancers trail off and the concentric arcs start to drift away from the pack. This drift continued throughout 2004 in a process that can perhaps be coherently described as a kind of minimalism that emerged in the wake of expansive iteration. The next step for Patrick, as a painter, seemed to be to find the confidence *not* to fill the whole canvas. Working towards that end occupied Patrick for the next year: a process clearly marked in time by the four paintings compared in Figure 7.34a-d.



Figure 7.34a. 248/04 7.34b. 471/04 7.34c. 665/04 7.34d. 833/04

What is unmistakable in the visual evidence here is how Patrick gradually developed confidence in the authority of his own innovations. In order to make a visual break, he needed a discursive one as well. Having transferred the concentric arcs from the Wanayarra to the Ngatijirri, from Sturt Creek to the Tanami Desert, he used this new geographic and thematic ground exclusively throughout 2004 to explore new possibilities in painting. The relationship here between story and form is more interesting than this, however; because the sequence of paintings shown above suggests temporal crystallisations of a process whereby Patrick sought to unhinge those concentric arcs from the security of narrative context. By this I mean, rather, a movement away from creating elaborated *visual* context on the canvas (background dottings, connecting lines, space-filling shapes) which leaves the concentric arcs to float with authority as *story enough*: no

longer requiring aesthetic embellishment. It is interesting to note the visual correlation here, in what I am calling 'abstraction' to an image such as Johnny Mosquito's lightning flashes (Chapter 4, Figure 4.3b). Patrick's artistic processes of abstraction can be interpreted as leading 'back' to the elemental iconographic power of Kuruwarri in the visual system, and also forward to the place of the *Tjukurrpa* in his own evolving practice.

As with his wife, this experimentation succeeded because it was played out through an organising structure. Patrick's paintings have, for years, been largely structured by a compositional template (Figure 7.35) which had the concentric arcs framing the sides of the painting and a central panel that would either be filled with narrative elements such as arcs, dotted lines and meanders, or would be rendered simply as a solid line itself, as in Figure 7.33.

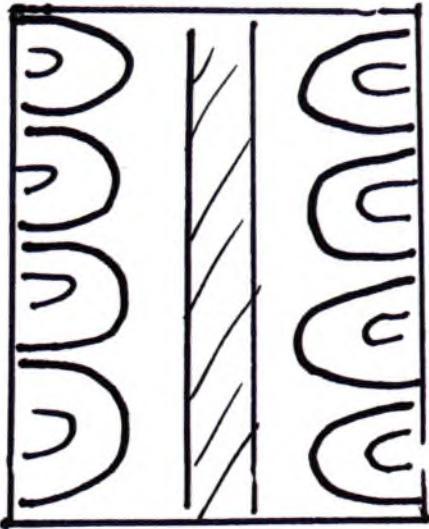


Figure 7.35 Patrick Smith painting template

This underlying structure of Patrick's work is all the more evident through this process of transition, and in the specific relationship between Figure 7.35 and the previous sequence of works in Figure 7.34a-d. In these paintings, where space emerges as the embellishment diminishes, the chronological sequencing of canvases reveals how the template was breaking up through time even as it holds the individual compositions together. Yet even in painting 665/04 (Figure 7.34c), where the concentric arcs are floating free, the template persists: the concentric arcs frame the painting, however more sparsely, and, themselves

form the central line of the panel. Where in 7.34c the concentric arcs have replaced or transposed the structure, in the painting at 7.34d they have *become* it.

Through a process that articulates coherently with western descriptions of abstraction, Patrick's personal 'style'—embodied in his thickly dotted concentric arcs—has replaced the form, content and structure of his earlier paintings. And here the analysis returns to the social and domestic relationship between Patrick and Marie, and an examination of how this impacts on the relationship between the forms on their canvases.

Abstracting in your own way

This 'abstraction' of the icon in Patrick's oeuvre is, in essence, the same cultural transformation as pioneered by Marie, though expressed in seemingly opposite aesthetic process. While one artist experimented with removing iconography entirely, the other removed everything but the icon. While Marie radically transformed her dotting technique, Patrick maintained the same one throughout. While Patrick commenced his process of abstraction by changing the principal narrative, Marie maintained the same narrative until she had developed a stylistic confidence. All of which is to suggest the relatively *inessential* (by which I mean *transposable*) quality of any one of these aesthetic components: whether they be iconographic, technical, structural or narrative. Each of these elements can be drawn on, adapted, or even dispensed with entirely in the service of artistic experimentation or stylistic change. None is more integral, or less interchangeable, than another. It is the relationships between them that are 'cultural', and it is in the personal navigation of these relationships that cultural principals are played out.

These superficial differences in Patrick and Marie's paintings are less important than the recognition of a more generalised process of abstraction taking place: a process which is linked in both cases to the exploration of personal confidence and authority in reproducing cultural materials in the cross-cultural contexts of acrylic art production. It is also a process

in which social relationships are inextricable from the specific forms that appear on canvas. In Figure 7.35, above, I identified the principal ordering template of Patrick's oeuvre and noted its visibility in his aesthetic process of transition. Strikingly, this structure is also manifest in Marie's process of transition. From the paintings she completed for Patrick in early 2004, through to her own formal experiments, this sense of a segmentation of the sides of the canvas and a central panel containing the narrative elements emerged. This structure was nowhere evident in her paintings prior to late 2003. In engaging with her husband's paintings, in the very practice of painting them herself, Marie absorbed his compositional template, which in turn emerged to structure her own experimentations. Note the formal relationship in the sequence below (7.36a-c), where Patrick's structure can be seen to drift across Marie's oeuvre.



Figure 7.36a. Patrick



7.36b. Marie paints Patrick



7.36c. Marie 476/04

While Marie does not utilise Patrick's iconography here in Figure 7.36c, in segmenting the borders of her composition, the structure employed is the same as in the other two paintings in the sequence. It suggests further that the social practice of painting together is a substantial determinant in the aesthetic pollination of constantly evolving 'styles' of Balgo art. It also suggests another socio-aesthetic layer to the process underpinning the development of Marie's new squared structure for the *Nakarra Nakarra* painting. Whilst it is tempting to infer that Marie was influenced by Kathleen Padoon's painting of the same dreaming, a chronological formal analysis of Marie's production in 2004 suggests that she was already beginning to segment the canvas as a result of painting with and for her

husband. Here style is neither simply developed nor inherited, but a dynamic interplay between multiple social influences.

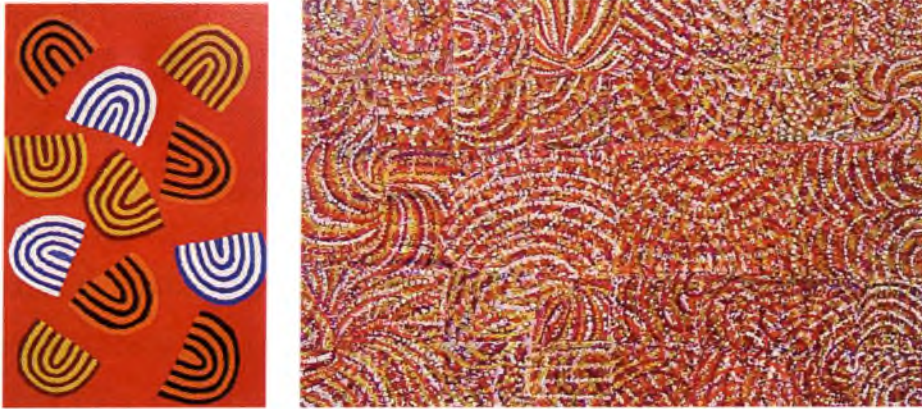


Figure 7.37 Patrick and Marie in late 2004

My analysis of Patrick and Marie's oeuvres during my fieldwork period finds them vastly removed, in late 2004 (Figure 7.37), from where I first encountered their paintings in early 2003. For both artists, these important stages, encompassed in the paintings depicted here (and discussed earlier), were clearly part of a broader process. Neither of them continued to paint exclusively in this fashion. Abstraction, as I define it here, is not a one-way process in Balgo art. Artists rarely simply reiterate a major event of abstraction; rather, elements of iconography or customary composition are reintroduced and incorporated back into a successful abstraction. There is an abiding tension between mark-making and story that pervades the production of Balgo art and this is evident in the paintings that followed for both Patrick and Marie. The very next painting Patrick completed after that at Figure 7.37 reverted back to the genre of composition he had been working through earlier in the year.¹⁷³ This time, however, the narrative did not remain *Ngatijirri* (Budgerigar), as it had been in paintings that resemble this previously, nor did it revert to *Warnayarra* (Rainbow Serpent). Rather, Patrick transposed his explorations onto the travels of the two men, the *Wati Kutjarra*, whose travels and associated narratives are among the broadest and most significant in the Western Desert pantheon.

¹⁷³ such as in #471/04

CONCLUSION

The processes of abstraction observed in contemporary desert art commonly discussed but rarely analysed in anthropological terms. This chapter has sought to both examine, and provide cultural interpretations for, the processes of abstraction in Balgo art through the prism of one artist, Marie Mudgedell, and the people who influenced her such as her mother, Mati, and husband, Patrick. Her use of abstraction suggests strongly that contemporary painting styles are not simply inherited or given, or transferred from other mediums; they are built up out of multiple relationships and influences and adapted according to the circumstances of an individual and the political, economic and personal vicissitudes of their daily life.

The example provided by Marie (and Patrick) also strikes at the heart of assumptions - in the art world and implicitly (through analytical absence) within anthropology - that the processes of abstraction currently proliferating in desert art are somehow indexical of diminishing cultural content. Such analyses focus on individually 'abstract' paintings, rather than on a body of work as the expression of a broader cultural *process* involving abstraction. Abstraction in one art work is mistaken for the process of art.

Marie Mudgedell's story provides an insight into that process of art in Balgo today. In her work, abstraction is not indexical of any separation between form and content, but the search for more meaningful contemporary relations between the two. In her work, abstraction is not a recession from the authority of the Tjukurrpa and its place in acrylic art, but the evidence of its enduring importance (and cultural tensions) for the next generations of desert painters. The art of Marie Mudgedell reminds us that paintings are not simple 'representations' of the Dreaming.

Abstraction is a part of the aesthetic toolkit desert artists use (and have always used) in making sense of their world. It follows that in contemporary Balgo art abstraction does not manifest a stasis or end point, but rather part of the dynamic complexity of an enduring

and transforming graphic system it reproduces itself in contexts of intercultural elicitation. Abstraction in Marie's art, and in Balgo art more broadly, is not just an expression of 'culture' or 'country' in vague or abstract terms, but is the specific visual strategy employed by artists in exploring the boundaries of their experience, cultural and otherwise. Abstraction is not an expression of some other realm – it is for many artists the terms on which the Dreaming is enacted, explored and reproduced. Acrylic painting, therefore, is not an expression of some Aboriginal 'culture' being reproduced in more integral ways elsewhere, but is an integral cultural practice requiring appropriate depth of analysis.

These case studies also demonstrate the need for interdependent art-historical and anthropological modes of description and frames of interpretation in approaching contemporary desert art. The material in this chapter argues strongly for the necessity of longitudinal studies of individual artists work, but also for latitudinal comparisons of the paintings by people with whom artists share the work of painting, or who may be influential in that artist's life. The former is a largely art-historical methodology, whereas the latter is the general social context anthropology is best equipped to describe. In the case of Marie and Patrick, neither approach would be capable of rendering either the formal transformations, or the cultural connotations, without the other.

Chapter Eight

The Social Life of Style: Kinship, Cooperation and the creation of Country

Designs can be seen as social forms moving between persons.

(Munn 1986: 57).

The principal concern of this thesis is to provide a description of contemporary Balgo painting practices and products, including novel styles and aesthetic abstractions, as 'cultural' phenomena. I have argued that the technical innovations of Balgo art are cultural insofar as they continue to encompass – in their affective qualities – enactments of the Tjukurrpa. The real story of Balgo art, however, is not how dots shimmer on a canvas, but how they move off it. So in this chapter I develop my argument further: these innovative styles of painting are not simply powerful representations of the highest Aboriginal value; they have become vectors of that value and a significant means by which it is reproduced in contemporary social life.

I have already sought to both examine, and provide cultural interpretations for, the processes of abstraction in Balgo art through the prism of artists such as Marie Mudgedell and Patrick Smith. These applied to both the forms that appeared on the canvas, and the identifiable socio-economic factors that influenced the emergence of those forms. A holistic anthropological description and interpretation of desert abstraction requires more than this though. For novel or innovative forms to be more than the aesthetic experimentations of individual artists pursuing individual gain, they must surely be shared, transmitted and *reproduced* through social practice or processes. It is here that Balgo 'styles', operating as objects of exchange *within* Balgo, demand better social analysis. To this end I seek to explore these innovative forms in comparison with arguably the definitive anthropological analysis of Western Desert social life: Fred Myers' *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* (1986). This chapter is an attempt to examine how the social creation

of Country outlined in Myers account, and the core dialectic of relatedness and differentiation that operates in social life, articulates with contemporary desert painting practices. It is through the prism of Country, the selves who paint it and the 'styles' in which it is objectified, that I develop a socio-cultural description and analysis of the innovative forms of Balgo art.

Style

In this thesis, I have offered descriptions and interpretations of how the diversity that appears on Balgo canvases is related to the various social, historical, economic and cross-cultural influences on daily life. I have demonstrated how specific 'styles' of painting – expressive, minimalist, abstract – worked in the market and how that fed back into what it was that people painted. When an artist pioneers a technical or aesthetic innovation, it is these techniques, built up into distinctive personal styles, rather than any story or cultural content, that are the markers of value in the art market. This localised sense of style is perhaps different from the art historical use of the term, where 'style' as a mode of formal description and categorization allows objects to be located in historical, social and geographic contexts. It also seems to diverge from the (admittedly varied) anthropological uses of the term (Kroeber, 1957; Forge 1973) as an index, manifest in material forms and social practices, of cultural identity and difference. My use of style, however, follows the way it is used by the producers of Balgo art to describe the *difference* and personal authority of what they put on the canvas. During my fieldwork two artists expressed this principal in interviews about painting:

When the old people paint, they paint and they sing. The young people sit with them and the old people tell them about their own story and they do their style (Philomena Baadjo, Balgo, 2003).

Sometimes young painters get a board; they take it home and paint it too quickly. They rush it. But not me. I take it home, and I take my time, you know. I do it carefully. I think about that style. I measure him, straighten him up. Then I start. I paint slowly, carefully. Telling that story right (Lloyd Shepherd, Balgo, 2003).

Philomena Baadjo was the chairperson of Warlayirti artists at the time, and Lloyd an emerging artist, and for both the English word 'style' is used as a marker of an individual's authority to paint in a certain way. This use of 'style' is shared by Balgo artists in ways that make it useful as a term of analytical and cross-cultural reference. Furthermore, for each of the artists above, 'style' is associated directly (if non-specifically) with *story*. In these combined ways, their use of the term draws closer to a more generic anthropological conception of 'style as the product of a specific way of conveying meaning, expressing ideas, or marking status' (Morphy 2005:209).

Balgo is famous for the stylistic diversity of its art. This thesis can be read, in one sense, as an attempt to render the stylistic diversity of Balgo art meaningful from an Aboriginal perspective, but also from an anthropological perspective as an overarching cultural style in and of itself. This is a complicated endeavour in a place where the population does not identify clearly with one another. There are at least eight different language groups who have come to populate Balgo over the decades. Whilst there is now a nominal acceptance of a shared Kutjungka identity rooted in shared histories, marriages and contemporary living arrangements, people are equally, if not more, concerned with articulating their difference from other families or groups in Balgo. It follows then that these processes of differentiation are also manifest in the material production of the Kutjungka people. Artists in Balgo are proud of, and actively develop, their own unique style of painting. Whilst these same processes occur in other regions, there is something intimately localised in the association between a Balgo painter and their style. Balgo artists are no more innovative or creative than others, it is simply that the social milieu of Balgo encourages artists to do more than simply paint their own unique stories; it seems to encourage processes whereby those stories find their articulation in unique form. This was something observed by Poirier in the earliest days of the art movement, where she noted 'each person having his or her own creative style' (2005: 49). This observation has been reiterated endlessly by other commentators ever since: 'Individual painters take pride in their own personal styles and in the dreamings they are entitled to paint...' (Ryan 1989: 59).

