

Desert Country

EDUCATION RESOURCE

Introduction

The exhibition *Desert Country* is drawn entirely from the extensive holdings of Aboriginal art in the Art Gallery of South Australia's pioneering collection. It is the first exhibition to chart the evolution of the internationally acclaimed Australian desert painting movement. Spanning a period of over sixty years the exhibition demonstrates the creativity and energy of the remarkable contemporary artists from Australia's desert regions.

Included in the exhibition are one hundred paintings by ninety-five artists that illustrate memories, ceremonies, country, and the relationships shared by the people who live in the vast desert areas. Mediums range from watercolour on paper, to natural ochre on canvas, to the bold and dynamic synthetic polymer works on canvas.

State and territory borders do not exist for Aboriginal people – their boundaries are drawn according to birthplace and their relationship to those places. The ancient stories that connect people to their country are what we see in the paintings. The variety of painting styles and techniques highlight the diversity and ever-evolving nature of cultural expression among Aboriginal people throughout Australia.

In general, men were initially the main artists in most communities, with women working alongside them, but from the early 1990s women started painting in their own right.

cover detail: Tjungkara Ken, Australia, born 1969, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia, *Ngayuku ngura – My country*, 2010, Amata, South Australia synthetic polymer paint on linen, 101.5 x 152.5 cm; d'Auvergne Boxall Bequest Fund 2010 © Tjungkara Ken, courtesy of Tjala Arts 2010



Outside Fregon, APY Lands, South Australia, September 2009 photo: Nici Cumpston

Information for teachers

This education resource has been produced by the Art Gallery of South Australia to support the national tour of *Desert Country*.

The aim of this resource is to offer insights into the artists, their way of life and the stories behind the works of art. It is intended for use by teachers and students of primary and secondary school groups as a starting point for learning and generating ideas for discussion during the visit to the exhibition. The resource examines key works of art, provides background information on artists from a variety of areas in the desert regions of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia, and offers focus questions and suggested post-visit activities.

This resource can be used in a variety of ways – for student groups as well as for individual study and research. The material is intended to complement, and be used in addition to, the information provided in the exhibition book and on the exhibition wall texts. Primary and secondary students are encouraged to develop their knowledge by interpreting symbols and analysing meanings, and by learning about the artists and the artistic traditions of Australian desert painting.

Teachers are advised to adapt the resource to suit their students' needs, or to select and integrate sections into existing units of study.

A study of this material would be useful for a variety of curriculum areas: Society and Environment, Design and Technology and Science and Arts. Themes that might be investigated with this resource include spiritual beliefs and customs, ceremonies, and the significance of country to Indigenous people.

Pre-visit learning

The title of the exhibition is *Desert Country* and all of the artists come from the desert regions of Australia. Among the ninety-five artists, sixteen different language groups are represented. This means that not only are sixteen different languages spoken but each one of these groups has different beliefs and customs that have been handed down in various rituals, ceremonies, and art forms through the generations.

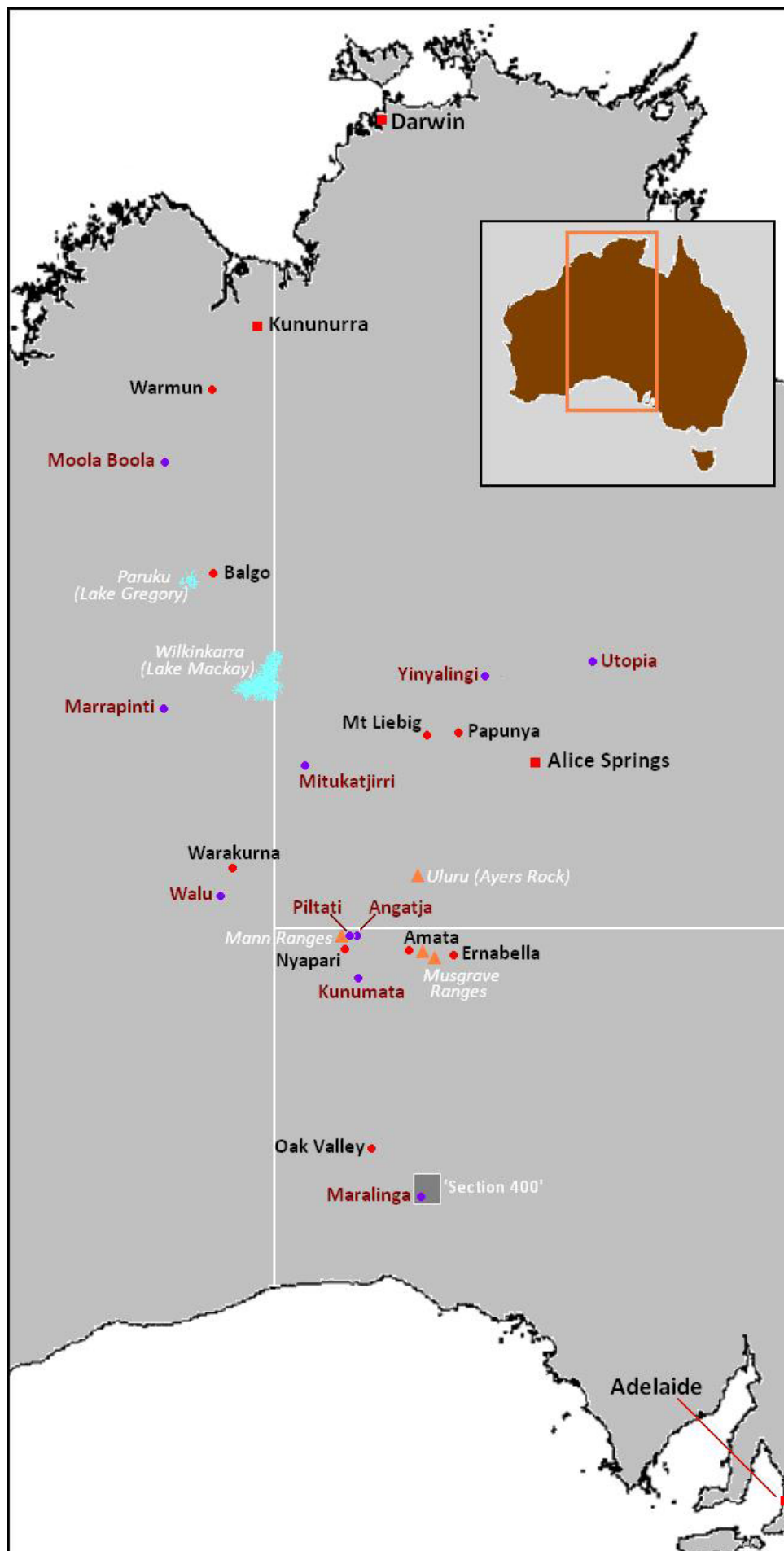
The stories have been referred to as Dreaming stories, but in Aboriginal culture they are known as the Tjukurrpa, and in the East Kimberley as the Ngarrangkarni. Whichever word is used, *Desert Country* reveals how lives remain linked by the Ancestral Creation stories, which have travelled in thought, spirit and through ceremony over many thousands of years.

