

6

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Touching the land

6.1

Nungurrayi making track marks in sand.

Photo: Christine Watson

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 point some way up her forearm.]

*Ivy Robertson Napangarti
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.

¹ Wayne Barker's film *Balgo Art* (1991) is one example.

² Kutjungka is a term used to convey common cultural usages over the different language groups in the Balgo region. *Kutju* means 'one', and *-ngka* is a suffix meaning 'at' or 'on'.

³ *Wakaninpa* means 'poking, as in painting dots, originally in sand' (Greene *et al.* 1993: 51). It is a woman's word (Tjama Napanangka, pers comm).

⁴ For example the names of sites on the Nakarra Nakarra (Seven Sisters) Dreaming track in Ngarti and Kukatja lands near Balgo encode the basic visual forms of their *kuruwarri* (ancestral power) designs (Watson 1996: 123).

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 haptically yielding 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 stamping 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 sense 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 reawaken dormant memories (Seremetakis 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 *jiri* means 'marks', 'names', or 'songs' (Munn 1970: 142–5). Although Kutjungka culture holds to the same conceptualisation, I focus in this essay on touching and how it is evident in the aesthetic qualities of contemporary Balgo paintings.⁴ I discuss the physicality of the media in which icons are embedded, and the modes of touching which are used by the Kutjungka in making images. I survey the

surface of the land which is marked both in public and restricted or *kuruwarri* (ancestral power) sand drawing as well as by the feet of dancers in ceremony; the surfaces of rocks which are painted or grooved; and the skin of the body which is coated with *kuruwarri* designs for ceremony. In addition to being painted with ceremonial designs the skin of the human body is permanently marked with cicatrices that give information about an individual's ceremonial status, and with scars that indicate the death of loved ones.

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 *luurnpa* (kingfisher) 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 native 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 Creek and 'discovered' Gregory Salt Lake near present day Malun. 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

1989: 3).⁵ 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 Wangkajungka 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 Wangkajungka to continue living in their country. Although as yet largely unseen, Europeans were beginning to impact more strongly on the Ngarti and Kukatja people of the Balgo area by 1915. In 1916 local 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 Ngarti and Kukatja had to accommodate neighbouring 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 Kartiya for the first time in the early 1940s when they were between ten and fifteen years old. Their early memories are of internecine 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 Wangkajungka 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 Ngarti, Jaru, and Warlpiri. In the early days of the mission until

the late 1950s when it became heavily institution-alised, 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 Kartiya—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, *walya* (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

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 ochre site in the area west of Lake Mackay was formed from the vomit of the ancestral dingo (painting documentation in Cowan 1994: 93).

and generations of people who have died in the area (cf Rose 1992: 42, 56).

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 curviform foliage are called *ngarpulu*, which is the main word used for breasts. The word *muurpu* is used for a ridge or a person's back. Caves (*pirnki*) are likened to wombs (cf Rose 1992: 42), while the concave surface of the underside of clouds is called *tjurni*, which in the human body is the stomach or womb (Valiquette 1993: 305).

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 engrained 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 (Mowarljarlai 1992: 8).

In the Balgo region, as in Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara countries to the south, Dreaming ancestors have been metamorphosed 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 *janganpa* (possum) ancestors. 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 ancestors' bodies.⁷

Thus the land, to Kutjungka people, is very much alive and embodied, though not every 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 transference of designs from one medium to another in desert Australian iconography has been noticed by a number of writers (see Dubinskas & Traweek 1984: 27; Dussart 1997: 193) 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 *Yarrtji* (Napanangka *et al.* 1997). *Yarrtji* 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 pointing 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 elements and available for receiving sensory information about the environment. Although some information about the environment is received through the nose, or through sensory receptors in the stomach, the skin is a most important receptor. Kutjungka people spend a great deal of their time sitting or lying on the land, relaxedly in contact and in communion with it. They, like the Warlpiri, are proud of living on the ground (Munn 1986: xviii). Despite the adoption of clothing in everyday life by Kutjungka adults, the feet of Kutjungka people are usually unshod and open to sensory contact with the land, both in walking, and especially in the more culturally important activity of ceremonial dancing. While Kutjungka people will sometimes refer to themselves as having been 'walking around naked—poor thing' before the coming of Europeans, at ceremony times women not actively engaged in dancing and not painted up would walk around bare-breasted or roll their T-shirts up above their breasts, demonstrating a desire to be sensorily open to the environment at that time.⁸