Long before acrylic paint and canvas entered the desert, Ronald Berndt had detected a similar aesthetic dynamism around Balgo from the evidence of rock art and crayon drawings:

(M)inor variation in art-style does occur throughout that (desert) region, but these are relatively insignificant until one reaches the northern end of the Canning Stock Route (in the vicinity of Balgo Hills, Billaluna [sic] and Sturt Creek). Here, although the basic Central Australian designs are present and in fact dominant, meandering motifs are much more noticeable, with a wide range of angular and semi-angular geometric designs. (Berndt 1958: 40-41)

This cultural geography of Balgo has been an important yardstick for the ways in which the diversity of Balgo art is interpreted. In one of the first exhibitions of Balgo art, coordinator Michael Rae noted that 'probably the greatest strength of Balgo art is its diversity, and this is a reflection of geographic, cultural and gender mix,' (Rae, 1990). The diversity of Balgo art is commonly attributed to the historical circumstances in which many different linguistic groups came to live, and make art, together in Balgo (Stanton 1989, Watson 2007:219). As stylistic variation was a characteristic that both preceded and outlasted market interventions, the assumption that such variety is attributable to some deeper/prior cultural demarcations would seem a reasonable one to make. There is, however, an ambient essentialism and implied cultural stasis in such positions which does not gel with the way in which style operates in Balgo today. My experience of Balgo art in the early 21st century was not of differentiation emerging out of abstract or historical categories of identification. The daily adaptations, 'thefts' and transmissions of style seemed rather more *emergent*, arising out of localised family or 'camp' politics and discrete economic considerations of the day. Dussart has argued that a similar process is objectified in acrylic painting at Yuendumu for the Warlpiri:

The Dreaming canvases, however generically "Warlpiri" they have become... manifests a network of connectedness that reaffirms a model privileging the expressions of social identity of individuals and individuals' residential camps over those of settlements or "Aboriginals" (2000: 209).

Taylor (1996) has shown how variations in style are associated with particular settlements in Western Arnhem Land. In Balgo, where no such discrete outstation identities exist to foster geographically localised variants, divergent styles have emerged between people who have spent the last 50 years living within a stone's throw of each other. Although most descriptions of Balgo art assert that the stylistic diversity of the paintings is attributable to differences in language groups, the efflorescence of styles which characterise the Balgo aesthetic are invariably born of these contemporary social contexts, of family and camp dynamics, and must be understood through them.

Stylistic Transmission

In Balgo, and in desert art and life more broadly, people have always authorised and legitimated the Country they paint by stating that it is their parents or grand-parent's Country. The narratives expressed within this general model of descent demonstrate enormous personal variation; yet there remains in desert culture the necessity of validating through whom you trace the right to paint that Country. During my fieldwork I recorded approximately 1000 painting stories with artists, and in the vast majority of cases they would begin by telling me this was their "mothers country" "father's country", or "grandfather's country"; thereby conforming to the discursive norms of patrilineal or matrilineal inheritance.

This has manifested visually in Balgo art by people following their parents in painting the same basic composition or design for any given Country. This is shown clearly in the Njamme family (Figure 8.1). Despite being stalwarts of the painting movement since its inception, the Njammes have never had a family member develop a particularly unique or innovative style. As such, they each paint their own personalised versions of the basic design for Piparr – which comprises at its basic constituent level 3-4 concentric circles. This basic figure-type becomes a template around which family members can experiment, developing their own style and following their own personal aesthetic, even turning the circles, in Monica Njamme's case (second from right, bottom), into squares.

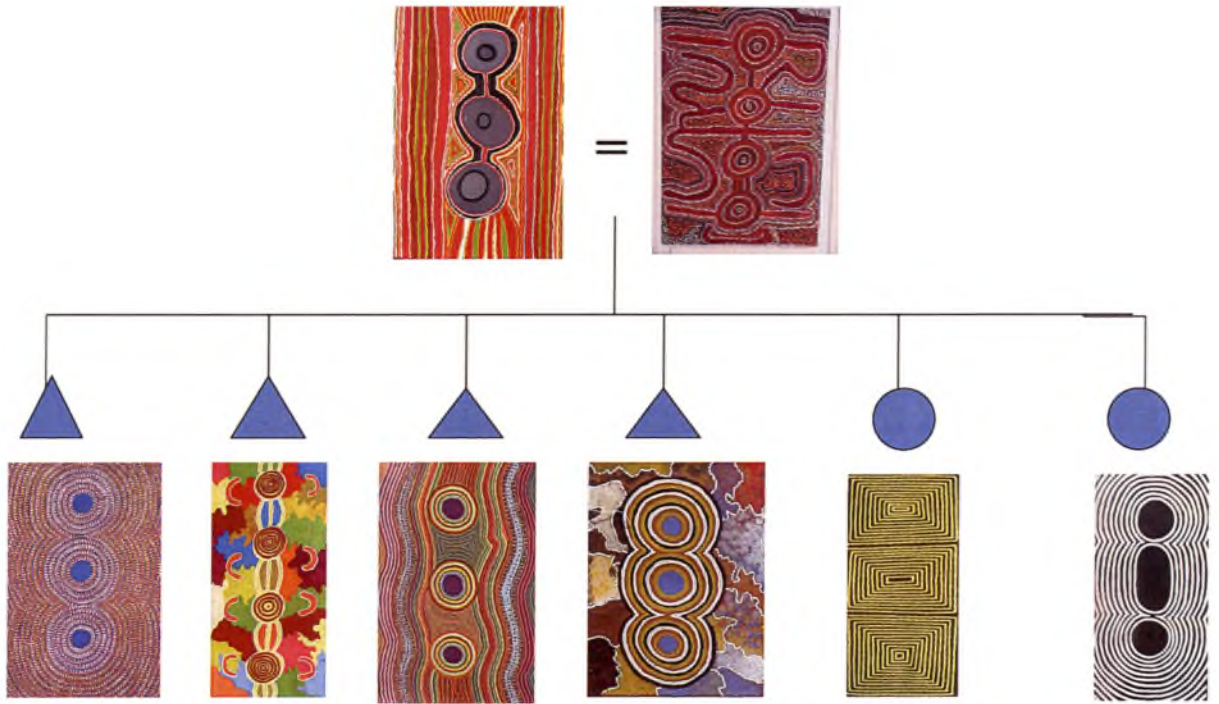


Figure 8.1. Njamme Family Style Tree

The Njammes might be said to have a family composition, more so than a family 'style'. This is further developed by the fact that Kathryn Njamme (far right) has used that same basic composition to paint other sites and other Tjukurrpa (*Wati Kutjarra & Nakarra Nakarra*) in the family estate. That line of circles, therefore, is no longer simply 'Piparr' (though it of course still functions in that specific role), it has become transformed through the acrylic economy into the principal index of the Country they have the right to paint. This is an important insight for the broader arguments about style being developed here. The Njamme family continue to use, to reproduce and transmit, the classic iconographic depictions of their Country. This was not the norm in Balgo during my fieldwork, when people were more likely to be reproducing the kinds of aesthetic innovations and abstractions described already in this thesis. These novel forms, like the classical iconographic forms that preceded them, have become a complex form of social currency. Senior artists, having created the possibility of exchanging their Country with the market for the highest possible value through their dotting techniques, have also been transmitting these innovations to *walyja* (kin). Techniques, palettes and compositions are passed between family members, parents and children, as a kind of resource or property.



Figure 8.2a & b. Lucy Yukenbarri

Figure 8.3. Christine Yukenbarri

The most prominent movement of style in recent times has been Lucy Yukenbarri's (Figure 8.2) transmission to her daughter Christine (Figure 8.3). As outlined previously, Lucy's pioneering of the *kinti-kinti* technique of (close or overlapped) dotting has been definitive in the stylistic developments in Balgo art – an innovation through which many other artists' innovations can be traced. It was, like all Balgo 'styles', an artistic technique developed over several years of acrylic experimentations. Lucy's first paintings, like almost all Balgo artists, employed the familiar representational techniques laid down by the elder men. In fact the very first painting attributed to her (834/87) was only authorised by her and painted by her son.¹⁷⁵ Lucy's first solo paintings followed two years later, in 1989, and were anything but distinctive. With the neat rows of banded dotting around central icons (Figure 8.4a) and occasional footprints (405/89) or figuration (488/89), her paintings were so similar to the prevailing milieu in composition, technique and palette that there is no sense of artistic individuation at this stage.

¹⁷⁵ The certificate for this work states "The painting shows the country of Lucy Yugenbarri [sic], it is her dreaming, told to and painted by her son Richard. It depicts a system of rock holes, soaks and 'living water' (springs) in sandhill country."



Figure 8.4a Lucy 337/89

8.4b. Lucy 230/90

8.4c Lucy 3/91

In 1990, in what would have been her tenth catalogued painting (Figure 8.4b), Lucy completely abandoned the rows of concentric dotting that had hitherto defined her style. She introduced fields or blocks of a certain colour of dotting where previously a segment of a painting would be made up of several concentric lines of different colours. Lucy gave each colour its own field, and abandoned the linear. Now lines on her canvases demarcated separate space, as opposed to filling those spaces. There is a discernable shift towards more clumpy dotting in this painting (230/90), but the dots themselves remain separate. This tension of the dots merging ever closer into themselves is preserved in the handful of paintings that follow, and the emergence of the actual *kinti-kinti* style, is only perhaps discernable at the start of 1991 (Figure 8.4c).



Figure 8.5a Lucy in 1991 (475/91)

8.5b Lucy in 1991 (562/91)

The dynamic between the linear and the 'field' (or clumps) of colour was a defining tension in Lucy's aesthetic trajectory throughout 1991 (Figures 8.5a & b), although it became

increasingly subsumed in the emergence of what would become the template for her signature works (638/91, 60/92, 204/92, 269/92). Yet despite obviously hitting on an effective technique, Lucy didn't immediately settle into reproducing it. The splodgy dotting of 303/92¹⁷⁶ suggests the artist pushing the dot beyond *kinti-kinti* into a more expressionistic hand movement. This wasn't against the flow of Lucy's processes of abstraction, but it was an experiment from which she clearly recoiled, as it was never again repeated. Her next painting (418/92) returned to the increasingly familiar terrain of the *kinti-kinti* Country, from which she never again deviated.



Figure 8.6. Lucy Yukenbarri, *kinti-kinti* variations, 1990s.

Lucy continued to experiment throughout the next decade of her career, elaborating and embellishing her compositions (Figure 8.6) around a central black rock hole, though always producing them through the signature *kinti-kinti* style she had innovated. It was this 'style', a decade after it first emerged, that was transmitted to her daughter Christine.

I paint from my mother's Country... I was watching my mother painting. I always sit side with her and watch her painting. She teach me how to paint like her.... when my mother was alive, she always asked me to sit down and watch her painting you know. She asked me to get some water and some colours, and I'd get a blanket and sit around with her. And I always ask her, "Which country you

¹⁷⁶ The B&W photocopy reproduction of this image is so poor it has not been reproduced here.

doing?" I was watching my mother, how she was doing, put some waterhole, one waterhole, and different colours, side. That's what I started doing now... I'm still painting like my mother; she passed it on to me before she died on 2003.¹⁷⁷

Christine learned to paint by working directly with her mother, in the kind of aesthetic 'apprenticeship' Taylor (1996) identified among the Kuninjku. In this way she not only became familiar with the technique, palette, and compositions that her mother produced, she also learnt directly how these elements were put together successfully in the process of painting. Her adaptations of her mother's core aesthetic components are highly valued in the art market, and increasingly considered to be at least the equal of her mother's.

Eubena Nampitjin has pioneered arguably the most successful personal style in Balgo history, a warm palette of reds, yellows and oranges applied to flowering structures in a textured, expressive style of dotting. Within the market, her paintings have for some years been valued far higher than other living Balgo artists. Her daughters and granddaughters have painted her stories, and her basic compositions, for many years, without ever looking much like Eubena's work. In 2005, however, this changed when Stella (daughter) and Genevieve (granddaughter) began executing paintings of remarkable family resemblance (Figures 8.7a-c).



Figure 8.7a. Eubena



8.7b Stella (daughter)



8.7c Genevieve (grand-daughter)

¹⁷⁷ Transcript from interview recorded by the National Association for the Visual Arts Ltd "Our Art, Our Art Industry" project. <http://www.youtube.com/user/NAVAartistcareer#p/u/6/GWWMVj6sAek> accessed 14/10/2010.

These paintings show family members no longer simply painting the stories or designs that they inherit, but the palette, composition and techniques. After years of watching Eubena paint, learning her rhythmic pushing of the paint brush, her family members were no longer simply painting her Country, but painting it in the precise technical style she had pioneered. The comparison of dotting technique – of pushing paint into florets of colour – between grand-daughter (Figure 8.8b) and grandmother (Figure 8.8a) shows this phenomenon clearly. Stylistic transmission in Balgo is rarely as close as these two examples from the Yukenbarri family and Eubena’s kin. In some cases, an artist’s style – in all its constituent elements of technique, palette and composition – is reproduced by kin. But this is not common; most often kin only reproduce signature aspects of that style. Technique is the hardest aspect for people to learn or mimic, so most commonly it is through palette and composition that an artist reproduces a family ‘style’.



Figure 8.8a Eubena technique



Figure 8.8b Genevieve technique

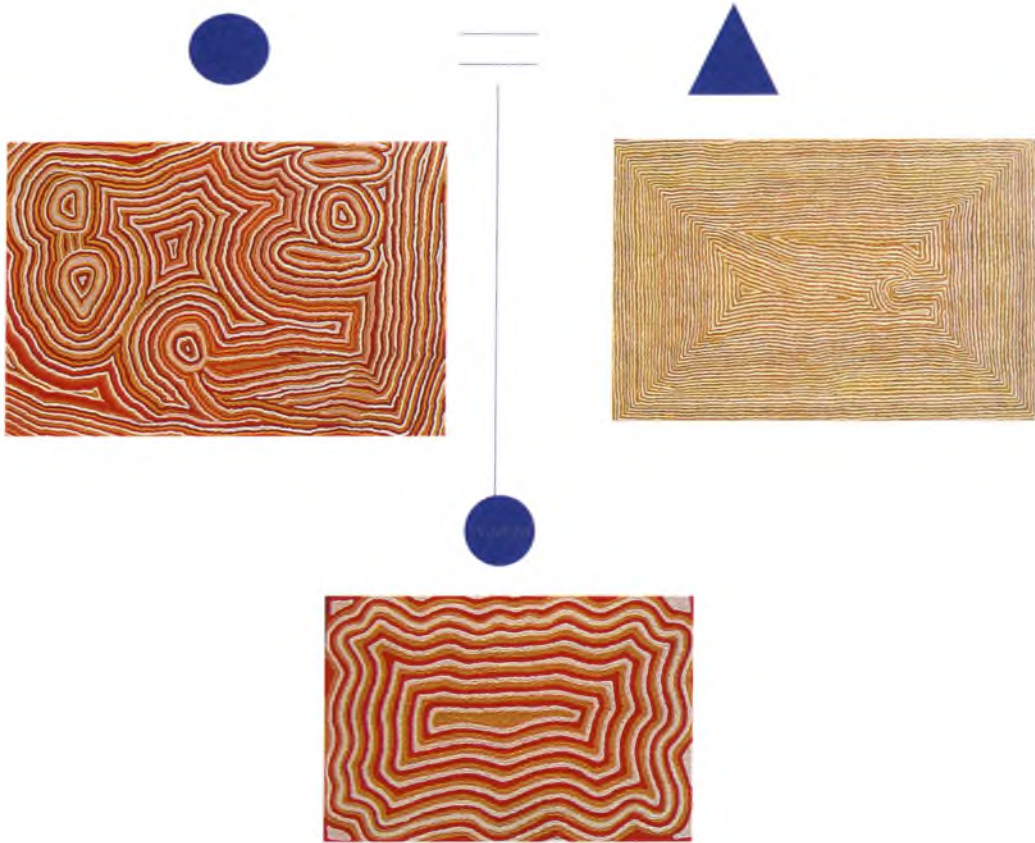


Figure 8.9. Winifred Nanala stylistic influences.

