

UNA REY

Review of David Brooks and Darren Jorgensen,

***The Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa,*
Perth: UWA Publishing, 2015**

The Aboriginal painting movement has long been characterised by ‘remote stars’ whose seniority connotes the last generation to embody the full lexicon of pre-contact experience of language, law (*tjukurrpa*) and Country. Witness, for example, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, whose career—launched in her eighties—was all ‘late’; the taciturn old men guiding the middle-aged painters at Papunya in the early 1970s; or the last Nyikina speaker, Loongkoonan, who started painting in her nineties and is now brushing her second century.

Much contemporary writing on the movement-that-has-become-an-industry barely conceals nostalgia and despair for what is being lost with this changing of the guard, but *The Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa* by David Brooks and Darren Jorgensen has no truck with such tendencies. The book opens with the metaphor of intergalactic space to describe—both formally and esoterically—the spare paintings that have bewitched lovers of a loose, raw hand. An infinite site of mystery that holds universal wonder for us terrestrial mortals, deep space offers another sublime analogy: eighteen months after the book’s publication, all but one painter had died of old age, like diamond pinholes in the night sky, which burn out millennia before we see their light.

In the lacuna between a virile, productive life and death, the lucky artist has the luxury of repeating themselves over pale mannerist horizons or deconstructing a visual language contingent on physical (in)capacity and fugitive memory. The Wanarn painters fall into this latter category, but the routes to their late flowering are discursive. Some, such as Tjunka Lewis and Mary McLean, experienced the canvas economy in a sustained way, starting to paint in the 1990s with the Warburton Arts Project or one of the boutique art centres across the region. Others painted only after becoming residents of the Wanarn Aged Care Facility deep in the heart of Ngaanyatjarra Lands, a final resting place for the artists and an axis from which the gently fused narrative of *Wanarn Painters* arcs across history and geography, punctuated by tunnels into the *tjukurrpa*.

Collaborating authors Brooks and Jorgensen put aside the historic antagonism between their respective disciplines of anthropology and art history, drawing on distinct strengths and eliding the boundaries between the two. As a means of interpreting Australian Indigenous art, the fields of anthropology and art history have most visibly played out in two primary sites of encounter: the ethnographic museum, attended by the static ghosts of Primitivism, and the white cube gallery, its custodians dressed for business in black garb and white gloves. Today, such antinomies feel redundant given the generational gains made by Indigenous artists since the 1940s, when the bickering was in its infancy. In contemporary art practice anthropologists work together with museum archives and Indigenous artists and communities to deliver interdisciplinary projects that enhance both public exhibitions and Australia's art history: the *Yirrkala Drawings* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Yuendumu doors in *Warlpiri Drawings: Remembering the Future* exhibition are just two examples. In *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters*, recently at the National Museum of Australia, intercultural knowledge systems form the exhibition's connective tissue. This ameliorative turn is a natural outcome of the changing politics of engagement that makes way for partnerships in which Indigenous people are active agents, ongoing custodians and sometimes guardians of cultural content, rather than one-off suppliers—informants—handing over knowledge in good faith but with no control over the end-usage of their collective intellectual property.

Wanarn Painters is exemplary of such productive exchanges, the honey of the cross-cultural hive. When Warakurna Artists manager Edwina Circuit introduced the authors, she hoped that their different approaches might rub off on the other. That, in doing this, they would offer an alternative, and potentially playful, way of considering the work of the oldest Ngaanyatjarra artists, beyond the standard gravitas of *tjukurrpa* and Country most often intuited. This intellectual match-making paid off: Brooks' decades-long working relationship with the community and the younger Jorgensen's close analysis of art centre archives gives the project an immediate logic, but the findings are never prescriptive. Indeed, the authors concede that interpretation and meaning in the paintings is always speculative, though they are, like Vasari, intrigued and encouraged by the lives of the artists, all of whom were born in the desert. The painters' biographies and characters are intimately portrayed, intersecting with postcolonial realities and *tjukurrpa* discourse, which give rise to many open questions: Why does one artist paint a subject so far from his custodial country? How does an individual recover their life-force after a close call with death by magic? What do their mates *really* think of the 'messy' paintings?

The book covers ground familiar to readers of the Western Desert painting movement with an emphasis on the local conditions of early contact. The reader expecting a reiteration of Australia's brutal colonial impositions may be surprised to learn that Ngaanyatjarra have been in full possession of their land without interruption, and that the Warburton mission, established in 1933, had a more circuitous impact on Ngaanyatjarra lives—rather than 'concentrating' the local population. Here, adults were encouraged to roam widely across the desert in pursuit of dingo scalps (unencumbered by children), thus maintaining a nomadic lifestyle far beyond the scope of their homelands. When they did settle in more sedentary communities from the 1960s onwards, rather than being wholly dispossessed of their culture by an imperial Christianity, Ngaanyatjarra assimilated Biblical narratives into the orders of the *tjukurrpa*.

Survival in arid Australia demands comprehensive knowledge of the physical world, a talent that appears miraculous to outsiders. But, as the authors note, these skills are not especially valued by the Ngaanyatjarra. Instead, highest regard is reserved for those who possess expansive knowledge of the *tjukurrpa*. This metaphysical operating system and its elemental resonance across the land is unequivocal, but access to its arcane depths and detailed allegorical sagas follows a strict age, origin and gender-related hierarchy. Those most invested with this capital are—following the rules of gerontocracies—the elderly elders, keepers of secrets. Like Scheherazade whose artful storytelling over 1001 nights kept her King and executioner at bay, the survival of elders is contingent on having more gifts, more morals and more punchlines to reveal.