One method of passing on the creation stories is by drawing patterns and shapes in the sand; this technique is also used to explain which foods can be found, where, and at what time of the year, and to identify the locations of important water sources. This activity involves people sitting in a circle in the sand with one person as the storyteller. An area in the sand is cleared with the back of the hand, and patterns and shapes are made, usually with a special stick. The storyteller will make hand gestures, which also have special meanings, and they may also sing the story in their language as they draw.

Another method of passing on stories is during special ceremonies where, as well as singing and dancing, patterns and shapes representing different stories are painted on the body. These iconographic symbols and markings have also been carved and painted on to cultural artefacts, as well as on cave walls.

The paintings on display in *Desert Country* are direct translations of these creation stories. It was in the early 1970s that Aboriginal people began painting their stories, using symbols.

Map of Desert Country regions



‘When we, as Aboriginal people, talk of ‘country’, the term takes on a much broader meaning than the notion of ‘country’ for non-Aboriginal Australians. Country is spoken about in the same way non-Aboriginal people may talk about their living human relatives: Aboriginal people cry about country, they worry about country, they listen to country, they visit country and long for country. Country can feel, think and hear, it can accept or reject and be difficult or easy, just as living people can behave towards one another. Aboriginal people are born with an inherent cultural responsibility for their country. We believe that the land owns us, not the other way around, and we must do our utmost to care for it. State and territory borders do not exist for Aboriginal people. Our boundaries are drawn by our birth places and our relationships to those places, made manifest through the ancient stories connecting our people to their country.’

Nici Cumpston
Curator, *Desert Country*



Jay Creek, on the road from Mparntwe (Alice Springs) to Ntaria (Hermannsburg) Northern Territory, May 2010 photo: Nici Cumpston

PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri

c.1934–2002, Anmatyerre people, Northern Territory



Honey Ant Ceremony, 1972, Papunya, Northern Territory

synthetic polymer paint on board, 104.0 x 81.4 cm

Elder Wing Centenary Gift of The Foundation 2001 © Estate of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri 2010, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri

c.1934–2002, Anmatyerre people, Northern Territory

The **Papunya Tula Artists Company** Pty Ltd began in 1972 as an Aboriginal-owned and managed organisation. It was set up to run the business of the Anmatyerre, Arrernte, Luritja, Pintupi and Warlpiri artists who had begun to paint in the community

of Papunya the year before. Papunya Tula artists today are world-renowned, with works in all major Australian state galleries, private collections, as well as in well-known international galleries and collections.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was born in a creek bed at Napperby Station, in Anmatyerre country, about two hundred kilometres northwest of Alice Springs.

Growing up in the bush and at Jay Creek settlement, he was taught how to survive in the tough desert climate. From a young age he did stock work at numerous cattle stations and was a fine horseman. In the late 1950s he was recruited to help build the Papunya settlement, where he married Emily Nantakutara Nakamarra.

In the late 1960s Clifford Possum was already a noted woodcarver, and had experimented with paintings based on traditional symbols. The explicit secret-sacred content of his very early paintings on boards was soon replaced by creation stories, partially covered by a layer of dots, such as traditionally used in rituals and ceremonies. From 1976 he produced his large map-like representations of the Dreaming country. He gradually began to refine his work, focusing on symbolic representation, a style which he adopted from the 1980s. His art earned him considerable fame as the most celebrated Aboriginal painter of his time. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in June 2002.

Honey Ant Ceremony was Clifford Possum's second or third work after he began painting at Papunya. The painting depicts men's and women's ceremonies for the Honey Ant site of Yinyalingi in the artist's ancestral country near Mt Allan.

In the mythological past, groups of Honey Ant people gathered there for ceremonies, which lasted from dusk until first light. In the central oval panel, three concentric circles on overlapping spirals represent the underground nests of the honey ants, which were dug up by an ancestral woman during the ceremony.

Around the oval's rim are the woman's belt and digging stick, as well as items associated with men: boomerangs, stone knives, axes, hair-string belts and *tjurunga* (sacred boards used in rituals), which also appear on either side. The large central oval – itself shaped like a *tjurunga* or shield – shows a significant gathering of people for ceremonial purposes. Outside this area, overlapping yellow arcs represent 'growth' in the roots of mulga trees, where the honey ants live. The honey ants gather nectar from the mulga tree flowers to fill their abdomens. These ants full of 'honey' are a delicious, nutritious food, which women dig from nests a metre or so below ground.

PRIMARY

Look carefully to **locate** the following objects: belt and digging stick, boomerangs, stone knives, axes, hair-string belts and *tjurunga* (sacred boards used in rituals).

What do the concentric circles represent? **Imagine** the kinds of movements the artist used to make the fine lines.

Describe what you can see, noticing colour, line, shape and pattern.

Tell the story behind this painting to a friend.

SECONDARY

Analyse *Honey Ant Ceremony* in terms of the focal point, line, shape, colour and composition.

Describe the various techniques used by the artist.

Research the symbols and objects used in this work.

Discuss why the *Honey Ant Ceremony* story is significant for the artist.

PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS

Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula

1942–2001, Pintupi people, Northern Territory



Straightening spears at Ilyingaungau, 1990, Kintore, Northern Territory
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 181.5 x 244.0 cm
Gift of the Friends of the Art Gallery of South Australia 1990
© Estate of Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula 2010, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS

Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula

1942–2001, Pintupi people, Northern Territory

Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula was born in a creek bed near Haasts Bluff ration depot, hundreds of kilometres from his traditional Pintupi homeland. For many years his family group lived in the bush around the depot before ‘coming in’, first living at Haasts Bluff, then at Papunya. Throughout his childhood Turkey Tolson learnt about Pintupi stories and places he did not see until he was an adult. He worked as a stockman at Papunya, also doing labouring and kitchen work. He married twice, raising six children. In 1983 he moved to Pintupi country before returning to Walungurru in the last years of his life.

Turkey Tolson began to paint at Papunya around 1972, but he was not one of the movement’s founders. Over the years, however, he became one of the best known of the Papunya Tula artists. In 1979 he was artist-in-residence at Flinders University in Adelaide and in 1997 he travelled to Paris to create a traditional sand painting. Between these years, his work appeared in several important Aboriginal art exhibitions in Australia and overseas.

Straightening spears at Ilyingaungau, highlights the shimmering hot intensity and infinite distance of his country. The painting represents part of a Kulata (Spear) Dreaming story concerning a large group of men at Mitukatjirri, a cave site in the Ligertwood Cliffs, about sixty kilometres southeast of Walungurru. The group had travelled some distance from Tjukula in the south to the small Ilyingaungau claypan near Mitukatjirri, where they made camp. At the same time another group of men entered this country from Tjikari to the north, and the Mitukatjirri men challenged them to a fight. The series of shimmering horizontal lines depicts many spears being heated and straightened over a fire in preparation for this conflict.