Sometimes that style is not simply the product of one artist, but a combination of influences from within a family group. Winifred Nanala is an artist who has experimented with several styles of painting over her career, and what is interesting is watching the way she combines and recombines aspects of other family member's styles to create her own. In Figure 8.9, for example, she has painted her father's (Tjumbo Tjapanangka) concentric rectangular composition, but in her mother's (Ningie Nanala) bolder palette. Winifred has also endeavoured to recreate her mother's 'liquid' dotting style; but her use of a smaller brush and less viscous paint make for an invariably neater, though still recognisable, version of the same. While Winifred's painting lacks the optical shimmer generated by her parents technical mastery, it nevertheless embodies those transmissible aspects of Balgo 'style'.

In other families, different children will take different aspects of the one parent's style and use that as the basis for their own stylistic development. During my fieldwork Elizabeth Nyumi had developed an extremely effective painting style based on large compositions and fine, stick-worked dotting. As this overall style became increasingly valuable in the market, Nyumi's daughters began adapting it into their own painting practices. As the utterly idiosyncratic overlocker rhythm of their mother's technique is almost impossible to replicate or mimic, the daughters have harnessed other aspects of her style (Figure 8.10). None of these paintings could be mistaken for Nyumi's work (as say, Stella's painting could have been for Eubena's); yet if you were able to digitally combine these three paintings by Nyumi's daughters into one work, it would look remarkably similar to the paintings produced by their mother. And it is here that the operation of 'style', as a social marker and Aboriginal category of thought, is seen more clearly.

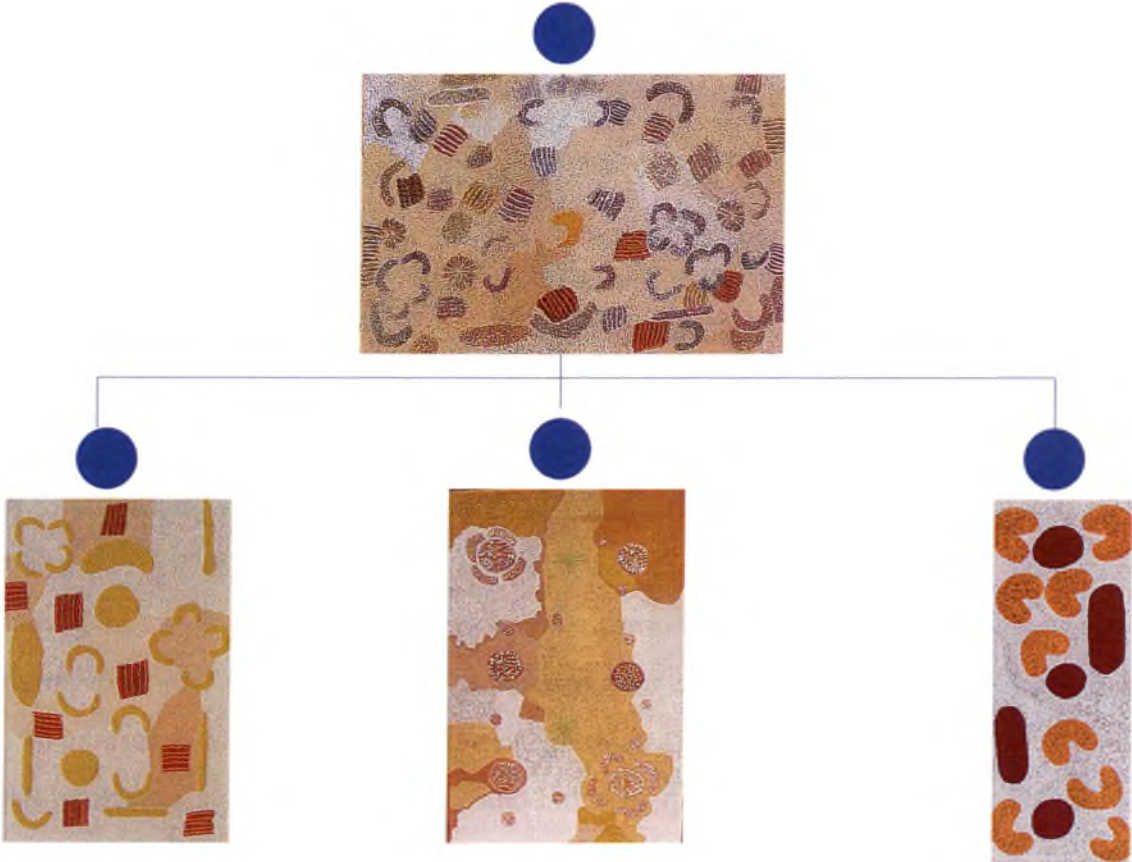


Figure 8.10. Nyumi Family Style Tree

None of the daughters actually reproduces their mother's entire 'style', in an artistic sense, but in adapting aspects of her paintings, each has, in Aboriginal terms, appropriately reproduced their mother's Country. Interestingly, each artist has adapted a different aspect of their mother's painting style - whether it be composition, palette, or fine stick-worked dotting technique - which suggests the daughters are involved in simultaneous processes of identification (with their mother) and also differentiation from each other. From this perspective the practices of painting - the aesthetic and economic negotiations over acrylic Country - seem to evoke the dialectic of relatedness and differentiation that Myers (1986: 159-179) identified as the principal tension of desert social life. The Yukenbarri family provides a more expansive example upon which to explore this resonance. As noted above, the passage of style between Lucy Yukenbarri and her daughter, Christine, is a key example of the kinds of aesthetic apprenticeships that underpin stylistic transmission across generations. Yet this transmission is by no means a standardised process between parents and children.

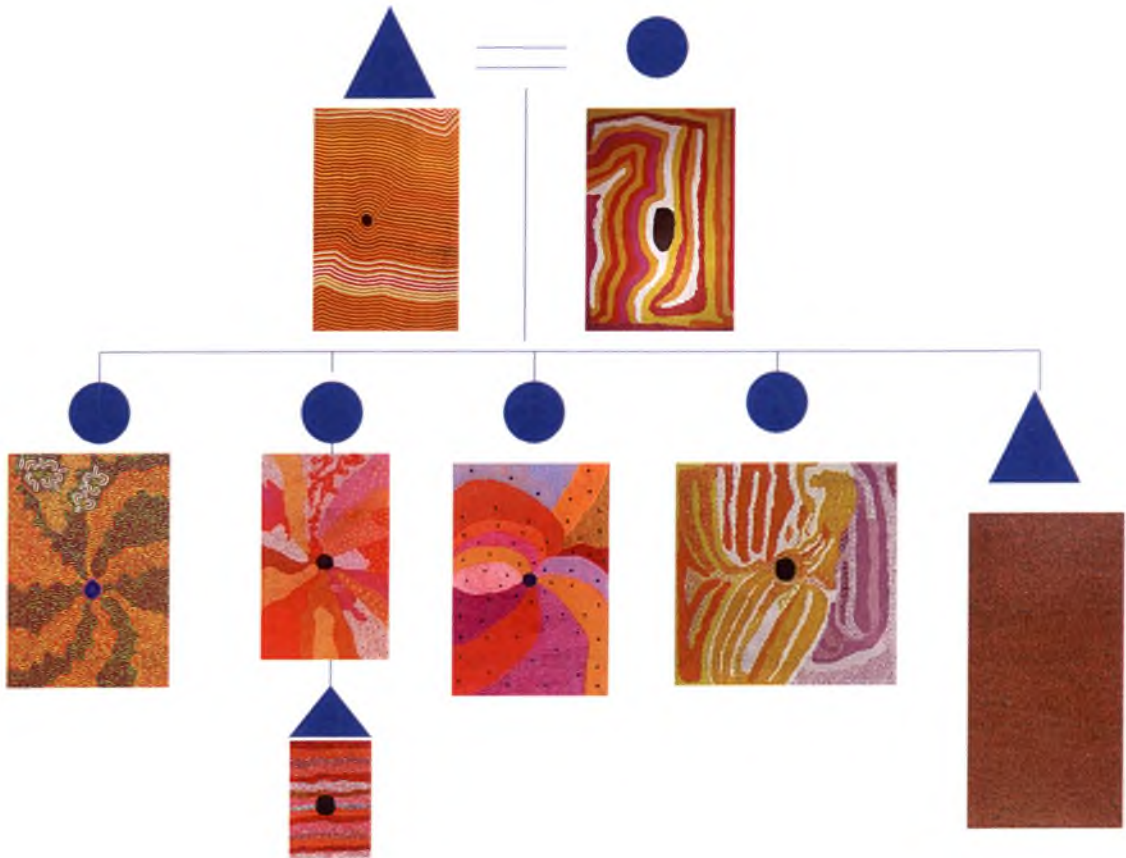


Figure 8.11. Yukenbarri Family Style Tree

Lucy's son, Richard (far right, Figure 8.11) doesn't paint like her at all; yet as with the Nyumi family, each of Lucy's daughters can be seen to have taken on aspects of her 'style' in different ways (Figure 8.11). From the evidence of what her daughters paint (and all of them now paint their mothers place *Winpurpula*) Lucy's Country is conceived as being correctly rendered by the basic composition of a central circle with surrounding fields of *kinti-kinti* dotting. As, Christine described it: 'one waterhole, and different colours, side.' However, this broader realisation of the family style only really eventuated in 2004, after Lucy had died. Prior to 2004, each daughter had followed their own unique aesthetic path. Lucy's three youngest daughters - Carmel, Cathy and Christine - did not begin painting their own canvases until 1999, and their first efforts (Figure 8.12) were notable for a couple of factors. Firstly, none of them painted their mother's country, and none of them utilised their mother's style; they each painted *their* Country around Balgo, rock holes and bush foods that they knew well because they had grown up there. These were things they felt they had the authority to paint.

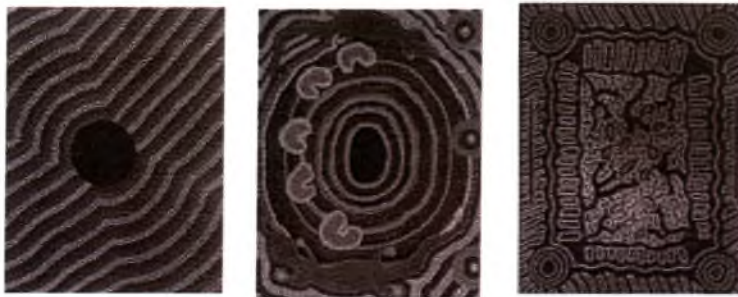


Figure 8.12a-c. Carmel (l), Cathy (c) and Christine Yukenbarri (r) first paintings, 1999.

Even Christine, who had learnt to paint at her mother's side, produced a more prosaic (or safe) iconographic depiction of bush foods around Balgo (Figure 8.12c) in her first solo painting. This, her first painting, was also the only painting she did in this style and every work since has been an adaption of her mother's technique, palette and composition. Christine moved quickly into painting her mother's country because she knew *how* to. For the other sisters it was a different process. Over the years between 2000 and 2004 each daughter experimented with painting different country, different stories, and in different styles. Both Carmel and Cathy experimented with aspects of their father's (Helicopter) linear style, as can be clearly seen in Figures 8.13a-b. Carmel, like Winifred Nanala, has created a hybrid style by combining her father's linear composition and her mother's fields

of dotting. She has, as illustrated in Figure 8.11, even passed this adaptation onto her own son.



Figure 8.13a & b. Carmel (l) & Cathy (r) trialling Helicopter’s linear style.

The eldest sister, Imelda, has never experimented with Helicopter’s style, because he was not her biological father.¹⁷⁸ Imelda, like her brother Richard, was born to a previous husband and is considerably older than Cathy, Carmel and Christine. She was born in the bush when Lucy was a young woman, before her mother’s family moved to Balgo. So her first paintings in 2000 were not of Balgo, but of her grand-father’s Country, and her mother’s Country.¹⁷⁹ As evident in figure 8.14, however, she did not immediately gravitate to her mother’s more abstract style, but continued to include iconographic elements in her paintings.



Figure 8.14a & b. Imelda Guguman, 2000 (l) and 2003 (r)

Figure 8.15. Richard, *Kalyuyankgu*

¹⁷⁸ Biological relatedness is by no means a definitive marker of someone’s capacity to share style. People in Balgo can and do readily take style from adoptive parents, or step parents. However in Imelda’s case the fact that she had a different father provided her with a salient point of personal, and artistic, differentiation, from her sisters.

¹⁷⁹ Imelda actually completed two paintings previously, one in 1989, and one 1990. However, given the decade between these first paintings and the commencement of a regular painting practice in 2000, I have considered it more illuminating to frame her beginnings alongside her younger sisters here - in terms of the emerging family practice.

Just as Imelda paints with a conscious differentiation from her sisters, her brother Richard Yukenbarri does the same. Richard and Imelda share the same father, 'Guguman'. So Richard does not paint like Helicopter, nor has he adapted his mother's style in any way. He paints his biological father's Country, *Kalyuyankgu*, and he paints it in an entirely different way to the rest of his Balgo family. This is because Richard, as will be explored later in the chapter, does not live in Balgo. While each of the daughters trialled different aspects of their mother's style in a search for their own, it was only Christine who was able to reproduce it as a regular and recognisable object of exchange in the years between 1999 and 2003. This changed during my fieldwork (which commenced on the day of Lucy's death), resulting in a broader dissemination of the family 'style' illustrated in Figure 8.11, for reasons to be explored below.

It is worth summarising the point of this example, and the contribution it makes to the developing argument about the transmission of style. Through the choices these children have made on the canvas, we can identify the different social, historical and personal factors that contribute to (or inhibit) the transmission of certain visual forms within one family group. In these choices we find different configurations of autonomy and relatedness, different 'configurations of belonging' as Poirier (2005) has put it, played out in the stylistic identification and differentiation among *walyja*.

Walytja, 'Countrymen' and Affinal Transmission

The transmission of style in Balgo – as articulated by Balgo people - tends to play out along lines of descent, passing most commonly between parents and children, and other close kin or 'Countrymen'. Yet style does not simply pass from parents to children, or grandparents to grandchildren, like an aesthetic inheritance. It is something that develops through innovation, and often through collaborations between husbands and wives. This affinal aspect of stylistic transmission, while rarely commented upon by artists who tend

to focus discursively on consanguineal inheritance, is essential to understanding the operations of Balgo art.

It is an overwhelming fact of Balgo art that the most successful 'artists' have almost always been those for whom painting was a regular, shared domestic activity with a partner who also paints. The Balgo painting records demonstrate clearly that people who have a partner who paints are also likely to paint, and to paint regularly. It follows that people for whom painting is a regular practice also tend to get better at it, to improve their technical and compositional skills. Balgo has an extensive, largely unrecorded, and ongoing history of husbands and wives painting together; collaborations that have led to the development of significant changes in individual style (as evident in Chapter 7). Of the major dotting styles associated with individual artists today, the overwhelming majority were developed, at least in their early stages, by husbands and wives working together. Sometimes this involved artists painting individual works in each other's company, but just as frequently, the artistic record seems to suggest collaboration; painting the same country on the same canvas. Often these collaborations are articulated through culturally sanctioned gender protocols, whereby the wife claims that her husband taught her to paint or gave her that style. There are, however, other cases where men have helped their wives for years without ever taking credit for the paintings produced.



Figure 8.16. Tommy Skeen (left) and Millie Skeen (right) comparison.

It also follows that as the very practice of painting is underpinned by this husband and wife dynamic, the visual forms of the paintings produced are likewise going to manifest that relationship. When one looks at the paintings of Tommy and Millie Skeen (Figure 8.16), Bai Bai and Sunfly, Muntja and Johnny Mosquito, Susie Bootja Bootja and Mick Gill, or Eubena and Wimmitji (Figure 8.30), it is – at different times in their career – difficult to tell who has painted what. Despite the lack of formal attribution, the artistic records at Balgo show clearly that in each relationship there were times when both artists were working on the same canvas. At times a husband’s painting looks noticeably like his wife’s style, and vice versa.