Epics from the *tjukurrpa* interwoven with the events of contemporary life give the book a certain theatricality. In one act of the extensive performance, the western quoll Parrtjarta participates in a painting exchange with Walpurti, the termite-eating numbat. Sitting down near Warburton, they negotiate to paint each other's backs with totemic designs in ceremonial custom. With careful focus, Parrtjarta applies neat stripes to Walpurti's back, then duly waits for Walpurti to paint his back in return. When the job is complete, Parrtjarta is furious to see the haphazard scattering of messy white daubs marking his back and, in retaliation, he strikes Walpurti, leaving the numbat (and then all numbats forever) with a red mark on his chest. In the familiar trope of animist mythologies, this altercation grants Ngaanyatjarra people an explanation for ancestral actions and their reappearance in the living embodiment of animals, as well as identifying local equivalents of Saint Luke, the patron saint of painters.

Walpurti is reckless in his ritual mark-making and causes offence—though following the book’s logic, he may just be very, very old. Painter Tjunka Lewis’s creative experiments with Walpurti as subject (a relatively minor Dreaming narrative, without song *tulku* or ceremony) supports one of the writers’ hypothetical conclusions that less important *tjukurrpa* are available for inventive (childlike) play. The narrative also recognises an inherent aesthetic preference, betraying a universal admiration for *techne* or carefulness. In addition, it describes Lewis’ peers’ appraisal of his work. Adept at recognising his paintings as Walpurti, ‘the spotty one’, they also joke about the old man’s ‘scribbles’ (pp. 40-1); here, the authors assume that such judgements are learned from ‘whitefella’ worlds, but as their own example from the *tjukurrpa* attests, however modest in stature, the ancestral players liked to look sharp too.

Notwithstanding the consistent brand of Papunya Tula Artists’ pared-back palette and reductive iconography, the past fifteen years have seen a flamboyant, colourful style of desert painting emerge to the south of Pintupi Country, beginning in the APY Lands from the early 2000s. These were joined by a storm of equally spectacular colourists from Ngaanyatjarra communities, though crossovers between art centres and artists—particularly those making *punu* (wood carving) and *tjanpi* (spinifex sculpture)—have a longer history adequately detailed in the text. Within this dynamic mix, the Wanarn paintings offer a welcome departure that the writers interpret as owing to a certain freedom and independence acquired through seniority.

Goethe was an early champion of the positive aspects of ageing in which a withdrawal from the material world gives way to an infinite and mystical realm, a Germanic spiritualising of old age that holds equivalence with Ngaatjatjarra elders.¹ As dealers in ‘sublime [ancestral] knowledge’, these men and women at the edge of reason capture fragmented particles of the *tjukurrpa* in ‘a troubling transect of the dot painting movement, where visual ideas are lost in a blur of paint or a fading of intention that nonetheless whisper in the language of the desert’ (p. 4). This idiosyncratic shorthand flags the idea of an old-age style particular to time and place; that is, a late desert painting tradition dubbed by Jorgensen here and elsewhere as ‘wobbly style’. The authors recruit the German *verschmolzenheit*—a blending of all the formal and expressive elements developed over an artist’s productive lifetime—as a definition of the ‘expressive simplicity’ that comes to artists in old age.

¹ Sohm, 2007, p. 8.

Now embedded in art historical usage, old-age style as a universal phenomenon is credited to the seventeenth-century Roger de Piles, who mapped three stages of artistic development applicable to all artists: a youthful period of apprenticeship, a mature or established style, and a late, old-age style, typically characterised by mannerism and sometimes described as degenerating into a second childhood. This life-cycle of artistic range is applied widely to artists, writers and musicians alike. The book cites Adorno on Beethoven's final compositions for piano, in which convention is 'made visible in unconcealed, untransformed bareness' (p. 89), like the Wanarn paintings in which the icon is stripped to its core, unadorned.

Brooks' term '*tjukurrpa*-thinking' describes Ngaanyatjarra's active relationship to the *tjukurrpa*, its perpetual currency and its multifarious temporalities, sharing parallels with W.E.H. Stanner's 'every when', which explains the Dreaming as concurrent with both contemporary time and deep ancestral time.² This temporal slippage brings a poetic, fabulist quality to the cross-cultural narrative genre exemplified in T.G.H. Strehlow's memoir *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (1969), in which the adolescent narrator attends to his dying father, Pastor Carl Strehlow, travelling overland from Hermannsburg Mission in a failed medical evacuation in 1922. *Wanarn Painters* shares some of the weaving narrative (indebted to the anthropologist's fluency in Aboriginal language), but death is an inevitable protagonist that the artists accept. Old age or grave illness aside, there is scant focus on Ngaanyatjarra mortality or the immaterial 'where-after' in *Wanarn Painters*. Unlike Strehlow's struggle with a Christian God, Indigenous cosmology is engrossed with ways and means of surviving *living*, the keys to life rather than to an afterlife. Even the Tiwi Islanders, whose primary cultural motif is the *pukumani* funeral ceremony, are ultimately concerned with the protection of the living from the spirits of the dead, hence the elaborate rituals and taboos to ensure a smooth transition *away* from life.

When we hand an infant a bunch of keys to keep her occupied, her delight with the rattle bears no relation to its functional power: it is only in adulthood that these abstract objects become crucial tools for everyday life. In following the final years of the Wanarn painters, Brooks and Jorgensen trace the artists' return to the ignorant innocence of childhood, *itirringu*, becoming a baby, and a regression to the ur-qualities of children's drawings. While easily celebrated as informal *memento mori*, these wobbly paintings offer more than nihilistic

² Stanner, 1979.

indulgences or a leap into the animated void. A commemorative gesture from the jurisdiction of the Pink Cockatoo, the Crow and the Seven Sisters, *Wanarn Painters* provides a key to new readings and pays tribute to old stars.

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Bibliography

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