PRIMARY

How has the artist created the impression of shimmering horizontal lines?

What features can you identify in the painting?

Use Turkey Tolson’s line painting style to **create** your own shimmering painting.

SECONDARY

How has the artist created the impression of shimmering horizontal lines?

Discuss the painting techniques and processes used by Turkey Tolson.

Why do you think *Straightening spears at Ilyingaungau* was significant for the artist?

Research the Papunya Tula painting movement and its subsequent impact on the Australian and international art scenes.

PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS

Doreen Reid Nakamarra

c.1955–2009, Pintupi people, Northern Territory/Western Australia



Rockholes at Marrapinti, 2007, Kiwirrkura, Western Australia

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 153.0 x 183.0 cm

Gift of Frances Gerard, Dr Michael Hayes, Mark Livesey QC, David McKee, Lady Porter and Sue Tweddell through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation Collectors' Club 2007

© Estate of Doreen Reid Nakamarra 2010, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS

Doreen Reid Nakamarra

c.1955–2009, Pintupi people, Northern Territory/Western Australia

Doreen Reid Nakamarra was born on the east side of Warburton in eastern Western Australia. She spent time at Papunya then at Amata, in the far northwest of South Australia, before rejoining her family, who were then living closer to their country at Docker River. She married twice and finally settled in Kiwirrkura.

From 1996 Doreen Reid began to paint at Kiwirrkura for Papunya Tula Artists. Her confidence and output increased, and by about 2003, influenced by the spell-binding optical effects of her husband's later work, she had developed her minimalist style. However, it was only after his death in 2005 that she began to realise her full potential as an artist. In 2007 she was included in the National Gallery of Australia's exhibition *Culture Warriors* and in 2008 she won the general painting section of the 25th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

Rockholes at Marrapinti depicts a significant women's site west of the Pollock Hills in the Gibson Desert of Western Australia. Marrapinti is where the ancestral women of the Nangala and Napangati skin groups would camp and make nose bones or *marrapinti*. During ceremonies the older women would pierce the nasal septums of the younger women. The fine dotting in this painting forms a sophisticated lineal pattern, depicting the creek at the site, and the surrounding sandhills.

The story of women travelling east through Marrapinti is part of a creation story that belongs to the Kungka (Women) Dreaming.

PRIMARY

Imagine being among the sand dunes as you look at this painting. How would you feel?

If you **focus** on the painting for a length of time, what happens?

When next at the beach **observe** the ripples in the sand. **Create** these sand patterns in a painting or drawing.

SECONDARY

Discuss how the visual elements – such as line, shape, tone, colour and composition are used by the artist to represent her country.

How does the artist create a dazzling, moving optical effect?

UTOPIA REGION

Angelina Pwerle

born c.1952, Anmatyerre/Alyawarr people, Northern Territory



Bush Plum, 2007, Utopia, Northern Territory
synthetic polymer paint on linen, 120.0 x 330.0 cm
Gift of Bill Nuttall and Annette Reeves through the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collectors 2009.
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program
© Angelina Pwerle, courtesy of Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

UTOPIA REGION

Angelina Pwerle

born c.1952, Anmatyerre/Alyawarr people, Northern Territory

The **Anmatyerre, Eastern Anmatyerre and Alyawarr people** are the traditional owners of a vast region known as Utopia, which is situated 240 kilometres northeast of Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The artists, who live on their traditional country in extended family groups, paint their creation stories.

Angelina Pwerle was born at the Utopia homestead, about 250 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs, more than twenty-five years before the pastoral property was returned to its traditional owners. Her country includes Ahalpere on Utopia station, which was her father's and grandfather's country; her mother was from Kurrajong. She lives just south of the Utopia homestead at Camel Camp. She is the sister of painters Poly Ngai and Kathleen Ngai, and her late husband was the artist Louie Pwerle.

It was perhaps through the influence of her late husband that Angelina began her artistic life, with the production of painted wooden sculptures, from the 1980s and into the 1990s. Like many Utopia women, she also worked in batik, from 1986. She began painting on canvas in 1988–89 when she took part in the seminal 'A Summer Project', which produced the first canvases from Utopia, and launched the painting career of several artists, notably Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Angelina has exhibited throughout Australia and overseas, and was a finalist in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 1997 and 2006.

Angelina's early works were both figurative and abstract, but as her confidence has increased in recent years her painting has become more detailed and imposing. The subjects of her earlier works included ancestor figures, *awelye* (women's ceremonies) and bush foods such as bush tomato and bush plum; her current works are almost exclusively of the Bush Plum Dreaming and its associated country.

Bush Plum is a beautifully coloured composition of an under-painted layer of deep pink, which is then covered with fine white dotting built up in sections. Angelina has used a bamboo skewer to create each dot. The fine detail gives the overall effect of a subtly textured, shimmering surface. This work is one of a series of four large, painstakingly-produced canvases.

PRIMARY

This painting uses a fine dotting technique. Move in closely to **observe** how the bamboo skewer was used, then step back to experience the overall effect of the painting.

What do you notice about the dotting technique?

Use a bamboo skewer to create your own work of art.

Research bush foods (including the bush plum and tomato) and the way they are prepared for eating.

