Touch is a subtle element of everyday life in Kutjungka culture which has affected me both during fieldwork in the Balgo area in 1992–3, and on subsequent trips to visit senior women with whom I worked. \(^2\) From a funeral held in Billiluna in mid-1997 the memory of the coffin of a middle-aged woman is still strong—a coffin ritually stroked by the gum-leaf tips held in our hands, and embraced by the arms of distraught relatives as we wailed her spirit to the grave. On Christmas Eve in 1992 the sight of a lone mother pushing a child in a pram stood out as an unusual physical alienation amid the familiar closeness of children held in their relatives’ arms. During my fieldwork I was continually touched and touching as I sat talking with women or walked with partially sighted women through the camps. The element of touch was so ever present that when I finished my fieldwork and came back to Canberra, there was a void around my body when those women were no longer in physical contact with me.

Towards an aesthetic of Balgo contemporary painting

That’s right. When you put your hand into the earth, all that power from the ancestors and their kumpu (urine, body fluid) comes right up into your hand. (Accompanying gesture to a paint same way up her forearm.)

Ivy Robertson Mapangarti
Malun, May 1997

Introduction

An index finger rests on the surface of the painting, tracing the path of ancestors through the land. The artist tells the story of their travels. This is a recurring image in texts on Aboriginal art from the desert, both alongside text on the printed page, and particularly in films where artists explain their works to an (unseen) audience. \(^1\)

Touch is a subtle element of everyday life in Kutjungka culture which has affected me both during fieldwork in the Balgo area in 1992–3, and on subsequent trips to visit senior women with whom I worked. \(^2\) From a funeral held in Billiluna in mid-1997 the memory of the coffin of a middle-aged woman is still strong—a coffin ritually stroked by the gum-leaf tips held in our hands, and embraced by the arms of distraught relatives as we wailed her spirit to the grave. On Christmas Eve in 1992 the sight of a lone mother pushing a child in a pram stood out as an unusual physical alienation amid the familiar closeness of children held in their relatives’ arms. During my fieldwork I was continually touched and touching as I sat talking with women or walked with partially sighted women through the camps. The element of touch was so ever present that when I finished my fieldwork and came back to Canberra, there was a void around my body when those women were no longer in physical contact with me.

Wayne Barton’s film Balgo Art (1991) is one example.

Kutjungka is a term used to convey common cultural usages over the different language groups in the Balgo region. Kutjungka means ‘one’, and -ngka is a suffix meaning ‘at’ or ‘on’.
Wakaninpa

For example the names of the ancestors means 'poking, as in painting sites on the Nakarra Dreaming track in Ngarti visual forms of their (ancestral power) designs (Watson 1996: 123).

Balgo—the place, its history and cultural make-up

From a European point of view Balgo is extremely remote and, like some other communities in the area, has a palpably exotic character as a result of its late contact by European Australia. At the same time it is internationally celebrated for its art, and a number of artists are household names to art enthusiasts from Europe to America.

From the Kutjungka point of view, Balgo, or Wirrimanu as it is more properly called, stands on the landscape (geographical) Dreaming track in an area much trafficked by ancestral beings. It is a ceremonial hub for the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley and western desert. While it struggles to come to terms with the ways of the Kartiya (white) world, Balgo is deeply involved with contemporary routine title issues and with communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

European Australian presence in the region began with sporadic visits by explorers such as Sir Augustus Charles Gregory, who in 1855 travelled down Sturt’s Creek and discovered Gregory’s Gap Lake near present day Malan. He was followed in 1872 by Peter Warburton who journeyed from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean, passing some forty kilometres south of the present-day Balgo community (Cane 1970: 142–5).

While the role of touch in Kutjungka sand drawing was self-evident, one of the most lingering challenges posed during my fieldwork has been the local conception that painting on canvas—wakaninpa—is a matter of poking.3 In one sense, it is not surprising that the original medium of inscription, the tactically painting sand, should linger in contemporary terminology for the medium. But the choice of a word meaning ‘poking’ is an assertion of a three-dimensionality that does not coincide with the European-conception of painting as applying pigment to a two-dimensional surface.