The skin of humans is also the place where the identity of individual Kutjungka people is linked with that of human relatives, ancestors, ceremony and land, and for this reason is a vessel for considerable emotion.⁹ A person's relatives all have a place within or on the body. In sign language, people indicate their grandfather or grandmother by moving their hand from the top of their head to their forehead, their mother by cupping their hands around real or imaginary breasts, their father by placing their fist on their chin, their sister-in-law by placing two fingers on their wrist, a daughter or son by placing their hand on their belly, and their cousin by their fingers placed over their heart. When relatives die, it is Kutjungka practice for both women and men to make 'sorry cuts' on their heads. Many

of the old women who have seen many deaths have scars on their heads from hitting themselves with their digging sticks during 'sorry business'. These marks, the holes in individuals' noses from the insertion of nose bones at initiation, and those of cicatrisation, are permanent markings of the body. Although they are not readily visible in everyday Kutjungka life, they form a geography of the body within which the more ephemeral markings of *nyirrtinin* (body paint) are made.

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 ff; 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—*walkala* or *walkula*—is predominantly conceived of as piercing the ground, though mounds of earth can also be built up, for example to indicate piles of food cooking in a fire. In women's practice of *walkala*, they press a sand-drawing stick on their bodies before beginning (Valiquette 1993: 315), thus ritually connecting the body and the skin of the body with the land and its 'skin'. *Walkala* is predominantly a 'secular' medium though there are aspects of its conceptualisation and practice that are linked with the *tjukurrpa* (Dreaming). *Walkala* is used in storytelling to show

⁸ See Father Anthony Peile's comments (1985) on the importance to Balgo people of being in open space so that the wind, the original breath of the Dreamtime, can penetrate their bodies and in this way nourish their breath and their spirit.

⁹ Rodaway argues (1994: 44) that the skin is a site of emotion for all people due to the emotional bond which exists between ourselves and our world.

⁷ Graham & Mulvaney 1995: 28, 41, and cf Mountford 1971: 44, 121, and 147.

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. *Walkala* 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 *mirn-mittjurra* in Ngarti and Walmajarri, uses a curved stick called *milpa* to ritually beat the surface of the ground [6.2]. This process involves the production of sound as the ground is struck, as well as through verbal commentary by the narrator.¹⁰ *Mirn-mittjurra* is connected with the Kukatja term *mirntulytjurra*, or *mirntulypuwa*, meaning 'to crack the joints' or 'to click the fingers' (Valiquette 1993: 97).¹¹ These terms also suggest the articulation of differing realms, which are enacted through these image making practices.

In *kuruwarri* (ancestral power) sand drawing, the ground is pierced and raised in the same ways as in secular 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 Kutjungka say that drawing in sand allows each gender to communicate restricted information without it being overheard by members of the other gender. *Kuruwarri* sand drawing is 'special', an 'important one' which is used to tell the deeds of ancestors who are very dear to the Kutjungka. The Kutjungka experience *kuruwarri* 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, Kutjungka people are linking themselves with the ancestors and their power. *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 *kuruwarri* sand drawing, similar to ground constructions made by Warlpiri and Anmatyerre peoples using plant down, is also practised in the Balgo area by both men and women. The Kutjungka apply sands of different colours onto a base, usually of red sand, and, in the case of women, also incorporate objects such as coolamons, ceremonial sticks and *ininti* beads.¹²

It is clear from sites such as Yarlurluyarturlu in The Granites, where the images have been pounded into the surface of the rock (Graham & Mulvaney 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 Kutjungka culture.

Women's body painting (*nyirrtinin*) is conceived of as smearing or rubbing paint in the form of *kuruwarri* designs over the surface of the body. The Walmajarri use the word *maparnu*, 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.¹⁴ Dubinkas and Traweek make the point that central desert body painting designs 'reproduce the shape and shadows of the furrows and resulting adjacent ridges that are made when marking the ground (eg with a finger)' and in this way establish a correspondence between the human body and the earth (1984: 27).

Cicatrisation (*kumurlpa*) was traditionally an important part of the Kutjungka 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

¹⁰ *Pu-wa* is a verb meaning 'to hit, kill, cause sickness', or 'to feel or tap the muscles of a sick person with the palm of the hand'.