Figure 8.17a & b. Lucy Yukenbarri (left) and Helicopter (right)

Among the most famous of all such painting partnerships is that between Lucy Yukenbarri and Helicopter Tjungurrayi. Both have developed singular styles (Figure 8.17) that have developed great exchange value; both within the art market and within Balgo. Lucy is widely recognised, both within Balgo and without, as having pioneered the *kinti-kinti* style of dotting. But such an attribution is in part an obfuscation of Lucy’s own influences and practices. She did not just independently merge the dots one day, but rather that technique occurred during a period when Lucy was collaborating with her husband. Helicopter did not paint under his own name until 1995. Before then, he worked on his wife’s canvases, and his hand can (retrospectively) be identified in a great many of the works Lucy produced between 1990 and 1995. Both artists use the *kinti-kinti* style of close

dotting in these canvases, but Helicopter (as his later paintings reveal), turned that technique to a fine linear aesthetic whereas Lucy favoured the clumpier fields of dotting.



Figure 8.18a-c. Lucy and Helicopter collaborations 1990 (left), 1993 (middle) and 1995 (right)

In the paintings at Figure 8.18 (all attributed to Lucy) it is possible to identify the two different approaches to *kinti-kinti* co-existing on each collaborative canvas. In the painting from 1995, the year that Helicopter began painting under his own name, the canvas (Figure 18.18c, right) is neatly divided into Lucy's style (left half) and Helicopter's (right half). When the two stopped collaborating on the same canvases, they both took the basic central black 'rockhole' composition and *kinti-kinti* technique and pursued their own artistic trajectories; whereas Lucy went on to create ever more subtle colour fields, Helicopter distilled their shared practice into a more classical, perhaps generically *masculine*, circle-line/site-path signature (Figure 8.18b).¹⁸⁰ This simple but widely celebrated style can be seen as a disentanglement or *differentiation* of his own practice from Lucy's and a renegotiation of his personal authority to paint.

Helicopter and Lucy's 'late' styles are clear expressions of differentiation, but they also, simultaneously, express a long term intimate artistic relationship. What this example illuminates, reflecting back upon the Yukenbarri family style tree (Figure 8.11), is a broader principle in Balgo art: that the styles transmitted down through generations, framed locally as inheritance of Country from mother or father, are crystallisations of dialogical processes

¹⁸⁰ In the desert graphic system, Munn suggests men associate circular camp form with the female, and the linear path with the male (1986: 166). Whilst Helicopter's work at 8.17b could therefore be seen as a perfectly gender-neutral artwork, my sense is that the *compulsive linearity* of his solo works, anchored around that single circle, was a process of gendered differentiation from the collaborative works he made with Lucy.

and familial dynamics. Momentarily fixed as a cultural object that can be transmitted – these styles are actually far more fluid expressions of the relatedness and differentiation played out between other family members over time.

Is important to point out that although they no longer worked on the same canvases much after 1995, Helicopter and Lucy continued to work together for the rest of their married life. The collaborative split was only a division of social labour into separate canvases: it was not a division of that labour itself, as the couple continued to *paint together*, side by side, ever after. At this elementary level of kinship, style emerges between people engaged in economic pursuits and social practice. As evident from the case of Marie Mudgetell in Chapter 7, a clear driver of these aesthetic decisions is a labour strategy. Balgo artists take a keen interest in which of their paintings have sold, which have been sent to exhibition, and which have been hanging idle and unsold on the racks for months or years. If one partner's paintings are selling more than the other, couples will often invest their cooperative labour into the more successfully painted Country. Alternatively, the less successful partner will gradually experiment with and absorb aspects of their partner's painted Country into their own.

The case of Theresa Nowee and Morris Reid is a telling example here. In 2003, Morris was producing some new works that were well received by the arts coordinators and were selling quickly (Figure 8.19b). Morris was consequently receiving bigger canvases from the art centre, which sell for higher prices. Theresa was still struggling to develop a viable style out of her parental and sisterly influences (Figure 8.19a), and she only ever received small canvases that would sell for \$100 - \$200. Despite considerable effort and commitment from her, even these small paintings were not selling well. Adding to her frustration, her newly successful husband was distracted by other priorities, and therefore not working on the large canvases he was being given. In June 2003, when Morris had left the community for a few days, Theresa told me that she was going to paint his big canvas instead. I was initially concerned that what would come back to the art centre would be a very large version of the unsaleable paintings Theresa had been producing. What Theresa produced, to everyone's surprise, was a replica of the last painting Morris did (Figure 8.19c).



Figure 8.19a
Theresa Nowee

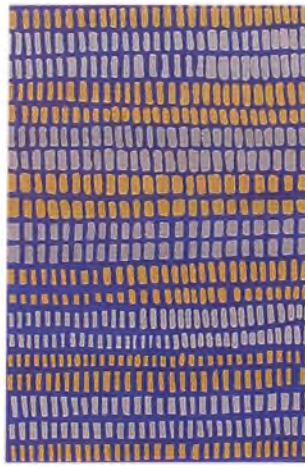


Figure 8.19b.
Morris Reid



Figure 8.19c
Theresa painting
Morris' canvas in
Morris' style



8.19d Theresa's new
style post painting
Morris' canvas

It was, in Theresa's reckoning, culturally coherent and economically rational that she would complete the domestic labour left unfinished by her husband (in his style) to ensure that they, as an economically co-operative unit, could maximise their income. What's more, following this watershed, Theresa began absorbing aspects of her husband's compositions into her own paintings to affect a significant stylistic shift (Figure 8.19d). This same process was manifest in the study of Marie Mudge dell in chapter 7, and is manifest in a similar example of spousal stylistic drift from Theresa's sister, Geraldine, and her husband Lloyd. When I arrived in Balgo in 2003, Geraldine and Lloyd were painting in different visual styles. Geraldine had successfully adapted her father's concentric square motif into a more abstract and commercially successful style (Figure 8.20b) than she had previously produced (Figure 8.20a).



Figures 8.20 a & b. Geraldine Nowee changing square style

Her husband, Lloyd, originally from Warakurna, painted his Country in a style notably different to anyone else in Balgo (Figure 8.21a). Lloyd’s paintings were always the same story, a depiction of a cave in a hill (the central circles) where an ancestral event of great significance happened. The hill is located in the Country of Lloyd’s father and grandfather, near the present-day community of Warakurna. These paintings fulfilled multiple purposes for Lloyd. He was a proud artist, and enjoyed the practice of painting. But as the only man from Warakurna in the community, he was unavoidably a more marginal figure in Balgo social life and frequently expressed his ‘homesick’ longings to me. He was a long way from home, and painting his Country made him happy. It also made him *money*, and without fail, every time we discussed his paintings, Lloyd would assert that he was painting in order to save enough money to buy a car and go home to visit his family, friends and country. He was painting Warakurna in order to go back there. Lloyd’s painting sold relatively well, and he persisted with this style (8.21a) unchanged throughout 2003-2004. Lloyd’s aesthetic did not change or develop during my fieldwork, and his prices hit a market plateau as did demand for his work. But this was his Warakurna style, he was proud of it, and he stuck with it. It was how he expressed his authority and difference within Balgo.

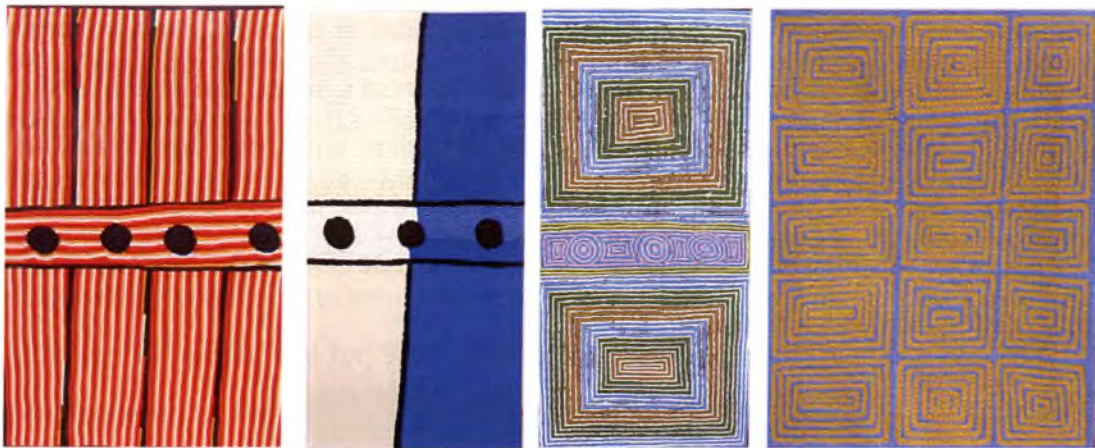


Figure 8.21a-d Lloyd Shepherd 8.21b 8.21c 8.21d

Over time, however, as Lloyd came to spend year after year in Balgo without returning home, it is clear that different aspects of his wife’s painted Country were seeping into his own. In figure 8.21b, Lloyd’s Warakurna composition is infused with Geraldine’s palette; in 8.21c, his composition is merged with hers; and 8.21d shows a complete appropriation of his wife’s style (see 8.20b). Painting styles in Balgo emerge in dialogue between husbands

and wives, but they are also transmitted as objects of exchange in domestic painting relationships. Geraldine's Country, for all intents and purposes, had become a resource for Lloyd to exploit and an objectification of his own identification with the affinal kin who dominated his social life in Balgo. The painting documentation for these blue paintings tells us that, as far as the artist is concerned, these are still the same story as that being previously, still paintings of that cave near Warakurna. Yet Lloyd is effectively painting his own Country in his father-in-law's style, mediated through the blue palette of his wife's personal painting aesthetic. As ever in the desert, discourse accommodates the necessary dynamism of practice; although discursively paintings of Warakurna, Lloyd's later paintings (8.21b-d) were in practice an objectification of his life in Balgo as much of his Country around Warakurna.

a person's 'one countrymen' are those with whom he regularly camps.... The concept is egocentric, with each person's set being unique to him.... These are people with whom a fundamental identity is held to exist. (Myers 2000: 85)

Myers analysis of social processes of identification and objectification in desert life invite us to move beyond the discourse of inheritance that dominates the creation of 'Country' in acrylic art. It is possible to read Lloyd's blue paintings, and indeed the broader analysis of affinity and stylistic transmission in Balgo art practice, through the prism of Myer's equation that "One's Country is a projection – in a sense- of one's movements and social relations, of kinship, converted to identity with place." (Myers 2000: 95).

Painting in other people's Country

The example of Lloyd Shepherd, and the broader influence of affinity on painting style in Balgo, raises the notion that painting Country is as much, if not more, about *where* you paint, and *who* you paint with, as what you paint. A fact that struck me during fieldwork was that people visiting from other communities (Lajamanu, Kiwirrkura, Kintore etc) either to visit kin, participate in funerals or ceremonies, would often paint with, or in the style of, the artists with whom they camped in Balgo. Furthermore, as I became increasingly aware after I left Balgo, people from Balgo often painted quite differently

when they went to live somewhere else for a period. Every now and again, a painting by a Balgo painter comes up for auction as a Papunya Tula-provenance work, meaning they have painted the work whilst staying in communities, such as Kintore and Kiwirrkura, serviced by Papunya Tula. Almost invariably, these works are aesthetically different from the works they paint in Balgo.



Figure 8.22a. Tjampo painting at Papunya, 2002



Figure 8.22b Tjampo, Balgo work 2002.

Tjampo Tjapanangka is one such artist. In 2002, he visited family in Kiwirrkura and produced a painting markedly different from what he paints at Balgo. Despite being among the most senior and authoritative painters in the Western Desert, he nevertheless adapted his style to that of the Papunya Tula artists he camped with (Figure 8.22a). In this comparison, Tjampo has painted his signature concentric composition, but introduced the site-path cluster that had long ago receded from his Balgo paintings. This change is no doubt partly about access to different coloured paints, and perhaps partly about being conscious of the kind of 'style' that Papunya Tula readily sells. But it is also, in the context of the arguments about style being developed in this chapter, more than that.

In 2006, Napangarti, who used to live in Balgo, rang me up for a chat. She had left Balgo and had remarried in Kintore, where she told me she was painting. I asked her if she was painting in her Balgo style, and she replied "Different, from Kintore, my (classificatory) Father's style. I'm helping him." People, whether visiting Balgo or travelling to other communities from Balgo, tend to paint in the style of the people with whom they camp. Just as visitors to your country would have once shared in your resources when there, visitors to Aboriginal communities share in the resources of the people with whom they camp: and today acrylic Country is one of the principal resources people have to share. Observations recorded by John Stanton on his experience at Balgo in the late 1980s and

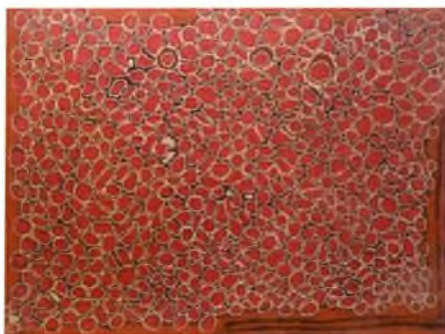
early 1990s suggest this was perhaps always a feature of the painting economy; ‘aboriginal painters say that when visiting communities which are not one’s own, the visitors will paint according to the local artistic conventions’ (Jestribek 1997:111). This desert-wide economy of exchange in painted Country evokes Myers’ principal arguments about the creation of Country more generally in desert life:

My concern is to show that the identities produced as an experience of mutual caring among residents of transient ‘camps’ (*ngurra*) are transformed into or objectified as relations to enduring ‘countries’ (*ngurra*) as dreaming, and these objectifications mediate social relations within a region. But there is an emergent dimension that enters experience. Such ‘countries’ are meaningful to Pintupi cultural subjects as possessing the potential of exchangeability (Myers 2000:96).

The ways in which people paint, recreating the style exchanged with them, and likely thereafter exchanging that transformed style with others, parallel the ways in which Country is created, objectified and exchanged in desert social life. They are also indices of the ways that emergent practices are continuing to produce social relationships and values through the acrylic economy. ‘In such relations of exchange,’ Myers argues more broadly, ‘place becomes more ‘generalized’, a sort of currency’ (2000:99). This notion of painting style (and the Country it objectifies) as a kind of transferrable resource is further developed by the fact that artists are also transporting their styles with them, when they travel, as objects of exchange. In recent times, when successful artists from other communities come to stay in Balgo, they will often ‘give’ that style to less successful artists to paint in Balgo. Patrick Tjungurrayi has given his style to his brother, for example, but such occurrences are not restricted to close family.



Figure 8.23a



8.23b. Walangkura Napanangka



8.23c. Angie takes Walangkura’s style

In 2007, Angie Tchooga, who normally paints in a style associated with the waterways of Sturt Creek (Figure 8.23a), began painting in a markedly different style that had, for me, no obvious reference to what she had painted before (Figure 8.23c). Angie's explanation was that her sister, Walangkura Napanangka from Kintore, had visited Balgo and camped with her. Walangkura and Angie share the same father. Walangkura, after camping in Balgo, had given Angie the style she uses – very successfully - to paint her Country near Kintore (Figure 8.23b). In sharing her style with her hosts in Balgo, Walangkura activates the principle that the critical condition for participating in a cooperative 'camp' 'is recognition of the others as *walytja*.... which can be glossed as 'relatives' or 'kin'.... The concept formulates kinship as the inclusion into one's own identity of those with whom one cooperates' (Myers 2000: 85). Angie's transformed painting style is a clear manifestation of this principle. Just as my friend Napangarti was painting in the 'Kintore style' of the people with whom she now camped and cooperated, so too can other people's Kintore style be transported to Balgo as an object of exchange for activating and reproducing *walytja*. This is further evidence for my argument that the Country one paints is constituted more by where you are, and who you are camping and sharing resources with, than any fixed style.

