



## Art Centres in the Kimberley

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The first Aboriginal art centre in the Kimberley was Waringarri Arts in Kununurra. Established in 1985, it was set up to service artists working in Kalumburu, Kununurra, Port Keats, Warmun (then Turkey Creek) and smaller settlements. Like art centres across Australia, Waringarri differed from art programs that had previously been run for Aboriginal people. For artists across Australia had long been making 'ethnic and tourist arts' on their own initiative, and occasionally working in art studios run by adult education programs, hospitals, missions and prisons.<sup>i</sup>

The arrival of art centres however marked an era of Aboriginal agency in the arts, so that the day to day work of non-Aboriginal arts managers was answerable to the artists themselves, rather than to a Church, clinic or government department. The other Kimberley art centre that dates back to the 1980s is Warlayirti Artists at the Wirrimanu Community (or Balgo) on the Tanami Road into the Western Desert. Warlayirti was established in 1987 out of the success of a local adult education program, and the success of a 1986 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, *Art from the Great Sandy Desert*.

At Warlayirti and elsewhere around Australia, a series of art centre managers facilitated the exhibition of local work in the galleries of Australia's southern cities. The role of managers is to enable artists to access the artworld, while ensuring they are fairly treated. Consultant Tim Acker emphasises this ethical and intercultural role of art centres:

Art centres are independent enterprises, owned and governed by Aboriginal artists; they identify and nurture artists, promote and sell works of art, provide accountability and reinvest in the livelihoods of their communities. In short, art centres are hybrids; highly effective, inter-cultural, somewhat mercurial commercial ventures operating successfully in remotest Australia, using an enterprise model built on the artistry and energy of an economically marginalised people.<sup>ii</sup>

So it is that art centres are aligned with the politics of remote Aboriginal communities themselves, a politics of self-determination that coincides with an era in Australian Federal politics dating back to the early 1970s. The economist Jon Altman has theorised the way that art centres are a part of hybrid economies developed in this period in remote Australia, 'born of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal processes, they are both black and white.'<sup>iii</sup>

In Fitzroy Crossing, Mangkaja Arts was established in 1993 after a series of art programs were run in the 1980s at the Karrayili Adult Education Centre, and after a landmark exhibition at Tandanya in Adelaide in 1991. The Warmun Art Centre began in 1997 so that local artists would no longer be dependent on Waringarri, located down the road in Kununurra, or upon private operators who were not representing their interests.<sup>iv</sup> The artist Queenie McKenzie was crucial to the establishment of Warmun, but not everyone wanted to work in this community arts situation. Some artists still worked for private operators, while in 1998 Freddie Timms, in close collaboration with Melbourne art dealer Tony Oliver, set up private arts organisation Jirrawun. This was designed to operate at a distance from community-based art centres, creating work by and for an elite group

of local artists and selling to high end collectors. At this time too a former manager of Waringarri established a private gallery in Kununurra representing Billy Thomas and Nancy Noonju among others. In 2001 another private gallery, largely catering to the tourist trade, also established itself in Kununurra. In just a few short years, the East Kimberley artworld had been transformed.

Through this diversity it is possible to see the impact of art centres upon the history of art practice in the region, for different studios made decisions about what kind of work they would support. Artists at the Warmun Art Centre deliberately chose to only use local ochres, while Waringarri employed a mix of ochres and processed pigments, giving both centres distinct colour palettes. Waringarri's reflects its own cosmopolitan situation, based as it is in a large town where different Aboriginal groups mingle, and further from sources of natural ochres. Warmun's restricted, ochre palette continues to embody its grounding in the local community and country. Jirrawun's artists were among the most minimal of the Kimberley's painters with Paddy Bedford, Rammey Ramsey and Timmy Timms emulating Rover Thomas with lateral landscapes. The group's style reflected the freedom of their studio situation, their ambition evident in large, bold compositions.