SECONDARY

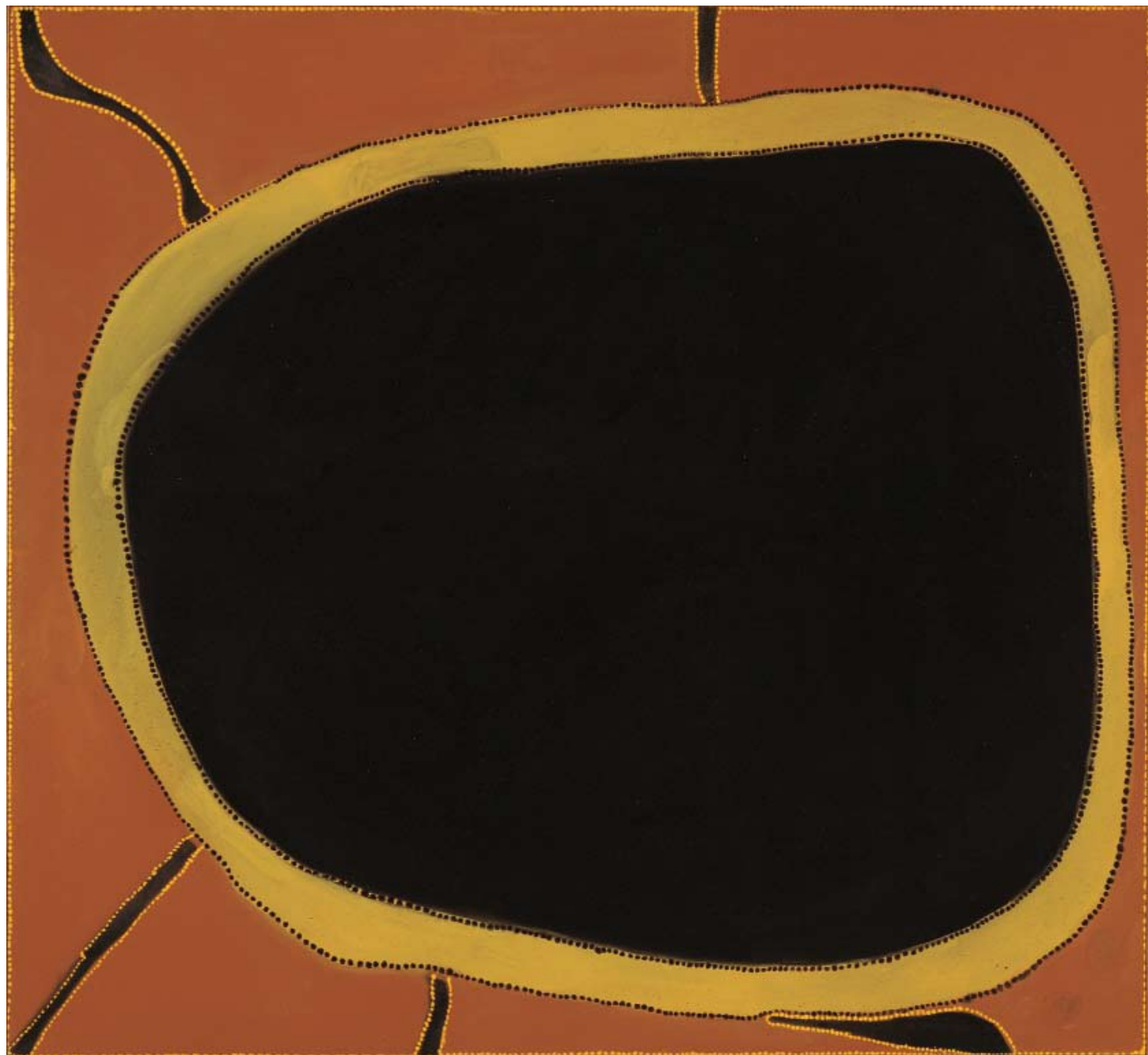
When looking at this painting, **consider** how the artist has been able to achieve the shimmering effect.

Compare the dotting and colouring technique used here with that used by Lilly Kelly Napangardi in *Sandhills*.

WARMUN ART, EAST KIMBERLEY

Rover Thomas

1926–1998, Kukatja/Wangkatjunga people, Western Australia



Paruku (Lake Gregory)

1991, Turkey Creek, Western Australia

natural pigments on canvas, 168.0 x 183.0 cm

South Australian Government Grant 1991

© Rover Thomas estate, courtesy Warmun Art Centre

WARMUN ART, EAST KIMBERLEY

Rover Thomas

1926–1998, Kukatja/Wangkatjunga people, Western Australia

Warmun Art was established in 1998, although painting had been done at Warmun from the mid-1970s. Warmun is situated in the magnificent East Kimberley region of Western Australia, two hundred kilometres south of Kununurra. This group of artists is unique in that they are the only artists located in the desert regions who paint using natural ochres sourced from their own country.

Rover Thomas was born at Well 33 (Gunawaggi or Kunawarritji) on the Canning Stock Route in the Great Sandy Desert. He was raised by two fathers, Lanikan Thomas and Sundown, both Wangkatjunga men. His mother, a Kukatja woman, was called Ngakuyipa or Nita. Rover Thomas's paintings have been said to reflect his desert origins. In the 1940s he was initiated into traditional law and began working as a stockman. He finally settled at Warmun (Turkey Creek) in the mid-1970s.

After his mother's death Rover's visions gave rise to the Krill Krill narrative dance cycle, during which participants held up painted boards depicting creation stories and contemporary events. These first boards were painted not by Rover but by Paddy Jaminji, his mother's brother, whom he instructed on their format. It was not until about 1980 that he himself began to paint the boards. With rising non-Aboriginal interest in the boards, artists started selling their Krill Krill paintings. From this beginning other themes developed in Kimberley art.

According to one explanation of *Paruku* (*Lake Gregory*), Rover's paintings depict his own interpretation of the landscape as a site of historical and spiritual importance, as well as his own personal experiences. The artist has painted the five creeks that enter the lake. They are: (anticlockwise from the top right) Coodoo, Dallyil, Djarday, Buragod and a tributary that 'comes from Balgo'.

PRIMARY

List the colours that you can see. Why do you think Rover chose black for the colour of the lake?

How is this painting similar to a satellite photograph? **Locate** Lake Gregory on Google Earth.

Using your own colour code **map** your school grounds from an aerial perspective by drawing the different areas used, for example, buildings, ovals, gardens, bike racks, and out-of-bounds areas.

Compare and **discuss** your map design with others made in the class.

Develop your own set of symbols to show places where people gather, or where special events take place. What is the most important place to you?

SECONDARY

Locate the landscape elements in this painting. **Describe** how a sense of place is evoked through the use of imagery and the painting's surface quality.

The artist has used natural pigments/ochres for this painting. **Research** the making and use of ochres for use in both ceremonies and works of art.