Ownership, Style and 'Stealing' Country

I have demonstrated how painting style has become a kind of social currency in Balgo, something that passes between people to create and signify relationship. Yet what provides the basis for identification within kin groups in Balgo also has the distinct capacity to differentiate between them. As objects 'around whose production and dissemination identities are managed, regulated, and policed,' (Myers 2004:12) painting styles in Balgo elicit social boundaries, becoming objectifications of identification and differentiation. In Balgo, to paint in someone else's style (even unwittingly) is perceived locally as tantamount to 'stealing' someone else's Country - and therefore of committing a significant cultural transgression. An example of this technique tenure occurred in late

2003, some months after the death of Lucy Yukenbarri. Napangarti walked into the art centre and commented on the work of another female artist, Nangala (Figure 8.24a).



Figure 8.24a

Figure 8.24b

Nangala had painted her usual image, passed on to her from her own mother, which she has never had any problems reproducing. However, whilst the form of the image was the usual central rockholes and radiating lines of sandhills she frequently painted (Figure 8.24b), the dotting she used was far more merged together than usual - much in the *kinti-kinti* style identified with Lucy Yukenbarri. This painting (Figure 8.24a) was hanging up on the wall in the art centre. Napangarti asked me “What’s that still doing there?”, the implication being that as Lucy Yukenbarri had passed away in recent times, cultural protocols regarding the dead required there should not be any of her paintings up in the art centre. The fact is, however, that this painting, even with merged dotting, really looks nothing like Lucy’s work (and I’m confident that Napangarti knew this also). What she was deliberately implying, without accusing the artist concerned of stealing, was that her use of Lucy’s *kinti-kinti* style was too close for someone outside that family.

This proprietorial attitude towards acrylic style as property is not restricted to techniques that have been innovated; they can also apply to other aspects of painting. This can become complicated when, as illustrated in chapter 6, there is a conflation or blurring of the boundaries between style and story; seemingly generic visual forms can become highly politicised. During my fieldwork, Brandy Tjungurrayi was encouraging his daughters, and his second wife, to take up his concentric square compositions (fig 8.25). Brandy had been a relatively successful painter in his time, but as he was getting older he gave his female *walyja* the authority to paint in his style. All but one of the daughters took up the squares to some extent during my fieldwork; some only briefly, and others, such as Geraldine

(second from right), far more successfully. Either way, they became a recognisable feature of the family painting practice when I was in Balgo. It followed that these squares soon also became a source of public tensions.

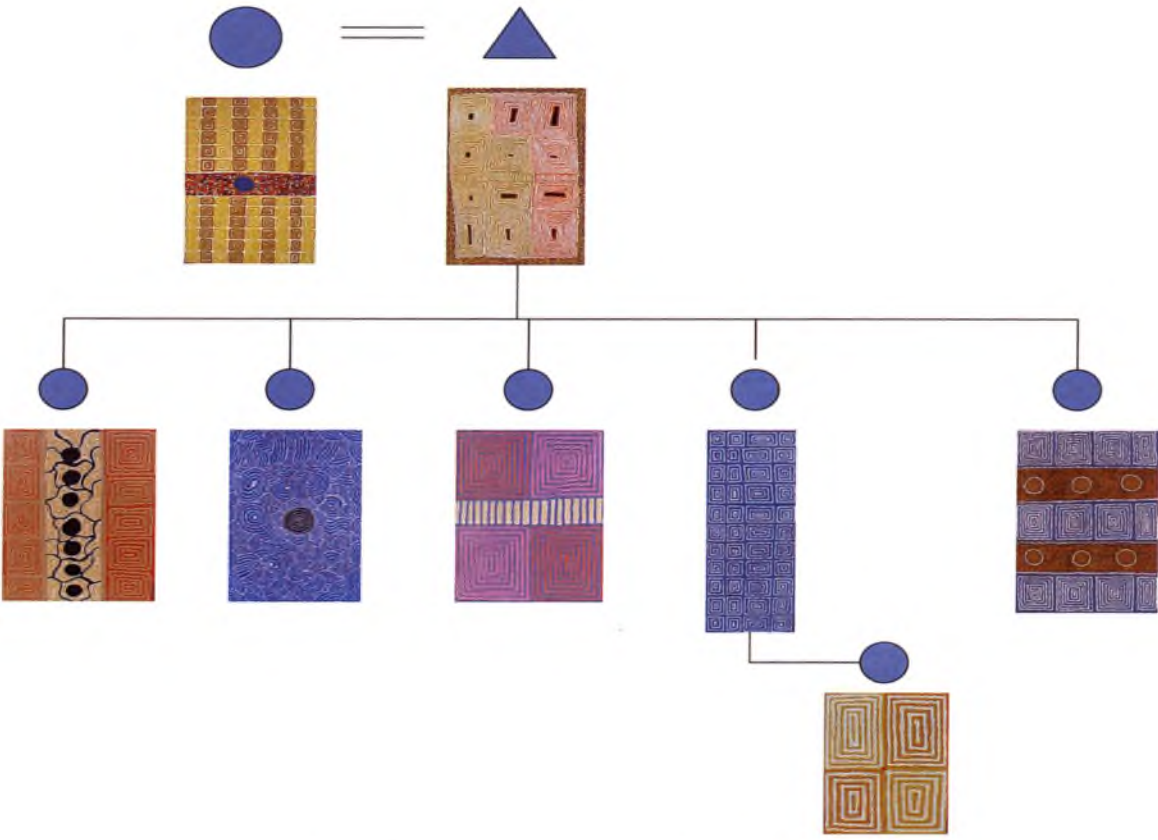


Figure 8.25. Brandy's Squares entering the family style.

In June 2003, Brandy's son-in-law, Tjakamarra, told me that Brandy had been angry about the paintings being done by a young woman, Nangala, from another family. The woman was painting compositions identical to his daughter Geraldine's; and could only be differentiated by the fact that she used black paint as opposed to Geraldine's blue. Nangala drew on her own family traditions to legitimate the practice, but Brandy was adamant that these squares are his Tjukurrpa and shouldn't be painted by her. Brandy claimed the woman had stolen his Tjukurrpa, and even asked me to turn the painting around to face the wall so that other people wouldn't see it. What is interesting in this case is that the squares are a fairly generic composition in Western Desert art, common to many painters from multiple art-producing communities. But within Balgo, those squares had come to form the legitimate, though not uncontested, grounds of a family's style, and

their capacity to exploit that style economically and *exclusively*. In Balgo, where the politics of story and style have become entwined through the processes of abstraction described in Chapter 6, to paint these squares without Brandy's permission had become framed as a cultural transgression; as 'stealing' his Country.

The tenure of style – of painted Country – is not dissimilar to the operation of land tenure expressed through Country more broadly. You don't just have land and then exploit it, the forms of tenure emerged from the need to access, control and regulate diverse means of production. But because Aboriginal people living in Balgo today have such minimal control over their means of production, or no power to exclude others from their Country, acrylic Country becomes a prominent arena of social action on which these issues are played out. If ownership is, as Myers argues (1986: 99), the right to be asked for something, it is understandable why people painting in similar styles are a source of tension. Brandy's claims of ownership in such contexts are not about the substance of the designs themselves, which are demonstrably generic, but about the localised economic autonomy and social identities they mediate.

Techniques pioneered by individual artists, such as the merging of dotting developed by Lucy Yukenbarri, can be identified intimately with that individual. As such, they are generally available to be used only by close kin of that artist or those with whom one shares their camp and resources. Ownership emerges out of innovation, and transmission, but it can also be claimed. Looking at Brandy's style tree in the context of the disputed squares, it is illuminating to reflect on Marilyn Strathern's observation that 'Ownership gathers things momentarily to a point by locating them in the owner, halting endless dissemination, effecting an identity' (1999: 177). There are of course different implications to be teased out in who can own a square or who can own a dot; and Brandy's enduring vigilance about what other people are painting is testament to this emergent and contested arena in Balgo. It is an arena, nevertheless, in which successful styles and techniques (and even squares) are equivalent to a well made weapon, a working vehicle, or even Country itself; they are an objectification of families' economic autonomy, their rights and capacity to earn a living, and are guarded and shared accordingly.

Differentiation and Contestation

Ensnared as they are in the relationship between authority and economic autonomy, the processes of transmission described here are not without complications and contestation. People in Balgo keep a keen eye on not only what goes on *between* their family and others, but also what goes on within other people's families. This is particularly true when painting authority appears to pass from father to daughter. Male to male transmission of Country is, without doubt, a defining aspect of social reproduction in desert culture. But the system of transmission is necessarily flexible; variations and exceptions are not uncommon. It is a culturally coherent practice for senior men (particularly elderly men who have no *kajta* 'sons', such as Brandy) to pass on 'country' to daughters, who would 'hold' the country and (hopefully) then pass this knowledge onto future male heirs. Kimber documents Wuta Wuta (Uta Uta) Tjangala doing precisely this when he took female kin to the site of Yumari:

Uta Uta was ensuring that, in the event of his death and that of the other few senior men of authority who knew the location, there were sufficient people who could pass on the general knowledge to the correct men of the next generation" (Kimber 1990:7-8, see also Myers 2000:91-92)

Similarly, Sunfly Tjamptijin passed on his Country to his daughter, Pauline, who had helped him in the execution of paintings in the latter part of his career. Pauline was authorized not only to pass this Country on, but to paint it herself, which she has done with considerable success (see Figures 8.26 and 8.27 for a comparison). Interestingly, Pauline's description of the painting content at figure 8.27 resonates with the concerns encompassed in the transmission of authority from father to daughter:

The painting depicts ceremony for this country which is centered around goanna dreaming. The ceremony and body painting associated with this country is no longer practiced, having died out with Pauline's father and grandfather.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Catalogue reference unavailable. This information sourced through Short St Gallery, Broome, where the painting was displayed.



Figure 8.26 Sunfly (l) & (r) Pauline comparison



8.27. Sunfly (l) & Pauline (r) comparison II

I asked Bai Bai, Pauline's mother, where her daughter had learnt to paint and she told me that 'she got her hand from her father [Sunfly]'. Significantly, Bai Bai hereby intimated that Pauline had not only inherited her father's stories, she had also inherited or learnt his technical style (his 'hand'). Pauline painted her father's compositions with such skill and confidence, forged in her own aesthetic apprenticeship, that her works are frequently

mistaken for 'men's' paintings (which, in a sense, they are). This created problems for her in Balgo during my fieldwork (after Sunfly had passed away) when some senior men questioned whether a woman should be painting such designs. Despite the fact that these stories had been passed, legitimately, from a senior man to his daughter, contestation about the validity of this transmission continued during my research. Throughout 2003 and 2004, Pauline continued to paint these designs for sale outside Balgo, though she requested that her paintings not be publicly displayed in the art centre *within* Balgo where men may take issue with them. Acrylic painting emerges here as a complex field of social action in which artists can be found exercising their economic and political autonomy cross-culturally in the face of significant intra-cultural resistance.

A revealing example of this in Balgo art history is found in the case of the man who was perhaps the most critical of Pauline Sunfly's painting: Tjumpo Tjapanangka. Tjumpo was among the leading male artists in Balgo for most of his career from the mid 1980s until his death in 2006. A senior law man, a deeply conservative custodian of important Tjukurrpa, and a powerful maparn (healer), he was also a staunch individualist. This manifested in his painting practice as well. Watson noted during her research at Balgo that 'the *Marlu* Tjukurrpa has been prohibited as a painting subject' (Watson 1996: 52-53). Several restrictions were placed on women, and on younger artists, during the early days of painting at Balgo, and this was one convention that the men imposed upon their own



practice: painting *Marlu* was forbidden. And yet the Warlayirti Artists archive reveals that, from as early as 1988,¹⁸² Tjumpo Tjapanangka was executing *Marlu* paintings. *Wirruwiyi* (Figure 8.28) reveals one such painting, which the artist identified as his "Father's country and Kangaroo Dreaming".¹⁸³ The final resting site of *Marlu* is painted in the upper left corner of the painting. Tjumpo's father is also buried at this site.

Figure 8.28. Tjumpo Tjapanangka, *Wirruwiyi*, 1988 (photocopy of black and white photo).

¹⁸² Warlayirti Artists catalogue ref #051/88

¹⁸³ Warlayirti Artists catalogue ref #328/89

The existence of this painting (and several others by the same artist) seems to contradict the existence of an injunction against depictions of the Marlu Tjukurrpa; but *contradict* is perhaps not the right word here. The local discourse in Balgo, in the 1980s and early 1990s, asserted that *Marlu Tjukurrpa* was restricted and not to be painted for commercial sale. But discourse and practice are aspects of Balgo art that should never be uncritically conflated. The vitality and tensions of the art have always been bound to the cultural tensions upon which it rests; and one of those defining tensions is that between the individual and collective. This example shows that clearly.

Tjumpo was a senior custodian of that Tjukurrpa which had initially been considered too important to release into the market contexts. As the *Marlu* dreaming is closely associated with Tjumpo's Country, we find a situation of cultural tension here between the authority of the individual and that of the group. Whilst everyone else painted their Dreamings and engaged with the market by selling them, the grounds of Tjumpo's authority were perhaps diminished by not being able to transact that authority in the cross-cultural domain. Furthermore, the injunction against the *Marlu Tjukurrpa* would have prevented the artist, as evident in Figure 8.28, from painting the site of his father's burial. I did not have the opportunity to discuss this with Tjumpo before he passed away, but my interpretation of this case is that, in continuing to paint *Marlu Tjukurrpa*, he may have felt that the authority of the group had overly constrained his personal authority. It is unclear, and impossible to gauge retrospectively, to what extent the other senior men knew about the specific content of Tjumpo's paintings, but he certainly didn't conceal it. Indeed, in 1998, he even authorised his wife, Ningie Nanala, to paint the *Marlu Tjukurrpa* (Figure 8.29).



This painting depicts country belonging to Ningie's husband, Tjumpo. He has been responsible for mapping out the painting and Ningie has painted the majority of the work. It depicts country south of Yagga Yagga.... This country was created by Marlu.... We see the place where he lay down to rest and his pillow, which now are seen in the landforms of the area.¹⁸⁴

Figure 8.29. Ningie, *Marlu Dreaming*, 1998 (photocopy of black and white photo).

¹⁸⁴ Warlayirti Artists catalogue reference #227/98

From this example it is pertinent to reflect upon the fact that Tjumbo was a critic of Pauline Sunfly's paintings, which he considered to be taken from the men's domain and therefore not to be painted by women. The discursive 'rules' of Balgo art, like the norms of desert social life, are not immutable: they are invoked, and also periodically *ignored*, in order to address specific political contexts and to buttress localised economic interests; interests that are always articulated through the idiom of Country.

Significantly the kinds of transmission that occur between husbands and wives – even those that involve women painting seemingly restricted aspects of their husbands' Country – are rarely, if ever, contested within Balgo (or, at least, I never encountered any examples of such contestation during fieldwork). This is notable because it is this spousal transmission that most often transgresses the norms of inheritance. I argue that there is, embodied in the practices of nuptial partnership, a more important cultural value at play than the discursive rules of inheritance. Country, as the organising objectification of desert social life, political authority and economic autonomy, absorbs these patterned ruptures into a greater order.

The familial work of art

As these examples show, combined with those of the husbands and wives previously, the question of stylistic transmission can be over-determined by a focus on genealogical descent and the language of inheritance. Too rigid a focus on the discourse of painting rights, as opposed to the practice, can lead to a static misrepresentation of the processes by which Country comes to be created and transmitted through social relations. Country is not simply something that is exchanged between people; it is also something that emerges out of relationships of cooperation and co-residence. The analysis of husbands' and wives' cooperative production exemplifies this, and opens up again the question of work in Balgo art and the cultural means by which painting labour is organised and experienced.