Other decisions about style were being made on the other side of the Kimberley in this same period. In 1997 Mowanjum Artists Spirit of the Wandjina Aboriginal Corporation was incorporated outside Derby, before becoming the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre in 2006, housed in new premises built in the shape of a Wandjina head. Their decision to paint Wandjinas would have an influence on another art centre at Kalumburu, a community on the northern coast. Here at the Kira Kiro Art Centre, which emerged out of a series of art programs run at the community, the artists tend away from Wandjinas and instead to paint what at Kalumburu is known as *Kiro Kiro*, but elsewhere by the Ngarinyin name of Gwion Gwion rock art figures.<sup>v</sup> To the south, in the coastal community of Bidyadanga, artists also decided upon their style. Here, Yulparitja painters from the desert negotiated with the local Karajarri people to use coastal colours, while the subjects of their paintings remain the dry, desert country from which they had walked some decades ago.<sup>vi</sup> In the absence of an art centre, the Yulparitja were represented by Emily Rohr of Short Street Gallery in Broome, and began exhibiting around 2002. In their use of bold acrylic colours, they joined desert exiles at Mangkaja and Warlayirti, who also used loud painting styles as if to proclaim their feelings and fidelities for the countries that they had left.

Today there are ten art centres across the Kimberley, including a new art centre at Bidyadanga called Bidyadanga Artists, Kira Kiro at Kalumburu, Laarri Gallery in Yiyili and Yarliyl Artists at Halls Creek, plus two textile studios. These late additions to the art centre scene are not all entirely supported by government funding, as was typical for art centres of the 1980s and 1990s, but also by other organisations, including a local school, a local shire and a TAFE college. Today, the expanded number of art centres, as well as the contraction of the art market since the Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008, has impacted upon the sales made by art centres nationally.<sup>vii</sup> 2007 also marks a definitive change in Federal policy toward remote communities, one that is no longer interested in self-determination, and a shift to funding tied to education and employment outcomes.<sup>viii</sup> On the one hand, this change has benefited art centres as the Indigenous Employment Initiative brought employment to local people.<sup>ix</sup> However, a drop in sales and the increasing impoverishment of Aboriginal people in remote Australia through this new era of government policy has also meant art centres have begun to increase their focus on supporting community development, employment and training.<sup>x</sup> One part of this shift lies in an increased number of projects being run through art centres, such as the *Motika* (Motorcar) Project at Warlayirti, as well as the *In the Saddle—On the Wall* travelling exhibition. The Art Gallery of Western Australia's Desert River Sea project is also supporting new art projects in art centres across the Kimberley.<sup>xi</sup> Such projects may be the beginning of a new stage in the history of art centres. For they tend to refunction these organisations as cultural centres, moving beyond the art market to also work with institutions and funding bodies to produce major exhibitions. This shift in the everyday work of art centres will likely change the history of Australian art, and the role of the art centre within it.

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<sup>i</sup> Here I am borrowing the terms used by Nelson Graburn to title his edited collection from the period, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976.

<sup>ii</sup> Tim Acker, 'The Art of Community: the place of art centres in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands', in Tim Acker and John Carty (eds) *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands*, Perth, UWA Publishing, 2012, pp. 37-47 at p. 42.

<sup>iii</sup> Jon Altman, 'Art Business: The Indigenous visual arts infrastructure' in Hetti Perkins, Margaret K.C. West and Theresa Willsteed (eds), *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, pp. 43-49 at p. 43.

<sup>iv</sup> See Suzanne Spinner, 'Three Certificates are Not Enough: Rover Thomas and art centre archives', in Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean (eds), *Indigenous Archives: The making and unmaking of Aboriginal art*, Perth, UWA Publishing, in press.

<sup>v</sup> Philippa Jahn, 'Between Rocks and Hard Places: Mary Puntji Clement and the Kalumburu Art Project', in Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean (eds), *Indigenous Archives: The making and unmaking of Aboriginal art*, Perth, UWA Publishing, in press.

<sup>vi</sup> Personal communication with Emily Rohr, 18 August, 2014

<sup>vii</sup> See Tim Acker and Alice Woodhead, *The Art Economies Value Chain Reports: Art centre finances*, CRC-REP Research Report CR006, Alice Springs, Ninti One Limited, 2014, ix.

<sup>viii</sup> Marked by the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (or 'The 'Intervention').

<sup>ix</sup> Acker and Woodhead, p. ix.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> For more information on In the Saddle—On the Wall see < <http://desertriversea.com.au/the-people/research-and-commentary-/in-the-saddle-on-the-wall>>