Touching spans a huge field of sensory input which cannot be compartmentalised as belonging to one sense only. Tactile physical contact communicates information on the size, shape, temperature, and texture of objects. The action of tapping or beating a stick on the surface of the land cannot be separated from the sound this makes, any more than stepping the feet on the ground in dance can be separated from the resulting sound vibrations. Subtle vibratory information about the location or movement of other living beings in the environment is received through millions of sensitive receptors in the skin as well as by auditory mechanisms in the ear (Rodaway 1994: 42–50). Information inscribed in or received from touch may also embody or be transferred through auditory means (Kenny 1994). Aboriginal conceptualisations from the Yuendumu and Balgo regions confirm the multi-sensual nature of mark making. In Warlpiri conceptualisation the object world is both verbally and visually constituted.

Visual marks are held to contain sonic information: the word wakaninpa ‘marks’, ‘names’, or ‘songs’ (Munn 1970: 142–5). Although Kutjungka culture holds to the Indian Ocean, passing some forty kilometres south of the present-day Balgo community (Cane 1989: 3). In the closing decades of the century European occupation started to push at the Jaru and Gidja people to the north of Balgo, through the establishment of cattle stations in the Kimberley and the discovery of gold in the Halls Creek area, some 280 kilometres north of Balgo. In 1906 Alfred Canning travelled through the lands of the Walmajarri and Wikangkujka to the west and south west of Balgo to find a route for moving cattle to southern markets. The subsequent droving of large mobs of cattle down this corridor, and the fencing off of water points made it virtually impossible for the Walmajarri and Wikangkujka to continue living in their country. Although as yet largely unseen, Europeans were beginning to impact more strongly on the Njarrji and Kutjungka people of the Balgo area by 1915. In 1916 people sighted an aircraft passing overhead. European trade goods may well have been arriving in the area by this time, and on the ground the Njarrji and Kutjungka had to accommodate neighbour-having linguistic groups who had been displaced from their hunting grounds by Europeans.

Most of the senior women with whom I work, now of an average age of sixty, encountered Kartija for the first time in the early 1940s when they were between ten and fifteen years old. Their early memories are of intermittent warfare over rights to consume introduced stock, and of male relatives who did so, or were accused of doing so, being marched in neck chains to Halls Creek or Alice Springs. Catholic missionaries who set up in the mid-1930s at Rockhole just outside Halls Creek, and from 1939 further south, were often asked to intervene between Aboriginal people, pastoralists and police. People from the Kukatja, Walmajarri, and Wikangkujka language groups were among the first to come to live more permanently at the Balgo Mission in the late 1940s. They were followed later in that decade and in the 1950s by the Njarrji, Jaru, and Warlpiri. In the early days of the mission until the late 1950s when it became heavily institutionalised, the Kutjungka were able to combine a life of visiting the mission, staying out in their traditional lands, or working in varying capacities on pastoral stations, at the same time maintaining their ceremonies. The members of the senior generation of Balgo elders have thus grown up with a traditional education base, which they now balance with the thought-world and ways of Ka r t i y a —ways which are often as unclear to them as Kutjungka ways are to Kartiya.

Land and humans as sentient bodies

Kutjungka conceptualisations, like those documented by Munn for their Warlpiri neighbours (1970, 1973, 1986), offer a complex and rich outlook on the world and the place of human beings within it. To Kutjungka people, wa l y a (the earth, dirt, sand, or ground) is saturated with gender symbolism and the bodies, power, bodily fluids and songs of ancestral beings. The surface of the land is both male and female. Landform elements, from tiny mounds of earth made by ants to plants, trees, rock holes, creek beds, and major hills are gendered depending on their shape and their involvement with the actions of the ancestors. The bodies of the Dreamtime heroes, male and female, animal and human, are present within the land at sacred sites. According to Lewis and Rose, these sites and the ancestors are one and the same living, conscious entity (1988: 47). The transformed bodily fluids and excreta of ancestral beings present in the earth at these sites infuse the land with their power.6 Also present within the earth in the form of vibrations are the names and songs of the ancestors. The depths of the earth are thought of as female, a mother to the people living on it and the final destination of the life forces of ancestral beings.

3 Wakaninpa means ‘poking, as in painting dots, originally in sand’ (Berrene et al. 1993: 5–6). It is a woman’s word (fama Napanangkura, pers comm). 4 For example the names of sites on the Nakarra Nakarra (Eleven Sisterns) Dreaming track in Ngarti and Kukatja lands near Balgo moods the basic visual forms of their ancestors’ (ancestral power) designs (Watson 1986: 123).