In Chapter 2 I argued for an understanding of painting framed by the notion of work. I outlined the contexts in which people paint their own canvases together in a group, or

share the work of painting a single canvas; and the detail of these contexts have been enriched by subsequent description of the ways in which spouses also organise the work of art. Children and grandchildren are more sporadic participants in the painting labour force, and tend to be cajoled into 'helping' to finish a canvas by more senior relatives. Yet it is in these specific contexts that younger artists learn how to paint in the style of their elder kin. People know that the art market prefers one Aboriginal person to complete a painting. It has been drummed into them by arts advisors over the decades, and (uncommissioned) collaborations are generally discouraged. And yet, while the cultural value of work is somewhat undermined by these injunctions from the market, it has never extinguished the more fundamental character of painting as socially constituted work. Through the process of helping family members finish a painting, without making it clear that more than one hand worked on it, spouses learn their partners style, children learn their parents' style, and siblings learn each other's style. Cross-cultural stylistic subterfuge gives way to cultural transmission.

It is clear that work of art is not restricted to those people actually painting: in Balgo family sit round an artist's canvas as they work, 'for *marlpa*' (company) and contributing their presence to the social labour of painting Country. There are multiple ways that a person can be recognised as contributing their labour to the creation of Country in acrylic art:

- 1) The shared labour of painting a single canvas
- 2) The shared labour of sitting with an artist as they paint
- 3) The labour of painting shared Country (i.e. painting an individual painting of the Country you share with your *Walytja*)

Different people prioritise different strategies depending upon fluctuations in their own economic and artistic fortunes. The combination of these cooperative practices over time suggests that people in Balgo conceive of the work and rewards of painting Country somewhat collectively. This notion of the familial work of art is proven in reverse, as it were, by the localised recognition of the *absence* of that labour. Those people who don't paint, and who don't sit with the principal artist as they paint, can come to be criticised by countrymen for failing to participate in the network of exchange, for failing to respect that, as Peterson notes, 'relationships have to be constantly produced and maintained by social action' (1993: 870). On one occasion, Tjamptijin, a grandson of a famous artist, was

scolded by his family at Money Morning for continually demanding money without ever doing his own paintings (despite being a competent painter himself). The people 'growling' him, his aunties and siblings, were precisely those people who regularly sit with the artist as she paints. Shamed, he stormed off, but later in the week came into the art centre with an (overdue) painting of his own. It was messy, rushed off, and seemingly executed with little concern for whether or not it would sell (unlike his previous paintings). What was important, in this social equation, was not that he generates income from his own works of art, but that Tjamptijin be seen by his own kin to be contributing his labour to the familial *work* of art; such that he could again make legitimate demands on his grandmother's income.

Turning camps into Country: cooperative kin-based production

This notion of the familial work of art is one that emerges clearly in Balgo through the way that Country is reproduced as an objectification of social identity through practices of exchange related to both style and money. Painting style flows in much the same directions as painting money. The extent to which people help each other with their paintings is correlated to the extent to which they camp and share food, the extent to which there is a more communal sense of property as expressed in painted Country. The transmission of style and money documented in this thesis provide clear and related examples of how painting practices are organised and experienced in around the broader Aboriginal system of relationship objectified in the idea 'Country'. This phenomenon is evident in the sharing of style outlined in this chapter, or the sharing of money discussed in Chapter 2, but it is also apparent in the broader statistical dynamics of painting production.



Figure 8.30. Wimmitji (l) and Eubena (r) stylistic comparison 1991

Eubena and Wimmitji, like Lucy and Helicopter, had a famous collaborative painting partnership. Their paintings together in the late 1980s and early 1990s are an extraordinary body of work. As is demonstrably clear from the two paintings at Figure 8.30, it wasn't simply a case of Eubena and Wimmitji painting separate works side by side, nor of finishing off each other's paintings. The practice of painting together, of sharing technique, palette and compositions, cultivated an aesthetic sensibility that is only comprehensible as a productive unit. *They* produced paintings together. Indeed, such was the integral *affinity* of their style, Eubena did not continue to paint with the same technique or compositions after Wimmitji stopped painting due to blindness. Rather, Eubena moved gradually into her own stylistic trajectory, eliminating the filigree-like dotting and moving further into a brush-stroked *kinti-kinti* style of merging the dots. Interestingly, this was the style pioneered by her step daughter (Wimmitji's daughter from

a previous marriage) Lucy Yukenbarri.¹⁸⁵ An even more interesting change in Eubena's painting practice can be identified in the period immediately before and after Wimmitji ceased painting. What we find in Eubena and Wimmitji's canvases is not simply a stylistic drift between people working together on their own canvases, or helping to complete each other's canvases. These husbands and wives constitute a cooperative unit of production, where changes in one individual's productive capacity - brought upon by illness, age, or disinclination - is balanced out by correlated increases in the productivity of the other. In these relationships the production of one painter tends to increase noticeably after the death (or physical decline) of the other. This is clear in the graph at Figure 8.31.

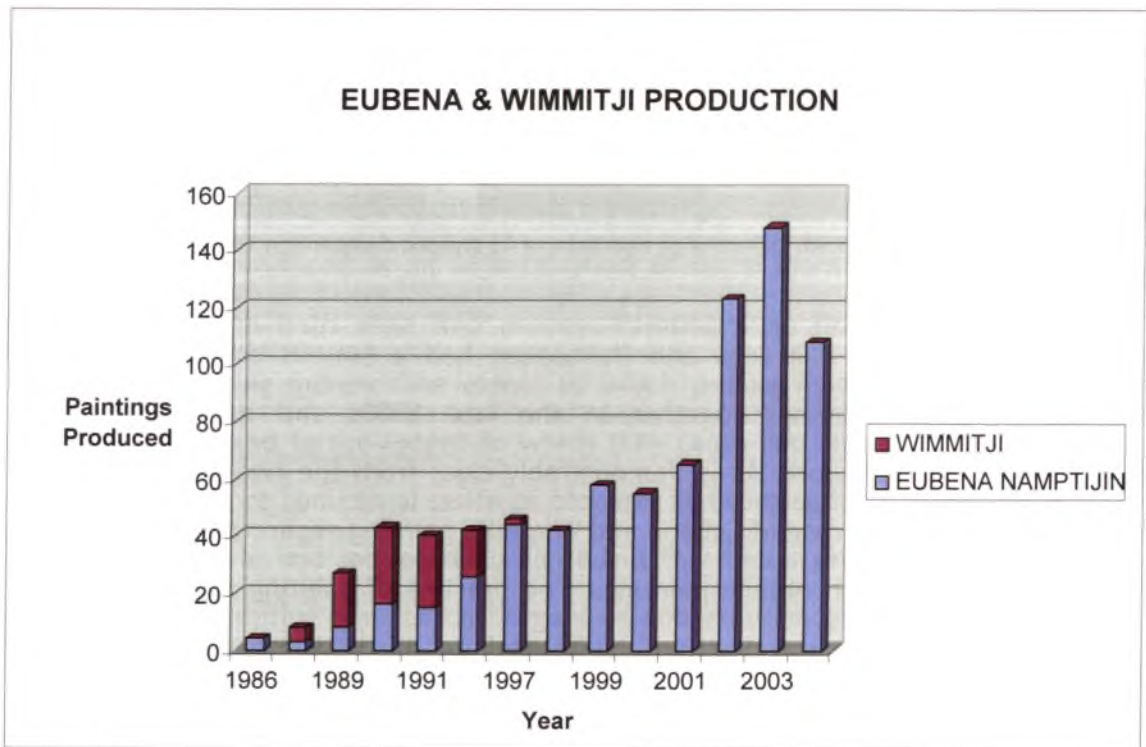


Figure 8.31. Eubena and Wimmitji painting production.

¹⁸⁵ Eubena and Lucy began working on paintings together in this time (see Warlayirti Artists catalogue files 448/96, 538/96, 573/96, 645/96 and 689/96) and this process of producing country together filters through into each of their individual paintings over this period.

These statistics demonstrate that Eubena and Wimmitji developed a productive plateau between 1990 and 1998 when they, as a cooperative unit, consistently created an average of 42 paintings per year.¹⁸⁶ In 1990-1992, the couple produce 43, 40 and 42 paintings in each respective year. Between 1991 and 1992, however, the ratio swaps with a curious precision (see Table 8.1). Whereas in 1991 Wimmitji had produced 25 works and Eubena 15, by 1992 Eubena was producing 26 and Wimmitji only 16. Eubena's production increased steadily with her husband's declining output over the mid 1990s, until in 1998, when he no longer painted at all, she produced their collaborative average output, forty-two paintings, by herself.

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
EUBENA	3	8	16	15	26	44	42	58	55	65
WIMMITJI	5	19	27	25	16	2	0	0	0	0

Table 8.1. Paintings produced by Eubena and Wimmitji per year.

The social system of art production only becomes visible, statistically, when a high producing artist is removed from the equation. When a senior artist dies in Balgo, localised adjustments in production are quickly made by kin groups or families (after a period of mourning, of course). When Lucy Yukenbarri died in 2003, art centre staff were concerned her husband would stop painting entirely, and that the extended family in general would suffer as a consequence of losing its two major earners. But looking at a broader picture of the family as a cooperative unit, the statistics tell another story (Figure 8.32).

¹⁸⁶ Based on the years that I have reliable data for (1990, 91, 92, 97, 98). I hope, in future, with renewed access to the Warlayirti archives, to be able to balance these figures against data from the intervening years.

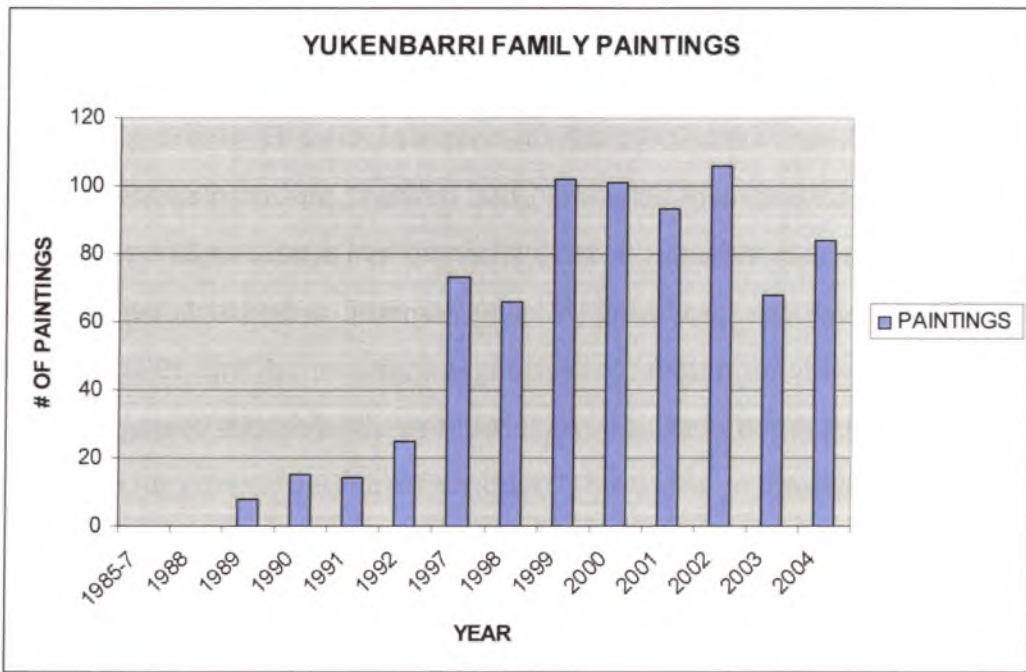


Figure 8.32. Number of paintings produced annually by Yukenbarri family

Since 1999, when the Yukenbarri daughters began painting, the family produced approximately 100 paintings per year. During that period, Lucy produced an average of 40 paintings per year. Correspondingly, in the year of her death, the family as a group produced a reduced number 68 paintings in total. The collective total was also down on average in 2004, but this reduction was not as pronounced as might have been expected solely by observing the numbers of paintings produced annually by Lucy and Helicopter. As is evident in Figure 8.33, the daughters systematically pick up the economic slack left in their mother's wake. In 2003, Imelda, Cathy, Carmel and Christine collectively painted 18 works. In 2004 this number had more than doubled to 37. This is not some altruistic 'let's all pitch in for the family' phenomena. Rather, a group of people who used to rely on a particular resource, their mother's painted Country, have to diversify and increase their own productive behaviours in order to maintain the kind of autonomies her income had previously afforded. So while the family average takes a significant dip when Lucy dies in 2003, by 2004 familial production was on its way to returning to normal (and by 2005, this had increased again, and the daughters were by then producing 50% of the family's paintings). Helicopter, tellingly, did not increase his production; presumably because - unlike Eubena and Wimmitji - he had not been investing his labour in helping his partner

finish her canvases prior to her death, and so did not have excess labour time to subsequently re-invest in producing more of his own canvases.

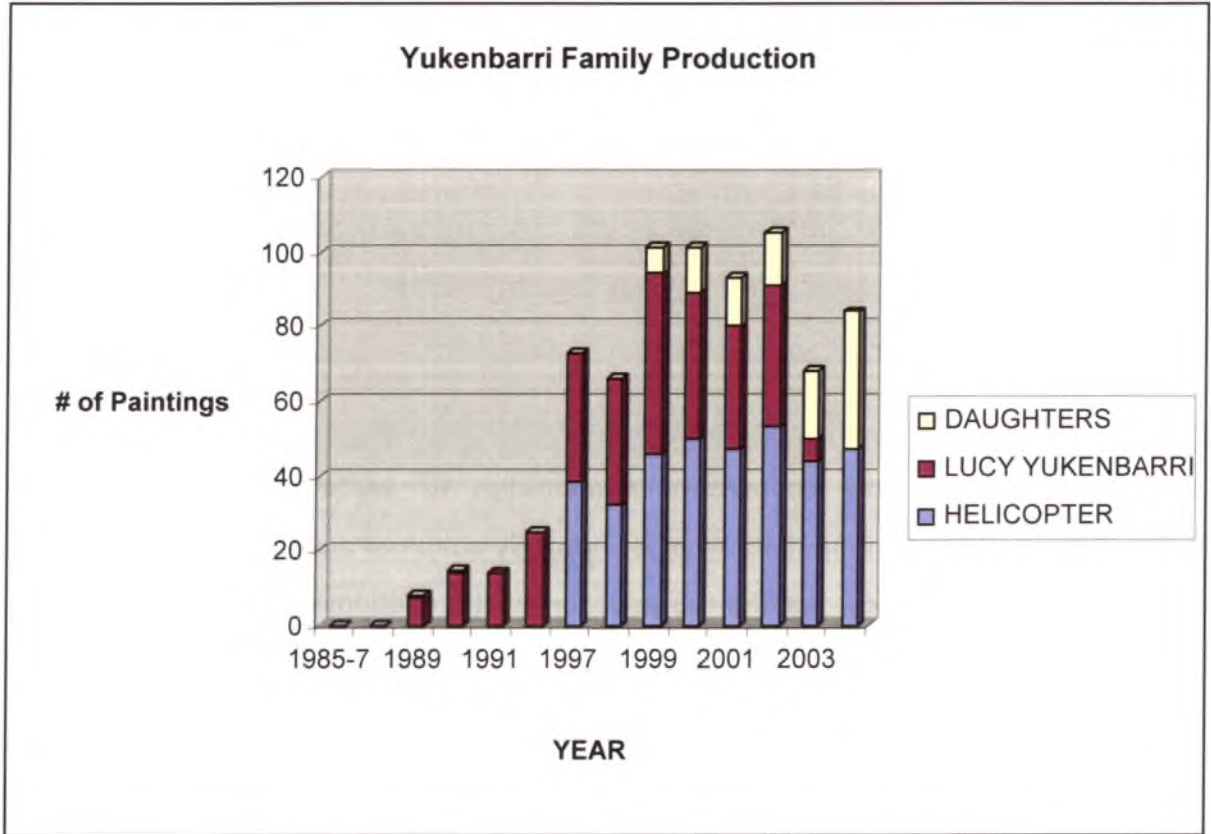


Figure 8.33. Yukenbarri familial distribution of production.