¹¹ The Kukatja word *mirna* means 'upper arm', 'branch of a tree' or 'branching stem' (Valiquette 1993: 96). Cf Morphy (1991: 90) and Keen (1995: 511) on the significance of joints and branches as places of connection or junction between ancestors, place, individual, group, and ceremony.

¹² Such a sand drawing was done by seven Balgo women at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in January 1997 to commemorate the link between Kutjungka people and the Nyungar people of Perth through their common custodianship of the Milky Way Dreaming.

¹³ There are other rock paintings close to Balgo, but as they are men's sites I have not attempted to research them.

¹⁴ See Moyle 1997: frontispiece and illustrations on pp. 89 ff.

creation of raised scars (Huchet 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 cicatrised during women's ceremonies held at the same time that their sons or nephews were cicatrised during their initiation into varying levels of men's Law. Although cicatrisation may appear violent in its severing of the skin, Kutjungka elders compare the action of cicatrising the body with the action of drawing in the ground to tell stories.

To Westerners, 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 aesthetic contemplation. Painting is another of the image making practices which the Kutjungka conceive of as piercing or poking the medium on which it is executed: the similarity of canvas or linen 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.¹⁵

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 old Mandjildjara-Pintupi woman who passed away in mid-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 weeds that had grown up since the time of their last visit, and sweep the floors inside to freshen everything. Still later, as I pored over 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 its surface,

6.2 Nungurrayi demonstrating *milpa-pungin*. Photo: Christine Watson

¹⁵ In the Yuendumu region, women's body painting designs offered a class of public imagery which the women felt could safely be used in contemporary painting (Dussart 1997: 188, 193). Warlpiri men mainly adapt designs taken from ritual objects and ground paintings. In the Balgo area, women's body painting designs are considered to contain ancestral power, and are not lightly included in paintings.

either with her fingers or with the *milpa* stick. This quality is also apparent in photographs of other women drawing in sand (Napanangka *et al.* 1997: 39). Its tangibility in their gestures, and its traces within their finished images, indicate that at some level the sacred is bound up in marking the ground.

The first time *kuruwarri* sand drawing was shown to me was very special. One of my classificatory sisters and I were sitting outside my modular aluminium house.¹⁶ Napanangka began to draw women's body paintings in the sand. There were eight 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 looked 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. Ngarti 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. Walmajarri and Wangkajungka men and women jointly hold 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, singing the Kukatja hymn, *Nyurna Tjitju Warnalku*

(I will follow Jesus). The photograph, in *Yarrtji*, of women holding a book in their upraised hands as they dance outside the Balgo church at a Christian celebration reiterates the Kutjungka emphasis on physically touching sacred objects (Napanangka *et al.* 1997: 98–9).

The practice of sacred touch extends to touching the earth in ceremonial dancing. As a soft-footed Kartiya raised to believe that feet need to be encased in shoes to protect them from the harsh ground, my experience of dancing on Kutjungka earth was always accompanied by considerable discomfort if not actual pain. In one of my strongest memories of what dancing should be like, I see another of my older sisters as she danced in ceremony. Far from being contorted with pain, her face glowed with smiles, and her 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 *mangarri* (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 Nungurrayi as she painted a *kuruwarri* painting of Yiwarra, her uncle's place on the *wati kutjarra* (two men) Dreaming track. Nungurrayi 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



6.3
Shadows thrown by
the ridges of
sand-drawing icons.
Photo: Christine Watson

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 objects. Often the connection is direct, as when icons and symbols are made by the artists' hands, or as in most contemporary Balgo paintings, when paint is dabbed onto the canvas with sticks. In other cases, there are visual reflections in the paintings of the touching that happens during sand drawing or body painting. They may be apparent in the beauty of lines drawn by hands with decades of experience of making marks in the flowing sand. They may be apparent in the qualities of the pigment, or in painting techniques which adapt traditional mark-making practice. In still other cases, there are reverberations of qualities of touching or of vibrancy within the visual aesthetic of the paintings.

At times the touch of the artists to the canvas is direct. Milliga Napaltjarri, a now deceased Balgo artist, used to put her fingers into the paint, and then dab them onto the canvas, 'just like people telling stories on the ground'. Balgo artists often apply pigment directly with their fingers when they include body-painting designs in a canvas, just as women artists from Utopia commonly do.