5 The Catholic mission of Balgo has moved several times in its history in response to factors such as the availability of water.

6 For example, a white sand ring site in the west of Lake Mackay was formed from the wurl of the ancestral dogs (painting documentation in Cane 1994: 90).
and generations of people who have died in the area (cf Rose 1992: 42, 58).

The Kutjungka, like their Warlpiri neighbours (see Munn 1970: 148), compare the forms of the landscape and of the sky to the forms of the human body. Trees with cunform foliage are called ngaprul, which is the main word used for breasts. The word muurpa is used for a ridge or a person’s back. Caves (kunpa) are likened to words (cf Rose 1992: 42), while the concave surface of the underside of clouds is called tjurrpi, which in the human body is the stomach or womb (Bälizørre 1993: 101).

In his book At Home in the World, Michael Jackson states that the Warlpiri make a specific connection between the belly and waterholes or sacred sites as places which generate and sustain life, “in terms of internal, visceral physiology and not just in terms of external anatomy” (Jackson 1995, quoted in Mcdonald 1998: 27). During my own fieldwork, I was struck by the significance that one of the ceremonially experienced younger women gave to designs which are engraved in the land at a place not far from Balgo and which are similar to women’s body paintings. She seemed to be saying not just that the designs are similar, but that it is important that the designs are located in the land. Similarly, a recently deceased western Kimberley elder collapsed the distinction between the human body and rocks. He described both body painting for ceremonies and the renewal of painted images on rock as acts of repainting to achieve energetic recharging (Mowlarjarlai 1992: 8).

In the Balgo region, as in Warlpiri and Pirlantjatjara countries to the south, Dreaming ancestors have been metaphorised into rocks in certain parts of the landscape. The main boulders of The Granites, a formation in the Tanami Desert some 150 kilometres south east of Balgo, are the bodies of the Jangampa (possum) ancestor. Two of the rocks on the north west side of the main formation are said to be female, the grooves and depression in the rocks being compared to the nipples and pouch within the female ancestor’s body.

Thus the land, to Kutjungka people, is very much alive and embalmed, though not very near place within it is physically charged with the bodies and power of the ancestors. Some places are neutral and can be used as hunting grounds (or for mining) while others cannot. Some places however have harmful or dangerous power because of negative ancestral actions that took place there in the Dreamtime. Kutjungka notions of the land as embodied and as embodying ancestral beings at specific sites hold consequences for the way in which Kutjungka touch the earth.

Surfaces of the land, rocks, and humans as skin

While the transformation of designs from one medium to another in desert Australian iconography has been noticed by a number of writers (see Daldalikas & Tronvæk 1984: 27; Dussart 1997: 101) it is significant that local Aboriginal people also appear to be making parallels between the media on which designs are made. In the Balgo area, the surface of the land is likened to the skin of the body. This analogy is apparent at a number of points in a recent book by six of the senior Balgo women titled Yarnj (Wapulajumpa et al. 1993). Yarnj acts as a primary source since its text has been written down directly from the words of its six authors, who collaged the 700 illustrations in the volume and designed the layout. Within the book we see a woman with bundles of lines running down her breasts to the nipples painting to a painting of similar groups of lines leading to a waterhole (p. 68). On other pages the lines formed by dancers’ feet on the surface of the ground are visually compared to the designs on the dancers’ bodies (pp. 32–3, 64–5).

Before the coming of Europeans and the adoption of clothing, the skin of human beings was an organ that was open to the emotional bond, to the emotional bond which exists between surfaces and our world.

The role of touch in the Kutjungka image making system

Kutjungka image making is a system of putting marks on the ground and on the bodies of human beings. While previous researchers have concentrated on the icons with which the ground is marked, or on the conceptual importance of footprints within these systems (Munn 1986: 137; Keen 1995: 510–18), I would like to dwell for a moment on the significance of touch as the means by which icons are registered within those surfaces. Kutjungka people highlight touching in the terms they use for their image making practices: there is a rich vocabulary referring to the different actions involved, and it is both varied and specific, reflecting the nuances of each action described.

