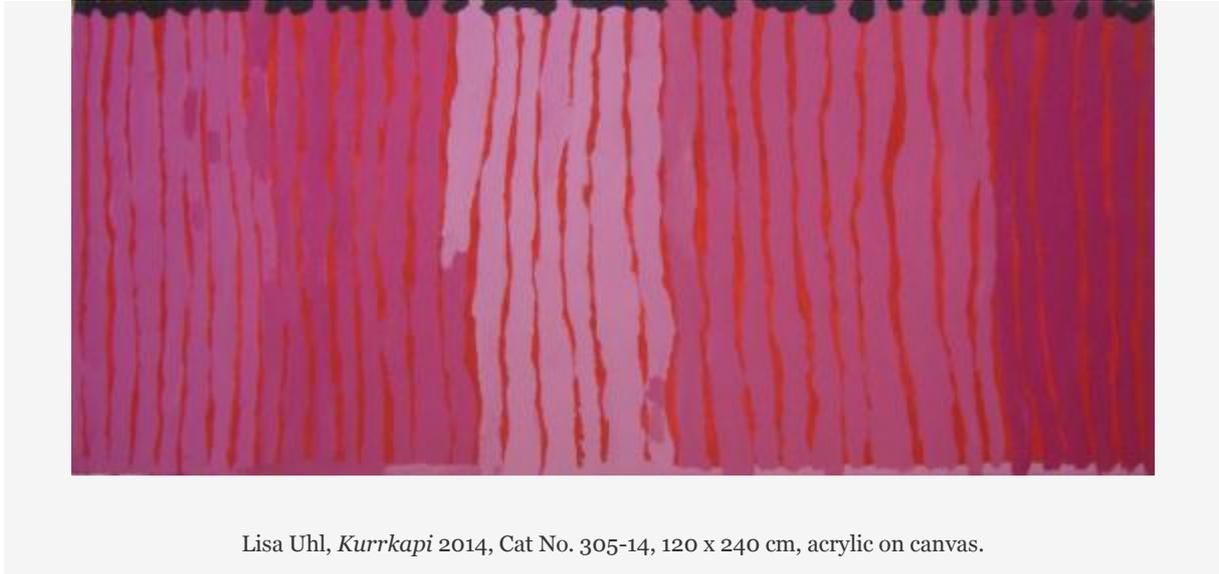


# Lisa Uhl: Seeing the Forest and the Trees

By Henry F. Skerritt



Lisa Uhl, *Kurrkapi* 2014, Cat No. 305-14, 120 x 240 cm, acrylic on canvas.

Most English speakers will be familiar with the phrase, “to not see the forest for the trees.” It is used to describe someone whose focus on minute details obscures their ability to see the broader context. Over her short career, the oeuvre of Lisa Uhl has been almost singularly devoted to trees—in particular, the *turtutjarti* (walnut trees) and *kurrkapi* (desert oaks) of Wangkajungka country on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. And yet, Uhl is most definitely a “big picture” painter. Nowhere is this more evident than in the works in this current exhibition, which rank among the most accomplished and daring of the young artist’s career. Here the *turtutjarti* and *kurrkapi* are rendered almost a spectral presence, subsumed beneath Uhl’s painterly experiments in the visualization of space. These paintings seem less concerned with taxonomic detail than with an ambitious project of world picturing.



Installation image, *Lisa Uhl: Turtutjarti*, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, November 19-December 19, 2014.

This is not to say that the centrality of *turtutjarti* and *kurrkapi* to Uhl's work has diminished in any way. The trees remain the structural foundation of her practice. Typically, they are the first element that Uhl commits to canvas, before following their contours to fill the negative space with color. It is this technique that gives Uhl's paintings their languid pulse, so evocative of the shimmering desert heat. In her most recent works, however, Uhl has begun to vary this formula. As Mangkaja Arts studio coordinator Wes Maselli notes, if Uhl encounters a blotch, splatter or errant line, "sometimes she will now follow that instead." In these new paintings, the negative space takes on a life of its own. Rather than being rendered in a single color, the space between Uhl's trees is now increasingly punctuated by bold gestural incursions and multiple colors. Differentiating between the trees and the spaces between has become increasingly difficult. Uhl is not prioritizing the forest or the trees, but refuting the entire binary. These paintings suggest that it is in the connective space *between* these poles that our knowledge of the world is produced—that allows one to see both the forest *and* the trees.

Much has been made of the story that Uhl has not actually "seen" the *turtutjarti* and *kurrkapi*, but rather, that her knowledge of them comes from the oral accounts of the influential senior women in her community. In noting this, we should be careful not to underestimate the significance of this system of oral knowledge transfer. After all seeing and knowing are rarely the same thing. The clunky attempts of early European painters to depict the Australian landscape is clear evidence of this. These artists "saw" the landscape, but lacked the conceptual frames to accurately represent it. Uhl might not have seen the *turtutjarti* and *kurrkapi*, but she has an intimate and passionate knowledge of them, imparted by figures of the highest esteem, such as Jukuja Dolly Snell, Milkujung Jewess James, Kuji Rose Goodjie, and Purlta Maryanne Downs.