Balgo artists imported the sticks from sand drawing and body painting into their contemporary art practice from its very beginning. One of the earliest photos I possess of Balgo people painting was taken by Warwick Nieass who worked as the first art coordinator in Balgo in 1981 [6.4]. It shows one of the senior male artists, Mick Gill, carefully applying dots of white acrylic paint with a twig that he has obviously picked up from the ground. Sister Alice

¹⁶ It is customary for outsiders living in Aboriginal communities to be adopted into local kinship systems. This places them within the social group and thus defines their relationships and responsibilities to people within the community.



6.4

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

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 *Purrapunpa 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 *Manga Manga in the Great Sandy Desert* [6.6] or in Elizabeth Nyumi's *Purra near Kiwirrkura* [6.7]. 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 Tjupurrula's *Yata Yata Tjarinpa west of Lake Mackay* [6.8], Tjumpo Tjapanangka's *Kangaroo Dreaming at Lake Mackay* [6.9], Eubena Nampitjin's *Tjalatjadu rockhole* [6.10], Fred Tjakamarra's *Nunjun in the Great Sandy Desert* [6.11], and Muntja Nungurrayi's *Willyawarra 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 eddy out from



6..5

Lucy Yukenbarri
Purrapunpa 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
 1996.0028.038
 Acrylic on canvas
 100 x 50 cm

In her painting Elizabeth Nyumi captures the softness of the surface of the land.



6.8
Donkeyman Lee Tjupurrula
*Yata Yata Tjarinpa west of
Lake Mackay*
1991
1992.0015.003
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 75 cm

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.