Secular sand drawing—walkula or wakula—is predominantly conceived of as piercing the ground, though ripples of earth can also be built up, for example to indicate plies of flood cooking in a fire. In women’s practice of walkula, they press a sand-drawing stick on their bodies before beginning (Dalgarter 1993: 315), thus visually connecting the body and the skin of the body with the land and its ‘skirt’. Walkula is predominantly a ‘secular’ medium through there are aspects of its ceremoniality and practice that are linked with the Yurratji (Dreaming). Walkula is used in storytelling to show
children how to hunt, gather, or cook bush food, to teach them how to behave in important social situations, or about things that happened to their family members in the past. Wikkaloo stories shared between adults tell of events in their everyday lives, their plans, or memories.

A second style of sand drawing called milpa-pungin in Kukatja and mirntulypuwa in Ngarti and Walmajarri, uses a curved stick called milpa to ritually beat the surface of the ground.[62] This process involves the production of sound as the ground is struck, as well as through verbal commentary by the narrator.[63] Mirntulypuwa is connected with the Kukatja term mimintjulypuwa, or mimintjulyumpi, meaning ‘to crack the joints’ or ‘to stick the fingers’ (Kulicke 1993: 97). These terms also suggest the articulation of differing realms, which are enacted through these image making practices.

In Kurunwarri (anodneral power) sand drawing, the ground is pierced and raised in the same ways as in ordinar sand drawing. The difference between the two is in the intentions of the mark-makers and the nature of the marks made in each case. The Kurunjka say that drawing in sand allows each gender to communicate restricted information without it being overheard by members of the other gender. Kurunwarri sand drawing is ‘special’, an ‘important one’ which is used to tell the deeds of ancestors who are very dear to the Kutjungka. The Kurunjka word for sand drawing is ‘special’, an ‘important one’ which is used to tell the deeds of ancestors who are very dear to the Kutjungka. The Kurunjka experience kurunwarri designs as vibrating with the power of ancestral beings, and say that these symbols are the ancestors. In repeating on the ground the same marks as the ancestors formed when they metamorphosed their bodies in the land, the Kurunjka people link themselves with the ancestors and their powers. Milpa-pungin, the beating of the earth with the milpa stick, is also part of restricted sand drawing, articulating the realm of human beings with that of ancestors beneath the earth.

An elaborate form of Kurunwarri sand drawing, similar to ground constructions made by Warlipiri and Anmatyerre peoples using plant down, is also practiced in the Balgo area by both men and women. The Kurunjka apply sands of different colours onto a base, usually of red sand, and, in the case of women, also incorporate objects such as coconuts, ceremonial sticks and insect/brack.12 It is clear from sites such as Yarulkuypartjapir in the Gravine, where the images have been ponded over the surface of the rock (Brahm A Mullaney 1995: 39), that images were sometimes made through extremely strong forms of touching. There are also a small number of rock painting sites within the Balgo region, such as Ngarmalu which was originally a men’s painting site but has been opened to use by the whole community for some decades.13 The type of touch used in making the images at Ngarmalu is more gentle, consistent with other forms of painting in Kurunjka culture.

Women’s body painting (nyirrti) is conceived of as an marking or painting in the form of kurunwarri designs over the surface of the body. The Walmajarri use the word marnpa, meaning to ‘spread a soft substance or dab paint’ (Richards & Hudson 1990: 139). Men may be painted with ochre designs, but also use plant down coloured with ochres applied to the surface of the body.[64] Dubinskas and Traweek make the point that central desert body painting designs ‘reproduce the shape and shadow of the furnaces and resulting adjacent ridges that are made when marking the ground [eg with a frond]’ and in this way establish a correspondence between the human body and the earth (1984: 27).

Cicatrisation (Amurula) was traditionally an important part of the Kurunjka marking system, appearing on the bodies of both men and women. The sides of the wound were drawn apart and animal fat, charcoal, sand or a combination of these substances was put inside in order to promote the cicatrisation of raised scars (Hurley 1994: 195, 1999: 368). Men’s scars are said to show that they are warriors, hunters, family men, ceremonially experienced, and that they ‘always do the right thing’ and are ‘on the right track’. Women had to go ‘the hard way’ too, and were cicatrizated during women’s ceremonies held at the same time that their sons or nephews were cicatrizated during their initiation into varying levels of men’s Law. Although cicatrization may appear violent in its severing of the skin, the Kurunjka women compare the action of cicatrizating the body with the action of drawing in the ground to tell stories.