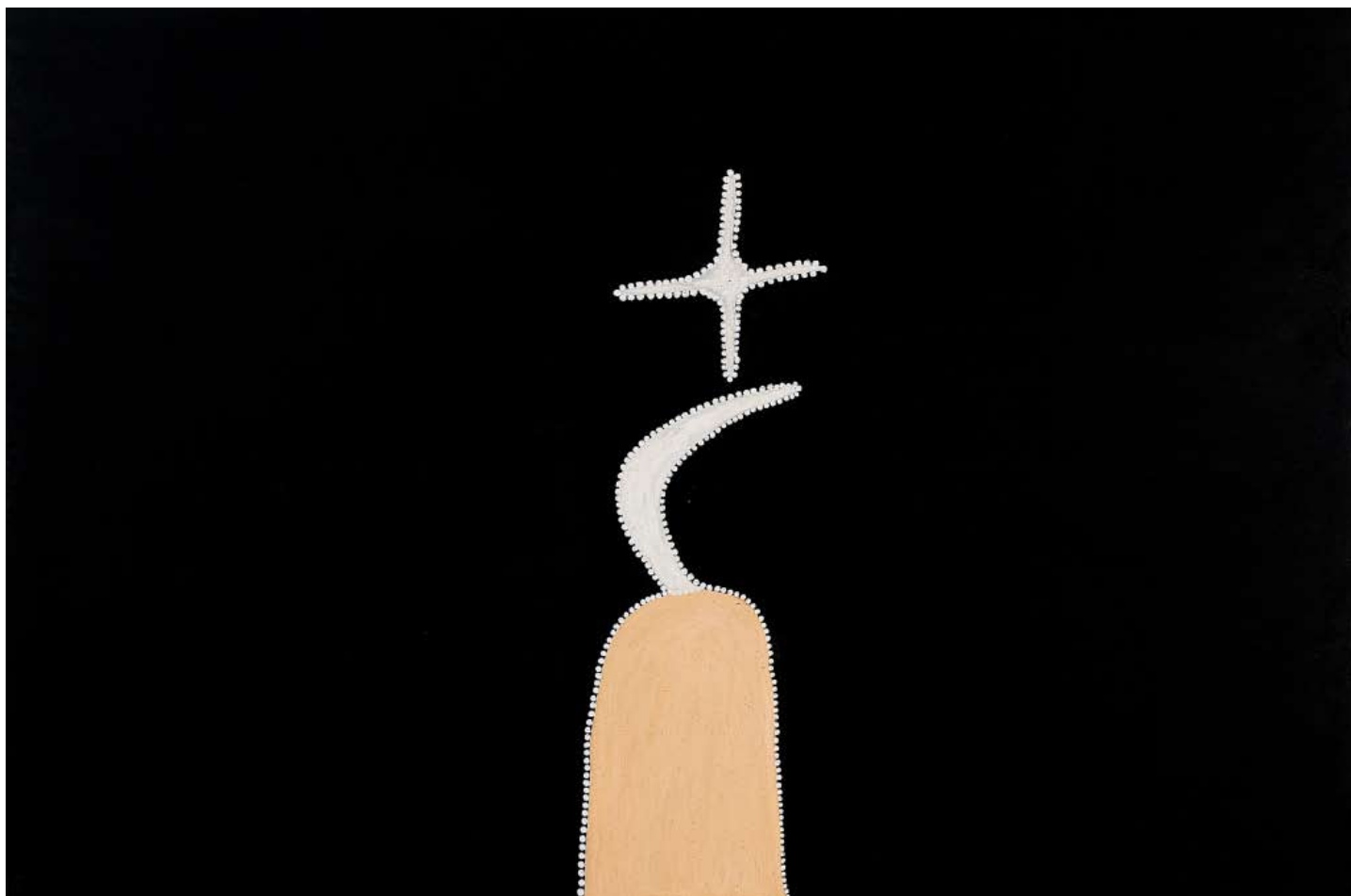
Locate and look carefully at Lake Gregory on Google Earth.

Create your own painting from an aerial perspective using natural pigments/ochres. Experiment with a variety of binders.

WARMUN ART, EAST KIMBERLEY

Mabel Juli

born 1933, Gija people, Western Australia



Garnkiny Ngarrangkarni - Moon Dreaming
2009, Turkey Creek, Western Australia
natural ochre and pigment on linen, 120.0 x 180.0 cm
Gift of the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2009
© Mabel Juli, courtesy Warmun Art Centre

WARMUN ART, EAST KIMBERLEY

Mabel Juli

born 1933, Gija people, Western Australia

Mabel Juli was born in the Kimberley region of Western Australia at Five Mile, near Moola Boola Station. She now lives and works at Warmun, an Aboriginal settlement near Turkey Creek in the East Kimberley. Mabel Juli is a senior custodian in the law and culture of her Gija people, which she sustains through ceremonial singing and dancing.

This painting depicts Mabel's traditional country, Yariny in Darrajayin (Springvale Station), which lies south of Warmun. In the Ngarrangkarni creation story, Garnkiny, the moon, was a man. One day Garnkiny came back from hunting kangaroo and saw a girl sitting with her mother. The girl was very beautiful, with long black hair, and Garnkiny fell in love with her instantly. This girl was Daawul, the black-headed snake. However, she was related to him, and so it was taboo for him to marry her. When the old people asked him whom he wanted for his wife, he pointed to Daawul, but they said that he must marry one of the promised girls, Daawul's daughters. He only wanted Daawul however, so he was banished from the community, after which he walked some distance before he sat down and turned into a hill. He cursed the old people, telling them that they were going to die, but that he would always live. As the moon, he comes back to life every month.

Mabel uses natural ochres, which are found in remote locations. The ochres are pounded into a powdered form, and then mixed with glue to form paints. Up to six layers of paint are applied to gain a rich velvety texture.

PRIMARY

Mabel has used three bold shapes to tell her Dreaming story. **Recount** the story in this painting.

Imagine you could turn into a hill, a star, or a native animal or plant at the click of your fingers. **Write** your own imaginative story about what you have become in your local night landscape.

Create a painting of your story using only three shapes and three natural colours.

SECONDARY

The story – of who you can/can't marry is a universal one.

Discuss the role of Indigenous art in providing information about laws of behavior. What important information can you infer from Mabel's painting?

NGAANYATJARRA WESTERN DESERT MOB

Tommy Mitchell

born 1943, Ngaanyatjarra people, Western Australia



Walu Tjukurrpa

2010, Warakurna, Western Australia

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 152.4 x 213.4 cm

d'Auvergne Boxall Bequest Fund 2010

© Tommy Mitchell, courtesy Warakurna Artists

NGAANYATJARRA WESTERN DESERT MOB

Tommy Mitchell

born 1943, Ngaanyatjarra people, Western Australia

The **Western Desert Mob** includes artists from the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in the Great Victoria Desert, situated in the far east of Western Australia. The Ngaanyatjarra Lands cover traditional country, and cross the borders of South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Tommy Mitchell was born in the desert on the Warakurna side of Papulankutja (Blackstone), in Ngaanyatjarra country in the Gibson Desert in far eastern Western Australia, near the Northern Territory border. His father's country is Nganturn, near Mantamaru (Jameson), southwest of Warakurna, and his country is also Nganturn and the Walu rockhole, about twenty-five kilometres south of Warakurna. As a child his family group travelled widely through the region's sandhill country. He describes this life:

There was no hospital and no clothes and we were naked and it was cold. I hunted *marlu* [kangaroo], rabbit, *tirnka* [small goanna] and pussycat, it was good meat. We also collected *tjarnmarta* [bush onions], *maku* [bardi grubs] and *kampurarrpa* [bush raisins].¹

Tommy is a senior law man and a well-known carver who makes traditional weapons used in ceremonies. He began painting in mid-2005, the year that Warakurna established its own art centre. Since then he has taken part in numerous group exhibitions in most major Australian cities, and in 2009 he was a finalist in the 26th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

This painting tells of two uncles and their young nephew who camp at Walu rockhole, a site on the Wati Kutjarra (Two Men) Dreaming route. While the uncles were out hunting, the boy would sneak into the Owl people's camps and steal their meat. The Owl people complained to the uncles, but the boy denied his crime. The uncles then became angry with the Owl people and a big tornado swept them away. The men again went hunting and returned with an emu. They were cutting it up for dinner when the greedy boy pulled out its heart and ran away, dripping blood. The blood is still visible today on stained rocks. One uncle, a powerful magic man, conjured a giant willy-willy and turned the boy into wind. The circle-like whirls on one side of *Walu* suggest this wind.