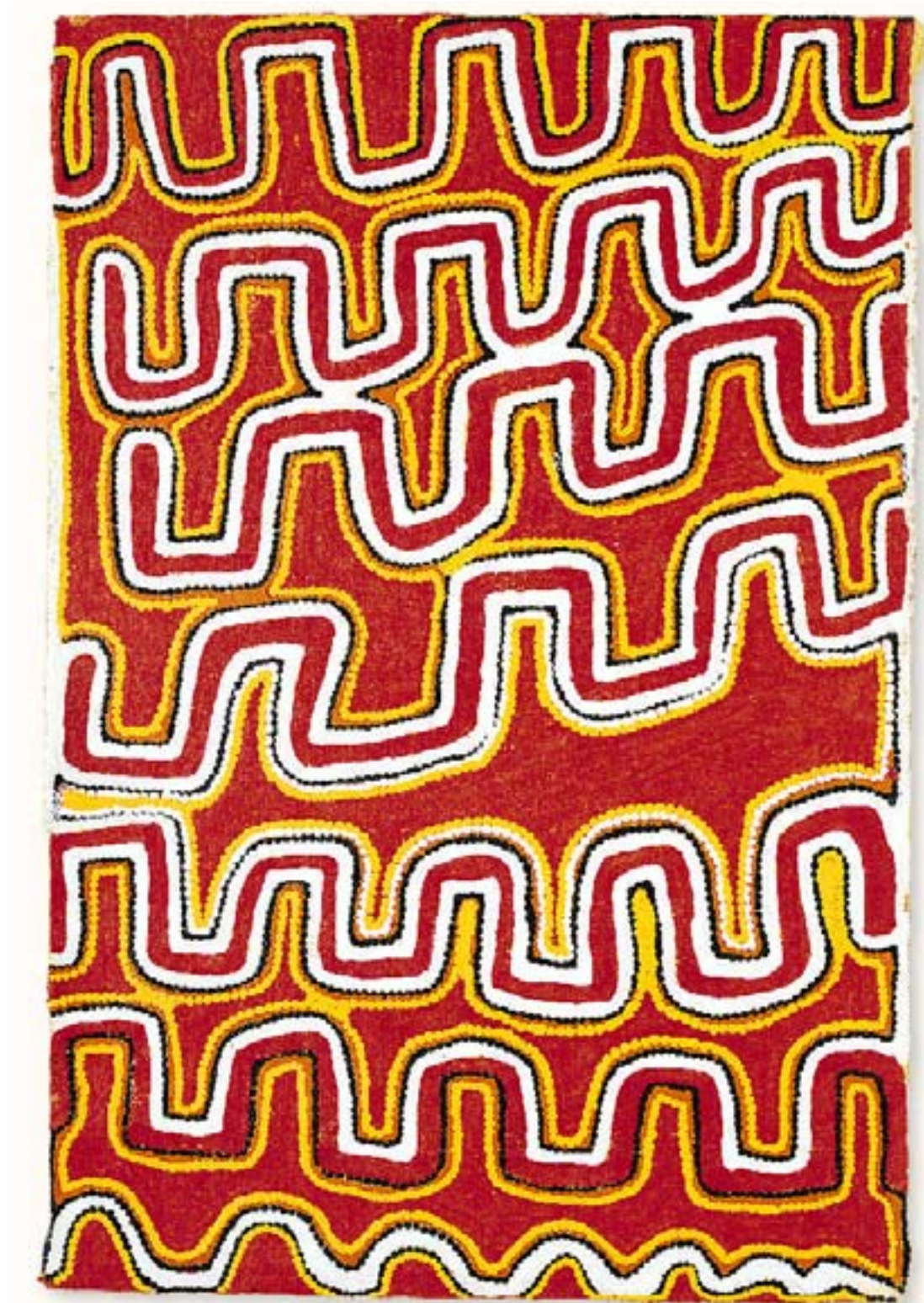
6.10



6.9
Tjumpo Tjapanangka
*Kangaroo Dreaming at
Lake Mackay*
1991
1992.0015.002
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 75 cm

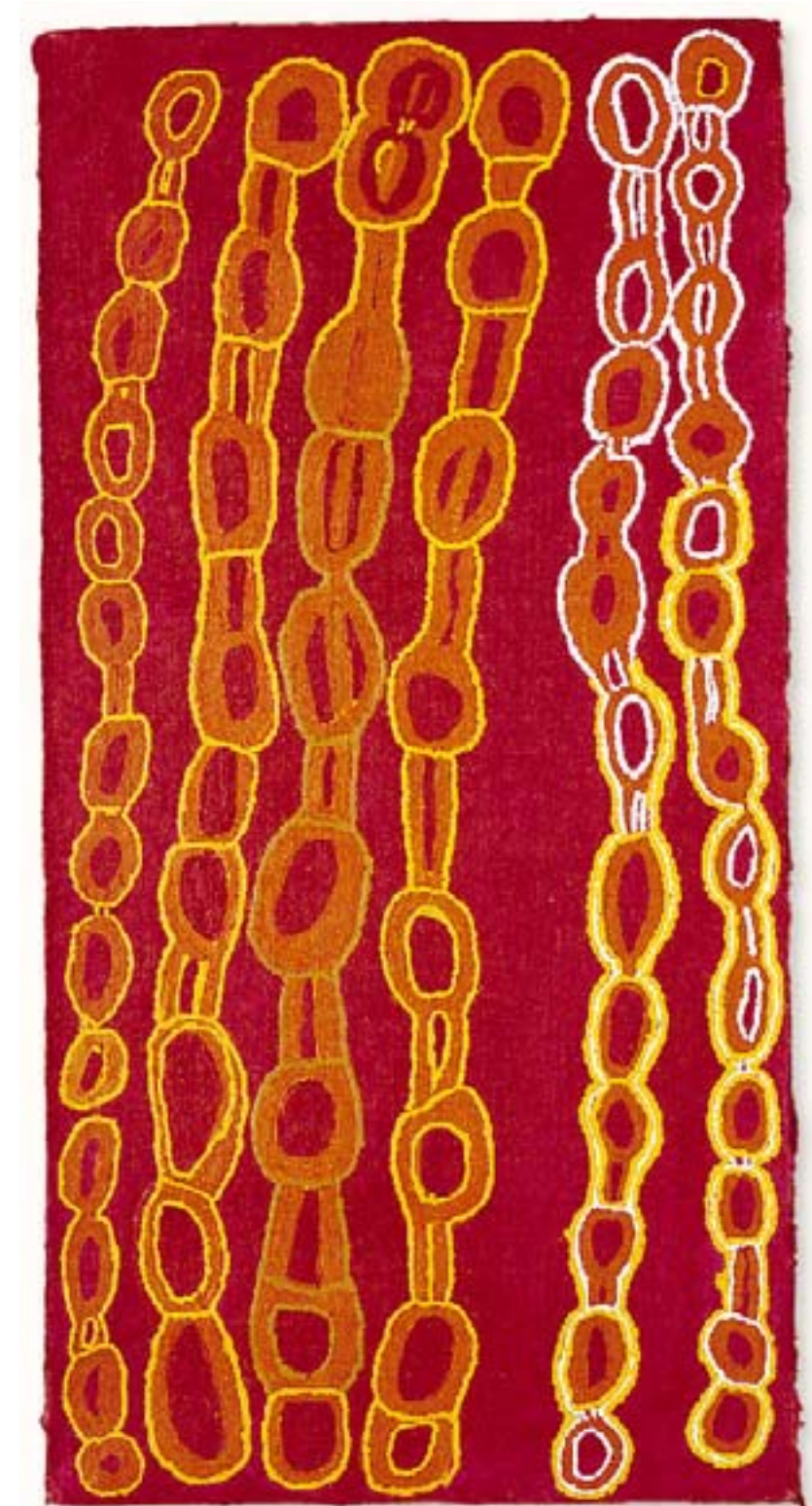
6.10
Eubena Nampitjin
Tjalatjadu rockhole
1996
1996.0028.018
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 80 cm