To Westeners, contemporary painting is something which makes us more able to relate to the artistic excellence displayed by desert Aboriginal people, but to Kutjungka people painting has been part of their cultural world for generations. For them it primarily fits within that world rather than within a Western ‘Art’ category which places paintings on walls for artistic contemplation. Painting is another of the image making practices which the Kutjungka conceive of as piecing or poking the medium on which it is executed: the similarly of canvas or canvas to them to a flexible skin means that painting on these media is similarly conceptualised. Balgo women artists frequently used body painting designs in their early paintings (see the painting illustrated in Ryan & Akerman 1993: 94), and to some extent body painting designs continue to be included within paintings by both male and female artists in the Balgo region.[14]

Qualities of touching

I would like for a moment to recount some memories of sand drawing sessions in which I took part and say a little about ceremony, to impart the atmosphere of those experiences. A number of women taught me about sand drawing, but the most memorable was an elderly Mandjilybara-Pintupi woman who passed away in 1997. Nungurrayi would lower herself gently to the ground, something which was difficult at her age, and clear the ground of debris—small sticks and stones and wisps of grass that would get in the way of her fingers as she drew. Some time later I realised that the women would do exactly the same thing when they went to the Women’s Centre where their dance regalia and sacred objects are held. There they would clean the area of words that had grown up since the time of their last visit, and sweep the floors inside to prepare everything. Still later, as I perused my photos while writing my thesis, I felt something that at first was intangible, but which I have begun to think of as a kind of sacred communion, in the way in which Nungurrayi held her hand over the earth as she marked it, surface, or with the palm of the hand, or to ‘hit, kill, cause sickness’, or to feel or tap the muscles of a sick person with the palm of the hand.[10]
It is customary for outsiders living in Aboriginal communities to be adopted into local kinship systems. This places them within the community, defines their relationships and responsibilities to the Balgo region. Ngarti and Kukatja women believe that men should not see women's body-painting designs on canvas. Walmapajarri and Wungkajungka men and women jointly held body-painting designs in two lines to indicate a band of ancestral women who had metamorphosed into hills in the Balgo area. It was immensely exciting: I had never seen such designs made in the sand before, and there was something in Napanangka's manner which suggested that she was doing something unusual, about which she had to be very careful. When we had finished, she locked around, and quickly erased the markings so that the man who lived in the house a few yards away wouldn't see anything out of the ordinary when he came back for lunch. Views on this subject vary in the Balgo region. Ngarl and Kukatja women believe that men should not see women's kuruwarri and vice versa, and that men and women should not paint each other's kuruwarri designs on canvas. Walmapajarri and Wungkajungka men and women jointly held their groups' kuruwarri designs and work together to paint them on canvas. For the Kutjungka, touching is part of sacred practice. It is important in Yawulyu (women's ceremony), when women stroke sacred objects and ceremonial sculpture. Touching has also been imported into Kutjungka Catholicism. At Easter time in April 1993, members of the congregation came up to the front of the church to a painting of the Stations of the Cross by some of the younger men of the community. They followed Christ's path from the Last Supper to the resurrection with their fingers on the calico. Their whole being, from head to foot, exuded what I can only call blissful love—love for ceremony, love for the ancestors, for the Dreaming, for the land, and at that moment, as far as I could see, for everything else. The touch which is involved in contemporary painting may or may not be overtly sacred, depending on whether the painting is a mangori (food), that is, a secular painting, or a painting of the deeds of the ancestors and their metamorphosis into sites in the land. Ultimately however, the secular and the sacred are part of the same thing. One day I sat with Nungunayarri as she painted a kuruwarri painting of Tiwana, her uncle's place on the wall kutjarra (two mm) Dreaming track. Nungunayarri sang from the song cycle as she drew the major design elements of the kuruwarri. Then she stopped singing and called upon a woman who was her classificatory granddaughter to draw in the lesser design elements. Fortunately or unfortunately it is hard for European Australians and others born of the West to recognise canvases which have been sung over to imbue them with the power of the ancestors, and the painting languished at the Art Centre for some months before it was finally sold.

