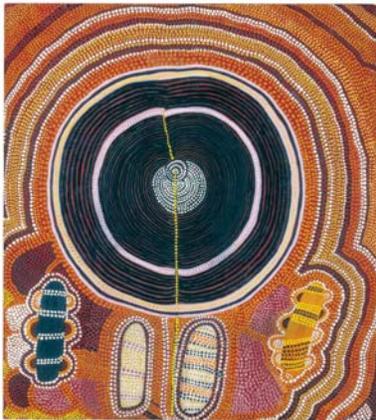


Stacey Ravel Abarbanel, staceyra@arts.ucla.edu
310/825-4288

For Immediate Use
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Two Fowler Exhibitions Showcase Australia's 'Art of the Desert'

Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya and Innovations in Western Desert Painting, 1972–1999: Selections from The Kelton Foundation
on display May 3–August 2, 2009



In 1971–1972 in the tiny settlement of Papunya, a group of Australian Aboriginal men began transferring their sacred ceremonial designs to pieces of masonite board. Since this crucial transformative period, Australian Aboriginal art has become an international phenomenon, widely exhibited and acquired by museums, galleries and collectors.

The Fowler Museum will present two exhibitions from May 3–Aug 2, 2009—*Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya* and *Innovations in Western Desert Painting, 1972-1999: Selections from The Kelton Foundation*— which tell this remarkable story, from its inception in the early 70s to the profound changes reflected

in works made by Aboriginal artists over the following two decades.

Icons of the Desert

In 1971, at Papunya, a government-established Aboriginal relief camp in the Central Australian desert, Sydney-based schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon provided a group of ranking Aboriginal men with the tools and the encouragement to paint. The resulting works became the first paintings ever to systematically transfer the imagery of their culture to modern portable surfaces. The designs from which these are drawn are thousands of years old but still in regular use today; they appear in body painting for religious ceremonies and in the temporary ground-paintings of Pintupi and Warlpiri ceremonial sites.

This is the first exhibition to focus on the crucial founding moment of Papunya art, which has a unique status in the history of Western Desert painting. *Icons of the Desert* brings together forty-nine extraordinary paintings—including some of the earliest and finest boards—as well as later works, created by leading Papunya artists Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Johnny Warangkula

2-2-2 Two Fowler Exhibitions Showcase Australia's 'Art of the Desert'

Tjupurrula, and Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, among others. This is a traveling exhibition and the Fowler is the only West Coast venue.

The Australian Aboriginal worldview is based on *Tjukurrpa*, or the Dreaming, a belief that creator ancestors who shaped the land formed the world, made all living things, and laid out the moral code for human conduct. The many Dreamings that relate to specific geographical features, animals, plants, and the elements are the collective responsibility of numerous Indigenous Nations who ensure their preservation for future generations in song, story, and imagery.

The exhibition's centerpiece is Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* of 1972; this work twice made Australian national headlines when it was sold for world-record auction prices in 1997 and 2000. The artist depicts the vital activity of the male elder who brings forth rain, rites that are associated with the sacred water hole at Kalipinypa. The painting reflects the artist's deep ceremonial knowledge of the site, but also his desire to obscure sensitive details.

Depictions of Water Men Ancestors and *tjurungas* (sacred ceremonial boards) are camouflaged and merge with the rest of the painting. Water holes, springs, caves, and other features of the sacred landscape are all subsumed in dozens of delicately drawn, irregularly shaped compartments, each with its own pattern: waving parallel lines, stippling, staccato dots, radiating curves, and crosshatches. Such detailed, abstract designs typify the paintings on display—replete with imagery in which biomorphic shapes, concentric circles, dots and lines are repeated to outstanding effect in a startling array of compositions. Most of the paintings are small in scale yet compelling in their use of saturated colors and intricate designs seemingly unbounded by the picture plane.

Several of the works in the exhibition include sacred imagery and depictions of ritual objects used in men's ceremonies that would normally be viewable only by initiated men within the Aboriginal community. However, key senior painters have granted permission for American audiences to view these works.

Innovations in Western Desert Painting, 1972–1999

This exhibition features fourteen paintings drawn from the vast collection of The Kelton Foundation. It explores changes in the Western Desert painting movement since its founding, including the shift to canvas, the use of non-traditional colors, transformations in content with regard to sacred imagery, the maturation of personal styles by individual artists, and the recognition of women artists, and provides an informative companion installation to *Icons of the Desert*, which focuses primarily on the earliest years of the movement.

Innovations in Western Desert Painting, 1972–1999 begins with enormous canvases by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, and Anatjari Tjakamarra, three of the founding fathers of the movement. Works by two women artists, Pansy Napangati and Gabrielle Possum Nungurrayi, conclude the exhibition with the vibrant color palettes that came into use in the 1990s.

The Kelton Foundation maintains the largest private collection of Australian Aboriginal Art in the United States. With more than 1,300 works of Aboriginal Art, the collection spans nearly one

3-3-3 Two Fowler Exhibitions Showcase Australia's 'Art of the Desert'

hundred years, from early 20th century Arnhem Land bark paintings, through the Western Desert art movement, to contemporary styles of work by urban Aboriginal artists.

Additional Information

Icons of the Desert and its catalogue were organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, with the generous support of the Actus Foundation, New York, NY. The works are drawn from the collection of John and Barbara Wilkerson. The exhibition was curated by Roger Benjamin, Research Professor in Art History, Actus Foundation Lecturer in Aboriginal Art, Power Institute University of Sydney. The Los Angeles presentation is made possible through the generosity of the Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles, the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director's Discretionary Fund and Australia's Northern Territory. Hotel Angeleno is the official Hotel Sponsor of *Icons of the Desert*.

Innovations in Western Desert Painting, 1972–1999 was produced in association with The Kelton Foundation and guest curated by Richard Kelton, Kerry Smallwood, and Marcus de Chevrieux.

Accompanying programs for both exhibitions have been made possible by the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund, The Kelton Foundation, and Manus, the support group for the Fowler Museum.

The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$9 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Events

Saturday, May 2, 2009 5 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture with Roger Benjamin

Affective Visions: Early Papunya Boards

Exhibition curator and research professor in art history, Roger Benjamin launches *Icons of the Desert* with a lecture that examines the nascent years of Aboriginal painting at Papunya. Created at the very outset of what became the Western Desert painting movement, the works often transgressed Aboriginal laws about the revelation of secret imagery. Benjamin considers the boards a distinct aesthetic and cultural category—artworks that possess a visual radicality and unpredictability that still inspire today. The Fowler Members' Opening follows.

Thursday, May 14, 2009 7 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture with Benjamin Genocchio

Dollar Dreaming: The Rise of the Aboriginal Art Market

The book *Dollar Dreaming* by *New York Times* art critic Benjamin Genocchio traces the dramatic growth of the Aboriginal art market, nearly non-existent in the 1970s and now estimated to be a \$500-million-per-year industry. Genocchio presents excerpts from the book, featuring interviews with curators, collectors, and the artists themselves, and explores the somewhat tense and controversial phenomenon.

4-4-4 Two Fowler Exhibitions Showcase Australia's 'Art of the Desert'

Sunday, May 31, 2009 2 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture with Vivien Johnson

Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists

The Papunya Tula Artists company is the founding force behind the Australian Aboriginal desert painting movement. Established in 1971–72, it is today the movement's multi-million dollar flagship. Vivien Johnson, Global Professor at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, introduces her landmark publication tracing the history of this remarkable company and art movement with a lecture detailing the lives and works of selected painters of the more than two hundred artists in the movement. A book signing and reception follow.

Support provided by IAD Press.

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