These statistics suggest that groups of artists in Balgo can be shown to function as cooperative productive units. We know, of course, that close-kin often help in the production of single canvases. More importantly, the data suggest that when a significant producer (and income earner) declines in productivity or ceases painting entirely, those people who have come to depend on the resources provided by that productivity tend to respond with adjustments to their own practices. While this comes through most clearly in the Yukenbarri case study, it can be observed statistically across a number of Balgo families such as the Sunflys (in the mid 1990s), and the Nanalas (in the mid 2000s).¹⁸⁷ In each case, the death of a senior artist can slow familial output and income in the short term; the family in mourning will not to paint for a few months and their annual productivity tends to decline briefly. But then these other *walytja* tend to paint with more

¹⁸⁷ Following the deaths of Sunfly Tjampitjin and Tjumpo Tjapanangka (Nanala family) respectively.

purpose than before, taking economic and stylistic responsibility for the reproduction of their Country as a resource.¹⁸⁸ The Yukenbarri daughters have each adapted aspects of their mother's style to reproduce her Country. This stylistic transformation occurred (apart from Christine) throughout 2004, and went hand in hand with the collective doubling of their painting production. The relationship between style, economy and cultural reproduction could hardly be more clearly defined. What is being described here is more than patterns of productivity between groups of people who share style and money; it is more akin to a description of the creation of Country.

By combining the two forms of visual representation employed in this chapter – the style trees and the family production graphs (Figure 8.34) – it is possible to see – through both space and time - the cooperative relationships of exchange objectified in the transformations of painting style. What is ultimately produced out of these relationships is neither style nor money, but the reproduction of the relationships of exchange (Myers 2000). These temporal relations of shared identity and exchange are understood, expressed, and objectified as 'Country' in ways that resonate unmistakably with Myers own formulation:

Thus groups are constituted essentially in the form of descending kindreds of persons who have primary claims to sites, but the exercise of continuing exchange ('giving') is essential in producing this organisational form. The process is one in which co-operative ties among frequent co-residents... may be transformed into a more enduring one.... Country is objectified as the shared identity of a distinctive set of kin (Myers 2000: 88)

¹⁸⁸ I suspect that it is also after the death of senior artists that familial production can split and reconfigure in different domestic or 'camp'- oriented groups. Children of recently deceased senior artists who increase their productivity thereby become the breadwinner for their children, and therefore focus their productive practices more so on their own painting, and that of their husband or wife. Further research would be required to demonstrate this, however. My research data from Balgo during 2003-4 is not sufficient to make definitive claims either way, but this kind of research would prove illuminating in discussions around the emerging dynamics, transformations and continuities of acrylic ngurra 'Country' in relation to domestic ngurra 'camps' in Balgo.

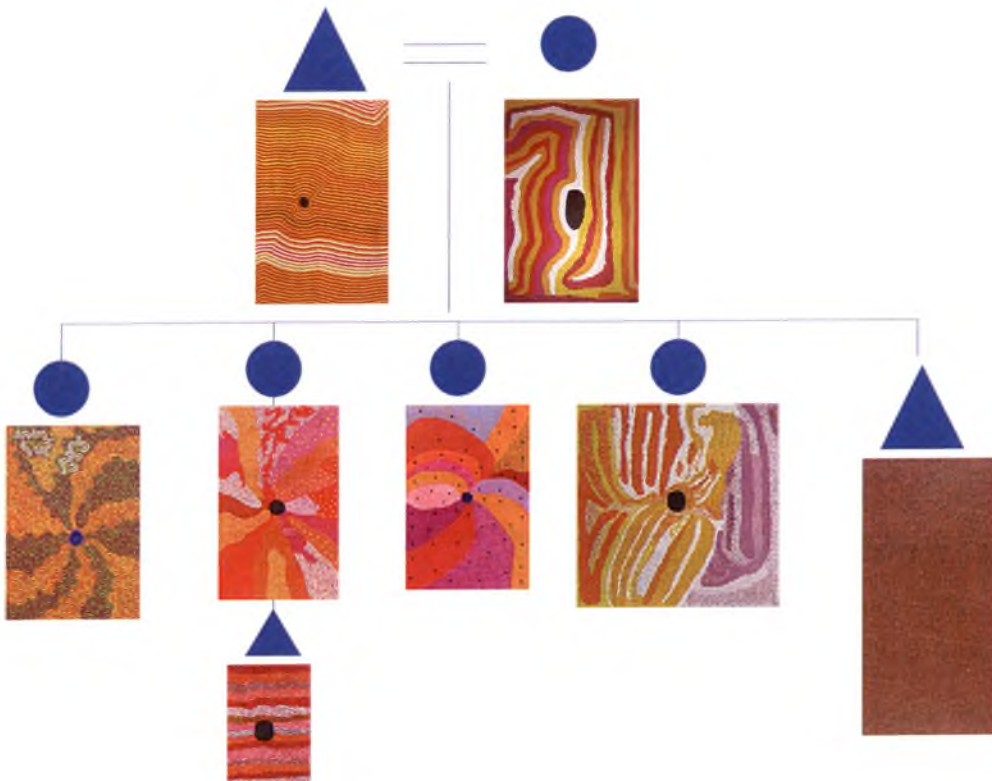
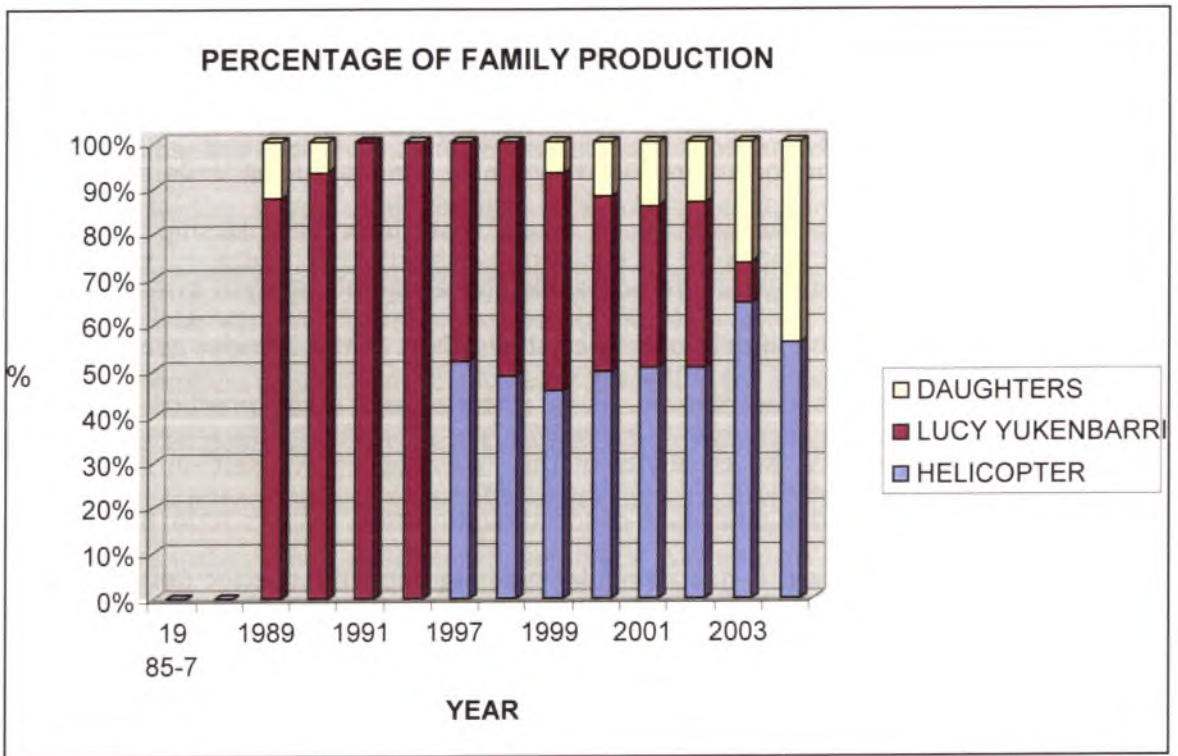


Figure8.34. Comparison between analytical representations of Yukenbarri Family

In Balgo, if you look beyond the idea of an atomised artist producing a single artwork, it is clear that the stylistic forms produced by kin in canvas can be understood as tangible reproductions of the dynamic social forms that those very kinship groups embody. Combined with the statistical, demographic and economic analysis offered in this thesis, such style trees can be understood as crystallisations of the broader generative power of acrylic art, as Myers describes it, as ‘a material and social practice that brings into realization not simply the creativity of the individual artist... but an image that has a distinctive history and is generative of social relationships’ (Myers 2004: 6). The image that emerges here, however, is not a singular painting depicting specific Country but a rather more dynamic, *distributed* image. It is not a physical form but a social one; comprised of the individual paintings, painters, and the specific relationships between them (through space and time). The true art of Balgo lies not in representing Country, but in creating it: as an object of exchange and objectification of the relations of exchange. It is Country then, and all it encompasses, that is elicited (Weiner 1995) in the socio-economic practice of painting; it is Country that is created through the work of art.

The disappearance of Country

The work in this chapter is heavily engaged with the work of Fred Myers, pivoting as it does on the putative dialectic of relatedness and differentiation that proves useful in formulating new approaches to desert art. My use of ‘differentiation’ to date has been somewhat different to Myer’s formulation, however, wherein ‘a tension between “relatedness” (being *Walytja*) and “differentiation” (as expressed in conflict and violence) defines the basic lived problem of Pintupi life’ (Myers 1986:160). My use of differentiation, rather, has been oriented toward the ways in which people use painting styles to demarcate identities either between or within families. These processes can result in conflict, as demonstrated in various examples, through rarely in violence. It does happen, however, and when it does, it is usually painting itself that is the victim.

A common perception of desert art is that the physical object - the acrylic paint on canvas - has little value to artists. In certain ways this is true. But paintings are caught in the web of social relationships, and their lives as they pass through those networks, however briefly, are implicated in the values and conflicts that characterise and animate any such relationships. Paintings have, like the artists themselves from time to time, arrived at the art centre with stab wounds. On one such occasion, Nungurrayi, an artist upon whom several family members depend financially, went travelling for a period and neglected to drop her completed paintings in to the art centre. When staff returned to pick them up a week or so later, family members – probably angry that she had left them with no money (according to the artist) – had stabbed her paintings. On another occasion, one Money Morning, two sisters who had been arguing about money were walking through camp shouting at each other. At the peak of the argument, one sister grabbed the painting the other was taking up to the art centre and smashed it on the ground, breaking the stretcher and ripping the canvas from the frame. These acts of violence against paintings correspond to Austin–Broos’ (following Munn and Myers) discussion of desert society through the

idea of life as objectification... as Aborigines revise the meanings of country mythically interpreted, their objectification of self, or their ‘identities’, come not only from engagement with places but also through an engagement with things (2003: 119).

Austin-Broos goes on to argue that ‘the circulation of cars, nondurables, and cash, as well as the access to entertainments brought by mobility, all act to prise kinship away from country and redefine its significance’(ibid). Whilst much of Austin Broos analysis is resonant with the description of Balgo art that I’ve offered throughout this thesis, the evidence from Balgo does not clearly support this conclusion. Kinship is arguably being redefined or recomposed in relation to regimes of value increasingly dominated by money and the ‘things’ it affords. As the analysis of Money Morning sharing practices in Chapter 2 attests, certain kinds of giving and certain kinds of kinship may have been reified, even institutionalised, through the structure of the painting economy. Yet whatever changes are occurring, kinship is not being ‘prised away from country’: quite the opposite. One final example will further illuminate how the enduring nexus of kinship and country not only survives the contemporary processes of objectification, but is actively reproduced through

it. The emergent reality of painted-Country-as-Country in Balgo is reinforced by the ways in which people interact with it as such, both cooperatively and violently, and even by the ways in which it can disappear.



Figure 8.35. Elizabeth Nyumi, *Parwalla* 2003

One Money Morning in 2003, Elizabeth Nyumi's Country, *Parwalla* (Figure 8.35), disappeared. The extended family of Nyumi raised questions about the existence of the Country she paints; leaving the art centre, her brother, nieces and sister-in-law proclaimed all of a sudden that they didn't know where that place "*Parwalla*" was. Nyumi has been painting this Country for many years, and yet all of a sudden her own family 'didn't know' it. At first, I didn't know how to make sense of these very public and vexing statements. It was only through changes in family painting practices that the nature of the dispute around Nyumi's Country became clear.

In recent years Nyumi had developed and maintained a style quite distinct from the concentric squares favoured by her brothers (Brandy and Patrick Tjungurrayi) and nieces (Figure 8.36).¹⁸⁹ Partly because of this differentiation, her reputation as an artist increased dramatically during the period of my fieldwork and she began to earn considerably more money than before. It turned out, on leaving the art centre after a frustrated Money Morning, Nyumi's extended *walytja* felt that she had not properly been sharing her

¹⁸⁹ I have elsewhere described in detail the process of stylistic development and transformation in Elizabeth Nyumi's work (Carty and French, 2011).

increased wealth with them.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, they made a point of stating that she only shares it with her daughters (see Figure 8.10). Patrick, another brother who earns a significant income painting for Papunya Tula in Kiwirrkura, regularly sends money to Balgo and also bought cars for the family. Nyumi was not doing these things, and that's the point. Nyumi's *walytja*, her own countrymen, were questioning the grounds on which her wealth is accrued - the style she has innovated on canvas as her Country - in order to assert their dissatisfaction with the way that collective resource was (or was not) being shared.

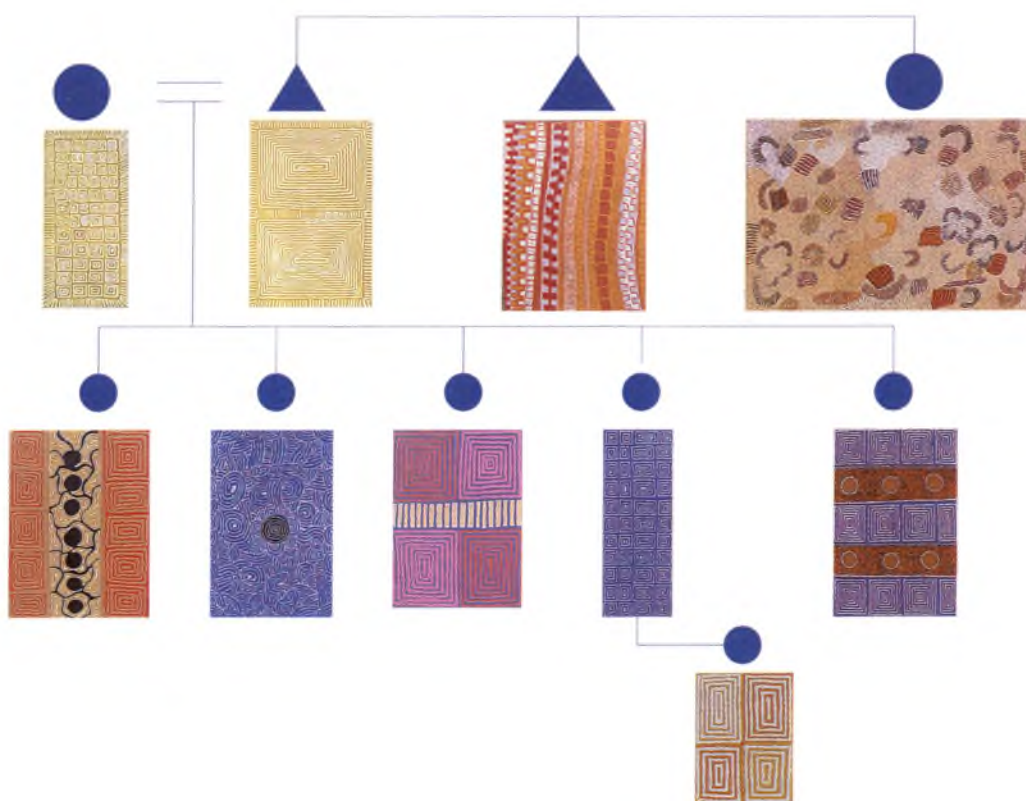


Figure 8.36. Nyumi & Brandy extended family painting styles

This incidence of not recognising someone's Country resonates distinctly with Myers' description of how Pintupi can lose Country: 'If one cannot sustain ties through residence,

¹⁹⁰Nyumi's prices increased dramatically between 2002 and 2006 (i.e. the market value of a painting sized 180cm x 120cm rose from \$11,000 to \$21,600, according to official Warlayirti pricelists). Based on painting size, production and sales, it is likely the Nyumi's annual income would have doubled during the course of my fieldwork. This, retrospectively, adds context to the concerns expressed by her family.

exchange, and so on, one cannot be a one countryman or kin – and one’s identification loses social recognition’ (2000:95). To my knowledge this matter was not raised again publicly. What happened was, at least to my eyes, only apparent by observing the body of paintings produced by the family following the dispute. In the months that followed, the niece closest to Nyumi and who often painted with her, Theresa Nowee, underwent a significant stylistic transformation (Figure 8.37) She began to move away from the squares of her father and sisters, and the experiments in her husband’s style, adopting Nyumi’s painting style of finely-sticked dot work in a pale palette.

