

Dorothy Napangardi, *Sandhill Country*, 2004. Acrylic on linen, 35 x 35".

Dorothy Napangardi and Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art

by Kathan Brown

"I really like painting. I really love doing dot paintings. While I'm doing my paintings, I always have my family in my mind, I have my country in mind." That is the way Dorothy Napangardi began her 2002 artist's statement for *Dancing Up Country: the Art of Dorothy Napangardi* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia.

Napangardi is an Aboriginal artist approximately fifty years old and, as such, is part of a living art movement called contemporary Australian Aboriginal art, an extension of an almost incomprehensibly old tradition. Some of the ancient rock paintings and carvings in Australia pre-date the prehistoric cave art of France and Spain.

The Australian census bureau reports that 450,000 indigenous people are now alive in Australia, many still living in vast arid lands mainly in the central, northern, and western areas of the country. These indigenous people are members of dozens of historically different tribes or clans with different customs and different languages. The first recorded contact of Westerners with the people of Australia was made in 1623 by a representative of the Dutch East India Company, who left them alone, reporting that they and their country were "of very little use to the Company." It was another century before immigrants came there. In 1771, Englishman Captain James Cook mapped the coast around Sydney, and a few years later Britain lost its new world colonies in the

American Revolution and began sending convicts and other colonizers to Australia instead of to America.

The new arrivals drove the native people away from the coast and other desirable areas, but people living in the desert were left largely to themselves until the late nineteenth century when gold was discovered in various remote places and miners rushed in, bringing railroads in their wake. Cattlemen established what are called pastoral settlements, and some Aboriginal men moved their families to them and developed skills as cowboys. There were also missions and, at a later point, government settlements. Nevertheless, some Aboriginal groups stayed clear of the "whitefellas." The last band of isolated nomadic people (a small group of Pintupi people) "came in" in 1984.

Dorothy Napangardi is one of the 3,000 or so Warlpiri speakers who live in or are originally from the Tanami Desert region of Central Australia. She was born in the area called Mina Mina in the early '50s and grew up at Mina Mina and in the settlement town of Yuendumu where her father is still a senior lawgiver. She has five daughters (two of them artists) and four grandchildren who live in Yuendumu and Alice Springs, the jumping-off place for the desert. She herself lives in Alice Springs and Sydney.

Napangardi remembers moving around the land as a child with her family gathering food. "My mother taught me how to make seedcakes, by grinding the seeds for hours, then cooking them like little dampers on hot ashes—hard work—and there was plenty of water in that area, in the soaks." In her Sydney exhibition catalog her father, Paddy Lewis Japanangka, comments on one of her paintings: "This is Mina Mina—there are a number of soakages on Mina Mina. The salt lakes are on the western side. ...In the Dreaming, the water found there was all right to drink, it was fine to drink, beautiful water, fresh and clear—not salty like now."

"When I paint," Napangardi has said, "I think of the old days, as a happy little girl knowing my grandfather's Dreaming." "Dreaming" is an imprecise English translation of the Warlpiri word *Jukurrpa*, which describes the origins and journeys of ancestral beings in the land, and identifies the sacred spots, places in which the spirits presently reside. The *Jukurrpa* theme, generally, is one of the inseparability of the self from the environment, and the stories usually include traveling. In the Warlpiri culture, understanding *Jukurrpa* insures the perpetuation of life.



Dorothy Napangardi

As an example, Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi relates in the Napangardi catalog a part of her own *Jukurrpa* that is interrelated with Dorothy's. "When this one, *Walyankarna* our Snake Ancestor, was traveling north, the women from Mina Mina, the *Kana-kurlangu*—those who possess the digging sticks—were traveling eastward. The women from Mina Mina had been dancing all the way along. Our Snake Ancestor was traveling north, and at a certain point they met. ...The women were dancing so enthusiastically, with such great enjoyment and energy, that their feet disturbed the earth, fluffing up the dust, causing the dust to rise from the ground in clouds. ...The dust rose up above the women's heads and eventually this dust cloud just lifted the Snake, our Ancestor, right up into the air. ...Then, borne on that same dust cloud, our Ancestor, *Walyankarna* the Snake, flew all the way to Yaturlu Yaturlu. In English this place is called The Granites, and there's a soakage there, a little rock hole where the water never dries out. ...When he landed, that Ancestral Snake went down into the rock hole where he stays to this day."

Bruce Chatwin, in his book *The Songlines*, points out that in all the dozens of Aboriginal languages the words for "country" are the same as the words for "line." It is impractical to stay in one place in a country dependent on patchy rainfall, Chatwin explains. "Everyone hoped to have at least four 'ways out' along which he could travel in a crisis. Every tribe—like it or not—had to cultivate relations with its neighbor." This was done with trade, but not as we in the West know it. "Aboriginals, in general," Chatwin explains, "had the idea that all goods were potentially malign and would work against their possessors unless they were forever in motion. The 'goods' did not have to be edible, or useful. People liked nothing better than to barter useless things—or things they could supply for themselves: feathers, sacred objects. ...Goods were tokens of intent: to trade again, meet again, fix frontiers, intermarry, sing, dance, share resources and share ideas."

