

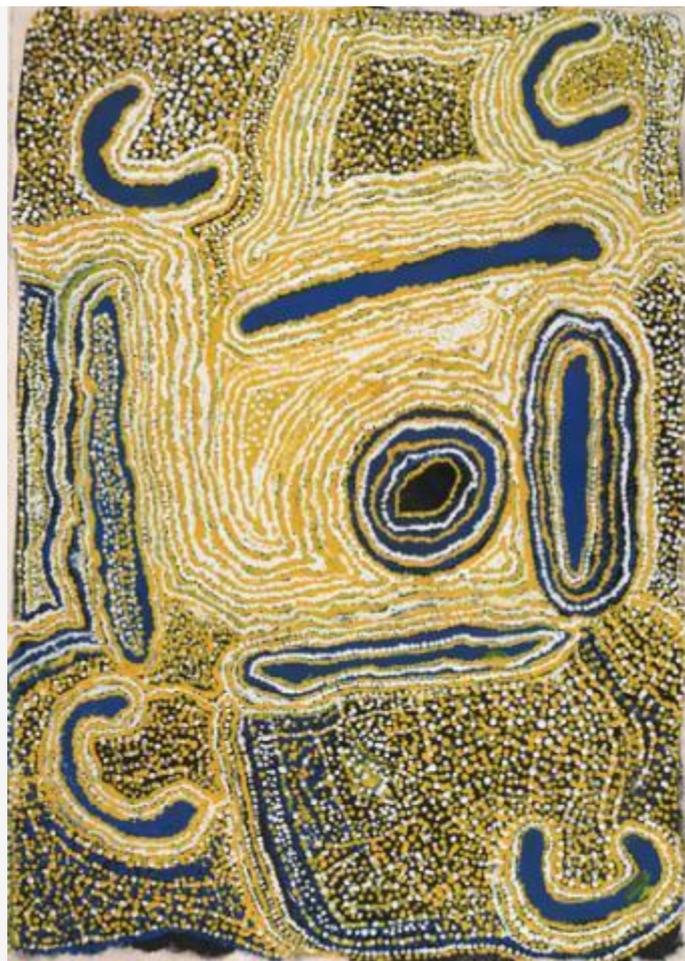
Jukurrtjanu Mularrarringu (From the Dreaming): Meaning and Movement in the Art of Nora Wompi
By Henry F. Skerritt



Nora Wompi, *Kunawarrtji* 2007, acrylic on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria.

With their thick, viscous skeins of impasto paint, the paintings of Nora Wompi seem to melt onto the eye. Layers of overlapping colours blur, making forms difficult to define; the desert landscape shimmers into being, like a mirage upon the horizon. Despite abandoning her searing palette of reds, orange and pinks Wompi's work has lost none of its blazing desert intensity. Meandering tracks of paint roll rhythmically across the canvas, creating a dynamic, anamorphic topography. The movement of the artist's hand is clearly visible in the thick brushstrokes, which run across the canvas like trails in the wilderness. The encrusted dots of early works have given way to broad swathes of shifting colour. Where the early works had a gravelly sense of place that evoked the material presence of the landscape, Wompi's recent works present a peripatetic, nomadic understanding of space.

In the past five years, Wompi's paintings have increased in both scale and confidence. Her development has not been a process of metamorphosis, so much as a form of artistic excavation, stripping away the crust to reveal the metaphysical essence of the landscape. Her latest works are less concerned with the visible features of the landscape than with its underlying spiritual meanings. They are paintings of experience, not cynical or world-weary, but acutely aware of the truth of the matter, of what is permanent and what fades away.



Nora Wompi, *Kinjun* 1995, acrylic on paper, National Gallery of Victoria.