These women have instructed Uhl in the deeper meanings of the land: meanings that come from the ancestral Ngarrangkarni. As a young woman, Uhl does not have the authority to paint the “big stories” of Ngarrangkarni. Instead, she restricts herself to the secular subject matter of trees. Nevertheless, her paintings still participate in a worldview informed by this “big picture” view of country.



Lisa Uhl, *Turtujarti* 2014, Cat No. 366-14, 90 x 60 cm, acrylic on canvas

This is a worldview defined by connectivity. In a sense, Ngarrangkarni is the most complex network of them all, connecting all things across time and space. It is also the foundation of being. During the Ngarrangkarni, the ancestral beings traveled across the landscape, creating the world and everything in it. Ngarrangkarni is not, however, restricted to the distant past. The residue of these events remains in the present, creating a landscape saturated in ancestral signs. Children are born from the ancestor’s spirits emerging from the earth, linking a person to their country and defining their identity. As a result, the boundaries between the human and natural realms (between self and country) are indistinct. Ngarrangkarni is a network of the most total integration.

While identity is rooted in place, the nature of place is not static. While many Westerners think of the desert and barren and monochromatic, it is full of color and life. The visual activity of the landscape—such as the shimmer of a waterhole or the changing colors of desert blooms—are all

tangible expressions of ancestral presence. Recreating these visual effects, such as in the vibrant color combinations and pulsing hum of Uhl's canvases, is a reenactment of the power of Ngarrangkarni. In Uhl's paintings, *turtutjarti* and *kurrkapi* are the earthly bedrock upon which the transformational actions of ancestral presence is manifest. Her motif is the mutable landscape, but its power is revealed through the ability of its surface to change.



Lisa Uhl, *Kurrkapi* 2014, Cat No. 340-14, 90 x 120 cm, acrylic on canvas

This explains why Uhl can find a seemingly endless source of inspiration in repeating the same motifs. It also explains why her paintings never fully divest themselves of the imagery of *turtutjarti* and *kurrkapi*. They are the literal roots of her network, bringing it back to earth and avoiding the inverse risk of only seeing the forest and not the trees. This insistent physicality of Uhl's paintings is also an insistent humanity, reminding us that the most powerful networks are also the most affective, uniting real people and real places. The dissociated image of surfing the internet has led many people to view networks as disembodied frames. In reality, networks are the imaginary links that we use to call our world into existence. These networks still require nodes, operators, and locations from which to form our relations.

This takes a decidedly contemporary relevance in a world increasingly defined by the entangled networks of globalization. Despite coming from the seemingly remote locale of Fitzroy Crossing, Uhl's paintings speak to a global condition. Picturing the complex networks that make up contemporary life—networks that are at once internationally expansive but locally experienced—is one of the central concerns of contemporary artists across the world. This is perhaps why, in

our world of increasingly unfathomable networks, the ancient wisdom of concepts like Ngarrangkarni has taken on such contemporary resonance. It is also why artists like Uhl sit comfortably at the vanguard of international contemporary art practice. Drawing on the network ontology of Ngarrangkarni, Uhl's paintings speak confidently across cultures without sacrificing any of their distinctive identity.



Lisa Uhl, *Turtujarti* 2014, Cat No. 383-14, 120 x 120 cm, acrylic on canvas

Since anthropologists first began recording Aboriginal culture in the late nineteenth century, Western commentators have been prophesizing its demise. But Aboriginal culture has proved remarkably resilient, continually adapting the tools of modernity for its own revitalization. It seems strangely fitting then, that the final exhibition at the legendary Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi should come from such a dynamic young artist as Lisa Uhl. While the art market might have its ups-and-downs, and galleries might come and go, in the hands of artists like Uhl, Aboriginal culture continues to find new vitality. Uhl is the model of resilience in the face of adversity and social tumult. Amid the often-challenging circumstances of modern Fitzroy Crossing, her radiant personality and personal strength shines through in the *joie de vivre* of her canvases. Like the *turtujarti* and *kurrkapi*, she stands tall: a sign of life in what others might wrongly perceive as a barren desert. This life breeds life, and as a committed artist, her success has inspired others in the community. In time, she may well grow to become as important a leader as the great women who went before her. The closing of Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi marks the end of one era, but the paintings of Lisa Uhl point to the future: *you just have to see the forest for the trees.*

*We gratefully acknowledge Henry Skerritt's permission to reprint the above essay, originally written for the catalogue for Lisa Uhl: Turtujarti, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, November 2014.*