The stories of the Dreaming are lyrics to songs that define trade routes. Chatwin says "trading in things is the secondary consequence of trading in song." Each Aboriginal child inherited "as his or her private property a stretch of the Ancestor's song and the stretch of country over which the song passed. He could lend them to others. He could borrow other verses in return. The one thing he couldn't do was sell or get rid of them. ...Supposing the Elders of a Carpet Snake clan decided it was time to sing their song cycle from beginning to end? Messages would be sent out, up and down the track, summoning song owners to assemble at the Big Place. One after the other, each owner would then sing his stretch of the Ancestor's footprints. Always in the correct sequence!"

Aboriginal paintings are the visual components of Dreaming or Songline verbal/musical maps. Traditionally, many paintings were made in sand or as body painting and lasted no longer

than the festivals and rituals for which they were created, but stone objects were also carved and painted, and permanent paintings were made on bark and on rock faces. Different tribes have different styles. One group specializes in cross-hatching, another in dots. Paintings from the central desert, Dorothy Napangardi's home, usually include rows of dots interspersed with broad brushstrokes and areas of bright color that define the image of a plant or an animal (or its tracks), and in her early paintings—the ones she made between 1987 and 1998—Napangardi colorfully yet delicately evoked wild plum or bush banana plants using dots interspersed with feathery brushstrokes and petal-like forms. In 1991, one of her bush banana paintings won the Museums and Art Galleries Award for the best artwork in Western Media at the Telstra National Aboriginal Art Awards.

Napangardi began painting in 1987, somewhat later than other well-known artists of the contemporary Aboriginal Art movement. Her half-sister Eunice Napangardi was already at that time a practicing artist earning an income from her work, and was living, as was Dorothy, in Alice Springs. Dorothy enrolled at the Institute for Aboriginal Development to learn to use Western painting materials, and soon was showing at its affiliated gallery, the Center for Aboriginal Artists and Craftsmen. There, her work came to the attention of Roslyn Premont, who founded Gallery Gondwana in Alice Springs in 1990. Napangardi was given a studio on the gallery premises. When Premont moved to Sydney in 2003 and opened a branch of the gallery, she created a studio for Napangardi there as well. Napangardi now divides her time between Alice Springs and Sydney with occasional visits to Yuendumu.

Napangardi is somewhat unusual in the closeness of her connection to her gallery, and in the fact that she has not lived in what is called the bush or the outback since she began painting. The contemporary Australian Aboriginal art movement is fueled mainly by government-sponsored art centers in the bush. Art activities at these centers are organized and executed by indigenous people with the help of government-appointed directors who provide materials and opportunities for the artists. Galleries specializing in Aboriginal art often buy it from the art centers. Dealers, and sometimes clients, travel into the bush to select paintings done there.

"We were overwhelmed by the amount of art we saw," said Sidney Unobskey, a San Francisco collector who made such a trip. "Paintings were stacked up everywhere, and artists were watching to see which we would select. When we bought one, the artist was paid on the spot." The selection was difficult because so many of the paintings were beautiful and compelling. "For them, art comes from within," Unobskey added, trying to explain how there could be so many good paintings in such a small space. "It's driven by an image that is part of their life and has been handed down in their family. They own it."

Artists of all styles, in all countries, generally know that the confidence of owning an approach, image, or idea combined with intensity of execution is a good formula for making art. Concerning the execution of Aboriginal works, Jennifer Isaacs, who curated an exhibition called *Spirit Country: Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art* for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 1999, quotes an Aboriginal, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr in this way: "It is an inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness...The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside...Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony. We don't like to hurry. There is nothing more important than what we are attending to."

Isaacs, in her catalog essay, goes on to explain that Aboriginal artists have no interest in keeping their paintings. "The physical object need not remain with its maker, because the substance within it, the images and intellectual content, is always his or hers," she writes. "The painting itself can go on its journey, bringing back good things to the maker: money to distribute, perhaps a Toyota, or a trip to Sydney or Paris. It becomes an object for trade, but those receiving it will be affected and will have reciprocal responsibilities. The Aboriginal contemporary painting movement is therefore a way of spreading information and knowledge, and strengthening Aboriginal power."