Exploring this intangible essence has required Wompi to develop a unique abstract visual language. The clearly identifiable iconography of desert painting – with its recognisable symbols for waterholes, campsites and rockholes – has slowly been replaced with a more fluid, gestural style. The specificity of particular places, stories and sites has given way to grand, totalised renderings of her country around Kunnawarritji. These are ‘big pictures’ that require a ‘big picture’ approach. The spiritual essence that they seek to capture cannot be described using a predetermined lexicon of signs, but requires the development of an artistic language based on emotion and intuition.

It is important to note that for Wompi, this visual language is not something simply imagined or ‘made up’. Although intangible, the essence of landscape that Wompi’s paintings address is very real. It is a spirituality revealed through a close connection and understanding of her ancestral country. It is only through a long and intimate association with the landscape that these mysteries are revealed. This revelation is described in her native Kukatja tongue as *jukurrtjanu mularrarringu* – the truth that comes from the Dreaming. It is from the Dreaming that everything of value or significance derives.

Born around 1935 at Lilbaru near Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route, Wompi belongs to a fading generation of senior Indigenous people who grew up in the desert, learning the solemn codes of the nomadic lifestyle. Consistent with this nomadic outlook, her biography is defined by significant movements: walking with her mother to Bililuna Station and then onto Balgo Mission; relocating to Fitzroy Crossing with her second husband Cowboy Dick; returning to Kunnawarritji with her sisters at the dawn of the homelands movement. Although aged in her seventies, Wompi maintains a highly transitory lifestyle, moving regularly between Kunnawarritji, Balgo, Kiwirrkurra and Punmu in order to visit relatives and attend to familial obligations.



Nora Wompi, *Kunawarritji* 2012, acrylic on canvas.

In the nomadic concept of country, places are not understood in isolation, but rather through their intersections and connections. In Indigenous cosmology, this reveals itself through the songlines that run across the country, uniting all places. These paths reflect the ancestral mythology of the Dreaming, when spirit beings traveled across the landscape creating its sacred sites and leaving their residue in the landscape. According to Indigenous beliefs, this sacred essence remains in the landscape, and is discernible to those whose kinship or custodial ties allow them to access it.

It is this pervasive presence that Wompi explores in her paintings. In their sinuous pathways, we see an organic lattice of places, each connected, rolling into each other like *tali* or sandhills. Each gestural mark upon the canvas is like a footprint, revealing its creator's presence. Like a footprint, they exist as the memory of presence – a nostalgic echo of past travels, both personal and ancestral. Judith Ryan has characterized this as a “haptic quality ... calling sites and spiritual associations through touch.” This touch connects Wompi's knowledge and custodianship of the land to that of her ancestors; her movement on the canvas becomes a mythopoetic recollection of all the spiritual travels that underpin her country. At the same time, it overlays her own journey –

both physical and artistic – onto these paths, creating a palimpsest that connects the past and present.



Nora Wompi, *Kunawarritji* 2010, acrylic on canvas.

In doing so, Wompi's paintings create a matrix that unites all time and place. They paint the history of her landscape, as it is transcribed by ancient songlines and transgressed by more recent paths, such as the Canning Stock Route, which, during Wompi's lifetime, brought European settlers into the world of the Kukatja. These settlers could not see the landscape, access its sacred powers or read its songlines. But perhaps this is the very point of Wompi's paintings. As their lines of colour spill outwards to the edge of the painting, it is almost as though they are trying to break free of the canvas, to pour out from Kunnawarritji to the world. As they reach the edge, they ask us to see the majesty outside the canvas – to realize that this mystical essence is part of the great continuum of existence. This is a unique gift; an intercultural exchange that offers both an expansive lesson in Indigenous cosmology and a critique of our own visual nescience. Painted lovingly and passionately by a powerful, individualistic woman, they project a unique understanding of the world. In their beauty and grace, they offer a guidebook that invites us to feel the indelible essence of this sacred land.

We gratefully acknowledge Henry Skerritt's permission to reprint the above essay, originally written to accompany the exhibition Nora Wompi at Fortyfivedownstairs presented by Suzanne O'Connell Gallery from April 27 till May 8, 2010