Although the direct reference of this painting is to the land, these lines are reminiscent of Wangkajungka women's body painting.



6.11
Fred Tjakamarra
Nunjun in the Great Sandy Desert
1996
1996.0028.007
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 60 cm

The dramatic lines of this painting depict the repeated crack of thunder and lightning evoked by rain-making ceremonies.



6.12
Muntja Nungurrayi
Wilyawarra in the Great Sandy Desert
1996
1996.0028.011
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 50 cm

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 *Yimurr (Stansmore Ranges)* [6.14] has a similarly kinetic energy in its depiction of an old man sitting watching the Seven Sisters approach, singing and dancing as they go.

Kuruwarri (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 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 Tjampitjin 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 Dubinskas and Traweek (1984) have pointed out, the shape and shadows of the furrows 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 in two colours, bands of dark and light colour alternate. When three ochres are used, the darkest colour is usually surrounded with lighter and then still lighter colours.

Kutjungka artists also translate these markings on the land and on the body into their paintings on canvas. The technique of outlining icons and symbols with bands of dotting, or with dots placed so close together that they form lines, seen in so many Balgo

paintings, is adapted from sand drawing and body painting. Icons in Balgo painting are often marked off from or greatly contrasted with the colour of the background, as in Richard Tax's *Wati kutjarra at Kurtal 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 overlays were routinely painted over expanses of blue or black paint 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 Billiluna's *Lake Gregory* [6.18] and Boxer Milner's *Wirrimangurru Lake* [6.19] are recent paintings that use white overpainting on a broad scale. In other paintings like Millie Skeen'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,

¹⁷ Molecular vibration or shimmering can manifest as visual brightness, or movement (see Morphy 1998: 185), or as sound. The Kutjungka appear to experience such paintings as having aesthetic values in both the visual and the auditory sensory register.

¹⁸ Paintings in the Kluge–Ruhe Collection by Bai Bai Napangarti, Nancy Naninurra, Rita Kunintji, Susie Bootja Bootja, Ningie Nangala, Johnny Gordon Downs, David Hall, Muntja Nungurrayi, Richard Tax, and Nancy Tax all show these techniques.

¹⁹ See also the illustrations in Napanangka *et al.* 1997: 68, 195.



6.13
Nancy Naninurra
Mina-Mina ceremonies at Kimayi
1997
1996.0028.039
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 60 cm

Women dance in ceremony, holding wands which they strike on the ground. The rows of dots eddying out from the wands are the visual representation of this striking movement.

6.14

Bai Bai Napangarti
Yimurr
(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.



6.15

Margaret Anjullu
Women's Dreamings of the Tanami Desert 2
 1997
 1996.0028.027
 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.





6.16

Richard Tax
*Wati kutjarra at Kurtal in
 the Great Sandy Desert*
 1997
 1996.0028.029
 Acrylic on canvas
 90 x 60 cm

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.

6.17

Tjama Napanangka
*Women's ceremony for
 yams and bush tomatoes*
 1997
 1996.0028.041
 Acrylic on canvas
 90 x 60 cm

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 Napanangka.



in the work of artists such as Alan Winderoo [6.21], Boxer Milner (6.19), and Jimmy Njamme [6.22].²⁰ At times the gentle quality of the pigment used in these paintings can best be described as a softness, a lovingness 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: Eubena Nampitjin, Tommy Skeen, Millie Skeen, Tjama Napanangka, Johnny Mosquito, Albert Green, and Sarah Napanangka.



6.18
Boxer Billiluna
Lake Gregory
1997
1996.0028.062
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 61 cm



6.19
Boxer Milner
Wirrimangurru 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.

6.20

Millie Skeen

Lirrawati in the Great Sandy Desert

1996

1996.0028.012

Acrylic on canvas

90 x 60 cm

The chalky quality of the white pigment in this painting is reminiscent of a body painting that has become powdery over time.