From a Western buyer's point of view, however, the situation can be difficult to sort out. We are used to buying art from galleries and, increasingly, we can find this art in good galleries at home. We can also rely on galleries in Australia like Gallery Gondwana that are well-regarded both for the quality of their artists and their honesty in dealing with them. Nevertheless, because the artists depend on art centers or galleries extensively, use Western materials, and sometimes do not live in the bush, a question occasionally arises as to whether this art is truly "authentic." The answer, provided by curators of exhibitions in museums as well as by the worldwide art market itself, is clearly "yes."

Jennifer Isaacs tackles the issue head-on. She says that in normal parlance "authentic" simply means that the artist who signed the work actually did the work, but when the word is used in reference to ethnographic art it is sometimes understood to mean "not influenced by the society in which it is being viewed (or bought)," an impossible concept in our time. Isaacs believes that anyone who thinks of contemporary Aboriginal, African, and Oceanic artworks "as though they were in some way primordial, rather than the changing and highly responsive art forms of modern non-Western peoples," is making an "erroneous assumption that in most indigenous cultures art does not represent individual creativity."

That erroneous assumption was put to rest, Isaacs says, in 1971 when "some of the most remarkable artwork of the twentieth century began pouring from the hands of the Pintupi,

Warlpiri, Anmatyerre, and Luritja people camped at the small desert community of Papunya." Members of many tribes had gathered at Papunya because of an official government policy of assimilation under which, Isaacs explains, "it was expected that these groups would somehow absorb European ways within a short period of time." Assimilation did not work, and "at the new settlement, alienation from their lands and former life, boredom, grief, ill health, and appalling food had produced a miserable and disenchanted community." This is a familiar story to those in touch with Aboriginal people. Dorothy Napangardi, herself, at the age of nine or ten was relocated with her family to a similar settlement, with similar unhappy results.

The miserable situation at Papunya was tempered by remarkable artwork because a young teacher there named Geoff Bardon in 1970 initiated a school mural project that was taken over by older men, then turned into a full-fledged painting movement in the community. The artists painted on boards and canvases the individual Dreamings that many of them had painted in sand when they were in their home communities. "The contemporary Aboriginal art movement did not appear suddenly and inexplicably from nowhere," Isaacs says. "The Papunya artists had simply shown a new way in which to elaborate on their 'cosmological preoccupations.'" (Art from Papunya was shown in 1989 at the John Weber Gallery in New York City in an exhibition that demonstrated the ability of this remote art to capture the enthusiasm of Western contemporary artists.)

As the Aboriginal Land Rights movement grew in the 1970s, the government gave up the idea of assimilation and encouraged the indigenous people to return to their lands. Water holes were dug; travel took place with vehicles. Art Centers opened in many remote locations. In 1988, the South Australian Museum organized an acclaimed exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art for the Asia Society in New York City. The Brooklyn Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum acquired paintings, as did several European Museums. A major exhibition called *Aratjara, Art of the First Australians* was shown in 1993 at the Hayward Gallery in London, then traveled to German and Danish museums. Dorothy Napangardi had not developed her mature style when these exhibitions were mounted, and was not included in them; she is in the second generation of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement. By this time, however, it is clear that in this movement, as in any other, there are weaker and stronger practitioners and that individuality is a hallmark of the strongest. Napangardi's work is valued especially because of its originality.

She began her mature work in 1998 when she put aside direct references to recognizable things and began constructing her paintings entirely of dots and limiting her palette to black, white and a few earth colors. In doing this, she is painting her interpretation of *Karntakurlangu Jukurrpa*, the Women's Digging Stick Dreaming especially associated with her particu-