The practice of touching: Visual reflections in contemporary paintings

In many ways Balgo contemporary painting echoes the physical practices of marking the ground in sand drawing, and painting on the body or on sacred sites in the land. Ultimately however, the secular and the sacred are part of the same thing. One day I sat with Nungunayarri as she painted a kuruwarri painting of Tiwana, her uncle's place on the wall kutjarra (two mm) Dreaming track. Nungunayarri sang from the song cycle as she drew the major design elements of the kuruwarri. Then she stopped singing and called upon a woman who was her classificatory granddaughter to draw in the lesser design elements. Fortunately or unfortunately it is hard for European Australians and others born of the West to recognise canvases which have been sung over to imbue them with the power of the ancestors, and the painting languished at the Art Centre for some months before it was finally sold.
Dempsey, who took over the management of the ‘painting business’ from Warwick Nieass, and organised the community’s artistic debut at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1986–7, said that people were always asking for sticks to paint with. Brother Nic Bilich, one of the staff assisting the preparation of the exhibition, remembered that the artists would pull the bristles off paintbrushes and use the blunt ends to place their dots. A solution to the waste of brushes emerged: the artists started to use wooden surgical sticks from the clinic. A bundle of these thin sticks is still routinely given to the artists along with one thin and one thicker paintbrush. To this day, few artists paint their whole canvases with paintbrushes since it is hard to make the bristles behave in the same way as a stick which is gently poked or dabbed onto the surface of the canvas. Lucy Yukenbarri is one of the few people who have mastered the technique. To sit with her as she paints is to participate in the atmosphere of softness created as she quietly plies her brush. This quality is carried through her gestures into the visual qualities of the paint surface she lays down, for example in Purrpunpa soak in the Great Sandy Desert [6.5].

The Kutjungka aesthetic does not generally put an emphasis on soft edges or painterliness, though it often evidences an interest in the textures of the ground. Works by Eubena Nampitjin, Tommy and Millie Skeen, and Bridget Mudgidell often contain grainy textures suggestive of stones on the ground or of low-growing vegetation. Sometimes the texturing is subtle, as in Tommy Skeen’s Mangali in the Great Sandy Desert [6.8], and in Elizabeth Nyumi’s Purra near Kiwirrkura [6.9]. These paintings show a softness in the surface of the land which is also captured in photographs of the local area (cf Napanangka et al. 1997: 32, 41).

Balgo paintings are characterised by fluidity of line, produced by artists trained in making marks in the sand. Numerous works in the Kluge–Ruhe Collection show this ‘calligraphic’ beauty. Donkeyman Lee Tjapurrula’s Yati Yati Tjarlpa west of Lake Mackay [6.9], Tjapoa Tjapawururu’s Kangaroo Dreaming at Lake Mackay [6.8], Eubena Nampitjin’s Tjalajulu rockhole [6.10], Fred Takamarra’s Nunjan in the Great Sandy Desert [6.11], and Murtha Nungurrayi’s Willywilmarra in the Great Sandy Desert [6.12] are all examples of such draughtsmanship.

The variety of linear forms in Balgo paintings also reflects a freedom in icon production characteristic of the graphic tradition of the area. Unlike the Warlpiri graphic system where a small number of icons is used to produce myriad meanings, in the Balgo graphic system a myriad of icons, ranging from abstract to more naturalistic, can be used to represent a single form in nature. The marks made on canvas by the artists reflect the individuality of their styles in sand drawing (Watson 1996: 73–86, 171).

Sand drawing is an active process, a poking of the surface layer of the ground. The sand is hollowed out as the finger or twig makes an indentation, and becomes raised at the edge of the dot or line to form a ridge. Both walkala and milpa-pungin public sand drawing may be accompanied by ritualised singing. In milpa-pungin, the action of poking the ground with the fingers is orchestrated into striking an arc-shaped stick on the surface of the ground. This is an action of some force that generates vibrations in the physical matter of the earth. Beating, stamping and striking actions seem to be significant for Kutjungka people: they occur in ceremonial dancing as well as in sand drawing. The aesthetic qualities of some Balgo paintings are a visual counterpart to the striking movement. In Nancy Naninurra’s Mina-Mina ceremonies at Kimayi [6.13], rows of dotting radiate out from