¹ Information supplied by Warakurna Artists, Warakurna, Western Australia, 2010.

PRIMARY

Look at the painting by Tommy and find the willy-willy.

Describe how the artist has created a feeling of movement.

Paint an abstract pattern that suggests the energy of a willy-willy over the landscape. Use a variety of colours, lines and shapes.

SECONDARY

How has the artist suggested a swirling movement typical of strong winds?

Connect the artist's technique and the story depicted. For example, why has the artist used so many rich coloured overlapping dots?

Investigate the use of dotting in desert painting and its connection to the ground and body painting.

WARLAYIRTI ARTISTS

Tjumpo Tjapanangka

c.1929–2007, Kukatja/Pintupi people, Western Australia



Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay)

2001, Balgo Hills, Western Australia

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180.0 x 120.0 cm

Gift of Harold and Neriba Gallasch 2002

© Tjumpo Tjapanangka, courtesy of Warlayirti Artists

WARLAYIRTI ARTISTS

Tjumpo Tjapanangka

c.1929–2007, Kukatja/Pintupi people, Western Australia

In 1987 **Warlayirti Art Centre** was established in Wirrimanu (Balgo), Western Australia, 650 kilometres south of Kununurra along the Tanami Road. Up to seven different language groups live in this region. *Desert Country* features Kukatja, Walmajarri, Pintupi and Wangkatjunga artists. These artists are known for working with acrylic paint in strikingly bold colours. Initially their paintings were quite representational, but they are gradually developing into more abstract depictions of creation stories.

Tjumpo Tjapanangka was born in the bush at Muruwarr, about a hundred kilometres northwest of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) in Western Australia, near the Northern Territory border. During his desert childhood, Tjumpo hunted animals for food, and built shelters of spinifex and mud for the wet season. He first moved to the mission at Balgo in about 1948, but for some years he had a mobile existence around the Great Sandy Desert and lived at Kiwirrkura and Walungurru (Kintore) before moving back to Balgo and settling there. He was a senior law man, a *maparn* (traditional healer) and a respected speaker.

Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) depicts a story from the Wati Kutjarra Dreaming in which two goanna men search for bush food as they move from waterhole to waterhole. The waterholes are represented by the three small yellow circles. This is one section of a commonly told story from the region, in which two hunters start a fire to flush out animals to eat, but the fire blazes out of control. The hills near Wilkinkarra are burnt by the fire and fall into the lake, creating today's dry lake bed.

This creation story concerns the travels of two brothers, also often called two goannas, whose actions create the features of the landscape. They are also 'clever men' or *maparn* (healers), like Tjumpo himself.

PRIMARY

Discuss why Aboriginal people sometimes use fire in their search for food.

What does the dominant yellow of this landscape suggest to you?

Mix a variety of shades of yellow to create your own desert landscape. Use black and white as a contrast.

SECONDARY

What things do you notice or discover particularly about the artist's technique, when you spend more time looking at the work?

Compare this work with representations of fire painted by other artists in *Desert Country*, and artists such as John Wolseley (born 1938), Tim Storrier (born 1949) and William Strutt (born 1825–died 1915).

Reflect on the different technical approaches used.

Create your own painting of the visual effects of fire.

Research the types of bush food (flora and fauna) that are available in desert country.

ANANGU PITJANTJATJARA YANKUNYTJATJARA ARTISTS

Ginger Wikilyiri

born c.1932, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia



Kunumata

2009, Nyapari, South Australia

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 97.0 x 166.0 cm

d'Auvergne Boxall Bequest Fund 2009

© Ginger Wikilyiri, courtesy of Tjungu Palya

Ginger Wikilyiri

born c.1932, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

The **Anangu (Aboriginal people) of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands** are artists from the far northwest region of South Australia. There are seven art centres located in the region: Ninuku Art in Kalka, Tjungu Palya in Nyapari, Tjala Arts in Amata, Ernabella Arts in Ernabella, Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts in Fregon, Mimili Maku in Mimili and Iwantja Arts in Indulkana.

Ginger Wikilyiri was born at Kunumata, a rockhole about fifty kilometres south of Nyapari in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of far northwest South Australia. He is a senior law man with responsibility for his birthplace of Kunumata, and for Piltati rockhole, in the Mann Ranges near Nyapiri. For many years he worked as a ranger at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Ginger began painting with Tjala Arts in Amata in 2005, but has since moved to Nyapari to fulfil his cultural obligations to look after his country. In 2009 he was a finalist in the 26th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

The Kuniya (carpet python) creation story from Kunumata is one of a network of Snake Dreaming stories stretching hundreds of kilometres from near Watarrka (King's Canyon), west of Alice Springs, to southwest of Kunumata.

Kunumata also includes this well-known story from Uluru of a non-venomous Kuniya woman and her nephew who battle a poisonous western brown snake. The two Kuniya are later transformed into *wanampi* (rainbow snakes/water snakes). Transformation into *wanampi* also figures in an important snake story from Piltati rockhole, fifty kilometres north of Kunumata. There, two brothers are angry with their wives for eating all the food the women had gathered while the men were performing *inma* (dance, ceremony). To teach them a lesson, the brothers turn into giant *wanampi*, but leave tracks that make the wives think there is a huge *kuniya*, an edible snake, nearby that would be good bush food. The wives try to dig up the *kuniya* but it constantly eludes them, making a great deal of futile hard work for them. Eventually one wife manages to confront the snake but, alarmed by its size, she throws her digging stick at it. Wounded and angry, the *wanampi* attacks and eats her. The other brother then eats the other wife.

PRIMARY

The story sounds a bit violent. What purpose do you think this telling of a violent story would serve?

Develop your own set of symbols that represent a place that is important to you.

SECONDARY

The artist has used symbols to tell a complicated story. Try to match the symbols with elements of the story.

Look carefully at the painting. Why does the snake appear to be so small in the overall composition?

Compare and **contrast** this work, and Eileen Steven's painting, *Piltati*?

ANANGU PITJANTJATJARA YANKUNYTJATJARA ARTISTS

Harry Tjutjuna

born c.1930s, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia



Spiderman Wati Wangka

2007, Ernabella, South Australia

synthetic polymer paint on linen, 120.0 x 150.0 cm

South Australian Government Grant 2008

© Harry Tjutjuna, courtesy of Ernabella Arts and Ninuku Arts

Harry Tjutjuna

born c.1930s, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

Harry Tjutjuna was born in Pitjantjatjara country in the western border country of South Australia and the Northern Territory. When he was young he moved to Ernabella, where he attended school at the mission. As a young man there, he worked as a bore sinker, fencer and gardener and with the mission sheep. He and his wives and family later moved back to his country near the tri-state border, living mostly at or near Irrunytju (Wingellina) and Pipalyatjara. He is a widower, a *ngankari* (traditional healer) and a senior law man who has travelled extensively throughout central Australia on ceremonial business.