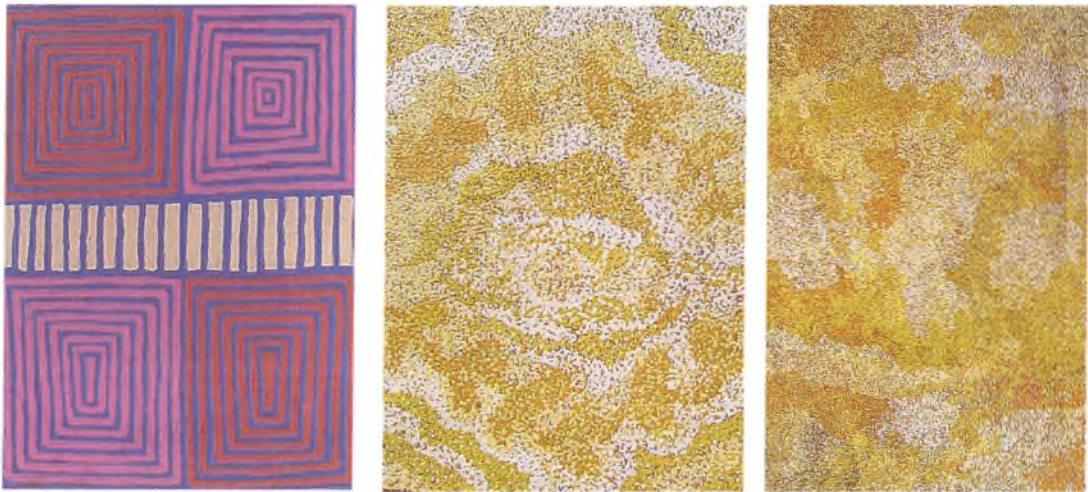


Figure 8.37. Theresa Nowee stylistic transformation 2003-2004

Significantly, when this proved to be a successful adaptation and Theresa started selling paintings more frequently, it, in turn was appropriated by the other sisters (fig 8.38). Although they didn’t claim to be painting ‘Parwalla’ specifically, they were clearly adapting, in culturally sanctioned processes, their auntie’s style. The conflict, Myers’ *differentiation*, was resolved not by Nyumi sharing more money, but by allowing or acceding to shared access to the exploitation of her greatest resource, her “style”. The conflict was not articulated in terms of money, but rather in the overarching discourse of Country. And it was likewise resolved.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ It is worth noting that I went through this case study with Brandy and his daughters before including it in this study. I was concerned that they may not want me to include this example of not recognising their family’s Country. Their response was an effusive affirmation that this needed to be in the thesis. Rather than seeing this process as an aberration in the family practice, they intuitively understood it for what it was, the true politics of painting Country.

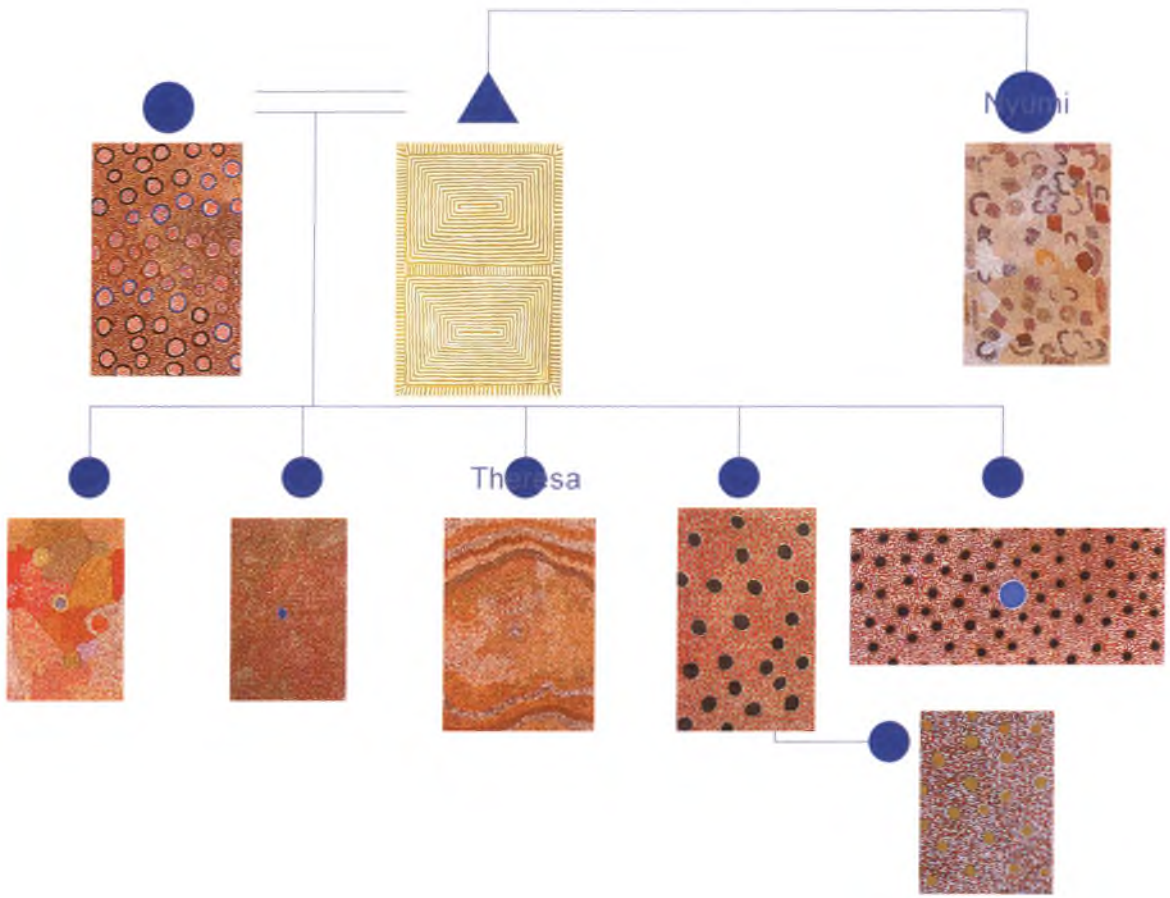


Figure 8.38. Brandy family takes Nyumi's style.

The ongoing recalibrations of sharing in the artistic economy - through style, labour and money – are daily acts of social reproduction in Balgo. In this example, style and money are translated through sharing into Country, or perhaps rather Country is translated into style and money through sharing. Either way, in this acrylic economy, not only cash is transacted, and not only paintings are created.

This analysis of Balgo painting styles- and the ways in which they are developed, transformed, transmitted and contested – reveals localised expressions of *walytja*; it illuminates the social life of 'art' through the motivated actions of individuals situated within the dynamic cooperative socio-economic units of contemporary life. Balgo art is not just a manifestation of values, of changing social groups, gender roles or recalibrations of authority and identity. These things are not merely made visible through Balgo art; they are, at least partially, produced, transformed and reproduced through it.

Balgo artists rarely say 'this is a painting of my Country', they tell us that this painting *is* their Country, and this analysis allows us to understand better what this might mean. Acrylic paintings are not representations of Country. What constitutes Country is, for contemporary Aboriginal artists, the same process that constitute painting Country. People share their painting money or style with the same people with whom they share their camp and other resources. While Balgo artists may no longer make their daily lives on their ancestral Country, they clearly continue to live through Country, to create the values and relations constitutive of Country through painting it. It is Country, and all it encompasses, that is elicited in the socio-economic practice of painting; it is Country that is created through the work of art.

Conclusion

Creating Country, Painting Balgo

In 1981 the public story of Balgo art began with the painting of the Luurnpa Banner. Twenty years later, the *Luurnpa Banner* was copied onto the outer wall of the new Warlayirti Artists building to honour its status as the progenitor of the contemporary painting movement (Figure 9.1). Yet Balgo paintings produced inside that art centre today seem, at first – through the processes of abstraction described herein - to be greatly removed from this aesthetic legacy. However, the abstraction that I observed in Balgo art suggests otherwise. Just as the senior men translated their Tjukurrpa into a new medium, and leveraged their Country into the changing landscape of cross-cultural exchange, so too have the artists that inherited their legacy. Through localised kin-based transmission of painting style and redistribution of artistic income, Balgo artists have painted themselves out of a post-colonial corner, recalibrating acrylic ‘Country’ as the customary basis of their economic autonomy in Balgo today.



Figure 9.1 Young Balgo men after reproducing the Luurnpa banner on the new Warlayirti Artists building, 2001. Photo Courtesy Tim Acker.

Some final reflections on the relationship between these creative processes and Balgo itself are in order here. Balgo is not Balgo. The name itself is a hangover from the site of the old mission, a possible mishearing of 'palkurr' - a type of grass (*Xerochloa laniflora*) the seeds of which are used for making damper (Valiquette 1993:181) – which may well have been what Father Alphonse was pointing at what he asked people what the name of the old mission site was. The new mission, where people relocated in the 1960s, was located on the path of the Luurnpa (kingfisher) Tjukurrpa. When the mission devolved in the 1980s the community was renamed *Wirrimanu* in accordance with these ancestral associations. But the name 'Balgo' has stuck, in popular usage and in relation to the art, and this is not without significance. Balgo is a new kind of place in the ecological, social and symbolic trajectories of desert life. In Chapter 1 quoted Ronald Berndt, the first Anthropologist to work at Balgo, at length:

The balance of traditional existence has been drastically upset. Practically speaking, for these people, survival is no longer conceptualised in traditional Aboriginal terms. The basis of their religious life and of the values manifested through it has been undermined, though not entirely. They are no longer dependent... notwithstanding the fact that some of them still believe they are- on the mythic beings and on what those mythic beings symbolically stood for: they are no longer directly dependent on their natural environment. And, except in retrospect, most of them are no longer Desert people (1972:212).

I return to this in conclusion, as a way of weaving a final, ecological thread into the social and historical story being told about Balgo art. It is no longer so clear, as perhaps it was starkly so to Berndt in the 1960s, that we can speak about Balgo people not being 'directly dependent on their natural environment.' People in Balgo live in permanent housing, drink their water from taps and buy the majority of their food from stores. The fact that these basic conditions of environmental dependency have been transferred to 'Balgo', however, requires that we find better ways of framing such places conceptually and analytically as an environment. For the vast majority of people in Balgo today, Balgo is the environment they were first socialised into. It is an environment structured by economic dependence. But it is an environment nonetheless.

Framing Balgo as an environment that people have adapted to, and that art has evolved within, renders more coherent the abstractions and stylistic differentiations explored herein. An archaeological perspective on art in environments is useful in adding a final adjustment to this interpretative frame. Smith (1989) argues – through the information-exchange theory of style – that where a body of motifs is seen to be fairly homogenous, as in Western Desert rock art, this reflects relatively open social networks that have evolved in response to environmental stress. According to such a theory, the closing of social networks in ecologically rich areas (such as Arnhem Land, for example) leads to localised differentiations in style; whereas those people in more arid environments who needed to share information over vast distances required a collective system of communication. If this is a basic ecological premise underpinning the archaeology of rock art, how then does this relate to art production in communities today? Has Balgo become like an ecologically rich enclave, where an efflorescence of stylistic differentiation has evolved out of a previously limited system? As demonstrated, the specific location of Balgo, based as it is on the fringe of the desert and the richer Kimberley ecology, encouraged the settlement of different peoples with varying artistic traditions. This undoubtedly underscored the diverse array of imagery available to artists in the early days of painting, but it is no longer a compelling explanation for the *kinds* of emergent variation found in Balgo today. Jestriek, an archaeologist, echoes Dussart (2000:209) in suggesting the kind of localised focus adopted in this thesis is a more productive way of approaching the social differentiations objectified in contemporary desert art:

regional differentiation may be rather related to a 'community' focus, that is, that differentiation becomes an expression of community values... If Aboriginal groups differentiated themselves from other groups in this way, artistic differences between communities may be associated with locality rather than dialect affiliation (Jestriek 1997:111).

The stylistic diversity of Balgo art undoubtedly has roots in the historical and cultural complexity of the Balgo population. It is also tied to the entwined cultural geography of its place at the fringes of the desert and Kimberley ecosystems. But what is driving that engine of diversity can no longer be identified as the cultural or linguistic differences of

people 'from' other places. People painting in Balgo today are, by and large, from *Balgo*. What drives them is a *shared* cultural orientation born of that shared geographic, social, historical and economic context. It is this that is expressed in the variegated styles of Balgo art, organised as painted Country, and it is this that brings us closer to understanding these variations in anthropological terms as the culturally coherent 'Style' of the Balgo people, no longer living in, but forever *through* their Country.

The Countries of contemporary art are not settled forms, but are resonant with the dialectical tensions of autonomy and relatedness, identification and differentiation, innovation and tradition. The abstractions of Balgo art are made possible by what Poirier identifies as the creative interplay of 'forms of permanence' and 'openness' which underpin the formidable adaptive and creative capacities of desert people. Just as the 'openness of Tjukurrpa itineraries allows for spatial and temporal transformations and reinterpretations' of narratives (Poirier 2005:86), so too has it allowed Balgo people to transform and reinterpret the very place of narrative within the artistic system. The Tjukurrpa is not an enduring edifice, however much it is presented as so. It persists because it changes.

The same could be argued for Country. The Country that emerges today is no longer simply the iconographic depiction of the *ngurra* of ancestral sites, nor is it only an expression of *ngurra* as residential or kin relations. 'Ngurra is not only the human creation of "camp"', Myers reminds us, 'but also the Dreaming creation of "country"' (Myers 1986: 55). As people have come to 'camp' in Balgo somewhat permanently, the difference between a place where people camp and enduring, named places becomes more ambiguous. Or rather, perhaps, the two become increasingly conflated. Arrayed as marks around the rockholes of contemporary art, the polysemic modulations of *ngurra* as a site of residential relations, ancestral meaning and the land itself are all held in dynamic and beguiling tensions. These abstractions are a range of personal, familial, historical and economic reconfigurations of the meanings of Country as place, as Tjukurrpa, as home.

'Country' is, among other things, an objectification of relationships between people who 'camp' together. Balgo is full of such 'camps', but it is also now, after 60 years of continuous habitation, a named and enduring place. Perhaps, like *Wirrimanu*, it *is* Country.

I began by stating that it is not possible to understand Balgo art outside of the contexts of the ecological and economic disembedding of desert people. Likewise, we can't understand Balgo art today without re-embedding those people, and their economic practices, into some kind of coherent human ecology or environment. That environment, then, is not the desert rockholes and sandhills, but Balgo the community; intersected as it is by private, church and state interests, by diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups and the values they share and seek to reproduce. Balgo is where people dwell (Poirier, 2004, 2005); a conditioning environment that shapes idea and practice, a place out of which Country continues to form and transform. Balgo is where people camp, where they eat, where they hunt, forage, share and avoid sharing. Balgo is where people paint. And in this my interpretation of Balgo art stretches into territory wherein it is possible to understand the Country of contemporary acrylic canvases, despite the discursive depiction of desert camps, ancestral presences and named places, as an objectification of Balgo.

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