6.4 Mick Gill applying dots to a painting with a stick. Photo: Warwick Nieass

6.5 Lucy Yukenbarri Purrpunpa soak in the Great Sandy Desert 1996 1996.0028.002 Acrylic on canvas 60 x 90 cm Unlike most Balgo artists Lucy Yukenbarri uses a paintbrush to apply the paint to the surface of her canvases. The visual qualities of this painting reflect the softness of her gestures as she works.
6.6 Tommy Skeen
*Manga Manga in the Great Sandy Desert*
1997
1996.0028.034
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 50 cm
The visual and tactile characteristics of the ground and vegetation at Manga Manga are subtly reflected in the surface texture of Tommy Skeen’s painting.

6.7 Elizabeth Nyumi
*Purra near Kiwirrkura*
1997
1996.0026.038
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 50 cm
In her painting Elizabeth Nyumi captures the softness of the surface of the land.
Balgo artists first learn their calligraphic skills through making sand drawings. The characteristic fluidity of line seen in this and the following paintings (6.10–13) reflects the artists’ original training.

Although the direct reference of this painting is to the land, these lines are reminiscent of Wangkajungka women’s body painting.
The dramatic lines of this painting depict the repeated crack of thunder and lightning evoked by rain-making ceremonies.

The spacing of the icons in different planes evokes the three-dimensionality of sand drawing.
wands held by the women in ceremony, suggesting that they are being struck on the ground as the women dance. Bai Bai’s painting of Timnor (Stansmore Range) [6.14] has a similarly kinetic energy in its depiction of an old man watching the Seven Sisters approach, singing and dancing as they go.

Kurunma (restricted sand drawings) are said by the Kutjungka to be active, radiating with the potency of the ancestors. Balgo art is a bold, powerful, and intensely alive art which shimmers with ancestral power. This power is communicated through dotting and outlining rather than through the crosshatching technique used in Arnhem Land. Paintings with banded rows of dots or compounded roundels have a vibrancy in some ways comparable with the reflection of light on a skin painted up with animal fat or oil (see Napanangka et al. 1997: 72–3). The work of artists like Margaret Anjullu [6.15], Johnny Gordon Downs, Bai Bai Napangarti, Fred Tjakamarra and Sam Tjampijilin are redolent with this power of the Dreaming.17 The ‘touch’ in these artists’ works is a visual rather than a physical vibrancy which is received both by the eyes and by the body. As Dobinsons and Trasew (1984) have pointed out, the shape and shadows of the flames and ridges of completed sand-drawing designs are reproduced in designs painted on the body. Sand drawing icons on the ground are often distinctly hard-edged, reflecting strong shadows at particular times of the day (6.4) and see Napanangka et al. 1997: front cover, 20, 39, 144). When translated into body painting, the body is usually a very gentle one. This gentleness of touch is found over and over in Balgo paintings, is adapted from sand drawing and body painting. Icons in Balgo painting are often marked from or greatly contrasted with the colour of the background, as in Richard Tax’s Wati Ajarra at Kurult in the Great Sandy Desert [6.16].18 Balgo artists’ interest in pigment is often connected with the look of ochres applied on the human body. The visual effect of body painting is enlivened by the shimmering brilliance of fat or oil applied to the skin underneath the ochres (cf Napanangka et al. 1997: 72–3). The subtly glowing colours in Tjama Napanangka’s painting, Women’s ceremony for yams and bush tomatoes [6.17], reflect the aesthetic qualities of sunlight on body painting.

Ochres used in body painting or to decorate sacred objects take on a powdery appearance over time, and the recurring use of chalky pigments in Balgo painting reflects this process. In the mid- to late 1980s, paintings often contained large areas of milky white dotting, while white overly layes were routinely painted over expanses of blue or black to indicate the milky water of Sturt Creek and Gregory Salt Lake. To European eyes the varying coverage of background colours in these paintings is somewhat amateurish, and at times in the history of Balgo art it has been suppressed in favour of aesthetic effects more pleasing to Kartiya. Boxer Billilund’s Lake Gregory [6.18] and Boxer Miller’s Wirrimangurru Lake [6.19] are recent paintings that use white overpainting on a broad scale. In other paintings like Millie Sreen’s Lirrawati in the Great Sandy Desert [6.20], the chalky quality of pigment in some areas of the canvas is similar to body painting marks with their redolence of touched ochre.19