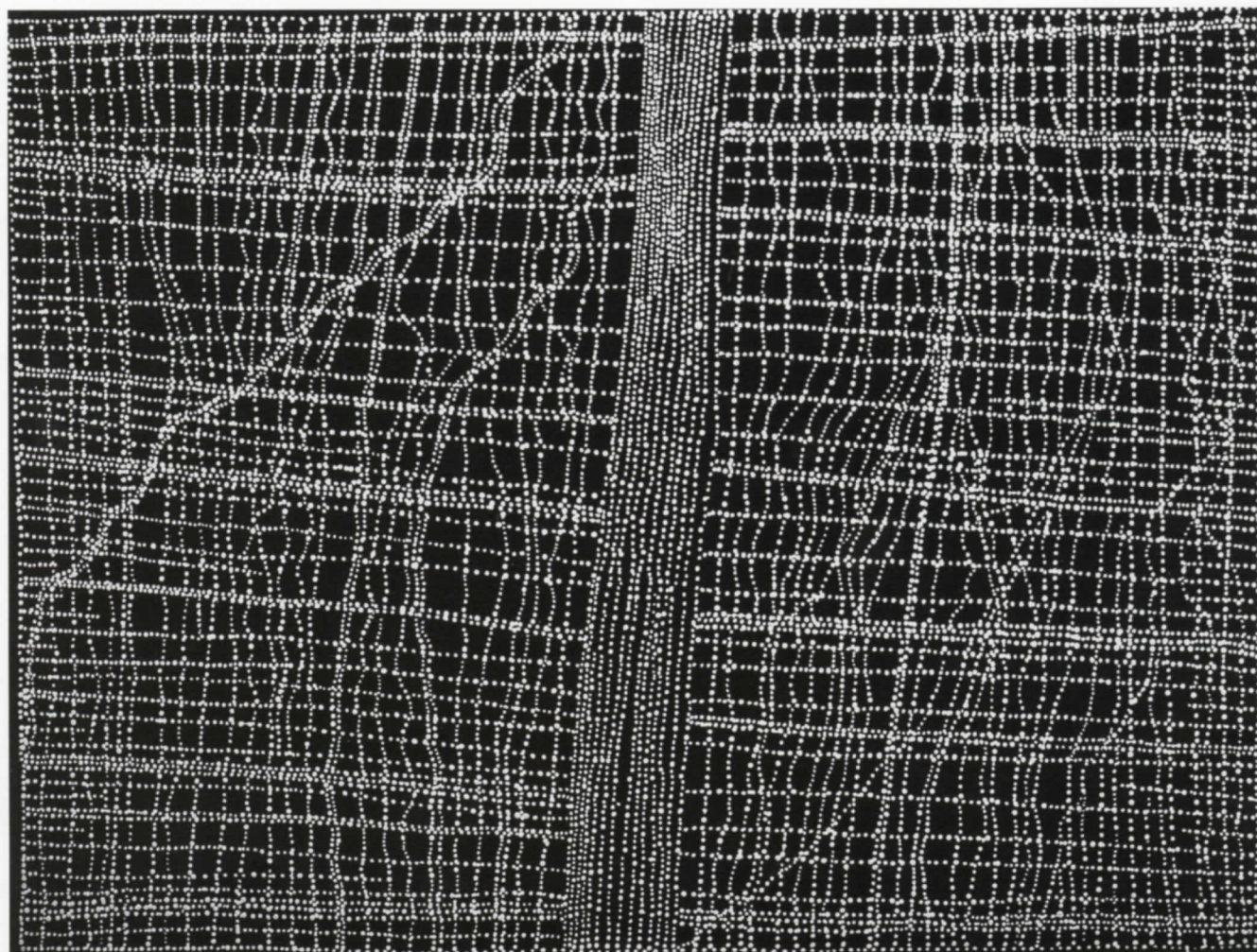
lar ancestral area. Mina Mina is significant to Warlpiri speakers as the place where digging sticks emerged from the ground and were taken up by women ancestors who danced with them across the land creating life forms and features of the land as they went. In her art, Napangardi sees the paths of the women from above (or, alternately, from close to the ground) and creates flowing interconnecting lines by accumulating dots. Lotte Waters of Gallery Gondwana says that the *Karntakurlangu Jukurrpa* ceremonies that Napangardi thinks of as she paints “convey vital information not only for the maintenance of cultural identity but also for the understanding of the relationship of all things.”

At the Telstra Art Awards in 2001, Dorothy Napangardi won the \$40,000 “best in show” award. Her paintings command high prices (a four-foot-square canvas sells for around \$20,000) and she is able to provide many Toyotas and other useful items for relatives in the desert. In 2004, Sotheby’s sold a painting of hers at auction for \$131,725. Beyond her success in the wider artworld, Napangardi values the high regard in which she is held by her community. As Jeannie Herbert Nungarri wrote in her introduction to Napangardi’s Sydney museum catalog, “Warlpiri people who achieve recognition...are all part of the

process of holding onto our culture, maintaining our culture for future generations. We have our own individual ways of expressing our intrinsic Warlpiri-ness.”

Beyond Warlpiri-ness, however, Napangardi’s work embodies an Aboriginal approach in general, an approach understood by artists everywhere but sometimes forgotten by the rest of us when we look at art. A senior Yolngu artist, Wandjuk Marika, describes it in this way: “I am not painting just for my pleasure; there is the meaning, knowledge and power. This is the earthly painting for the creation and for the land story. The land is not empty, the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. Earth is our mother, the land is not empty. There is the story I am telling you—special, sacred, important.”

—Quotations from Jennifer Isaacs are from *Spirit Country, Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Hardie Grant Books, 1999. The quotation from Wandjuk Marika was quoted by Isaacs. Other quotations as noted in the text are from *Dancing Up Country, the art of Dorothy Napangardi*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2002, and *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin, Penguin Books, first published 1987. The quotations from Lotte Waters and Sidney Unobskey were in conversation with Kathan Brown, 2004.



Dorothy Napangardi, *Salt on Mina Mina*, 2004. Acrylic on linen, 48 x 35".