In 2005, aged in his mid-seventies, Harry began painting when he was again living at Ernabella. His *Tjukurpa* (Dreaming) subjects from his country include *Malu* (kangaroo), *Wati Ngintaka* (Perentie Lizard Man) and *Minyma Mingkari* (Marsupial Mouse Women). However, the *Tjukurpa* he is primarily connected to is *Wati Wangka* (Spider Man). As a *ngankari* he uses spider webs to treat skin injuries and abrasions. He also paints *Wati Nyiru* (Nyiru Man), the hunter who perpetually chases the women of the Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters) Dreaming.

Spiderman Wati Wangka depicts both an autobiographical and traditional story. It operates on several levels – as a personal story of Harry, as a reflection of his role as a traditional healer, and as a *Tjukurpa* (Dreaming) story. In speaking of this work, he described himself as a *ngankari*, a traditional healer or doctor – a spider man, which is also his totem as a *ngankari*. Harry and the spider are one and the same, shown by the fact that the spider is looking for a woman (represented by the circles), as is Harry. Spiders are also involved in the creation stories of Harry's birthplace. People often associate themselves with one or more of the creatures of their *ngura* (home place) in this way. Talking of similar paintings, he has called the spider a 'clever man' – a common term for a healer.

The circle-like background patterns are a common feature of the artist's spider paintings. They not only reference the intricate pattern spun by spiders but also represent *minyma wangka tjuta* [many spider women], these are all the women and children for this man.¹

¹ Harry Tjutjuna, *Wangka: spider*, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 2009, www.alcastongallery.com.au.

PRIMARY

Look at the painting and **describe** the particular creation story.

Talk about how the colours the artist has used, and the story are connected?

Create a design based on a spider.

SECONDARY

Discuss the important role of the traditional healer in Aboriginal communities.

Research other traditional cures or medicines found in Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal people often associate themselves with one or more of the creatures of their home-place, known as a totem. **Discuss** Harry's connection to his totem through this painting.

ANANGU PITJANTJATJARA YANKUNYTJATJARA ARTISTS

Nura Rupert

born c.1933, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia



Mamu (Spooky spirits)

2002, Ernabella, South Australia

synthetic polymer paint on linen, 92.0 x 122.0 cm

Ed and Sue Tweddell Fund for South Australian Contemporary Art 2006

© Nura Rupert, courtesy of Ernabella Arts

Nura Rupert

born c.1933, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

Nura Rupert was born at Tjitapiti, a rockhole near Angatja at the eastern end of the Mann Ranges in far northwest of South Australia. After her family moved to the Ernabella mission, the teenage Nura worked in the craft room, learning to weave and make hooked floor rugs, as well as knitting jumpers for the men working at the mission. Over the years she did wood carving (*punu*) and pokerwork decoration, making carrying dishes (*wira*), as well as carvings of animals such as snakes, birds, donkeys, and rabbits. In recent years she has also decorated ceramics and made etchings.

In 1997, after Nura had returned to Ernabella's art centre to make *mukata* (beanies) for the Alice Springs Beanie Festival, she became interested in painting with acrylic on canvas and paper. Her work is whimsical and quirky, and often expresses stories from her childhood. Her subjects often involve *mamu* (spooky spirits), *papa* (dogs) and *tjiti* (children), but have also included *Wati Ngintaka* (Perentie Lizard Man), flying birds, emus, *tingka* (donkeys), rabbits and camels.

Despite the sense of humour and imagination apparent in this work, Nura carries strong *Tjukurpa* (Dreaming) stories about *mamu*, who are blamed for illness and strange disappearances. *Mamu* (Spooky spirits) was featured on a 55-cent postage stamp in 2009.

PRIMARY

Look at the painting *Mamu (Spooky spirits)* and describe the spooky spirits. What kinds of sounds do you think they would make?

Research other spirits in Aboriginal creation stories.

Create your own scary monster (part human / part animal).

SECONDARY

Discuss Nura's work *Mamu (Spooky spirits)*, and how it might relate to her *tjukurpa* (Dreaming) story from her childhood.

As a designer, you have been commissioned to design a series of stamps to commemorate the *Desert Country* exhibition. Select a painting from each of the artist groups on which you would base your series. **Create** a series of stamps using paint or collage, or a computer graphics program.

ANANGU PITJANTJATJARA YANKUNYTJATJARA ARTISTS

Ruby Tjangawa Williamson

born c.1940, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia



Puli murpu - mountain range

2009, Amata, South Australia

synthetic polymer paint on linen, 121.5 x 152.0 cm

South Australian Government Grant 2009

© Ruby Tjangawa Williamson, courtesy of Tjala Arts

Ruby Tjangawa Williamson

born c.1940, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

Ruby Tjangawa Williamson was born in the bush, west of Amata in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of northwestern South Australia. In the mid-1950s, when she was a young girl, her family moved to Amata, which was then a cattle station called Musgrave Park (before its return to the ownership of the Pitjantjatjara people in the mid-1960s). She married a cattleman who worked at Musgrave Park and nearby stations, and whose family are the traditional owners of the country around Amata. After her husband's death, Ruby was left to bring up their five children. She is a senior law woman with a commitment to fostering traditional culture, storytelling, dance and painting. She has a great sense of humour, which has helped her through difficult times.

Ruby began painting in 2000 with Minymaku Arts (now Tjala Arts). Her very distinctive works have received increasing attention and acclaim, and are recognised for their 'quirkiness'. She also weaves *tjanpi* (grass) baskets and makes *punu* (wood carvings) with burnt pokerwork designs. Her main subjects include *puli murpu* (mountain range) and *ultukunpa* (honey grevillea) as well as sand goanna, bush tucker and bush cat. She has exhibited in a large number of joint shows across Australia since 2000 and in several solo shows since 2003.

Puli murpu is a Pitjantjatjara name for a mountain range, ridge or rise. This painting depicts part of the Musgrave Ranges behind Amata, where Ruby lives. The dark areas in the painting are the mountains from the side and above. The blue circles are *kapi tjukula* or rockholes, where water collects after the rains. The three frond-like elements at the edge of the rockholes are *ultukunpa*. *Ultukunpa* (*Grevillea juncifolia*), a six-metre-high shrub, is among the most accessible of the edible 'honey plants' of this area. The plant's nectar or 'honey' (*tjuratja*, *wama*) can be sucked directly from its orange-coloured flowerheads, called *kaliny-kalinypa*, or the flowerheads can be soaked in water to make a dark-coloured sweet drink.

PRIMARY

Symbols are used here to tell a simple story. **Identify** the symbols in this work.

The grevillea flowerheads can provide natural, sweet flavouring for water. **Research** other native plants which might provide flavouring?

SECONDARY

This painting has a 'contemporary' feel to it. What makes this so? **Think** about both the use of colour, and overall design/composition.

Compare this work with others in the exhibition that you feel have a contemporary style.