Walya, the earth, is very dear to Kutjungka people. The bodies of relatives are very dear when they are painted up. The touch that the artists use to make marks on the skin of the ground and the skins of people is usually a very gentle one. This gentleness of touch is found over and over in Balgo paintings,
8.14
Bai Bai Napangarti
Yinurr
(Stansmore Ranges)
1992
1996.0017.002
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 60 cm
An old man watches the Seven Sisters approach, stamping their feet as they dance. The sense of kinetic energy evoked by the painting echoes the actions of the dance.

8.15
Margaret Anjullu
Women’s Dreamings of the Tanami Desert 2
1997
1996.0028.037
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 60 cm
The vibrancy of the visual effect produced by the dotting and outlining in this painting conveys the potency of the Dreaming ancestors.
In body paintings, fat or oil is applied to the skin before the designs in ochre, in order to make the finished painting glow. The aesthetic quality of sunlight on body painting is captured in this work by Tjama Napangka.

In many Balgo paintings, icons or symbols are outlined with bands of dotting so that they stand out in contrast to the background, as in this work by Richard Tax. The technique is adapted from sand drawing and body painting.
in the work of artists such as Alan Windaroo [6.21], Boxer Milner [6.19], and Jimmy Njamme [6.22]. At times the gentle quality of the pigment used in these paintings can best be described as a softness, a loveliness that is the visual counterpart of the communion between human beings and land which takes place in touching the land in ceremony and ceremonial dancing.

20 Other artists whose work displays this quality are: Euthenia Nampitjin, Tommy Skeen, Milie Skeen, Tjana Napanangka, Johnny Mosquito, Albert Green, and Sarah Napanangka.

6.19 Boxer Milner Wirrimanguru Lake 1997 1996.0028.036 Acrylic on canvas 90 x 60 cm

In this and the previous painting (6.18) a white overlay is used to indicate the milky colour of the lake water. This technique has been suppressed from time to time because the result may not accord with Western aesthetics.
Kutjungka venerate their land. Those emotions find their visual counterpart in the gentle quality of the pigments used in this and the following painting (6.22).
Conclusion

I hope that this essay, in dwelling on the importance of touching the land—the ground of Kutjungka being—will enable gallery goers to move through a room of Balgo paintings in a different way, to start feeling the paintings through the sense receptors of their skin, sensing the qualities of touch and the qualities of emotion which are recorded in the paintings, as well as using their eyes to pick out the symbols and their minds to process their interpretations.

The international art market is well known for its appetite for new and innovative works. Much of the time, Balgo artists are painting from their repertoire of sites, or painting about ancestral beings dancing in ceremonies for which they are custodians. These paintings visually reiterate the ancestral power designs for these sites, thus keeping them alive and constantly before the eyes of their families. I hope that my account of the Kutjungka world will serve to open viewers’ eyes to aesthetic elements of Balgo paintings which cannot be explained in terms of Western experience, and which have therefore tended to be overlooked.

Though Balgo artists, both young and old, often produce secular paintings, Balgo art is predominantly the art of the Kutjungka elders: a religious art practised to retain traditional religious knowledge as well as to obtain financial gains. In Australia it is often said that Aboriginal art is ‘spiritual’, but few writers explain what this might mean. Though it contains few recognisable human figures, Balgo art, with its optical brilliance and evocatively soft touch, is comparable, for me, to devotional art from the European painting tradition, and which have therefore tended to be overlooked.

Though Balgo artists, both young and old, often produce secular paintings, Balgo art is preeminently the art of the Kutjungka elders: a religious art practised to retain traditional religious knowledge as well as to obtain financial gains. In Australia it is often said that Aboriginal art is ‘spiritual’, but few writers explain what this might mean. Though it contains few recognisable human figures, Balgo art, with its optical brilliance and evocatively soft touch, is comparable, for me, to devotional art from the European painting tradition, and which have therefore tended to be overlooked.

References

Barber, M. 1991, Balgo Art (video-recording), Gunada Productions, Broome.

Carr, S. 1989, Return to the Desert, Report to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Wirrimanu Aboriginal Council, National Heritage Studies, Hat, ACT.