6.21

Alan Winderoo

Lappi Lappi in the Tanami Desert

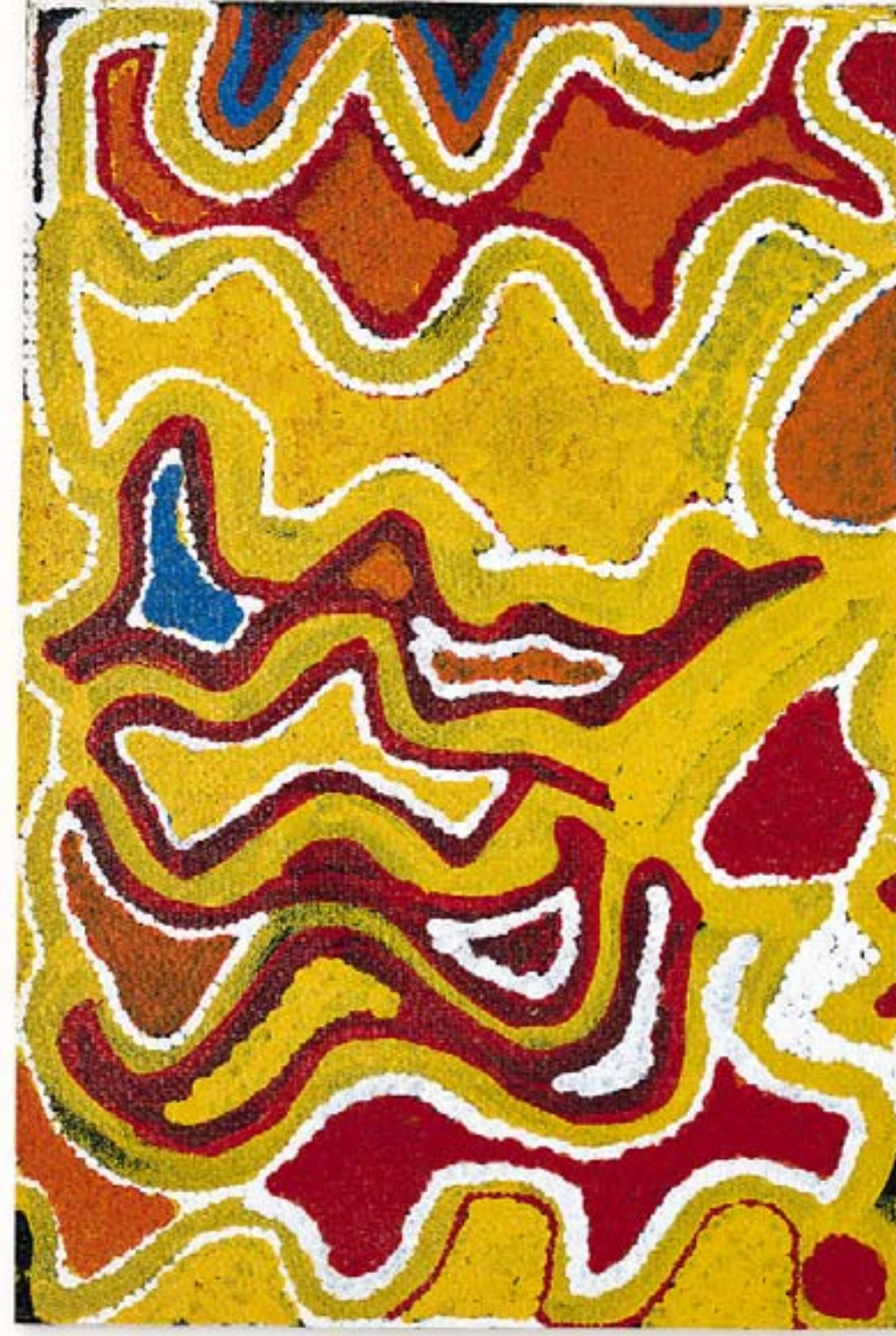
1996

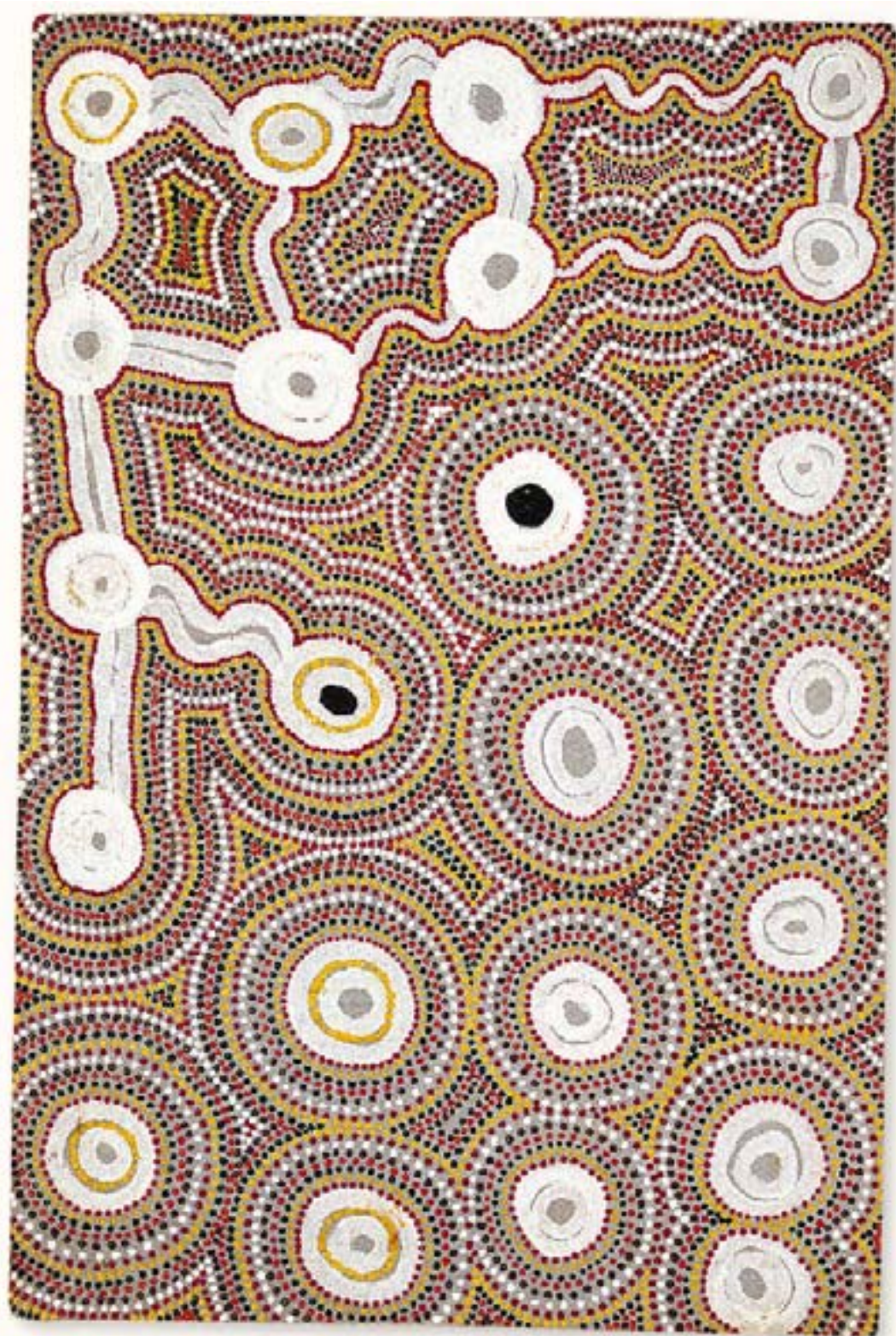
1996.0028.059

Acrylic on canvas

75 x 50 cm

Kutjunga 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).





6.22
Jimmy Njamme
Pippar south of Yakka
Yakka in the Great Sandy Desert
1994
1996.0028.065
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 60 cm

In this, the last painting he finished before he died, the artist evokes his love for his country. His family used the canvas at his funeral in June 1997 as evidence of his identification with his land.

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. Similar sentiments were expressed by viewers of an exhibition I helped to stage in Sydney in 1988 which incorporated one wall of Balgo paintings. Many visitors commented on the heartfulness of the paintings, and said that they experienced them as reverberating with subtly

uplifting and healing qualities. I hope that my account of Kutjungka religious practice and sensibilities will serve to enhance viewers' appreciation of the depths and subtleties of their art.

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