MARALINGA TJARUTJA PEOPLE

Kunmanara Queama

1947–2009, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

Hilda Moodoo

born 1952, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia



Destruction I

2002, Oak Valley, South Australia

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122.0 x 101.2 cm

Santos Fund for Aboriginal Art 2002

© Kunmanara Queama and Hilda Moodoo

MARALINGA TJARUTJA PEOPLE

Kunmanara Queama

1947–2009, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

Hilda Moodoo

born 1952, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia

Kunmanara Queama was born at Ooldea, on the eastern edge of the Nullabor Plain. With the dispersal of residents after the closure of the United Aborigines Mission (UAM), he was sent to the Lutheran mission school at Koonibba, near Ceduna. Over the years he worked as a farmer and labourer on wheat farms across the Eyre Peninsula. He became recognised as ‘an excellent community leader and a person who commanded a strong respect from those around him’,¹ serving as a member and chairperson of the Maralinga Tjarutja Council. He worked for many years on land conservation and management boards, and had an abiding commitment to the return of the Maralinga Tjarutja lands. Most of the Maralinga lands were returned to the Pitjantjatjara people in 1984, and in that year he and his wife Hilda Moodoo were among the founders of the Oak Valley community there, a community 150 kilometres northwest of Maralinga.

Hilda Moodoo was the second child of Daniel and June Moodoo, who married in the 1940s at the UAM at Ooldea, after ‘coming in’ from the desert. In 1952, when the mission closed, Daniel and June were sent to the Riverland, where Hilda was born that year, at Barmera. It was not until she had turned eighteen that Hilda saw her country and met her extended family for the first time. Hilda and Kunmanara raised six children together.

Painting began at Oak Valley from December 2001 when Victorian Aboriginal artist Lance Atkinson spent two months there teaching the technical skills for painting on canvas. Hilda Moodoo and Kunmanara Queama’s *Destruction I* was included in the resulting *Desert Oaks* exhibition at the Adelaide Festival Centre in March 2002. The Desert Oaks project was a deliberate expression of identity for the new community formed after dispossession. The project represented an opportunity ‘to pass on their knowledge through their paintings and leave their history behind for others’.²

In *Destruction I* the artists depict a mushroom-cloud shape which is a result of the atomic bomb blast.

¹ Jay Weatherill, Ministerial statement to House of Assembly, Hansard, SA Parliament, 17 November 2009, p. 4638.

² Robin Usher, ‘From history’s shadow’, *Age*, 20 February 2002, Culture, p. 3.

PRIMARY

Locate Maralinga and Oak Valley on the map provided.

Research the effect the atomic bomb and rocket tests had on the artists, their families, and communities, and their country.

What feeling or mood do the artists convey in this painting?

Discuss how you might feel if you had your home destroyed and had to leave your country, perhaps never to return.

SECONDARY

Carefully **analyse** the painting and look at the different way the artists use colour, line, pattern and shape to communicate their story – and the feelings that go with this story/event.

Locate photographs taken at the Maralinga test site. **Compare** these with photographs recording the atomic bombs used in time of war – for example photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Research the effect the atomic bomb and rocket tests had on the artists, their families, and communities, and their country.

IKUNTJI AND WATYAWANU ARTISTS

Lilly Kelly Napangardi

born c.1948, Luritja/Walpiri people, Northern Territory



Sandhills, 2005, Haasts Bluff, Northern Territory

synthetic polymer paint on linen, 185.0 x 307.0 cm

Gift of Justice Bruce DeBelle, Peter Dobson, Frances Gerard, Anne Kidman, John Mansfield, David McKee and Dick Whittington QC through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation Collectors' Club 2005

© Courtesy of Lilly Kelly Napangardi & Watiyawanu Arts

IKUNTJI AND WATYAWANU ARTISTS

Lilly Kelly Napangardi

born c.1948, Luritja/Walpiri people, Northern Territory

Ikuntji Art Centre at Haasts Bluff, situated in the spectacular West MacDonnell Ranges, 230 kilometres west of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) was established in 1992 as an Aboriginal-owned art centre, with Pintupi and Ngaatjatjarra, Luritja and Warlpiri artists as an Aboriginal-owned art centre.

Watiyawanu Artists of Amunturrngu Aboriginal Corporation was incorporated in 1995 and is situated in Amunturrngu (Mt Liebig), with Pintupi, Luritja and Pitjantatjara artists working from there.

Lilly Kelly Napangardi was born at Haasts Bluff, the eldest of more than a dozen children to Sandy Wawiritjunulba Tjapanangka and his four wives. Her Luritja mother was Narputta Napurrula, whose country was around Haasts Bluff. Her Warlpiri father was from Mt Liebig. Around 1960 the family moved to Papunya, where Lilly married Norman Kelly Tjampitjinpa. They have three surviving children and several grandchildren. She and her husband now live in Amunturrngu (Mt Liebig).

At Papunya Lilly witnessed the emergence of the Western Desert painting movement. Later she helped her husband with his painting, dotting the backgrounds of his works and gaining valuable technical experience. She began to paint for Papunya Tula Artists in 1986, later painting for Watiyawanu Artists at Amunturrngu. She won the Northern Territory Art Award in the year she took up painting and has since been a finalist in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. She often paints sandhills, wind and 'after rain'. Her stories are from the areas of Haasts Bluff (her birthplace), Kintore, Coniston and Kunajarrayi (Mt Nicker, west of Yuendumu), particularly the women's Dreaming story there.

In *Sandhills* Lilly has skilfully depicted the small grains of sand blowing across the surface of the dunes. The overall effect is hypnotic and suggests a sense of contours in this basic landscape, where features seem to appear and disappear with the changing winds blowing the sand. Although she paints with microscopic detail, her overall view of the landscape is large in scale.

PRIMARY

Look carefully at the bird's eye view of the landscape you see before you and **describe** what you see.

Shut your eyes and **imagine** flying above the land. How do you feel?

Look closely at the painting. How does the artist give the impression of the sand moving?

SECONDARY

Look closely at the technique used by the artist – particularly her gradations of dots. What aspect of the desert does this painting represent? How has the artist achieved a 'moving' effect?

Research the Alice Prize and the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Why are these important events on the visual arts calendar?

Reflection

Consider the variety of styles used by artists in the exhibition to represent their country and stories, from the figurative to the almost abstract, from multi-coloured to the minimal use of colours.

Do you prefer a particular style, or a particular artist or group of artists? Why?

Recommended resources

Nici Cumpston with Barry Patton, *Desert Country*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2010

Ananguku Arts – APY lands Aboriginal artists
<http://www.ananguku.com.au/>

Papunya Tula Artists
www.papunyatula.com.au/

Desart – Central Australian Aboriginal Art Centres
<http://www.desart.com.au/>

ANKAAA – Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal artists
<http://www.ankaaa.org.au/>

ABC Indigenous
www.abc.net.au/indigenous

Adelaide Botanic Gardens
www.oac.schools.sa.edu.au/outreach/oes/botanic/discov.htm

Alice Springs Desert Park
<http://www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au/education/research.shtml#>



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We have the energy.

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